

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: THE TASK OF ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Introduction

The key objective of this discourse is to delineate some of the basic tasks of contemporary African philosophers, without entanglement in the perennial dispute over the existence and nature of African philosophy. The peoples of modern Africa are faced with various social and economic problems. The African condition requires an all-encompassing survey by African philosophers in order to identify the problems that must be tackled. Thus, the genesis, existence and nature of African philosophy which engendered much philosophical debates since Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* was published in 1945, shall cease to be the perennial subject matter of modern African philosophy. African philosophers were basically engaged in argument pertinent to the existence and nature of African philosophy in the past three decades. Such debates were an important phase in African philosophy. However, African philosophers of the 21st Century need to focus their philosophic acumen on the evolution of philosophies that are socially, politically and economically viable to the African condition. We should ensure that philosophy in Africa must become a viable method for dealing with the diverse problems facing the African peoples. African philosophers need to attack the contemporary confusion in the socio-economic life of most African nations with the feeling that there lies a duty which cannot be evaded. It is a duty from which African philosophers cannot withdraw themselves without betraying their true mission.

According to Rene Descartes, "the civilization and culture of a nation is regulated by the degree in which true philosophy flourishes in it, and accordingly, that to contain true philosophers is the highest privilege a state can enjoy."¹ Modern African philosophy does have a social function to perform in order to avoid being devoid of social value in Africa. It should clarify for Africans the social and moral issues of our times and thereby contribute to the aspirations of Africans to attain a more ordered and meaningful existence. African philosophy would be part of the process of criticizing or clarifying African cultures. It has to assist in distinguishing meanings within African cultures and to help in giving it direction and form. Dewey declares that philosophy must cease to be "a device for dealing with the problems of philosophy" and become a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of humans. Dewey's postulations about the social function of philosophy find similar statement in R.J. Njoroge's critical expositions on philosophy and social consciousness.

The practical value of philosophy has been emphasized by Njoroge in his attempt to explore the extent to which philosophy can illuminate the question of social consciousness within the African condition. Njoroge argues that philosophy should not perform only analytical functions.² Philosophy has a wider role to play in society, but in some philosophical traditions of the past, this has been sacrificed on the altar of the analytical

function of philosophy. Nevertheless, he duly reckons the importance of this analytic role of the philosopher when he states:

In the analytic field he sells his clarification of issues, a task which is necessary for enlightened social policy. An analytical philosopher is capable of revealing fallacies in certain arguments of politicians who may think that only certain worldviews are consonant with the adoption of certain forms of social organisation.³

He posits that philosophy must not only analyse but it must also endeavour to change the world by exerting its constructive influence on our social life. One of the functions of philosophy according to him should be to develop moral sensitivity in those who study the subject so that they can explore and suggest what could have beneficial impacts on their social milieus. This implies that philosophy should perform normative functions along with the analytical ones. In respect of this normative function of philosophy, Njoroge maintains that:

The most successful philosopher in the social field would be the one who would, as it were, produce normative ideas or suggest such ideas, not necessarily explicitly, at least implicitly through his analysis of certain social phenomena. A reflection on the question of what is worthwhile in a culture is bound to reveal the philosopher's value not only to himself but also to others. In the normative field the philosopher sells his moral predilections.⁴

This shows that the African philosophers in order to fill this role must attain social consciousness through the acquisition of

the knowledge of prevailing social relationships in African societies. He must study the social situation in a given social environment to be able to figure out how it can be best organized. African philosophers therefore have to be morally sensitive because without the moral awareness of the existing social order that need to be altered or changed it means the philosopher has not attained social consciousness.

