



Research Paper

## African Ethics Of Responsibility: Overcoming The Blame Syndrome In African Communalism

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**ABSTRACT:** Most Africans blame others for the choices they make in life. Africans will point to another person as the source of their woes or the reasons why things are not going on well in their lives or Africa as a whole. The ancestors, gods, and especially witches are consistently blamed for the epidemics, famine, offences committed in the communities, and deaths. Till today, colonialism have been blamed for the poverty in Africa even though most African countries have been independent for over 20yrs. This article investigates why Africans hold others responsible for their challenges or failures and not themselves. It will be concluded that instead of blaming others for their challenges, if Africans could identify their flaws and challenges, and do something about them, a lot can be achieved in the African continent.

**KEY WORDS:** Ethics, responsibility, ethics of responsibility, African ethics, communalism, taking responsibility

Received 13 November , 2018; Accepted 27 November, 2018 © The Author(S) 2018. Published With Open Access At [Www.Questjournals.Org](http://Www.Questjournals.Org)

### I. INTRODUCTION

The main goal for the exercise of morality in the African context is the perpetuity of the community. The community is at peace when the gods, ancestors, the biosphere and the people live together in harmony. The gods and ancestors are known to be the messengers of the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is, therefore, hardly addressed in the African community since His role is catered for by the gods and ancestors. The Supreme Being is considered as the originator of the universe. In his classic major book on African Philosophy, which concentrates on the philosophy of the Akan people of Ghana, Gyekye observes that the Akan people refer to God as Onyankopōn, meaning the Supreme Being or the Great one. He is called, Obōadee, meaning creator, or Bōrebōre or creator, excavator, hewer, carver, architect, originator and inventor.<sup>1</sup> This means that God is the ground of all being. God is also regarded as the embodiment of all goodness, and as such evil cannot be ascribed to God. In fact, God did not create evil, evil comes from two sources: the deities and humankind's own will.<sup>2</sup> Even though the deities are the messengers of God, they have been given authority by the Supreme Being to punish evil actions in the community. The gods and ancestors are not considered evil when they act against the community or an individual for the wrongs committed, or when taboos are broken. For the African, nothing happens by chance. When something adverse happens, either it is from the gods or ancestors or witches or even fellow human beings. At all cost, an answer must be sought for every serious or mysterious occurrence in the community. Thus, when a young person dies, or one who is less than 70yrs old dies, the corpse is told to revenge his/her death. Thus, blaming others for one's calamity is embedded in the African tradition. Now let us go on to discuss what African ethics of responsibility is, and end up making recommendations as to how Africans could eventually free themselves from the blame syndrome.

### African Ethics Of Responsibility

The word responsibility derives from the Latin word *respondeo*, which means to promise a thing in return for something else. In legal language it means to give an opinion, advice, decision, or, generally, an answer when one is called to appear in court. The latter sense harmonizes with the German *Verantwortung*, which means answering.<sup>3</sup> This implies that a responsible agent is someone who takes responsibility for his/her actions, and therefore willing to appear before a court to answer questions regarding his/her actions. The activity of answering is therefore key in responsibility. This means, the self exists to answer and to respond to others. The logical conclusion then is that others are a necessary condition in defining a self, and subsequently, responsibility engulfs the whole of life, since responding to others outlines the meaning of self.

There are three main theories of responsibility: agential, social, and dialogical theories of responsibility.<sup>4</sup> The agential theory concentrates on an agent as the source of responsibility – “agent” here means the one who performs the action. In this wise, the agent is held responsible for his/her actions. It is referred to as the agent/act responsibility theory. Agential theories of responsibility emphasize the accountability of the agent.<sup>5</sup> When an action takes place, the agent could be held liable if it is proved beyond doubt that he/she is indeed responsible for the cause of the action. But if, on the other hand, the agent can be shown not to have caused an action, or in the event of taking the action there were very good reasons to excuse his/her actions, then he/she is not held morally responsible for the action.

