Yoruba Intellectual Tradition on the Individual and Social Order: A Critical Insight

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Abstract

Discourse on social order considers fundamental roles that individuals versus social institutions play in engendering/endangering the existence and sustenance of social order. The fundamental roles of the individuals versus the social institutions in engendering/endangering the existence and sustenance of social order have led to dispute among social scientists/philosophers leading to different schools of thought categorized into two broad and distinct theories of individualism and holism. The former posits that social order is a function of outcomes of the actions of self-determining individuals, while the latter argues that society as a functioning whole determines the existence and sustenance of social order. Given the Yoruba intellectual tradition, this paper examines and demonstrates the fundamental roles of individuals versus social institutions in engendering/endangering the existence and sustenance of social order. Essentially, the paper argues the case that the roles of the individual(s), as compared to that of social institutions, are fundamentally indispensable in engendering/endangering the existence and sustenance of social order.

Keywords: *Social Order, Individualism, Holism, Yoruba, Intellectual Tradition*

Introduction

Incidents of mass shootings, disruption of societal peace, and related violent social conditions raise serious concern about the existence and sustenance of social order. Existence and sustenance of social order guarantees progressive and development of a flourishing society and individual. Thus, social order constitutes a very fundamental notion in discourses among social scientists and philosophers. Therefore, this paper re-examines the dynamic forces (between the individual and the whole) that engender/endanger the existence and sustenance of social order. Essentially, it (this paper) draws resources from the Yoruba intellectual tradition to underscore the claim that the individual rather than the whole is the most fundamental force that engenders/endangers (the terms engender and endanger are used literally to mean "give rise to a situation/condition" and "put a

situation or condition at danger" respectively) the existence and sustenance of social order. It is important to reiterate a shared understanding of what social order means, and why it is important or fundamental. The notion *social order* can be said to depicts the regularity, cooperation, collaboration, and any other united relationship that exist among people in society. This shared understanding features implicitly or explicitly in academic or professional conception of the notion. Moreso the notion has more technical meanings among scholars than the simply shared understanding.

Social order, according to Cole, "refers to the organization of many interrelated parts of a society." (2020); the nucleus of this definition is *organization*, and by any means to have an organization demands unity and/or regulation otherwise there can be no organization. In another publication, social order "refers to the way in which the various components of society: social structure and institutions, social relations, social interactions and behaviors, and cultural features such as beliefs, norms, and values work together to maintain the status quo" (Uboho and Udoh, 2019: 2); the crux of this definition is "… to maintain the status quo", again maintaining a status quo requires some form of united front and/or cooperation among members of society. Interesting parts of these definitions are the phrases "… many interrelated parts of a society" (Cole) and "way in which the various components of society…. work together" (Uboho and Udoh). These phrases express the very concern of social scientists and philosophers because they dispute about the dynamic force (between the individual and the whole) that is responsible for the existence of social order. The reason for this concern about the dynamic force is adequately noted in the "Introduction" to an edited volume titled *Social Media and Social Order* when it submits that "social order…should not be conceived as static, but rather as dynamic, constantly evolving and actively reproduced through continuous interaction." (Herbert and Fisher-Hoyrem, 2021: 1-2). An important note in the submission is that social order is a dynamic and not a static occurrence that is constantly evolving and actively reproduced by continuous interaction in society.

From the above, the question that arises is what makes social order a dynamic and not a static occurrence? By a twist, the same question comes down to asking what engenders/endangers the existence of social order. This question is the focus of the section titled "Social Order Between Individualism and Holism" where responses by some scholars and researchers are examine under the auspices of individualism and holism as opposing theories of social order regarding the force that is responsible for the existence of social order. Before jumping to the next section, it is important to say something about the Yoruba intellectual tradition, and why engage the tradition in the discourse on social order.

