

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY IN ACHIEVING NATIONAL GREATNESS

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Abstract

Nigeria after a century of birth and over five decades of freedom from shackles of colonization and imperialism is yet to be one of the great nations of the world. The socio-economic and political problems, which have stymied development and progress in Nigeria (and Africa in general) calls for a sober reflection. The problems include economic quagmire, insecurity, corruption, bad leadership, ravaging diseases high death rate, ethnicism, etc. This paper argues that African philosophy will play a key role in revamping this ugly situation for the achievement of national greatness. This would be achieved through its effects on the human agent and structures of development in one hand and by providing solution to invisible problems of cultural alienation and identity crisis that have adversely affected the development and progress of many African nations.

Introduction

It is a truism that Nigeria just like many African countries is yet to be listed among the great nations of the world. Nigeria is still among the third world countries or developing nations. Kasdan (1973:4), opines that “the third world countries are technologically less advanced or developing nations... generally characterized as poor having economics distorted by their dependence on the export of primary products to the developed countries in return for finished product”. Some of the phenomena of the third world countries include high rate of illiteracy, diseases, identity crises, criminality, unstable governments etc. All these features characterize Nigeria as a nation. Hence, when some call Nigeria, “a great nation”, the giant of Africa, they are far from the truth. It is simply a presumption and presumption is illusion, which is always deceptive. National greatness has eluded Nigeria just as most of African nations; despite over a century of birth and more than six decades of independence. Nigeria’s problems like other African nations, seem all the more frustrating these days considering the progressive changes taking place in other parts of the world which were formerly grouped in derogatory ladder of “third world”. For instance, many Asian

countries like China, Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea, Singapore, etc. Hence, Oguejiofor (2001:23) rightly avers, “in Asia many countries have almost completely jettisoned the yoke of poverty and social denigration”

Against this backdrop, a discussion on “achieving national greatness” becomes imperative. This is because education is a veritable instrument of national development and greatness. This paper wishes to project African philosophy as a special type of education, which would play an important role in achieving national greatness. “Right from cradle of learning philosophy had laid claim to special insight into the nature of things, as well vicissitudes of human situation” Nwoke and Eshaya: (2015:260).

The socio-political problems African nations find themselves today is because of three basic factors: natural disadvantages, historical factors of slavery, colonialism/imperialism and the aftermath of the European contact; which is identity crises. Therefore, to tackle these problems, a type of education, which must be first contextual, and culture bound, possibly speaking the African vocabulary while reflecting on the same African ingredients and socio-political situations is a *sine qua non*.

This paper hence submits that the role of African philosophy in achieving national greatness is the synthesis of the projects of African philosophers. This role is encapsulated in three fold: on human agents, on structure of development and on invisible problems created by African contact with Europe, especially the psychological trauma, self-inflicted injury of inferiority complex and identity crisis.

Meaning of Philosophy

The major distinguishing feature of man from other animals is “rationality”. Any rational being desires to know. Hence, Aristotle asserts, “all men by nature desires to know” Ross (1980:176). It is this curiosity of man to find out things, to know that can be referred to as philosophical thought. Plato describes the philosopher as “a man whose passion is to seek the truth a man whose heart is fixed on reality”. Omoregbe (1999: X).

From the etymological point of view, philosophy is made up of two Greek words ‘philos’ and ‘sophia’ which mean love and wisdom. Literally speaking philosophy means love of wisdom. Agudos (2002:18) observes that, “to specify the type of wisdom and love in question, philosophy as considered above designates a high and supreme achievement of man as a rational animal”. Philosophy has no generally accepted definition rather there are varied classical definitions by different scholars. It is called “knowledge of truth” Copleston (2008:3). Epicurus defined philosophy “as an activity which secures the happy life by means of discussion and argument”. For James (1911:15), “Philosophy implies the thinking man and his concentration on the generalities of realities rather than on particulars”. Dewey (1916:381) attributes philosophy to the “power of thought that has become conscious of itself”. On the other hand, Wittgenstein (1961:49) pictures philosophy as “a logical clarification of thoughts”.

According to Kant, “philosophy asks four fundamental questions! What can I know? What I ought to do? What can I hope for and what is man?” Hence, philosophy concerns itself with the

problem of knowledge of the universe, the question of social and moral relationship belief and that of self-knowledge. Philosophical questions and answers recognize those question and consequent answers that are ordinarily taken for granted. According to Russel (1951):

Philosophy is an attempt to answer such ultimate question not in a straight and confident way as we ordinarily used to these first causes and principles. Philosophy is an attempt to answer those ultimate questions, not carelessly or dogmatically as we do in the ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically, after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas.