The social theory is a theory of responsibility that dwells on the social observance of praise and blame. This means that an agent is ultimately held responsible for the roles and social positions he/she holds. It is to be noted that this type of responsibility is tied to one’s performance in the social role one holds, or the official position one holds in the community. Thus, Schweiker postulates that “Social theories of responsibility focus on social roles, vocations, stations, and thus communal unity”.<sup>6</sup> It was first formulated by F.H. Bradley in his *Ethical Studies*. In the social theory, for example, when something goes wrong in an organization or a community, the head or the chief is held responsible for the failure. In much the same way, when things go right, praise is apportioned to the leader even though he or she may not be the only one who brought about the success. But more importantly, in the social theory of responsibility, the self as a moral person is identified through social roles or the station that one holds, or through descriptions. Consequently, personal identity does not exist before the allotment of responsibility through descriptive practices of praise and blame. According to Peter A. French, in the social theory, moral persons “come into existence at various levels of description or, more to the point, via descriptions”.<sup>7</sup> Bradley notes that what constitutes the self is a prototype of associations within a community. The practice of praise or blame is the means by which society or the community determines the responsibility of the individual. The practice of praise or blame, therefore, acts as the means by which the social world is controlled as it helps form the character of the agent, as well as collective integrity. This means that the integrity of the self is defined by the social practice of praise or blame. Peter French states it precisely this way: “Experiences of shame are characterized by a sensation of the loss or the slipping away of the identity one has tried to maintain and project to others. To be shamed is to be stripped of one’s self-image”.<sup>8</sup> However, French and Smiley believe that we do not have to find out the cause of every action to establish its moral position. As far as an agent’s identity is at risk, the social practice of praise and blame is vital to a theory of responsibility. The Social Theory of responsibility, therefore, focuses on the office held by someone in a society or in an organization.

The dialogical theories have been formulated in two dimensions: Karl Barth’s divine command ethics, and H. Richard Niebuhr’s social ethics. Other proponents of the dialogical dimension are the Roman Catholic moral philosopher Bernard Häring, Charles Curran, and the moral teaching of Jesus Christ, to name a few. The basic teaching of the dialogical ethics of responsibility centers on an agent and his/her response to some “other.” The “other” could be a human being or the divine. It defines the identity of a person from his/her relation to the world, others and to God.<sup>9</sup> The dialogical theory is referred to as the self/other theory of responsibility because it focuses responsibility on the interpersonal relationship of individuals. They center ethical reflection on the observable fact of answering.

In summary, whereas the agential theory of responsibility concentrates on individual responsibility, the social theory of responsibility focuses on the leadership or official role of an individual and apportions blame or praise to him/her based on the output of his/her leadership or contribution to an organization or a community. The dialogical theory, on the other hand, dwells on the relationship of the individual to others, where others refer to God and other human beings.

In order to state what ethics of responsibility is, it is imperative to lucidly explain the meaning of ethics. Some scholars are of the view that there is no difference between ethics and morality. But I differ. Literally, morality is the dos and don’ts of a society. It is the right or wrong (or otherwise) of an action, a way of life or a decision. To have a morality is to hold a set of beliefs about that which is good and evil, commanded and forbidden. Morals or morality may refer simply to the specific set of norms or rules by which people should live. For example, one of the key moral injunctions of the Israelites is the Ten Commandments. Obedience to the Ten Commandments enables one to live a good moral life, and vice versa. The Ten Commandments are therefore the main well from which the Israelites draw their morality for their communal moral relationships. Morality is, therefore, the raw material from which people draw out their rules and regulations to enable good relationships.

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, is the study of morality. To “do” ethics is to reflect on such issues as the meaning of terms such as “good” and “ought” and the method of justifying ethical rules. It is a branch of philosophy that reflects, criticizes, defends, promotes, and suggests moral concepts, and to answer questions of morality on such issues as the source of moral norms and how to justify one’s rules for governing action in moral matters. In this sense, ethics feeds on morality. Ethics is, therefore, the steering that drives the moral car.

At the heart of ethics is the explanation of what morality means, why we live moral lives and the principles by which we live. For instance, the expression, “Thou shall not commit adultery” is a moral expression. But ethics comes in to critique such rule, and tells us why we should or should not commit abortion. In other words, ethics comes to tell us the repercussions of our moral decisions, and thus enables us to make informed choices. William Schweiker puts it succinctly this way: “The task of ethics is thus to articulate the values one ought to seek, to assess them critically, and thereby to provide guidance for how to live”<sup>10</sup>. African morality, therefore, refers to the rights and wrongs, the rules and regulations governing relationships in an African community, and African ethics refers to the study of moral injunctions in the African context. Consequently, African ethics of responsibility signifies the African’s acceptance of responsibility for his/her actions, and at the same time willing to appear before the community chiefs and elders to answer questions regarding his/her actions.