The Yoruba Intellectual Tradition

This paper seeks to employ the body or system of knowledge that is indigenous to the Yoruba people and culture, and not system of knowledge that is corrupted. In order words, this paper is turning to the indigenous knowledge system or what is sometimes called native knowledge system of the Yoruba people; it existed before the advent of colonial intruders, through the colonial and post-colonial periods, and still exists today. The knowledge system is very much alive today and actively functional because of its transmission from one generation to the other through orality. It is important to acknowledge that parts of the knowledge system are lost while most parts are

documented as books, journal articles, and digital productions. The importance of this knowledge system, specifically as it relates to the subject-matter of this paper, cannot be undermined. Before the intrusion of invaders from outside Africa, there are records that demonstrate the Yoruba society (the empires, kingdoms, chiefdom, and *baaledom*[1]) enjoys thorough social order leading to peaceful co-existence among the people, meaningful societal growth, and progressive development. Gbadegesin amazingly amplified this view when he notes that Bewaji (an author) explores indigenous Yoruba philosophy with the ultimate objective of soliciting an appreciation of the relevance of Yoruba traditions to contemporary problems because the author (Bewaji) is convinced that the survival and flourishing of society depends on their ability to solve their problems including the deprivation of the good life to the people (2021: 189). As a necessity to do justice to the title of this paper, the section titled "Individual and Social Order in Yoruba Intellectual Tradition" focuses on the Yoruba intellectual tradition to interrogate the system of knowledge on the individual as the most fundamental force (as against the whole or institutions) that is responsible for the existence of social order.

In view of the above, the paper argues the case that social order is a dynamic occurrence because of individuals' activities: actions/inactions, decisions/indecisions, values, beliefs, and so on. In other words, the whole or social institutions are important in the scheme of things regarding the existence of social order, but the whole or social institutions are not as fundamental as the individuals in engendering or endangering the existence of social order. The firm articulation of this position and its' ideal for understanding contemporary social issues/problems is the focus of the final section titled "Conclusion: From Particular to General".

Social Order Between Holism and Individualism

Definitions of social order point out two clear observations: (1) it is about organizing society to ensure unity and peaceful co-existence among the people, and (2) it is about the requirement(s) to sustain accomplished unity and peaceful co-existence among the people. In this regard, there must be forces liable for the way society is organized as well as responsible for setting up the rules and standards required to maintain the organization. That is, there must be forces necessary for the existence of social order in any given society. What are these forces?

The above question has led to the emergence of intellectual disputation between two distinct and opposing theories of social order: one theory argues that the existence and sustenance of social order is a function of the dynamic forces of existing social institutions while the opposing theory holds that existing individuals in society are the dynamic forces responsible for the existence and sustenance of social order in society. The two theories known as methodological holism (holism) and methodological individualism (individualism) respectively are the focus in this section.

A. Holism

Methodological Holism is the theory that states that the collective (whole) is superior to individuals because the collective determines the characteristics, beliefs, actions, and decisions of individuals.

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[1] The head of a community district recognized by the authority.

Explaining the existence of social order, the theory is committed to the understanding of the social institutions/systems rather than the activities of the constituting individuals. This theory considers the social collectives (communities, states, socio-cultural agencies, business corporations, political institutions, and/or other social collectives) as more important than the individual.

In "Methodological individualism and holism", Gibril notes that holism is the conviction that "society cannot be reduced solely to its constituent parts – i.e., the individuals. Individuals are the product of society, history, economic inequalities, social status, and so on. Therefore, they should be treated as objects that can only be perceived and understood from within. They should be explained through causal mechanisms that go beyond the individuals themselves" (Gibril, 2021: 167). In this regard, it means that holists believe that individuals are born, take their place in society and then die, but society continues largely undisturbed. Unfortunately, holists fail to acknowledge dynamics of individuals' actions and decisions as significant forces that impart society. That individuals should be treated as objects is untenable because it undermines the ontological existence of the individuals (see Francesco Guala, 2022).

Also, Bulle states that "holism…is conceived as the doctrine according to which individual aims and decisions are created by social forces or which explains behavior by forces that are external to the individual" (Bulle, 2019:162). By enunciation, this is a view that proponents of this theory believe that individuals are the puppets of society because they are controlled by social forces emanating from the organization of society.

For the holists therefore, facts about society cannot be reduced to facts about individuals. Society is autonomous since social forces dictate the directions of individuals' conduct and actions. Hence, social order as a social phenomenon occurs because there are societal mechanisms that shape individuals' characters oriented towards the existence and sustenance of social order. It can be argued that since there are natural laws governing the behavior of chemicals, elements, plants, and animals, holists are convinced that there are also social laws and forces that determine, govern, engender/endanger the existence and sustenance of social order.