Omoregbe (2005:3), defines philosophy as, “a rational search for answers to basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and of human life in particular”.

From the above definitions, it is obvious that philosophy by no means enjoys univocal definition. Despite this, many if not all philosophers view it as a special form of rational and critical activity. It is a personal reflection on reality and what it means for man. Against this backdrop, philosophy subjects unorganized, uncritical mass of beliefs and unfounded view about nature and human experiences in the society into rational scrutiny to find out if there are rational grounds for maintaining these views and invariably upgrading man’s conditions on earth.

Philosophy and Africa: A Brief History

The African continent through history has suffered different situations in which it finds itself. This situation in Africa could be said to be beyond a problem, as such, Oguejiofor (2001:1) calls it “African predicament”. The African predicament comprises of slavery and slave trade, destructive racism, the humiliation of colonization, the confusion of political instability, the misery of economic crisis, the confusion of cultural and religious alienation, above all the total denigration and denial of African humanity. Africans were looked on as savages with no culture, no religion, no history and civilization. It was this denigration, which served as justification for European imperialism and the colonization of Africa. Africans, “were taken as uncivilized or not rational if they were human. They were not organized if they were rational. They did not know God if they were religious. They were illiterate if at all they were intelligent” Oguejiofor (2001:92).

The cumulative effect of the African predicament crystallized into the debilitating effect of a psychological trauma of a self-inflicted inferiority complex. It was in this context that contemporary African philosophy reared its head. Being supposedly inferior, the African was taken as incapable of rising above a certain level of conceptual thinking; he lacked the abstractive power to think, as such, does not have a philosophy and cannot get any.

In this regard, the question of African identity and humanity remains the major motivating factor in the field of African contemporary philosophy. In addition, because of this direction, the philosophical effort was therefore to assert or affirm the African humanity and identity in the face of dehumanizing experiences, just to be liberated from the trauma of inferiority complex. In order words, the assertion of the humanity of the African gave rise to the contemporary African philosophy. Placid Tempels was the person that set the pace in the assertion. Motivated by

sympathy, he entered into the scene to challenge the assumption and the prejudices of his contemporaries, to assert the humanity of the Bantu people of Africa by writing his book “La philosophie de Bantu”, published in 1948. He argues that every human being has a philosophy and lives by it. “Thus Africans possess a philosophy or system of thought peculiar to them and live by it” Tempels (1948). He did this by erecting ontology through a study of Bantu culture, “an ontology that is based on vital force” Oguejiofor (2001:93). So to deny the Africans of a philosophy, tantamount to the exclusion of them from the category of men, i.e. to deny their humanity. Tempels work, “Therefore was like an act of faith in the humanity of the Africans” Oguejifor (2001:93).

The beginning of contemporary African philosophy was marked by the inspiration of Tempels work because it was at the time seen as the paradigm of African philosophy. These inspired African thinkers like Kagame, Mbiti, and Senghor. Later in the early 70s, African thinkers in the likes of Hountondji, Towa, Boudurin, Boulanga, Okere, Oruka etc came to challenge the thought of Tempels and his immediate followers.

Okafor (1997:254) opines that, “indeed Tempels became for African philosophy what Thales was for Western philosophy”. This Tempels’ project and later challenges to it culminated to the trends of African philosophy. Olusegun Oladipo classified it into two: Traditionalists and Analysts. Traditionalists uphold the presence of philosophy in African tradition in general. While Analysts contend that philosophy is a special, kind of academic discipline that is not to be sought wherever there is culture. It was late Kenyan philosopher, Odera Oruka who expanded the divisions into four known as current in African philosophy. They include Ethnophilosophy, Professional, National ideological current and Sage philosophy. However, other trends abound, for instance, Hermeneutic current.

Definition, Scope and Nature of African Philosophy

The word Africa may be regarded as any person born in Africa either of whose parents is African descent. Again any person born outside Africa either whose parents is of African descent. Africans at a glance may mean the physical inhabitant of the African continent to the extent that they share much closer bond in worldview, culture, religion, etc.

However, talking about the definition of African philosophy, we can say that the various definitions of philosophy presented above which of course are definitions of philosophy in academic sense suffices for what African philosophy in its academic sense is all about.

We have seen that it is generally admitted that philosophy’s important task is to find rational ground and validity for man’s total experience. Philosophy raises critical questions about the universe and in the words of Heidegger “on man himself and on the meaning and goal of human being” (1961:8).