### **African Communalism**

Léopold Senghor, the famous African philosopher, poet and statesman, and former President of Senegal, was the first person to coin the word communalism. He did so to distinguish African communal living from the socialism and communism of the West. Communalism refers to a group of people that depend on each other for their survival; any selfish attitude by one of them is seen as a threat to the very survival of the community. Pieter Coetzee also aptly defines community in the following way: “A community is an ongoing association of men and women who have a special commitment to one another and a developed (distinct) sense of their common life. The common life is any public discursive space which members construct through action-in-concert.”<sup>11</sup> If this natural harmony is disturbed in any way by anyone, rituals will have to be performed to the gods and the ancestors to restore the disharmony. In his book, *African cultural values: An introduction*, Kwame Gyekye affirms that “A community is a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds – which are not necessarily biological – who share common values, interests, and goals.”<sup>12</sup> He notes that in African social community, every member of the community is expected to work towards the well-being of every individual in the community. Not to do so is regarded as inimical to the continued existence of the community. Children are trained right from the beginning through proverbs, folklore, maxims, etc., to inculcate the habit of recognizing the needs of others, and to work for the welfare and well-being of every member of the community. According to Bujo, the Western idea that you can act responsibly only if you use your rational capabilities (*cogito ergo sum* – “I think, therefore I am”) is not African, and that within the African community, the existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* – “I am known, therefore we are” – applies. According to Gyekye the main features of an African social community are cooperation, mutual aid, interdependence, solidarity, mutual help, collective responsibility, reciprocal obligations, altruism, and the like. He advocates that in African society, morality is designed in such a way that it promotes human well-being. He expresses it this way,

Thus, in African morality, there is an unrelenting preoccupation with human welfare. What is morally good is that which brings about - or is supposed, expected, or known to bring about – human well-being. This means, in a society that appreciates and thrives on harmonious social relationships, that which is morally good is what promotes social welfare, solidarity, and harmony in human relationships. An action, habit, or pattern of behavior is considered good only if it promotes human and social well-being.<sup>13</sup>

Within the African context, the responsibility of a person is tied to his relationship with and for the community. The self-identity of the person is derived from his/her obedience and connectedness to the community. What is ethically right or good is not, like the Western practice, tied to what the individual thinks or decides, it is intrinsically tied to the acceptable norms of the community. In the words of Ambrose Moyo, in the African context, “There is no identity outside community.”<sup>14</sup> The individual’s identity is, therefore, defined by his positive involvement in the community. Richardson aptly observes that “The notion of the sovereign will of the individual is obviously very far removed from the view that one’s very identity is known and expressed through one’s belonging in the community”<sup>15</sup> According to Munyaka and Motlhabi, “Only through the cooperation, influence and contribution of others, can one understand and bring to fulfillment one’s own personality. One is able to discover a sense of self-identity only in reference to the community in which one lives”<sup>16</sup> The identity of the person in communalism is, therefore, grounded in the person’s relationship with other members of the community and with the other (i.e., the gods, the ancestors, the Supreme Being, and even the unborn). This means that the identity of a person is also realized from his/her relationship and responsibility to the other.

This relationship of the individual to the other is crucial because it ultimately affects positively or negatively the well-being and continued peaceful existence of the community. In fact, that is why within the African context, every individual, especially the elderly ones, have absolute rights to inculcate good manners in the children and youth, and to correct the bad behavior of any member of the community so that their behavior will not spell doom for the community. Consequently, African ethics of responsibility signifies one’s acceptance of responsibility for his/her actions, and also willing to appear before the community chiefs and elders to answer questions regarding his/her actions towards the community and the gods and ancestors. In African ethics of

responsibility, blame should not always be shifted to others, but the chiefs and elders must be willing to take responsibility upon themselves to make sure that they hold people accountable for their own offences and shortcomings in the community.

