



African Philosophy and the Issue of Development

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ABSTRACT

This piece argues that the issue of national development requires a continuous analysis and examination, through the employment of diverse areas of study to help create possible path ways for its realization. It studies the relationship between African philosophy and development, taking into cognizance the relationship between theory and practice. It understands philosophy as originating from the human person's search for theoretical and practical solutions to the problems of life. It therefore argues that African Philosophy is a fundamental factor in the search for national development as it can contribute towards mental decolonization, critique of culture and ideologies, building rationality, definition of ethico-political values, conscientization and technological transformation.

KEYWORDS

African, Philosophy, Issue, Development, Nigeria, National, Factor.

Introduction

Namibia, the last African country under colonial rule, became independent in 1989. With the announcement by President De Klerk of South Africa of the intention of his government to dismantle apartheid, the total political independence of the whole of Africa came into full sight. According to Kanu (2012), this fulsome energy propelling the political emancipation and development of Africa, which swept across the continent in the 1990's, also filtered into the prospects of the development of the political, economic, social etc., dimensions of the African life. According to Amucheazi (1980b),

One of the driving forces which sustained the quest for independence was the belief that development would necessarily follow independence. Many nationalists believed that as soon as citizens were allowed to manage their own affairs they would so conduct the affairs of the nation that the country would easily attain the level of development already reached by the western world. (p. 1).

With this prospects that promised the heralding of a glorious future, discussions and debates were rife and lively about the problems of national development. Publications of various forms were produced on them and great hopes were raised on the possibility of these countries becoming developed within the parameters of the almost immediate future. A cursory glance at Africa, from the period of independence reveals that the vision of national development is far from being realized. The situation according to Amucheazi (1980a) is rather poor and disappointing. Heeger (1974) further observed that underdevelopment threatens to become a permanent condition in Africa rather than a transitory event.

This piece comes from the understanding that the issue of national development requires a continuous analysis and examination, through the employment of other areas of study to help create possible path ways for its realization. This understanding is far from that of despair and resignation. It is therefore not surprising that areas such as African philosophy is studied in this paper to see how much it can contribute to national development from a philosophical perspective. It believes that there is a relationship between African philosophy and development in Africa.

Meaning of African Philosophy

A cursory glance at the historical development of the discourse on the nature of African philosophy reveals four perspectives or schools. Gbadegesin (1991) outlines these four schools of thought as follows.

- i. For one group, African Philosophy is the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, and untainted by foreign ideas. It is based on this understanding that Tempels (1959) wrote that "I confidently hope to be able to convince my readers that real philosophy can be found among indigenous peoples and that it should be sought among them" (p. 17).
- ii. The second group understands African philosophy as, the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, African conceptual systems and social realities as undertaken by contemporary professional philosophers. This reduces African Philosophy to reflections by professionally trained philosophers who operate with the collaboration of traditional thinkers.
- iii. The third group understands African Philosophy as the combination of these two approaches, without suppressing or looking down on any. This would involve sifting philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc, and reflecting on them by professionally trained African philosophers.
- iv. The fourth group argues that African Philosophy is not any of the above; however, its proponents represented by Hountondji (1976) regards African Philosophy as any collection of texts produced by Africans and specifically described by their authors as Philosophy.

However, while it can be said that all these views reveal the dimensional content of African philosophy, preference is given to the first definition. The second is treated with reservation; this is because African philosophy goes beyond the thought of professional philosophers. As regards the third, the comments for the first two definitions still apply. The fourth definition needs to be remodelled. What makes a piece philosophical is not the author. What if a mad man was to be the author of an idea, and he calls his thought philosophy, does it make it philosophy? There should be principles that make a thought philosophical. Another question which often arises is why the philosophy of many cultures and nations in Africa should all be called African philosophy? The reason is very simply, there is a common discernible in cultures and thought systems in Africa, and this justifies the name, African Philosophy. This is not again to say that there is a unitary or uniform perspective on issues in Africa in the sense that every African adheres to it, but the fact that these ideas are indigenous to Africa, seen, interpreted and analyzed by Africans qualifies it to bear the name African philosophy. It is used in the sense one uses Western, Oriental, Indian or Chinese in relation to philosophy.