African philosophy on the other hand articulates and critically reflects on the total experience of the African. On the ways, he perceives reality. African philosophy places special emphasis on the African his world, history, values and the like, and on the significance these have for him. In general, African philosophy explores the particular way(s) the African experiences,

conceives and interprets nature, society, man, God, human conduct, and so on. In short, it deals with the African in his radical subjectivity that is precisely as an African.

Therefore, following Kant's assertion that philosophy asks for fundamental questions namely: what can I know? What ought I do? What can I hope? In addition, what is man; African philosophy also raises these questions but not in their generic and abstract meaning, but in their concrete, that is to the extent these questions disclose the African in his total experience. African philosophy thus seeks to understand the person. It systematically and coherently articulates his experience of reality. Its specific area and material object is therefore primarily and directly the African and his world.

Therefore, briefly defined, African philosophy is a critical thinking on the African and his experience on reality. It is according to Okolo (1987:12) "a path to a systematic, coherent discovery and disclosure of the African as a being-in-the African world". Through this knowledge and disclosure of himself and his world by critical reflection, the African grasp reality that is to say attains the truth about man and the cosmos in its entirety. For Anyanwu (1981:17) African philosophy is that "which concerns itself with the way in which African people of the past and present make sense of their existence of their destiny and of the world in which they live". Mbiti (1997:10) believes that "African philosophy is the understanding attitude of mined, logic and perception behind the manner in which Africans think, act and speak in different situations in life" Eneh (1991:13-14) defines African philosophy as "a critical reflection, analysis and synthesis of African cultural beliefs in reality". The above discussions expose us on the nature and scope of African philosophy. As regards the definition, there is not yet a generally accepted definition of African philosophy just as there is not yet a generally accepted definition of the discipline philosophy.

The role of African Philosophy in Achieving National Greatness

The concern for the role of education in achieving National greatness arises from the fact of conspicuous, obvious and immediate biting needs of African societies. African nations are classified as the third world. Most nations in African continent are characterized by the third world phenomena, which include underdevelopment, bad leadership, economic crises, cultural alienation, diseases poverty and identity crises. All these point that most African nation are yet to be great or are en route to greatness.

Therefore, in the face of the predicament that has made development elusive, the clarion call for every academic discipline to contribute its quota in the immediate amelioration of the developmental problems in Africa becomes imperative.

The role of African philosophy in this project becomes contextual under-pining of the outcome of philosophical reflections. In this regard, the role of African philosophy in achieving national greatness is the synthesis of all the projection of Africa philosophers.

This is focused in three dimensions: The first is the role of philosophy on the human agent of greatness. Philosophy aids greatness by improving in some respects the human beings involved as agents of development and greatness. According to Oguejiofor: (2009:255), "this agreement

implies that the inadequacies of the agent of development, among other factors, lead to conditions of poverty and misery in the first place”.

This assumption presupposes that human agents should be exalted or trained to engage in actions that lead to amelioration situations that have stymied achievement of national greatness. African philosophy can do this by making the human agents more morally responsible. This will help them curb such anti-developmental tendencies like corruption, misappropriation of public fund, unwarranted quest for material wealth found among leaders and citizens in our society. Plato believes that “knowledge is virtue” (Omogbe: 1993:161). Man who does evil does not actually know what he is doing. Therefore, the presupposition is that the awareness of the implications and meaning of ethical values lead to translating them into practice.

The second focus of African philosophy is on the structure of greatness. African philosophy would help to insert systems that will be more practicable in Africa. These are systems that are attuned to the specific situations in our society, not just foreign systems that have been very difficult to contextualize in African societies. For Oguejiofor (2009:235). “There is a supposition that philosophy, more than any other discipline is placed to encapsulate the type of versatility required to fashion a suitable socio-political economic system that would lead to the improvement of African predicament”.

It is indubitable that one of the major obstacles to achieving national greatness in Africa is bad governance. Akhideno rightly points out “despite the promises of democracy, the practice of democracy in most African countries has actually shifted from one country to another. ... For Africans this promises of democracy are rather a pie in the sky, simply unrealizable (1998:151). The question that begs for answer is, why has democracy failed in Africa despite its global acceptance as the best ideology and form of government? The answer is that democracy lacks “Africanness”.

The African philosophers in line with this have proposed various brand of democracy and other forms of government that are African vis-à-vis African world view. In his avowal, Akhideno (1998:153) maintains that re-visitation of African political systems which despite some criticisms contain elements such as checks and balances, aspect of aristocracy, equality, etc that can be used to invent workable African political systems”. Wiredu (1995:33-63) proposes “a democratic system that will eschew all forms of political party and based on African practice of decision by consensus”. Iroegbu projects “ohacracy” which is the rule of the masses. Anosike (1986:257) believes the best form of government for African, is a “nonparty system with an electoral college true to the African continent” Njoku (2004:64-84) opts for covenant relationship as the basis for good governance”. However, Oluwole (2004:419-430) prefers “traditional democratic system” as a way out. Echekwube (2004:457-480) suggests “a return to African communalist system of governance to curb the excesses of rulers”. There are yet other forms of government fashioned by African philosophers as the panacea to bad governance in the continent.