Evidently, the bulk of our tasks relate to practical philosophy. The aim of African philosophy should be action not theory, yet it must fulfill the theoretical aspect of authentic philosophical activity. J.O. Sodipo's assertion about philosophy proper applies by extension to African philosophy too. Philosophy must involve reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles we always use to organise our experience not only in our moral, social, political and religious life but also in other endeavours such as psychology, history and the natural sciences.⁵

Social Injustice in Africa

African philosophers have to examine the kinds of social injustice prevalent in Africa particularly at the national level. What are the factors that contribute to the persistence of social injustice in most African states? African philosophers are to throw light on the problems entrenched in many African nations which pave the way for social injustice. Social injustice is not a phenomenon peculiar to African nations. As Ioanna Kucuradi rightly observes, social injustice is a global disease; it prevails in both the developing and the developed countries. In this respect, Kucuradi suggests that "international and especially regional co-operation between philosophers, seems very important in order that philosophy may fulfil its vision in today's world."⁶

African philosophers along with their counterparts worldwide have to deal with the problem of conceiving radically novel institutions that would serve as effective ways for the prevention of social injustice. Some features of the social situation in modern Africa include the following facts: the poorest people in African societies are women, there are population and labour problems, mixture of religion and politics, tribal discriminations and crime, land and border disputes, disorganization of communal life, language parochialism, marital malpractices, the development of slums as a consequence of industrialization, AIDS, lack of character-building due to lack of integral education and social disorganization. There are unimaginable waves of domestic violence and various gender issues which have remained unresolved in the moral and social life of most African peoples. African philosophers must recognize and address these undesirable immoral features of our social situation. Any serious philosopher must focus and critically reflect upon, abstract from, and ultimately return to the effective resolution of the problems persisting at a given epoch. Kwame Nkrumah highlights this fact about philosophy and the social situation when he states that,

Philosophy always arose from a social milieu and that social contention is always present in it, either explicitly or implicitly. Social milieu affects the content of philosophy and the content of philosophy seeks to affect social milieu either by confirming it or opposing it.⁷

The inextricable mutual relationship between philosophy and culture entails that every philosophy arises from a social milieu or situation on which it seeks to make tangible impacts. African philosophy

must evolve as a practical response to the basic African problems in our time.

Teodros Kiros substantiates the widely commended opinion that we need a practical African philosophy. He expresses this position in the light of some historical factors contributing to the human condition in modern Africa. He postulates that:

Philosophy in the African landscape is destined to be a practical/moral task, a task imposed by the tragedies of history: the brutalities of slavery; the exacting tortures of colonialism; the menacing despotisms of the early phases of industrialisation; the excesses of capitalist indifference to the plight of the poor; the widespread absence of technological facilities with which to combat disease and poverty; and most acutely, the blindness of the African bourgeoisie to the condition of the poor in Africa. All these manmade obstacles can be overcome by intelligence, sympathetic imagination and philosophy as a practical moral activity.⁸

While historical factors cannot be discounted, mismanagement and insensitivity to basic human needs by African elites in post-colonial Africa are also demoralizing factors contributory to the challenges we now attempt to bring under control through practical philosophizing.

Economic Development and Traditional Values

Many socio-economic and political problems in modern Africa states need African solutions that could be harmonized with the tremendous impact of Western cultures which are already entrenched in

African societies. Obviously, original African cultures do not exist any more in our time. Their diverse aspects have been eroded by the pace of industrialization which fills a central role in the modernization process in Africa. Science and technology as the basis of industrialization currently constitute an indispensable educational foundation in African nations. The challenges and impediments that emerge in this cultural revolution on the African continent await African philosophers. The degeneration of morals in urban and rural life, corruption and economic constraints, religious and political differences, tribal values and unpatriotic attitudes combine in various ways to obstruct orderly progress in the many facets of our national endeavours. Some of these problems arise due to lack of adequate integration of what is alien with the African modes of existence.

The importance of African philosophers depend on their competence to advance pragmatic African solutions that would be commended and implemented by Africans and their leaders. It is perhaps important to clarify what is meant by the term "African solutions." What really makes a philosophical solution African? A pragmatic antidote to an undesirable African condition shall be an African solution if it is a product of critical reflections by African professional philosophers and the philosophic sages. These two classes of African intelligentsia are capable of critically reconciling our past with the modern African psyche and modes of existence along with those traditional values which are still relevant to our current situation, in the process of figuring out workable and satisfactory solutions to the various problems entrenched in African nations.

