

Exegetical Study Of Matt 18,20 And Application To African *Ujamaa* Aspirations: A Re-Enactment Of Igbo Communalism

Augustine Onyiloha¹, Dominic Obielosi²

^{1,2} Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Anambra State

Abstract

Individualism is scarcely a welcome concept in African life. Communal spirit is generally the order. No one is alone. The average African is convinced that alone can one achieve little or nothing. The Igbos say, *Igwe bu ike* (community is power). Kongo people have it that “a man outside his clan is like a grasshopper which has lost its wings”. Sofola (1982) and Onwubiko (1991) list sense of community life as one of the core values in African cultural setting. Jesus assurance to His followers of his presence in their togetherness underscores the power of communalism. This research work takes on Matt 18,20 from exegetical perspective and then seeks to give it a hermeneutical application bearing in mind the African value for communalism. Julius Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* philosophy is taken as an exemplary thought that truly expresses this unique African value of communalism. Since the Bible holds communalism at a high esteem and since it is an important part of African value, the researcher encourages the Africans especially the Igbo community to hold to this enviable culture even in the craze of ever menacing western culture.

Key Words: Ujamaa, Igbo, Communalism, Exegesis, Culture, Individualism

Introduction

Individualism is not a welcome development to man’s nature. It is indeed an abhorrence and foreign to his natural constitution. Biblical scholarship believes that God has endowed man with this yearning for complementarity. In Gen 2,18 we read: AD+b;l. ~d"Pa'h'(tAyðh/ bAj±-al{ ~yhiël{a/ hw"âhy> ‘rm,aYO’w: AD*g>n<K. rz<[Eß ALi-Hf,[/a,((Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him"). In ancient times, philosophers are not left out in this noble thought. Aristotle for instance describes man as “ens socialis”. He believes that one who cannot live with others is either a beast or a brute. Martin Heidegger, a very erudite German thinker and philosopher defines man as a mitsein. Africans are not left out in this communal spirit. Indeed, culturally, the Africans could be said to be champions of communal life. In the African community, life is based on the philosophy of live and let live (Egbe bere ugo bere, nke siri ibe ya ebela nku kwaa ya). Ifemesia (1979) captures the African sense of communalism as intrinsic to the African when he posits it as: “...a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values; a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings” (p. 2). In Africa people help one another not necessarily because of what they would gain but in



recognition of the other's worth as human being. Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to his welfare, some time and somehow. In Africa, especially among the Igbo's of Nigeria, no one does it alone. It is believed that 'gidigidi bu ugwu eze'. This thought structure is evidenced in the Igbo man's sense of community, human relations; hospitality; time, authority and respect for the elders; and even in her religious practices. This sense of communalism is enshrined in the Nyerere's Ujamaa philosophy. The researcher studies these communal traits among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria in the light of Matt 18,20. The paper believes that just as Jesus assures his presence among believers who gather in his name, so the Igbo is sure of her survival in her communal spirit. A purely exegetical lens is employed to interpret Matt 18,20. The result is applied hermeneutically to show that the provisions of the scriptural text is already in practice in Igbo land and forms part of her culture. The paper encourages all Igbo people to keep to the communal spirit.

Exegetical Interpretation of Matt 18,20

This text reads: ... ou- ga,r eivsin du,o h' trei/j sunhgme,noi eivj to. evmo.n o;noma(evkei/ eivmi evn me,sw| auvtw/n Scholars like Allen (1907) and Hagner (1995) believe that this promise laden saying attributed to Jesus goes back to Mal 3,16 and some rabbinic sayings. A look at the key words adopted indicates something deeper than ordinary reference to former sayings or teachings. Even if Jesus referenced the rabbis, it is not just a hotchpotch but a reference intended to communicate a deeper sense. His adoption of the numerals two (du,o) and three (trei/j) evokes significant theological connotation.

