

Ya Na Anigban as Tiv Concept of Human Rights

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Abstract

Human rights is indeed part of human morality. Universally, it is accepted that every moral agent has a conscience and therefore knows what is good and bad. Consequently, he or she is aware of what is good for himself and others. Whether we accept it or not human rights is universal, at least its concept. A thorough gleaning will reveal that many societies have some concepts of human rights. It may not be fully expressed and articulated as that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights document but the idea and elements of it can be found in many cultures. This paper explores human rights concepts among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. It contends that the Tiv saying, philosophy and practice of *Ya Na Anigban* literally translated eat and give to your brother has abundant elements of human rights. The methods to be used in this paper are phenomenological and analytical. The paper acknowledges that this phrase has many other usages but it can also be used to boost human rights among the Tiv people.

Introduction

Human rights is problematic in Africa. Indeed, there are so many practices in some African cultures that seem to be contrary to the adjunction of human rights. There are also many African leaders that have no respect for human rights. This also is very true. Even the so called African democratic nations are far from practicing true democracy. We remember the story of Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe, current serving leaders such as Paul Biya, Muhammad Buhari, Nguema Mbasog, King Mswati III, Salva Kiir, Field Marshal Umar Hassan al-Bashir, and Alassanne Dramane Ouattara, just to mention but a few. The practices of these leaders do not mean that all Africans disrespect human rights practices. Generally, the problem of human rights in Africa mostly lies with the treatment of women, human trafficking, modern day slavery and abuse of children. As Magnarella rightly states there are practices in Africa that are contrary to human rights (25) but a closer look and an analysis of these will reveal that some of these practices are situational, ignorance, poverty and unenlightenment

This paper is premised on the fact that there are international norms. Human rights include the idea of the entitlement and the rights of everyone in the community. Looking at the elements, nature, goals and

demands of human rights one can conclude that there are many concepts in Africa that project the same goals and demands as that of the United Nations human rights. Magnarella finds the idea of human rights among the Akan people of Ghana (25). African and the West differ on their understanding of the human being and society. This affects every area of thinking and projection including their understanding of human rights. - Magnarella notes that there is a fundamental difference between African notion and the Euro-Western notion of human rights. The Western notion is built on individualism while that of Africa is built on communitarianism (25). As such there is a problem for Africans to deeply appreciate the Western notion of human rights which lacks the elements of communitarianism. It is because of this that is necessary and demanding for African to find similar concepts and expression and develop them to suit African culture and understanding. The fact is that Africans emphasizes collective rights in most cases more than individual rights. For Africans human dignity does not necessary have to do with the individual but with the community. The United Nation declaration elevates individual right above group right.

There are other groups who would not what anything African to be likened to the Western human rights concepts. Michael Ignatieff writes, "The West now makes its own will to power in the impartial, universalized language of human rights and seeks to impose its own narrow agenda on a plethora of world cultures that do not actually share the West's conception of individualism, selfhood, agency, or freedom" (O'Connor n.p). Ignatieff sees the human right document as western imperialism and another attempt to control the lives of others and asks the question whether the document is really universal. Though, the UDHR lays much emphasis on individual rights rather than community is not enough to throw the basket away together with the baby. Sometimes arguments like this are meant to promote cultural diversities and communitarianism but there are many other ways to promote such things not by condemning good attempts to address human problems.

What this paper intends to discuss is a value system found in Tiv culture and a confirmation that Africans have a value system that can be developed to address issues of human rights. This Tiv concept of *Ya Na Angbian* can provide a fertile ground for the development of the western understanding of Human Rights. The problem is that Africa like to be a consumer society rather than a producer. We should aim at producing what is distinctive from our culture and something we can explain in our mother tongue. The question that most scholars have asked is whether the local people of African can really understand the UDHR document. Finding therefore what is easily understood, common to the local people like *Ya Na Angbian* is essentially important.

The philosophy of *Ya Na Angbian* works against the rise of new social and economic forces that turn to undermine and discriminate against the less privileged and vulnerable in society. It gives respect to human dignity and tolerates others. It is a philosophy that recognizes the rights of others.