B. Individualism

Methodological Individualism is the theory that interprets social phenomena as outcomes of actions of self-determining individuals. It is a doctrine that articulates actions, decisions, and conducts of individuals as fundamentals in explaining the existence of social reality. According to this theory, social occurrences are outcomes of the actions/inactions, decisions/indecisions, beliefs, and ideals of individuals.

In an article titled "Wholeness and Collective Intention", Liu comprehends individualism as *individual agent theory* to discuss collective intention. The author notes that "individual agent theory suggests that the subject of collective intention is the individual and conceptually recognizes collective intentionality, but ontologically, it believes that the mind only exists in the individual and that there is no "collective mind" outside of the individual" (2022: 209). What is important to note in this submission is the view that the individual and not the whole (collective) has ontological existence because the individual possesses a mind (mind being the seat of understanding, willing,

sensing, and other thought processes – see "Meditation II" of Rene Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*). Therefore, the individual is the most fundamental force/entity that is responsible for the existence and sustenance of social order.

Touching upon the theory of individualism and its' place in explaining the existence of social phenomena related to economic system, Ianulardo and Stella note that "…individual tastes, preferences, and desires are considered as the *prius*, the starting point of any subsequent economic analysis and explanation, … *because* individual agents' maximization allows one to explain how market relations (prices and quantities of goods and services) are determined." (2022: 199). In this connection, socio-economic realities (modes of social occurrences) are the outcomes of individuals' actions, decisions, and ideals.

Individualism as a theory, therefore, emphasizes the individual against the collective (whole) as the most fundamental force responsible for the existence and sustenance of social occurrences including social order. Hence, it (individualism) is comprehended in different perspectives as (1) individuals' behaviors and conducts have social consequences and outcomes, (2) social facts constitute facts about individuals, (3) social entities are assemblage of individuals behaviors and conducts, (4) explanations of social phenomena are derivable from facts about individuals, (5) statements about society are reducible to statements about individuals, and (6) social laws are derivable from general facts about individuals.

Holism or Individualism?

The dispute between holism and individualism is an important one and the appreciation of the dispute and its' significance cannot be undermined, particularly in the effort to achieve and sustain unity and peaceful co-existence (mandatory for the development of flourishing society) among the people. Observation from the theoretical dispute is that forces that drive the existence and sustenance of social order are in two categories: first is the structure of institutions consistent in society while the second is the individuals that exist in society. Theoretically, one can determine that the former (institutions) is molded to secure the unity and peaceful co-existence among the people while the latter (individuals) creates and molds the former for the purpose of securing the unity and peaceful co-existence among the people.

In principle, therefore, the above suggests that the former is not a necessary condition for the latter, thus there can be social order without social institutions and there can be social institutions without social order. In this light, it means that the individuals that constitute the society are the most fundamental forces that engender/endanger the existence and sustenance of social order. The reason for this claim is that *conditions of people (individuals as the governed) in terms of rights and privileges and the perceptions of leaders (individuals as the governors) about these conditions bring about collectivities (social institutions)* (Pais, 2022: 61). The same and more articulate view is propagated by Lerner et. al. with the submission that "there is interest around the world in the development of positive instantiations of character…and this interest is predicated on the belief of individuals, community leaders, program practitioners, and developmental scientists that enhancing the development of positive character attributes will benefit all individuals and, perhaps, particularly the thriving of young people and well-being in their communities and civil society"

(2022:34). This conviction necessitates the focus in the next section which interrogates the Yoruba intellectual tradition to emphasize the importance and nurturing of individuals as the fundamental forces that foster the existence and sustenance of social order.

Individual and Social Order in Yoruba Intellectual Tradition

An individual in any given African social system is an autonomous, self-regulating, and others-regarding being, according to Mbiti, because the meaningful existence of an individual is a function of the existence of other individuals. Mbiti notes:

The individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes this existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group...whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say 'I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am' (1969, 108).