Johnston (1990) teaches that the number two speaks of fullness of testimony, either for good or for evil. Thus Gen 1,1 speaks of God's perfect creation while Gen 1,2 immediately speaks of ruin from an unknown cause. In John 8,17-18 for instance, Jesus in answer to the Pharisees says that truth is confirmed once two men testify. Of the seven representative men of Gen, the second was Abel who was characterized by his difference from Cain, his brother. Again, in the OT whenever two men are coupled together, it is with a view to marking the difference between them, as with Abraham and Lot, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau. In the erection of the Temple, Solomon brought a skilled worker in brass, Hiram of Tyre, who raised two pillars of brass (1Kings 7,15), testimony of the enduring character of the millennial glory when a King greater than Solomon shall reign in righteousness. When Solomon's kingdom became divided, Jeroboam trying to consolidate his position by preventing the people from going to worship at Jerusalem, erected two calves of gold (1Kings 12,28), complete testimony to the idolatry of God's people. Then followed the witness of two prophets, Elijah and Elisha (2Kings 2) full testimony of God against idolatrous nation. The Psalms also have this depiction of the number two. In the New Testament, this symbol of testimony is more conspicuous. In the two blind men of Matt 9,27 is found a testimony to the moral blindness of Israel, over whose heart unbelief had drawn a veil, that they should not see in Jesus their promised hope. In Matt 22,40, Jesus maintains that the whole law hung of two commandments. This idea of two signifying testimony spans through the writings of Paul.

The number three speaks of solidity. It is the symbol of completeness (Johnston, 1990). This solidity and completeness suggest the Triune God, hence three denotes Divine testimony or manifestation. In the three years of Jesus' public



ministry there were three-fold testimony from heaven to show God's complete pleasure in His Son (Matt 3,17; Luke 9,35 and John 12,28). Three times too, Jesus displayed his supreme power over death by raising three different persons (Jairus' daughter; the son of a widow of Nain, and Lazarus). At Jesus' trial, the failure of the best resolves of man is fully shown in Peter's three-fold denial (Mark 14,72) while the third hour, was the manifestation of the powers of darkness.

The verb *sunagw* (to gather) used in this passage as perfect participle passive voice is a *terminus technicus* in the New Testament. The idea of gathering in this passage is not necessarily in the sense of a mathematical togetherness in the sense of numerality. It is not a geographical unification. gathering here has the sense of many in one. It is oneness with the implicit notion of plurality. It is solidarity of all in action or function. Ferreira (1998) rightly describes it as unity not in essence but in function. The Hebrew parallel for it is *dxa*. It is an agreement in will and belief, Jew or gentile. It is oneness in mission. It describes the goal of all who believe in God. Gathering concept in this passage is therefore a reference to the unification of all believers, with no less eschatological meaning. It means turning all back to the one God so that Jew or Greek, black or white, there will be only one God and Father of all while all become His children in love and understanding. This last meaning anticipates the prayer of Jesus in John 17. It also recalls John 11,4.

The text under study adds a promise to the preceding statements. In the conduct of its business and contextually in the handling of church discipline, where two or three are gathered in my name (*eivj to. evmo.n o;noma*) Jesus would be there in the midst of them. It is noteworthy that the author used *eivj* (into) instead of *evn* (in). The text literally means "...into my name". It is another way of saying "under my rule". In other words, it is not a gathering in the sense of numerality but a gathering in willful agreement. It connotes a sense of intimacy with God in keeping with His commandments. The text echoes John 14,21 where the Lord says that anyone who loves him keeps his commandments and the one who loves him and keeps his commandment would be loved by him and his father and he will manifest himself to him. The passage must not be taken metaphorically therefore but literally. Once believers gather together, i.e in oneness with Christ and one another, the resurrected Jesus is there in their midst as articulated in Matt 28,20. The saying is closely paralleled by the rabbinic saying that where two gather together to study Torah, the Shekinah glory is present with them.

In essence therefore, where two or three are gathered in my name ... simply implies that the assembly of believers in complete and perfect agreement as to their intentions, the Master is always in their midst. It means therefore that unity in the community attracts the divine. The text echoes the Igbo proverb which says that: *onu madu bu onu muo*. It negates sectarianism, partisanism, nepotism, tribalism and divisiveness. In Matt 18,20 individuals gather together but no one is alone. In spirit, the assembly is one. No one is there for himself alone. Each is there for the common good. Everyone is present for the other. It emphasizes racial and tribal harmony through moralistic sacrifice. It enshrines the Igbo communitarian spirit underscored in the *Ujamaa* philosophy.