Furthermore, the role of African philosophy in relation to this second focus is the critique of ideology. This is actually the role some African philosophers like Hountodji and Oladipo have assigned African philosophy. There should be the blending of African traditional values/ideologies

with Western values and ideals. In doing so, those that lack internal consistency which Agbakoba: (2002:10) describes as “the logical coherence of the various aspects of the ideology horizon that the consistency demonstrates the ability of the basic principles of the ideology to be applied across space and time”, should be left behind. The good ones should be blended by consciously adopting some foreign values and harmonizing them to fit for the contemporary African society.

The channels that have been taken by traditionalists and some analysts in search of African identity have often been defined as “false route”. Some have advocated for the return to pre-colonial African traditional system, while many believe that the stand has been over taken by modernity, as such identity lies in complete adoption of Western tradition. Therefore, care should be taken in rejecting African values and accepting Western values. There should be value reorientation especially in Nigeria. All good values in African culture both material and non-material should not only be retained, but also be promoted, while science and technology should be very quickly domesticated in Africa.

The third focus is the role African philosophy would play in rescuing Africans from invisible problems created by African underdevelopment, especially the psychological trauma, a self-inflicted injury of interiority complex. According to Oguejofor (2009:256), “It is often not seen by African philosophers themselves that this factor exerts enormous influence on the outcome of their work, including their concern for development”.

There is identity crises among Africans. The personality and the freedom of Africans are in question, hence the African identity crisis. The identity crisis, loss of freedom and self-determinations was wrought by Western colonialism and imperialism. When African personality passed through the rough and herculean terrain of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and new steps on the ground of imperialism and false globalization, it became bastardized. These antecedents and ambiguity of attitudes on the part of both Europeans and African gave rise the psychological trauma and cultural alienation, to the loss of collective identity of the Africans.

African philosophy, so appeared in this limelight as a rebellion against this untenable situation. Instead of doing philosophy, many African philosophers were busy trying to assert the African ability to think against denial of African humanity by some pears.

In the light of this, for the achievement of national greatness, African philosophy should not be a mere academic defense, but African philosophy should help to assert the African personality, neither by glorifying the African past nor by total rejection of African traditional values, but by a conscious modification of the pre-colonial African values with some foreign values. Above all, African philosophy would help in Africans, right frame of mind “philosophical attitude in order to realize the true identity. The realization of this identity indeed will mark the beginning of achieving national greatness.

Conclusion/Recommendation

This paper brings to bear that in the quest for achieving national greatness, African philosophy matters a lot. African philosophy as a discipline would help to develop the human agent by helping to imbue in the minds of Africans both leaders and the led to engage in actions that lead to amelioration of the condition that have been the cog in the wheel of achieving national greatness,

such as corruption and bad attitude to work. It is also the submission of this paper that it will also help to invent developmental structures and systems that would be more practicable in Africa not just the insistence on Western systems and paradigms, a copycat mentality. It was Frantz Fanon, who said, “If we want to turn Africa into new Europe ... then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They know how to do it better than most gifted among us. But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries” Fanon (1963:254). Equally, African philosophy would help to resolve the African identity crisis, detraumatize Africans from the psychological trauma holding them sway; being neither Europeans nor truly Africans.

Therefore, African philosophy is a veritable instrument for African to develop authentic frame of mind “a philosophical attitude” which will liberate them from the psychological trauma holding them hostage against the discovery of true identity and the gullibility inherent in traditional religious belief system which is inimical to growth of science and technology.

Finally, the following are the recommendations of this paper.

- ❖ Departments of African philosophy should be introduced in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions for critical study of African socio-political and economic systems.
- ❖ African philosophy must be first contextual and culture bound since it should speak the African vocabulary while reflecting on the same African ingredients and *sitz-em-leben* (situations in life).
- ❖ African languages should allowed as one of the official languages in teaching and learning processes in African.

Educational institutions, especially in study of African socio-political systems.

- ❖ Ennobling grounds should be provided for African class of thinkers and many be included in leadership positions in lieu of political sycophants.
- ❖ African scholars should direct their brains and muscles to inventing African socio-political system that will suit modern Africa, rather than trying to adjust our lives to the European style, so that European system will suit us.

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