The Meaning of Development

Eliot (1971), observes that there is no agreement as to what development is. It was coined by developed nations to describe the power and powerless nations. According to Onwuliri (2008), there are various aspects to what constitutes development, however common to all these is a positive change in human wellbeing. The individual and his quality of life must be the centre of the conception of national development. It is in this regard that Schumacher (1975), avers that development should not start with goods, but with the people, their education, organization and discipline. It is not all about money, profit and the number of industries. Levi and Havinden (1982) understand it as a long-term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by most of the people in the country. Schumacher (1975) names education, organization and discipline as the three ingredients of development. This perspective sees development as an overall social process including economic, social, political, cultural and moral dimensions of life.

In the past, discussions and commentaries on development easily tended to be developed by economists who saw it primarily from the perspective of economic growth. In that context, so long as the monetary value of goods and services (Gross Domestic Product) increased yearly, there was development. According to Nwajiuba (1999), this perspective is false as there could be an economic growth, but not development, that is, if the majority of the people did not benefit from it. Onwuliri (2008), thus opines that development thus goes beyond the narrow lines of economic and material advancement. It is all encompassing. Development is a multidimensional process involving the totality of man in his political, economic, psychological, social relations, among others. As Andre (1970) rightly observed, it is erroneous to see underdevelopment as an original state which must be characterized by indices of traditionalism and that therefore development consists in abandoning these characteristics and adopting those of the western world. Development is not a completed affair, it is an ongoing process. This being the case, does religion have any contribution to make towards national development?

Nigeria and the Search for National Development

As already observed, the language of African nationalists was that everyone should rise in support of independence so that development would quickly come the way of the struggling nation. Nkrumah, among others had argued that once independence was attained every other thing will follow. The quest for national development was at the top of the agenda of the Nigerian political decision makers of the early days of independence. Even though the tentacles of the colonial masters were still looming around, for Nigeria was still being run within the framework of the British political system of government, Sklar (1963) avers that they were able to mark a departure from the conservative policies of the colonial government. They put forward elaborate development plans geared towards the expansion and improvement of the educational system, development of high level manpower, expansion of industries, increase in the Gross National Product, providing infrastructures and social services. The First and Second Development Plan (1965 and 1970) focussed on agriculture, industry, transportation and manpower development. The Third Development Plan (1975) was launched during the oil boom and focussed on the distribution of resources, indicating that Nigeria had moved forward in development. Within the period of two decades after independence, Nigeria recorded impressive figures in terms of material development. The overall picture of Nigeria at the time was that of a developing black giant in Africa.

As promising as the future was, corruption slipped in through the backdoor and ravaged the development of Nigeria. It reached an unprecedented level during the Gowon era (1966-1975). According to Chikwendu (1977), this period was characterized by an unbridled squandermania, nepotism, and naked embezzlement and the government was not only helpless in checking these vices but seemed to have deliberately aided

and abetted their perpetration. Although there was material development, the rich were its beneficiaries. The problem was leadership. They conceived development as a unilateral process, emphasizing its economic dimension. They operated the Westminster government in Nigeria, with very little adaptation. Amucheazi (1980c) avers that the Westminster government proved dysfunctional and collapsed by 1966 as the military disbanded politicians and took over power. There was a general breakdown in law and order by the end of 1965. According to Mackintosh (1966), the legislature was more concerned with championing sectional and ethnic interests. Political institutions lost their credibility, as she could not even give an accurate census of her population without manipulating it for sectional interests. When it came to industrial projects, experts were influenced to produce reports that were unfavourable to particular communities. With this sectionalism, it was difficult to produce an acceptable formula for revenue allocation. The bureaucrats running the civil service were not exempted. They were sick of ethnicity, sectionalism and corruption; they rigged elections, manipulated census, falsified reports and frustrated the implementation of development plans. The result of all these was that the gap between the ethnic groups widened.

The advent of the military in 1966, which came in as a corrective regime, left the nation in a worse state. They were only concerned with maintaining law and order and increasing the production of material goods. Their corrective regime ended up widening the filth, evident in the poor quality of life, failure of economic projects, increase in corruption, uneven development of the country, decay of towns and villages, increase in robbery and banditry. These factors that crippled development during the early years of Nigeria's development, are still with us. They continue to slow down the wheels of Nigeria's development. The past of Nigeria is the hidden history of her present crisis.