The above is a signification that the individual in an African society is an embodiment of other individuals, that is, an individual shares the understanding that his/her own existence is a preservation of the existence of other members of society. Hence, an individual's autonomous and self-directing/regulating being is a function of group's (social) consciousness. The Yoruba society is not an exception regarding the individual as an autonomous, self-directing, and group conscious being. This is demonstrated when Fadipe writes that:

As a rule, the Yoruba *individual* cannot afford to pretend to be indifferent to the public – however anonymous. In the first place, the public has begun to have a meaning for *an individual* from early childhood, and from inside the compound. By one means or another, *an individual* has always been made amenable to the opinion of the group. Various members of the extended family have, at various times, taken their turn in bringing to bear upon him/*her* and his/*her* conduct various methods of social control namely: instruction, advice, persuasion, reward, and punishment. And just as he/*she* learns, under pain of disagreeable consequences, to avoid doing things which will earn him/*her* the disapproval of the small group inside the compound, so also does he/*she* learn to respect the opinions and prejudices of the larger society (1970, 309-310).

From the submission, Fadipe leads one into the nitty-gritty process of nurturing that an individual goes through in his/her lifetime growing up. The necessity of the process of nurturing derives from the Yoruba acknowledgement of individual's natural endowment as an autonomous agent whose autonomy can neither be destroyed nor eliminated but can be nurtured or cultivated to produce an individual that take decisions and actions or behaves in ways that engender rather than endanger the existence and sustenance of social order. In parody, Ogunlade et. al submit:

Individuals…are socialized into the prevailing norms, values, and practices that are considered functional to maintaining harmonious interactions…. Conformity or compliance with these social

expectations is sometimes interpreted as functional and perhaps useful in building and sustaining cooperation, cohesion, and harmonious interactions (2023: 178).

The above is a clear indication that the Yoruba nurture individual to act accordingly and does not take the hard line that insist individual acts in exactly those ways even though the ways are clearly defined. That is, the Yoruba culture accommodates neither indoctrination nor cohesion of individual, rather the tradition promotes socialization as emphasized by Fadipe and Ogunlade et. al. above. As a matter of fact, the Yoruba praises, punishes, and/or apply sanctions to an individual simply on the ground that he/she has or has not acted in conformity to societal expectations. Although, the culture often recognizes various extenuating circumstances; however, always insist on individual to cultivates, develops, and manifests characters to find out and do what support the existence and sustenance of social order.

The fact above is articulated by Gbadegesin when he explains the consequences of an individual acting contrary to societal expectations (like action that threatens social order). According to him, an individual that misbehaves in an *Agbo Ile* (a large compound occupied by related extended family belonging to a common ancestor) is corrected immediately and may be punished by any of the elders or older members of the household. This is the first exposure to socialization; in this kind of environment, an individual regards his/herself as a part of a household and not an atom. An individual sees intrinsic relation to others and the interdependent existence of his/her life with others. There is therefore a feeling of solidarity, and it is neither forced nor solicited. It develops naturally because of the experience of love and concern which the individual has been exposed to (Gbadegesin 1991, 62-63). Aladesanmi and Ogunjimi also reiterate the point in the submission:

Every stage of child growth in the Yorùbá thoughts and belief is characterized with different levels of care, handling, and formative directives. One of the major beliefs that pertain to this fact is that a child not properly monitored and cared for will certainly become a social destitute when such child is expected to be productive. A societal destitute child cannot take good care of him/herself talk less of making good use of the legacies of his/her parents or family…A child that is denied proper upbringing or a child that refuses to yield to the common path of societal norms is regarded as good for nothing being. It is the responsibility of parents to guide and give formative instructions to their children, but this does not rest solely on them. It is also the responsibility of the extended family and the entire society by extension in playing this role. It is believed that only two people give birth to a child, but the entire society guides and forms the child into the acceptable standard of their society (2019: 580-581).

Thus, an individual cannot exist in isolation since she/he identifies with social expectations as part of her/his own existence, that is, the acquisition of one's individuality is fastened with the existence of others; and this is made possible by nurturing the individual from childhood with ideals that support the existence and sustenance of social order. The individual, therefore, is the fundamental force that engender the existence and sustenance of social order in Yoruba intellectual tradition because it (social order) is a function of actions, decisions, behaviors, feelings, and attitudes

exhibited by *nurtured* individuals. Without coercion, an individual admits the responsibility of ensuring the existence and sustenance of order in society for the benefit of oneself and others.

To further elucidate the fundamentality of the individual as the dynamic force that engender the existence and sustenance of social order in Yoruba intellectual tradition, let's turn to some components of the intellectual tradition that are employed in nurturing the individual. The *Owe* (proverb) is a component employs to nurture the individual from childhood, two examples (nigerianfinder.com):

Ile la ti n ko eso re ode – charity begins at home.