Tribal Problems

Tribalism is a devastating problem that has crippled socio-economic development in many African states. Tribalism and nepotism have been major sources of political instability in African countries. Nepotism, however, is an integral part of corruption; an appraisal of the latter in its various aspects would show how it has jeopardized the economy of African nations. African philosophers must suggest the ways and means of minimizing of these practices that retard the economic and general well-being of African states. We need to analyze the factors responsible for ethnic antagonism which often engender the stagnation of individual and collective achievements that could prove helpful to an African nation.

Most African states are comprised of multi-ethnic populations. Every ethnic group within a post-colonial African state wants to be recognized and reckoned in leadership matters irrespective of the size of its population. Ethnic interests are often connected to the processes and opportunities for economic survival. Thus it appears that an inevitable ethnic competition develops within each African nation concerning the establishment of dominant values and the distribution of social and economic benefits. Since this competition must be engaged politically, ethnicity is politicized and becomes a means of claiming place or advantage. According to Michael Olisa,

Ethnicity can be formulated as an explanatory theory of an internal conflict. . . that unarmed or armed conflict will explode over time where two or more ethnic groups constituting a territorial sovereign state live in mutual suspicion or distrust arising from prolonged perceived or actual monopoly of political power by one or

more such groups and exclusion of others from such powers.¹⁵

At the background of the conflict situations which have persisted in Africa throughout the 20th Century are ethnic resentments, prejudices, agitations, grievances, and political problems.

Ethnic conflicts and hatred cause civil wars. How ethnic problems are galvanized in our social and political life need to be critically analyzed in the context of African condition. How do we harmonize our tribal problems with the genuine principles of Western democracy? Drawing on the example of Plato's endeavours, perhaps one means of combating such problems would be to expound on the nature of an ideal African state. A state with political structures and social institutions capable of controlling the explosive social problems that beset our national life. An ideal African state that would critically and creatively reconcile our noble traditional values, rapid industrialization, and the major characteristics of a democratic government.

Professional philosophers in Africa today operate in a situation of cultural and social tension. Perhaps the remedy to ethnic rivalry in Africa is not to stifle dissent or to accuse minorities of selfishness. The American writer Alvin Toffler, comments on democracy in the 21st Century in his book *The Third Wave*. He states that there is need for "new institutions that are sensitive to the rapidly shifting needs of changing and multiplying minorities."¹⁶ African philosophers, scholars and statesmen shall jointly undertake the task of creating new institutions that would effectively bridle ethnic rivalries, while allowing majority rule, minority rights, and noble ethnic aspirations without causing political unrest in African states.

From the on-going discussion we have seen that the perplexing problems confronting the African peoples makes a transnational as well as transcultural African philosophy born out of our peculiar circumstances indispensable. D.A. Masolo seems to be confirming this need which has been expressed in various ways by most African scholars and philosophers when he comments that:

Like other philosophical systems and traditions, African philosophy must also be born out of its own peculiar cultural circumstances combined with a living and constructive zeal amongst individual African intellectuals to understand and explain the world around them. These cultural circumstances must be seen to include many African constructions of their reality, their forms of modern living, their needs, problems, and methods of acquiring meaningful knowledge? African philosophy will thrive only when and if we continue to articulate and clarify our experiences of these historical and cultural conditions in philosophical premises in the manner of dialogue and discussion.¹⁷

There are three aspects of philosophical task which are implicit in Masolo's comments and which are truly typical of proper philosophizing. These are the quest for genuine knowledge and the integration of African experiences into a unified and coherent view. African philosophy should be able to respond to the problems and human conditions in modern Africa. It should also critically examine and clarify the concepts, beliefs and values which we hold, use and live by, through sustained philosophical discussion and dialogue. Kahiga J. Kiruki hits the nail on the head when he shares C.B. Okolo's view on the sort of philosophy that would be most

appreciable to Africans. Kiruki upholds this position while commenting on philosophy as an instrument of action in his book *Insights Into African Philosophy*. He maintains that:

The type of philosophy in tune with the present mood and life situation of the African is the practical, concrete, problem solving type, not the abstract, disinterested one. The African does not see his many social and cultural problems to be over in the immediate future, so his interests for philosophy will remain concrete and practical. Philosophy is to be seen in the light of action, or praxis as an instrument of action, for changing society and solving problems of daily life, as power to be exercised on things. One can use philosophy in explaining the reason why a particular problem is persistent, political or otherwise.¹⁸

Clearly, these are what should be expected from contemporary African philosophers who are philosophizing on the African condition now and in future. We cannot distance ourselves from the practical problems of life facing modern Africans without betraying our task as professional African philosophers.

Concluding Remarks

It would be relevant to insist that the goal of African philosophers remain consistent with the classical view of philosophy instead of instituting a radical departure from it. As Gail M. Presbey puts it,

Socrates saw both understanding virtue and living a virtuous life to be the goal of a philosopher. Stoic and Epicurean philosophers also had living a good life as the goal of their philosophizing. However, modern philosophy departed from that

tradition, and now many philosophers produce works which have little or no bearing on practical life.¹⁹

Indeed without living a virtuous life an African philosopher would not reflect the significance of his or her profession in its social milieu. We cannot stamp out the social evils in Africa by raising slogans against anti-social activities overtly, but we can affect change through diligent dissemination of our philosophical world views and our personal example. As Presbey rightly observes, there has been a serious departure from the above goal in contemporary philosophy. The path and the goal of genuine philosophizing can be summed up with the classical view upheld by Odera Oruka and a host of others, Africans and non-Africans, that:

It is important not only to love wisdom but also to possess and practice it. A philosopher is one who has intellectual concern for wisdom and who has this concern not just occasionally but as an integral part of life.²⁰

Oruka's philosophical writings helped to illuminate for us the tangible nature of contemporary African philosophy. He added a significant dimension to its nature by accentuating sage philosophy. This trend requires us to garner the residual African wisdom from African philosophic sages in order to subject this stock of knowledge to modern philosophical appraisal or to utilize it as philosophic wisdom capable of serving as practicable solutions to some of the social and moral problems in contemporary African conditions. Thus there is an urgent need to magnify sage philosophy methodology as a way of enriching African philosophical activity. It is the task of contemporary African philosophers to carry forward Oruka's vision of the incredible role of

philosophic sagacity to the development of African philosophy.

There already is in African philosophy a great love for wisdom and the virtuous life. There is also a deep need for this love to be translated into a practical moral activity which can be observed throughout the works of Odera Oruka, Masolo, Njoroge, Kucuradi, Kiros, Wiredu, Oladipo, Nkrumah, Presbey, Kiruki and others not mentioned in this text. It is this tradition in African philosophy that must be recognized and emulated.

It is apparent that the goal and function of philosophers everywhere is multi-dimensional. African philosophers ought to humbly accept what is good and reject what is bad in African and in both European and American cultures in order to attain the African perception of a sound development. Through regional and international cooperation in the field of philosophy, we can learn a lot from each other, the sharing of experiences and

taking what is good from other cultures, which obviously is the paramount essence of such philosophical interactions.

Good education for all would be a viable endeavor. It will promote self-reliance, creativity and above all the liberation of African women from certain obsolete domestic and cultural practices in which they've been trapped for too long. Philosophical discussions on poverty eradication in Africa would be baseless if the condition of women as the poorest among the poor is not addressed. The prevailing situation throughout the continent is that women have very limited access to resources that can make them self-reliant. In many nations this has been due to some cultural restraints. Thus African philosophy needs to be invariably tied to the socio-economic and cultural realities in contemporary Africa. It is not unorthodox for it to evolve as the outcome of social dissatisfaction and the need to address the strained circumstances confronting the African peoples.

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