Philosophy as a Factor in National Development

It was Auguste Comte that once remarked that the human mind develops through three stages, namely, the religious stage, the metaphysical stage and the scientific stage. The religious stage he qualifies to be the first or the primitive stage in the development of the human mind. At the religious stage, man develops a religious worldview and interprets reality from the religious perspective. Here, man develops the idea of the gods and divinities. As the mind develops, it moves from the religious stage to the metaphysical stage where he tends to offer metaphysical explanation to reality. The final stage in the development of the human mind is the stage of science, when scientific explanation of reality takes over the religious and metaphysical. Man thus moves from preoccupation in the search for the ultimate causes of things to that which is empirically observable, thus abandoning the attempt to explain phenomena in terms of the unseen. Comte cited by Copleston (1975), writes,

We believe that there are no substances, but only systems of facts. We regard the idea of substances as an ideological illusion. We consider substances, forces and all metaphysical beings of the moderns as a relic of scholastic realities. We think that there is nothing in the world but facts and laws, that is to say events and their relations... we recognize that all knowledge consists in the first instance in linking or in adding facts. (p. 114).

Karl Marx has followed the same path with Auguste Comte, when he maintained that civilization has moved from the theological through philosophical to the scientific. He regarded religion as a bourgeois attempt to feed the masses with opium, which numbs the senses from a correct perception of reality. Feuer (1959) quoting Karl Marx said,

As soon as Jew and Christian come to see in their respective religions more than stages in the development of the human mind- snake skins which has been cast off by history, and man as the snake who clothed himself in them – they will no

longer find themselves in religious opposition. (p. 200).

Karl Marx's glorification of the scientific people is depicted in a painting which portrayed a man as coming out of darkness into light. Science thus brought light in the midst of the darkness of mystification created by religion. The new economics of Marx presupposed that when St Peter meets us during the day of judgment, his only question would be: what did you do on earth to increase the gross national product.

In the 1960s, there was a mentality that gave the impression that the sciences were superior over arts. Kalu (1980) observed that the Ashby Commission on Higher Education had, among other opinions recommended an increased paced of training in the sciences. The new nation would embark on massive industrialization and thus would need technologist. To boost this pursuit, science teachers were imported from India. Among the students, they made a distinction between those in the sciences and those in arts. Those in the science were regarded as future leaders while those in the arts were regarded as talkative and their discipline as 'watery arts', with religion taking the worst place in the 'watery arts'. In the universities, those for arts were regarded as the bourgeoisie conservatives and those in the sciences as the bourgeoisie progressives. In the face of all these, science was promoted and arts relegated to the background.

African Philosophy and National Development

African philosophy is not just an abstract discipline. Nwala (1981) defines it as a study that "originates from man's quest for theoretical and practical solutions to the problems of life" (p.2). Popkin and Stroll (1982) defines philosophy as an evaluation or interpretation of what is important or meaningful in life" (p. xiii). These definitions present African philosophy as a discipline that deals with concrete human experiences, and can bring about a positive change for the betterment of society. Nkrumah (1974) wrote thus about the invaluable function of African philosophy,

Social revolution must therefore have, standing firmly behind it, an intellectual revolution, a revolution in which our thinking and philosophy are directed towards the redemption of our society. Our philosophy must find its weapon in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from these conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. (p. 78).

Writing further, Oraegbunam (2007) avers that,

... it has to be recognized that African philosophy has something to contribute. That is to say that African philosophy having transcended the level of the great debate must think seriously on how best it can be relevant to person-oriented development. No doubt, the most glaring role that any philosophy can play in any human development is that of constructive criticism. Therefore, African philosophers must think truly, think wisely, think critically, think globally and think virtuously with regard to the humanistic development of the African person. (p. 27).

This perspective points to the capacity of philosophy as being beyond abstract reflection to concrete historical involvement.