Meaning: good manners, characters, and behavior are learnt from home; therefore, an individual's good/bad behaviors are traced to his/her background.

Bi a ba soko loja, ara ile eni niba – he who throws a stone in the market will hit someone he knows.

Meaning: just as the marketplace is often crowded, so is life and people's paths cross easily, so be careful of your deeds because they may bounce back on you.

The examples above convey the understanding that individual's characters matter anywhere and in all situations; and encourage that one's characters always support the existence and sustenance of social order. These examples are significations that *owe* is veritable component of the Yoruba intellectual tradition used to cultivate or nurture individual's characters, behaviors, and actions that make for good and wholesome human relations in society.

Another veritable component is the *ifa* literary corpus. Two examples (Oyebade et. al., 2018: 174-175):

   A. *Iwa nikan l'osoro o,* – Character is all that is requisite,
      Iwa nikan l'osoro; – Character is all that is requisite;
      Orikan ki'buru l'otu Ife, – There is no destiny to be called unhappy in *Ife* city,
      Iwa nikan l'osoro o. – Character is all that is requisite.

   B. *Iwapele l'ókun aye fi'ropeti l'owo eni.* – Gentle character is it which enables the rope of life to stay unbroken in one's hand.
      O da 'fa fun Orunmila – So, declares the oracle to Orunmila
      Ti o nlo fi iwa gba okun aiye l'owo okan-le-ni-irinwo imale. – Who by means of gentle character was going to win the rope of life from the four hundred and one divinities.

The *Ifa* literary corpus above emphasize individual's character as most fundamental requirement to ensure the existence and sustenance of social order. In the first example, the corpus emphasizes that it is character that matters to guarantee a happy life for everyone because there is no one

destined to be unhappy; the second example also underscores the fundamentality of character in ensuring unity and cooperation to overcome challenges as a society.

To stress the importance of individual's characters as shown above is a clear indication that the Yoruba intellectual tradition places premium on the individual as the most fundamental force that engender/endanger the existence and sustenance of social order. Although, the tradition acknowledges the role of social institutions in the existence and sustenance of social order, but not as fundamental as individual's characters, conducts, in/actions, in/decisions, and behaviors. Above all, the Yoruba intellectual tradition identifies individuals' characters, actions, decisions, and behaviors as the dynamic forces that drive the existence of social order.

Again, it is important to re-emphasize that it is practically impossible to have *all* individuals in society to always act, decide, or behave to support the existence and sustenance of social order. in other words, there are situations where some individuals by their deeds, decisions, and actions threaten or undermine the existence and sustenance of social order. However, the Yoruba intellectual tradition on nurturing and cultivating the individual makes the demography of such individuals minimal if not negligible.

Conclusion

Important evidence from the Yoruba intellectual tradition on the individual and social order as presented above is that the actions, decisions, feelings, emotions, characters, and attitudes of an individual are fundamental for the (non)existence and (non)sustenance of social order. Thus, it is instructive that the many social disorders in parts of our world today are a function of individuals' actions, decisions, and characters as against a function of the failure of social institutions. A scrutiny of most social disorders in contemporary societies will reveal the degree of human conducts, characters, actions, decisions, and behaviors as avoidable imperatives that endanger the existence of social order in these societies. As demonstrated, non and/or improperly nurtured behaviors, characters, decisions, and actions of individuals only lead to the kind of situations we are having in most contemporary societies.

As humanity, to paraphrase Gbadegesin, our achievements in social relationships are no match to our achievements in science/technology. And scientific and technological advances have not brought with them a comparable degree of conquest over our problems of relationship with other people. Our success in social relationships generally has not approached our progress in our physical environment (1991: 62-63). Therefore, this paper holds that we take steps to correct the mis-prioritization of social institutions over and above individuals actions, decisions, and characters as the driving force for the existence of social order; otherwise, we must prepare as a species to spending more of our resources to fighting terrorism, insurgency, rebellion, revolt, and other forms of social disorder that are direct consequences of our failure to acknowledged the dynamic forces of individuals' actions, decisions, and characters as the fundamental drivers of social order.

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Acknowledgement