The Concept of *Ya Na Anigban*

The *Ya Na Angbian* is a concept that is applied to all aspects of Tiv life. It is a practice that is very important among the Tiv people. It became popular and more pronounced following the introduction of party politics and traditional rulers in Tivland. The Tiv politicians and king makers use it as an instrument to decide who occupies a certain political or traditional office or which area of the Tiv can contest for an office. It is like it was developed for political use. It is today mostly used as a socio-political philosophy for sharing of political positions among the Tiv people in their various parties. The philosophy was developed—and in use before the present political system. It will also be recalled that the Tiv society is a segmentarily structured as such kingship at various levels as we have today is recent. Even the *Tor Agbande*—Drum Chief was instituted on the instance of the colonial administration for effective control and administration. The conclusion therefore is that, this saying or philosophy is not bounded to Tiv political system. We can at best say that when the Tiv people adopted the new political system they used the saying to help them work out the system. The truth is that the philosophy has always been used by the Tiv people. How it came about is not known. Dent, a colonial administrator in Tivland once wrote

Long before Karl Marx ever wrote a word, some unknown thinker in the land of Tiv had concentrated the classless ethos of Tiv society into normative aphorism, 'Eat and give your brother'. Everything—food, money, jobs, chieftaincy—must not be hoarded or made hereditary but must be shared out among the people lineage by lineage (qtd in Iyortyer 104).

So many theories have been developed to trace its origin, however, many of these are oral. Kerker thinks the philosophy of *Ya Na Angbian* has to do with Tiv understanding of fair-play and justice (qtd in Shishima 11). For him, if properly applied—it can do away with many problems in Tiv land. On the other hand its neglect—can bring many problems (11). He believes that the philosophy has its origin from the practice of many people sharing a cricket. Thus, it was developed from the saying *Nyam Karen Nyighga* (qtd from Shishima 12). Literally this means no matter the size of the meat, it is eaten. Shishima himself concludes that *Ya Na Angbian* is a Tiv saying that has always been evoked among the Tiv people and the philosophy has a benevolent character (12).

Different scholars have sought to understand this philosophy in their own ways. Whether presented in written and oral form, the concept has many meanings and that fact is undoubted. Some even look at it as something negative. Jibo thinks that it promotes jealousy among the Tiv people and can be applied or extended to all aspects of life (Shishiam 12). Akawe, on the other hand—like Shishima thinks it is a political philosophy that is mainly evolved from the conduct of politics (Shishima 11). Shishima contends that it is a “principle of egalitarianism, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and above all equitable distribution of resources,” and it works against selfishness (12). It embodies “the idea of equitable distribution of political resources as enshrined in the *Ya Na Angbian* system was apparently employed to ensure that no segment is alienated and to prevent the selfish monopolization of positions of power and trust by a few person” (11).

Shishima sees it as the basis for stability and development, an instrument of peace, something that reduces tension and unnecessary bickering, but when violated, the result is usually underdevelopment, crises, greed, monopoly, anarchy, chaotic atmosphere, retrogression, and authoritarianism (14). Those that see it as political philosophy likens it to the federal character, political zoning or rotational system. Iyortyer likens it to the Golden Rule which says “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12). He considers the Golden rule a principle of morality just as like the *YaNa Angbian* philosophy. He also sees many similarities between the Golden rule and this Tiv philosophy. The Golden rule is for him, “the bedrock of human rights in the society today as it defines how human beings are to relate with one another” (165).

In a conference organized by the *Society for Research and Academic Excellence* at the University of Nsukka, Paul Akaa and Moses Anongu presented a paper on “The philosophy of *Ya Na Angbian* and its Impact on the Growth of African Values.” In the paper, they looked at *Ya Na Angbian* as a cultural and socio-political philosophy. For them the philosophy “emphasizes justice, fairness, altruism, accountability, and responsibility in our actions.”(2). This ideology is useful in the sense that it binds the Tiv people together, it is a good formula of power sharing and a philosophy that protects the minority against the majority in politics (Akaa and Anongu 2). The philosophy teaches diligent and just treatment of all persons and the fair equitable allocation of resources, takes care of the welfare of poor and more importantly in this day of ethniciticism, the philosophy curbs intra-ethnic and inter- ethnic rivalries (2). This philosophy is likened to other African concepts and philosophies such as the *Ujamaa* of Julius Nyerere which is about African brotherhood. It also has elements of the *Ubuntu*. *Ujamaa* means extended family, brotherhood or familyhood, and has the idea of oneness. One can success through

others or community. The idea is that all people in the community should work together. The goal of Ujamaa is unity. Unity can only be achieved through the respect of others and their rights. It is a philosophy aimed at creating traditional value of mutual respect, bringing units of families together, building up and bringing unity, love, cohesion, service and it is a moral way of life. This kind of system gives security to everyone in the society which is exactly the aim of human rights. President Nyerere used this as an economic philosophy it as many ramifications for human rights. Under this philosophy all people are brothers and therefore united. For Nyerere, unity is therefore, the main thing that can develop Africa (2).