### **Characteristics Of African Communalism**

The first characteristics of African communalism is the responsibility towards taboos. Taboos are very important since they are known to make or break the unity and peace of the community if not well managed. Etymologically, the word “taboo” is derived from a Polynesian word meaning “forbidden”. Taboos are religious and social prohibitions used to prevent the African community from behaving in such a way that the future existence of the community is not endangered in any way from the fury of the gods and ancestors.<sup>17</sup> Taboos are in two categories: general and special taboos.<sup>1</sup> General taboos refer to taboos that are used in the socio-economic and political life of the people. Special taboos, on the other hand, cover the religious lives of the people. Special taboos, however, come under the general taboos since all the religious prohibitions under the special taboos are also found in the general taboos.<sup>18</sup> The special taboos are the most serious ones as they are the ones that are committed directly against the gods and ancestors, and ultimately the Supreme Being. What we call “special taboo” is referred to by Gyekye as an “extraordinary” evil in the community, which results in corporate punishment from the Supreme Being or from the gods and ancestors.<sup>19</sup> Examples of special taboos are rape, murder, suicide, incest, having sexual intercourse in the bush, stealing things dedicated to the deities or ancestral spirits, etc. Failure to obey these taboos may result in the spiritual forces visiting the community with famine, epidemics, infertility, mysterious deaths, etc. Almost all Africans, including most African Christians avoid flouting the taboos in their communities as the punishment for disobedience could be instantaneous and fatal. Such people go through special sacrifices to appease the gods and ancestors. As a result, taboos are strong motivators for obeying the moral laws of the community.

According to Osei, within the African community taboos are classified into environmental taboos, economic taboos, medical health taboos, birth control taboos and general safety taboos. Environmental taboos are prohibitions geared towards preserving the ecological environment of the community. Examples of environmental taboos are: preventing people from clearing sacred forests or bushes and cutting down forbidden timber species; hunting of animals or fishing during forbidden seasons and sacred days, eating of sacred animals or fish, etc. This means that the authorities of the African communities will only declare a particular thing in the community or the ecological environment as a special taboo when they see it as so important that its extinction or elimination could have devastating consequences for the community and the people, as well as their relationship with the gods and ancestors. Once the thing is so important for the medical, social, economic and religious lives of the people, its use is restricted so as to keep it going for a long time. The gods and ancestors are then invoked to punish whoever flouts the prohibition. Because people are afraid of what the gods and ancestors could do to anyone who disobeys these special taboos, none will be willing to go against them. The fear of punishment from the gods and ancestors, therefore, acts as impetus for the moral responsibility of the people. The flouting of special taboos, if not checked, could result in the annihilation of a whole community.

The second characteristics of African communalism is holism. Neville Richardson, in his paper, *Ethics in an African context*, opines that holism plays a vital role within African communalism. He notes that unlike the Westerners who think dualistically, and therefore have opposites to everything, Africans see togetherness in almost everything. There is even no dichotomy between the secular and the religious. Among Africans, he observes, togetherness is prized over separateness. In other words, harmony and interdependence are at the center of African life. This harmony is also extended to the gods and ancestors, who are the custodians of the people and the continued existence of the community. Community for the African involves the people, the gods, the ancestors and even the unborn. Richardson puts it this way, “Western minds find African communality difficult to grasp because traditional African community means more than belonging to a particular group of people who are alive. It encompasses those still in their mothers’ wombs, about to be born, and also the ancestors”<sup>20</sup> Augustine Shutte puts it more succinctly this way: “The European idea is the idea of freedom, that individuals have a power of free choice. The African idea is the idea of community, that persons depend on other persons to be persons”<sup>21</sup> It is in this context that agential theory of responsibility comes into play. Your character and interactions in the community will normally determine your personality within the community. When you live according to the tenets of the community, you are regarded as a good person, and visa versa. For instance, Among the Ga people in Ghana, when you help people in the society, they say: *Mɔ̃nɛgbɔ̃mɔ̃ni*, which literally means, ‘This person is a human being.’ On the other hand, when you fail to help people in the society, they say, *Mɔ̃nɛgbɔ̃mɔ̃bonyoni*, which literally means, “This person is a dead person,”<sup>22</sup> or in other words, “This

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of easy categorisation, I named them general and special taboos.

person is a bad person.” This is in harmony with Richardson’s assertion that the sole aim of the holistic nature of African life is “the good of all, and the social ethics of Africa is deeply concerned with the good of all”<sup>23</sup>