Nyerere's Ujamaa Philosophy

Julius Nyerere heroically coined an ideology suitable for the people of Tanzania. Before the colonial era, Tanzania was dominated by nomads, hunters and agriculturists each having her own social and political structure. With colonialism came western education and emergence of elites among whom was Julius Nyerere. He developed a socialistic idea to take care of the excesses of western capitalism and complement the shortcomings of Russian communism. In his thought line he envisioned a society composed of atomic family units. Tanzania was to become a country made up of Ujamaa villages with mutual cooperation and collaboration. The nation would be fundamentally made of family units embracing the whole society by extension. The Ujamaa ideology is characterized by distributionism as distinguished from the acquisitionism of capitalist society (Kanu 2013). Onwubiko (1991) commenting on Ujamaa says that in the literal sense, it means "togetherness", "familyhood". It is not a familyhood founded on consanguinity but on community spirit of togetherness which considers all peoples as brothers. In it, the welfare of each individual becomes the direct concern of the members of the "clan vital" (Potholm 1976).

This brotherly spirit characterizes virtually all nations and tribes in African. It is the same spirit that Matt 18,20 encourages believers who gather in the Lord to have. The Igbo nation of Nigeria especially exhibits this communitarian spirit. This is clear from the discussions below.

THE IGBO COMMUNALISM

Communalism and community spirit is a very strong cultural value among the Igbos of Nigeria. No individual is alone. If you are happy, you are happy in the midst and with others. If you are sad, your sadness and the cause for it is shared by all. In fact, your identity is properly expressed within the community. This sense of togetherness and communal spirit is witnessed in the ways the Igbos live their life.

i. Sense of Community

Igbo communalism is both suprasensible and material in terms of reference. It is suprasensible because the earth is believed to be from God and so transcends those who live within it now. It is material because it cannot be understood independent of those who inhabit it now. The idea of security and its value depends on one's personal identification in and within the community. The community is the custodian of the individual and so one must always get identified with it. Thus an authentic Igbo man must go to the community centre or village square for social, political, judicial and religious matters. It is the meeting place for political discussions, communal, sports and games. The community's deity is often located there and so it is also the centre for religious activities and even trade. Because of the cohesiveness of this sense of community, the actualization of one's idea, noble as it may seem depends largely on approval by his community. Davidson (1969) in the light of this avers that for the African,

...there stood the void in strong and ever present contrast. Outside this ancestrally chartered system there lay no possible life, since a man without lineage is a man without citizenship: without identity, and therefore without allies ...; or as the Kongo put it, a man outside his clan is like a grasshopper with has lost its wings (p. 55).



An Igbo connected with his community has a strong sense of psychological and ultimate security. Igbos believe that individuals come and go while the community remains. One is expected to identify with his *umunna* while the *umunna* stands and identifies with him in good and in bad. Thus individualism is never encouraged among the Igbos. According to Biko (1978):

We regard our living together not an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community-oriented action rather than the individualism (p.42).

Because of the Igbo man's sense of community, poverty was a foreign concept unless brought on the entire community by a natural mishap. This is because the sense of communalism defines the Igbo man's extended family system. As a member of the community, you have obligations to the community. Your right is defined by your obligations to the community and not your community's obligations to you. Part of this obligation is to share your success with your extended family. You have obligation to see that they are well cared for. Thus, we may have poor people but hardly do we have beggars in the Igbo traditional setting because of the communal team spirit. The spirit of the community survives on the basic belief that 'united we stand'. Even in the attitude to work, this team and communal spirit is reflected. Okafor (1974) documents that among the Igbos, when a job is to be done, the whole community turned out with supplies and music and proceeded to sing and dance its way to the successful conclusion of each particular chore and hence translates stressful work into a pleasurable productive pastime. Solidarity is the key element in the Igbo communal spirit. This sense of solidarity make the rights and duties of individuals appear as elements of corporate rights and duties so that the individual's private interests or loyalties do not disrupt the community welfare. Ayandele (1974) commenting on this observes that:

The individualism of the educated elite would have been good thing were it not a jarring one. Unlike the indigenous society where individualism was healthy, in the sense that it integrated the individual in the corporate unity, the individualism of the educated elite made the society they were creating ever more atomistic. There was a community of individuals that never succeeded in nucleating into small groups, how much less evolve into one single society with corporate attributes (p.31).