1. Mental Decolonization

While Azikiwe (1978) spoke of mental emancipation, Nkrumah (1974) spoke of philosophical Conscientism, Wirendu (1995) spoke of conceptual decolonization, which are different from physical decolonization which was achieved in the late 1950s and 1960s by most African countries with the lowering of colonial fags and raising of national flags, mental decolonization is yet to be achieved. Wirendu describes conceptual emancipation, in relation to African philosophy, thus,

By conceptual decolonization I mean two complementary things. On the negative side, I mean avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation in our thought (that is in the thought of contem-

porary African philosophers) of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have an impact on African life and thought. And on the positive side, I mean exploiting as much as it is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditation on even the most technical problem of contemporary philosophy....necessity for decolonization was brought upon us in the first place by the historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems through colonialism. (p. 22).

Kanu (2010a) avers that the slave trade and colonization of Africa created a situation of the 'crisis of self-confidence' in the African, which has opened apertures for a lasting barrier to growth and innovation. Azikiwe (1961) argues that there is no specific proof to sustain the idea of superiority or inferiority of any race, and for the African to cultivate an inferiority complex is to sign the death warrant of Africa's future. He calls for emancipation from the crisis of inferiority and assures the African that he had a glorious past and can design a more glorious future. Zik, according to Ozimiro (1978), wants the African to follow Socrates' principle: Gnothi seauton, (Man know yourself), and like a sleeping giant wake up from his slumber and harness his power for his own good and that of mankind. Oraegbunam (2007) described the effects of this encounter as mainly psychological, manifesting itself through inferiority complex, cargo-cult mentality, anthropological impoverishment, identity crisis, cultural alienation, psychological trauma etc. Okolo (1993) describes this crisis as the "uprootedness of African being" (p. 49). In the contention of Oraegbunam (2007), African philosophy, through its tools of criticisms and reconstructiveness, can contribute positively to the mental emancipation of the African peoples.

2. Critique of Culture

The African, according to Kanu (2010b), like every other human person is shaped by his culture and he contributes in the shaping and transmission of this culture. The African therefore, is a homo culturalis. Culture, according to Gaudium et Spes (1965), generally refers to all those things which go to the refining and developing of the African's diverse mental and psychological endowments. The word culture is so rich and all encompassing that both sociologists and anthropologists have defined in multifarious ways. Adamson (1972) describes cultures as the integral system of learned behaviour patterns which are the characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance. In other words, culture does not come from human genes, but rather it is learnt and taught. This bears with the etymology of the word culture as colere, which means "to cultivate" or "to practice". The human person is therefore the author and architect of culture. He does not participate passively in the shaping and transmitting of culture, it is an active participation.

As African culture continues to develop and to adapt to new circumstances, what is the responsibility of African philosophy? According to Oraegbunam (2007),

It is the duty of African philosophy to determine through critical analysis which aspects of African culture to promote and which to consider anachronistic in the light of African needs at any given time. There is no gainsaying that some features of African culture constitute liabilities to African humanistic development. (p. 14).

Awolabi (1999) points out that the critical evaluation of culture has already begun. He wrote,

The claim of ethno-philosophers... that our traditional worldviews need to be revived in order to attain an authentic and autonomous mode of living in Africa can be interpreted as a discourse in development. This is in the sense that societal development can best be realised if members of society consciously generate the culture they operate with independently of external influence. On the other hand, the position of the professional philosophers... that African philosophy should engage in the critical analysis of our traditional culture; with the

objective of modernising it can also be described as a developmental programme. (p. 28).

There are two perspectives here: one looks inward for development, and the other looks outward for development. However, an objective evaluation of culture must look both sides. A critical and reconstructive study of African culture in a comprehensive way will reposition her in our age of globalization.

3. Evaluation of Ideologies

There is a very strong link between ideologies and development. The idea a person has about a particular thing determines his attitude and approach towards the particular thing. For instance, the African idea of education will obviously affect her educational system. If Africa sees education as the transmission of western ideologies without reference to the African environment, it will certainly affect the crop of scholars that will be graduated by our universities. They will know much about Europe and very little about their place, and thus cannot apply much of their knowledge to the development of their community. If again we understand western education as forbidden, it would mean that we are cut off from the good things that western education brings. Ezeani (1987) thus defines an ideology as "a guiding principle which regulates the economic, social and political, and at times the religious life of the people" (p. 13). This would imply that the quality of a people's ideology would affect the rate of their development. A poor ideology, a poor development, a positive ideology, a speedy development. This explains why the quality of the minds that seat in a country's Parliament or House of Assembly will to a great extent determine the progress of the nation. It is said that "Ideas rule the world".