Ubuntu is an African philosophy with deals with the value of human life. The term means humanity, it is humanity towards others and human kindness to all. It helps people to understand what is morally right and wrong. Under this system one is expected to see the good of other and not self (Metz 538-539). It has the meaning of "I am because we are." Singh Parmar says "it is a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity" (n. p). John Kehoe says "The values of Ubuntu manifest in good deeds, things like being sensitive to the needs of others, being compassionate, forgiving, caring and generous" (1). He lists the pillars of Ubuntu to include caring, empathy, sharing and respect (2). This is another African ethics and ideology that can be developed into human rights for it already has many elements of human rights. President Jomo Kenyatta also reiterated that the Gikuyu people before the advent of Europeans had a government system based on pure democratic principles where men and women had equal rights to decision making and governance. He says. "Prior to European settlement, African governance was based on sacrosanct principles of inclusiveness, equality of all without regard to status, freedom of expression and opinion, participation of people in decision-making based on respect of one another"(Hansuungule 73).

Literal & Semantics of *Ya Na Angban*

Ya Na Angban is translated 'eat and give your brother also'. The *Ya*-eat is more than eating food. It covers all possessions of the individual and community. It means you should not enjoy what you have alone but share it with others. Sharing with others is the main stay of this philosophy. Apart from that it is about taking care of those who lack the basic necessities of life in whatever form. According to Iyortyer, it refers to "what the individual or the community possesses such as tangible and intangible materials" (102). *Na*-give, which means sharing and sharing is fundamental to Tiv culture. To be human is to share with others. Sharing is about building the society and helping others to attain maturity. It helps others to develop morally, physically, spiritually, financially, socially, and politically. The Tiv people are known for hospitality. Dzurgba

the implication of giving someone the chance to practice his religion freely and associate with any group of persons.

The Declaration of Human Rights are well as the Tiv principle of *Ya Na Angban* are both instruments of human relation. It a fact that the fundamental goal of human rights is human relationship and that is equally the goal of *Ya Na Angban*. *YaNa Angban* is a propagation of peaceful co-existence, harmony and tolerance. *Ya Na Angban* does not only reduce tension, it helps people to be patience and wait for their turn. To give another person a chance is to tolerate the person. Nabudere defines human rights as birthrights of every person (3). *Ya Na Angban* teaches that it is the birthright of every person in the community to have free access to all the things that could possibly be enjoyed in the community. The principle is that every person must have what he or she is entitled to. This also foretells of the non-discrimination aspect of *Ya Na Angban*. Under this, the individual is protected from the greedy, the powerful and those aimed at violating other rights for their selfish goals. It protects minorities and the weak which is also the aim of human rights. What is more important about human rights is the value and dignity of human life. *Ya Na Angban* is also aimed at upholding the value and dignity of human life in all aspects.

To liken the Tiv philosophy of *Ya Na Angban* to the Western human rights does not mean the two are completely the same. The western human rights is legalized while the *Ya Na Angban* is not. One cannot be charged for violating it. Though violating it has its own consequences. Indeed, the western human rights is more encompassing and embracive. It deals with issues that *YaNa Angban* does not address such as women rights, children rights, women inheritance and circumcision. The western human rights is rooted in the western political system while the *Ya Na Angban* of Tiv is much more cultural. This paper does not see the UDHR as too much western bias or a neo-colonial instrument but a good attempt to develop what many Africans have always upheld in their own way.

Conclusion

This article does not in any supports cultural relativism. It is not saying everything in African culture is correct. The aim is to fish out the things in African culture that reflect the spirit and aim of human rights and develop them to meet up with the requirements of human rights. It should be a concept or philosophy that fights against unacceptable practices and promotes things accepted as morally right by the international community. The United National Human Rights Declaration should be used as the standard. We have gone beyond the point of criticizing the western pattern of things; we should come up with the alternative. Indeed, there are many people suffering some kind of oppressions in

different societies. All hands need to be on deck to find a mechanism to liberate those suffering. This paper thinks that both human rights document and *Ya Na Angban* are liberating tools.

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