The third most fundamental characteristics of an African ethics of responsibility can be found in the concept of Ubuntu. According to BuntuMfenyana, a socio-linguist who researched into the meaning of Isinto to understand Ubuntu, one should separate its two prefixes and suffixes and concentrate on the root word utu. Utu, he reveals, is the name for “an ancestor who got human society going. He gave us our way of life as human beings”<sup>24</sup> Ubuntu, therefore, refers to “an internal state of being or the very essence of being human.”<sup>25</sup> This means that we are ontologically Ubuntu. At the heart of Ubuntu is tolerance, compassion and forgiveness.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the main characteristics of an Ubuntu ethics of responsibility include caring, sharing, selflessness, tolerance, compassion and forgiveness. In other words, Ubuntu is one’s responsibility of caring, sharing and service to the other, where the other refers to your fellow human beings, the biosphere, as well as the gods, ancestors and the Supreme Being. Even though it is difficult to precisely define Ubuntu in Western language, “humaneness”, “compassion”, and “fellow-feeling” explains what Ubuntu means.<sup>27</sup> Richardson gives an example of Ubuntu as the selfless way by which people retain and care for the handicapped and the elderly among Africans without sending them to institutions to be cared for.<sup>28</sup> The selfless way by which strangers were welcomed and cared for is also an example of Ubuntu ethics of responsibility. For Desmond Tutu, “Social harmony is for us the summum bonum – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good.”<sup>29</sup> Ubuntu ethics of responsibility could therefore refer to the selfless caring for another person without expecting a reward; an altruistic kind of sharing.

From the above discussion, it could be concluded that Ubuntu ethics of responsibility is more prospective in nature, and like the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant, it also has the tendency to take care of the day-to-day ethical responsibility of humans. The African imperative of responsibility could therefore be stated as: In order to protect the future existence of life on earth caring, sharing and service should be our goal in all our interactions with humanity and the biosphere. Sharing, selflessness, service and caring in all our interactions with humanity and the biosphere contribute to the meaning of responsibility in the African context. This means that the activity of sharing and caring in a social setting are one of the core features in an African theory of responsibility.

The fourth characteristic of an African communalism is what is described as fellow-feeling. This is the concept in which those who are well-to-do have the responsibility to take care of those who are underprivileged in the community. This has been described as the extended family system among Africans. In fact, this practice of helping those in need may be one of the reasons why most Africans are not rich. No matter how small the resources of an African is, he/she is expected to help the less privileged in the extended family system. In fact, solidarity is one of the cardinal principles of African communalism. As Shutte ably puts it, “The extended family is probably the most common, and also the most fundamental expression of the African idea of community... The importance of this idea for ethics is that the family is something that is valued for its own sake.”<sup>30</sup> This means that in the concept of fellow-feeling, the well-being of a member of the extended family system is linked to the well-being of another member of the extended family. I can, therefore, formulate the concept of fellow-feeling in the following way: Because you are well, I am well; because you are satisfied, I am satisfied; and because you are clothed, I am clothed. So within the African communalism, “‘Family first’ and ‘charity begins at home’ are recurrent maxims of African moral thinking, where, at a fundamental level, the agent’s own, existing communal relationships are given precedence over others.”<sup>31</sup> Flowing from that culture, even when one is preparing food, the visitor and the stranger are also taken into consideration in the amount of food prepared! I remember when I was studying in Nottingham, UK, and one day a white friend of mine came to visit me while I was eating, I instinctively said to him, “You are invited.” This sounded strange in his ears. With an air of genuineness and innocence, he said to me, “your food is your food; you don’t have to invite me to share with you.” Such is the extent to which an African can go with regard to hospitality, and the Westerner with regard to individualism. In other words, whatever I do, the people around me, as well as the community, are taken into consideration in a we-feeling or fellow-feeling. The strong African Nationalism during the time of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president, is the result of the fellow-feeling among Africans. It is interesting to note that in spite of globalization, wherever the African is domiciled in the world, he/she still sends help to the extended family in Africa. I grew up in Accra, the capital of Ghana, but because of the way I was trained, till today, I still see it as an obligation to help my extended family. The same applies to almost every well-to-do person I know in Accra.

The fifth characteristic of an African communalism is the life force that holds the community together. Richardson claims that the force which enables the dynamic harmony and the interdependence among Africans is the life force or the vital link. The life force indwells a person in a smaller or greater measure. When it diminishes “through such eventualities as sickness, misfortune such as a car accident or lightning strike, depression, or the inability of a woman to conceive and deliver a healthy baby, the general assumption is that