Christianity or no Christianity. Civilization or no civilization. The Igbo must be encouraged not to lose this enviable communal spirit under the pretext of modernity. The first group of Igbo elites who travelled to overseas for western education are known as palm nut products because, their communities contributed palm nuts, sold them and sponsored them with the proceeds all in the same communal spirit. It is unfortunate that most of them got so engrossed with the European individualism and so forgot their kits and kins. Jesus knew the value of communal spirit and so demanded it of his followers with an assurance of his confirming presence each time they gather together.

ii. Sense of Human Relations

Igbo community life is based on live and let live. The relationship recognizes the worth of human beings not only because of what they possess or what they can do for each other. The later can only come up secondarily. Help is rendered to one who needs it without demanding for immediate remuneration. Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to his welfare, some time and somehow. In the Igbo human relations, dialogue and conversation is a cherished value. It can be seen as bad manners not to share one's concerns with others. It is believed that he who discusses his problems hardly runs into difficulties – “*onye ajuju anaghi efu uzo*”. Again, it is a popular saying that “*ome akara oha oghom anaghi aghoya*” (the one who tells others what he does never suffers mishap). In Igbo man's sense of human relation, everyone is accommodated. The weak and the aged; the sick and the helpless are affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere.

iii. Sense of Hospitality

The Igbos demonstrate their communal and friendly spirit in their high sense of hospitality. Strangers are accorded great welcome through presentation of kola nuts, traditional gin etc. If food is provided everyone is invited to participate in the eating (Okafor 1974). A stranger is expected to eat of the kola nut presented. Not to eat it could mean that the visitor is not sure of his or her safety in the home of the host or that he has evil intention. An Igbo adage captures it well: *Obiara be onye abigbula ya. Onaba mkpunkpu apula ya* (A guest must not harm his host and when he departs, he should not develop a hunch back on the way home).

iv. Sense of Religion

Atheism is not known in Igbo traditional setting. Religion forms part of Igbo man's value. It permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. One important fact about the Igbo man and his religious belief is that according to Mbiti (1975):

Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence (p.2).

Atheism is therefore a foreign concept to the Igbo man. Particular to the Igbo man's religiosity is the fact that his communal spirit is still expressed in it. There is a kind of cyclic relationship between the dead, the living and the unborn. The departed members of the family are regarded as the living dead. The good ones are always called upon for protection. In his religious practice, the sense of togetherness holds sway. In his prayers and incantations, he prays for his entire family. He does not just single himself out.



Evaluation and Conclusion

Individualism is foreign to the Igbo man. Jesus Christ by encouraging togetherness and oneness in Spirit especially when his followers gather in assembly has underscored this core value in the life of the Igbo man. When Jesus speaks of his own gathering in two or three and his assurance of his presence, he does not just imply mathematical numerology. His teaching and idea transcends mathematical gathering to connote a type of unity in diversity. Mathematically, they are different persons gathered but theologically, their gather must express opposition to evil intentions and complete witnessing to his demands. Once this is done, he promises his presence in the midst of that group. There is power in the community spirit. There is meaning in togetherness. It is exactly this notion that Julius Nyerere expresses in his Ujamaa philosophy. The Igbo man's sense of community, human relations, hospitality, religion all differently depict this notion. Communalism is very positive. It is proven to be very beneficial to the Igbo man. He must be encouraged to keep to it and reject whatever that is negatively contradictory to it especially the incipient individualism of the Western world. To uphold it is to be resilient to a core African value. To let it go and embrace individualism is to lose our focus and pride. The repercussion will very probably be regrettable. Communalism is the teaching of Jesus. Early apostles lived it. Our fore fathers initiated, lived, and passed it on. It must be maintained as a core value for the proper growth of the Igbo man.

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- Correspondence: Email: doielosi@yahoo.com