malevolence has been at work,” and this, according to him, is mainly caused by a member of the community. In that case, the person has to be identified by diviners and, eventually, rituals have to be performed to rectify the situation. The rituals also have the tendency to increase the life force in the person. When the Ga people say “Mɔnɛesusumawa,” it means “the person’s spirit is strong.” This is normally used to describe a person who had gone through lots of challenges and have been able to survive. Because such a person is good person, his/her life force is very strong. When calamity comes upon the community like, for instance, so many people dying in a particular family, or there is famine in the community, or rains destroy farms, it is because the vital link between the people and the gods or the ancestors has been broken by an irresponsible person or group of people. It may be that the people have neglected their duty to the gods or the ancestors, or it may also mean that a member of the community has offended the gods and ancestors. The vital link may also be broken when members of the community are quarrelling with each other. In that case, rituals have to be performed to the gods for the re-establishment of the vital link. For example, an incident happened in Ghana which is worth mentioning here. In 2013, a new Termal Three (T3) electricity plant was installed at Aboadze in the Shama District of the Western Region to provide 132 megawatts to the national grid. Three months later, the plant broke down on mysterious circumstances. Subsequently, the traditional chiefs and elders sent word to the Volta Regional Authority that until the god who had been displaced by the is pacified, the plant will not yield any good purpose for the nation. As a result, the VRA had a meeting with the traditional authorities and “After over an hour of deliberations between the ministry, led by the Minister of Energy and Petroleum, Mr. Emmanuel Kofi Armah Buah, VRA officials, Takoradi International Company (TICO) of TAQA<sup>32</sup>, the parties agreed that a resting place would be built near the plant with the floor filled with water for the displaced God.”<sup>33</sup>

The sixth characteristic of African communalism is the fear of public disgrace. The fear of public disgrace in the African community acts as an impetus for acting morally among Africans, and brings to the fore the practice of praise and blame in the social theory of responsibility. One could be praised in the community if one upholds the social norms of the community with alacrity. As Gyekye rightly notes, “The fear or thought of shame or disgrace, of loss of social esteem and opportunity, and so on, constitutes a real influence on moral conduct among Africans, and as such can be regarded as a kind of sanction, if an obscure one”<sup>34</sup>. So, the fear of public disgrace is a motivation for upholding personal responsibility and characterizes an African social ethics of responsibility. When an African loses public face, it is also an indictment on his family and extended family as well. Because no family or individual wants to be associated with the breaking of a taboo and its resultant disgrace for the family, most people within the community stay clear of any taboo. “The fear or thought of shame or disgrace, of loss of social esteem and opportunity, and so on, constitutes a real influence on moral conduct among Africans, and as such can be regarded as a kind of sanction, if an obscure one,” Gyekye declared (Gyekye 1987: 141, italics mine). John Taylor also makes the same observation about Africans when he notes that, “to some extent the primal world-view of Africans belongs to a ‘shame-culture’ rather than a ‘guilt culture’.” So, the fear of public disgrace is a motivation for upholding personal responsibility. When an African loses public face, it is also an indictment on his family and extended family as well. Responsibility leads to praise, and irresponsibility leads to shame. Thus, African ethics of responsibility finds expression in African communalism.

### **Blame Syndrome In African Communalism**

Another characteristic of the African social ethics of responsibility is the belief that nothing happens by chance in the community.<sup>35</sup> Writing about the Akans of Ghana, Gyekye rightly pointed out that most often, explanations are sought for “extraordinary” occurrences outside the normal course of nature. Examples of some of the “extraordinary” occurrences are famine, floods, a pregnant woman dying when giving birth, a woman giving birth on two consecutive occasions and the children dying, someone dying before old age,<sup>36</sup> death through accident, death through a strange disease, dropsy, a tree falling on a person or a whole house killing the occupants of the house, when someone travels abroad and does not come back, when someone gets missing mysteriously, train derailment, death through lightning, and so on. Such calamities fall on certain people because they may have been immoral or he/she may have broken a taboo, or may have been cursed by someone he/she had offended or he/she may have gone against the rules and regulations in the society. In such situations, the questions asked are: “Why should it happen to that particular person?” or “Why should there be flooding or famine,” or “Why should he/she die before old age?” or “Everybody gives birth successfully, so why should she die giving birth?” “Why should he/she die through lightning?” and so on. Answers to such questions are always sought from the spiritual world through the Priests and Priestesses in the communities. Every “extraordinary” happening in the communities are, therefore, blamed on the nature gods and ancestors or witches or diviners or, depending on what it is, on human beings. Even when someone is not doing well in his/her life, or business, which at times may be his/her own fault, the responsibility is laid at the door-steps of either the parents or even friends. At all cost, someone or some entity must be blamed for the calamity of another person or any adverse thing that happens in the community. For instance, when a hut collapses in an

African community, the gods or ancestors or even witches may be blamed. It may be that someone in the family or that particular family may have offended the gods and ancestors. On the other hand, when the house of a Westerner collapses, he/she finds the fault in a structural weakness of the building and not in any supernatural realm. For instance, each year, the Ga Homowo Festival begins with the planting of some corn by the traditional priests, and for the period that the corn is growing, a ban is placed on drumming and noise-making to allow peace and quiet for the gods to bless the corn to grow very well. While the ban was in force, the traditional priests and priestesses enter into serious prayers to plead to the gods and ancestors to let the corn grow. If the corn doesn't grow well, it spells doom for the community, and if it grows well, it means that there will be prosperity for the ensuing year. It was, therefore, critical that the corn grows well.

In 2012, a Melcom Mall collapsed in Achimota, Accra, killing 14 people.<sup>37</sup> So many people blamed this disaster on the gods and ancestors. When the gods or the ancestors are blamed for a calamity that occurs in the community as a whole, it means that a member of the community or the community as a whole has angered the gods or the ancestors either by ignoring their wishes or living immorally or breaking a taboo, etc. Another example: On May 9, 2001, there was stampede at the Accra Sports Stadium (now Ohene Djan Stadium) in a match between the two most successful teams in Ghana – Kumasi Asante Kotoko and Accra Hearts of Oak - and 127 people died.<sup>38</sup> It was described as the worst stadium disaster in Africa. Few days later, the Ga Traditional Council acting President, NiiDoodooNsaki II, called a press conference and attributed the disaster to punishment from the gods and ancestors for the breaking of the ban on drumming and noise-making as a result of the noise generated from the stadium during the match.<sup>39</sup> In cases like this, it is the responsibility of the priests and chiefs to perform the appropriate ritual to pacify the gods and ancestors in order to avert future occurrence.

I recently asked someone who is going through financial challenges why he was in that situation. His response was that because his parents did not send him to a good school, he did not have the chance to go to High School and to University. Meanwhile, a lot of people went to the same school that he went to and yet are doing very well. Instead of asking himself why he is in that situation and see how he could come out of it, he is rather constantly blaming his parents for his misfortune. Mbiti puts it more concisely when he writes about the shifting of responsibility in the African community in the following way:

Every form of pain, misfortune, sorrow or suffering; every illness and sickness; every death whether of an old man or of the infant child; every failure of the crop in the fields, of hunting in the wilderness of fishing in the waters; every bad omen or dream: these and all the other manifestations of evil that man experiences are blamed on somebody in the corporate society. Natural explanations may indeed be found, but mystical explanations must also be given. People create scapegoats for their sorrows.<sup>40</sup>

This social practice of blame in the African society may be one of the reasons why Africans continue to blame colonialism for the poverty of the continent when Africa should be looking at the problems of her economic underdevelopment and take responsibility for them. The question is: Why are Africans not taking control of their destiny after colonialism has come and gone? Why are Africans still blaming colonialism for her problems? Has it got to do with the African blame syndrome? How can Africans move forward and take responsibility for the poverty, the selfish leadership, civil wars and the bribery and corruption that has bedeviled the continent?

Addressing students at Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal as part of a tour of some of France's former African colonies on July 26, 2007, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France criticizes Africans for blaming colonialism for their economic underdevelopment and urges them to take full responsibility for their economic woes.<sup>41</sup> According to him, Africa's problems lie in her inability to enter into history to "take from it the energy, the force, the desire, the willingness to listen and to espouse its own history, and to "learn to view its accession to the universal not as a denial of what it is but as an accomplishment", and to "appropriate for itself human rights, democracy, liberty, equality and justice ... modern science and technology as the product of all human intelligence."

He further notes that Africa's 'tragedy' stems from the fact that "it has not been enough a part of history" and that Africans "should stop repeating endlessly the same words and gestures." Without mincing words, he argues that "Africa is partly responsible for its own misfortune," and warns that Africa should "become conscious that the Golden Age they are regretting will not come back because it has never existed." Though he tries to balance his speech by admitting that the slave trade, "was not only crime against the Africans," but "it was a crime against all of humanity," coupled with the negative aspects of colonization, and the past mistakes of France in her relationship with Africa, he nonetheless emphasizes that the reasons for Africa's woes lies in the bloody wars between Africans, the genocides, the dictatorships, the fanaticism, the corruption, the prevarication, the waste and the pollution. He concedes that

The colonizer came, he took, he helped himself, he exploited. He pillaged resources and wealth that did not belong to him. He stripped the colonized of his personality, of his liberty, of his land, of the fruit of his labour.

Nevertheless, he also argues that

The colonizer took, but ... he also gave. He built bridges, roads, hospitals, dispensaries and schools. He turned virgin soil fertile. He gave his effort, his work, his know-how... The Muslim civilization, Christianity and colonization, beyond the crimes and mistakes that were committed in their name and that are not excusable, have opened the African heart and mentality to the universal and to history.

After insisting that the colonizers also gave a lot to Africa, he urges Africa to avoid “self-hate” and respect their own “heritage” from Europe, which is an important part of their own history. He is of the view that Africans must take responsibility for their destiny; they must look into the future rather than looking back and always using the past to justify the present. This, according to him, is a cyclical behavior which must be broken if Africans want to break away from their present predicament. So, Sarkozy hit the nail on the head when he repeatedly referred to the blame syndrome of Africans as one most important obstacle to the development of Africa. Akintujoye also emphasizes the same problem among Africans:

The employed blame their bosses for lack of results and non-performance, blame colleagues for conspiracy and corruption, and quickly justify Mr. X’s promotion to be a result of his relationship with the MD. The dismissed blame their extended family for spiritual curses, or friends for jealousy, some even their mothers for witchcraft!... and run to religious houses, some of whom tell the truth, but most of whom leverage on our cultural psycho-pathology to rip citizens off and feed fat and play to the gallery with baseless theories of spiritual interference!<sup>42</sup>

Even though within the African social ethics of responsibility the practice of blame is the means by which society assigns responsibility to the individual or to a group of people, it seems to have gone overboard within the African society. If Africans, in this day and age, therefore could move away from the culture of blame and take responsibility for the future development of the continent, much could be achieved. It is about time Africans stop blaming others, take the bull by the horn and work seriously towards the economic growth of the continent for the betterment of the lot of the people.<sup>43</sup>

Why is it that Africans blame others for their own choices and challenges? The reason is not far fetched. The ontological worldview of African communalism is organized in a hierarchical manner. In the order of authority and power, the Supreme Being comes first, the deities come second, the ancestors third, humans fourth, and natural objects and phenomena in the world end the hierarch.

How can Africans break away from this blame syndrome and take their destiny in their hands? Some of the reasons why Africa remains poor are civil wars, bribery and corruption, dictatorship, coup de tats, and the inability to think for oneself. Brain drain is another area that is costing Africa a lot. This is because, after huge sums of money from the scarce resources of Africa has been used to train skilled workers, they travel abroad to use their skills and expertise to serve Western countries instead of using their expertise for the development of the continent. Of course, there is a sense in which colonialism and slavery contribute to the underdevelopment of Africa, but that is in the past and Africans must learn from the past in order to move forward.

The first action that Africans must take is to stop blaming our parents, extended families, colonialism, etc. and begin to look seriously at what is wrong with us or what went wrong. Instead of looking critically at what went wrong and try to acquire the needed skills and competence to correct them, most Africans tend to complain forever. For instance, instead of complaining that one didn’t have the chance to go to school, steps must rather be taken to educate oneself; as we often say, education knows no age limit. Again, instead of complaining about what the colonial powers syphoned away, Africans must seek after more natural resources – which is in abundance - and use them to develop the continent. If Africans will develop, we must put aside selfishness, where one leader steals millions of dollars from the national pot, something that belongs to the corporate body, and sends them into a foreign bank for himself and his family alone! Such leaders do not care about the plight of the poor in the society. For example, when one leader of Nigeria died, it was discovered that he had stolen millions of dollars from Nigeria and saved them in foreign banks. Ironically, it is these same leaders who publicly blame colonialism for Africa’s plight.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

If Africa will develop, instead of blaming ancestors, gods, witches and fellow human beings most often for the results of the choices that they make, it is important that governments must use the resources of their countries to create opportunities necessary for the citizens to explore and develop themselves for a better future. African countries are also bedeviled with dictatorship governments, instead of democratic governments. Democracy, it is believed, go hand in hand with development, and where democracy is lacking in a country, the process of economic growth is likely to slow down. So instead of Africans blaming others for their woes, we must look at the many problems that the continent is facing to solve them for the betterment of the continent.

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