There are times when the ideologies governing a nation are positive and to the advantage of the general populace, it is the work of the philosopher to study these ideologies and see how they can be better positioned for the good of the people. There are also times when ideologies promote only the selfish interests of leaders, at such times, it is the responsibility of philosophers to evaluate and critically criticize these ideologies. The best way to do this, according to Wirenu (1980), is to get people to think critically about abstract concepts employed in the formulation of these ideologies. Oladipo (1996) avers that the need for such a critical evaluation of concepts is to challenge the use of concepts to promote anti-human procedures and actions, which are sometimes manipulated to look like independent realities, while in reality, they are only personal opinions. While it is the responsibility of African philosophy to critique these ideologies, Oraegbunam (2007) avers that it is equally her responsibility to reconstruct ideologies to suit the development of nations.

4. Promotion of Higher Order Thinking

Higher order thinking speaks of critical thinking, the capacity to ask fundamental questions about reality. The development of any society is dependent on the quality of her 'think tank'. This ability to think down to the roots is a task proper to philosophy. Wirenu (1980) wrote that "the function of philosophy everywhere is to examine the intellectual foundation of our life, using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well being" (p. 62). Oraegbunam (2007) thus avers that "African philosophy can offer a kind of salvation, especially from a life of narrow-mindedness and dogmatism. African philosophy should be able to inculcate in people's mind the courage not to allow them to be defined and moulded by the prejudices of the group, by mere majoritarianism, by public pressures, or by the limitations of our cultural givens" (p. 19). Russell (1968) would therefore write that "The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from habitual beliefs of his age, of his nation and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation and consent of his deliberate reason" (p. 91). This type of higher order thinking, which helps us to understand our limitedness, summons us to open our minds to the views of others, respect of opinion and differences, debate and in-

clusiveness, is at the root of human and social development.

5. Promotion of Values

We live in a world where there are a collection of values, both good and bad. It is the challenge of African philosophy to help direct people on the path of the right values. Maritain (1961) wrote that,

Only the philosophical knowledge of man permits us, for example, to distinguish between what is conformable to the nature and reason of man, and the way in which men do in fact conduct themselves, indeed in the majority of cases, in other words to distinguish between the modes of behaviour which are really normal and the modes of comportment which are statistically frequent. (p. 11).

Oraegbunam (2007) further argues that for the promotion of values such as justice, goodness, right, honour, human dignity, common good, equality, knowledge, truth, freedom, law, mutual respect, tolerance, peace etc, on which the good governance of African states is based, African philosophy should furnish the best definition of such concepts. Philosophy should further be able to sting people to consciousness on the importance of the values, and perpetrators of the sins against the right values, such as deceit, dishonesty, intolerance, unaccountability, corruption etc, should be brought to the consciences of its perpetrators.

African philosophy should be able to also raise questions of value as regards the development of science and technology. At a time when scientists are also concerned about making a name and money for themselves, sometimes at the expense of values. Questions of technological transfer also should arise here. What are the limits of dominating nature? There are cases of environmental exploitation. Habermas (1980) wrote that "Instead of treating nature as the object of possible technical control, we can encounter her as an opposing partner in a possible interaction. We can seek out a fraternal rather than an exploited nature" (88), and African philosophy can be of help in this process. There is also the area of bioethics, experimentation and genetic engineering.

6. Promotion of National Unity

In a country like Nigeria where there are people with different religions who must live together, and from different cultural backgrounds, the promotion of national unity is an important factor in the search for the realization of development. This again is an area where African philosophy will have to come in. This is because philosophy thinks in terms of the comprehensive and universal, and has the capacity to offer a grand vision where all points of view, anxieties and interests are put into consideration. In the absence of this quality of thinking, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society can hardly survive together.

Conclusion

The position that this paper maintains is that African philosophy, although an enterprise that entertains abstract ideas, has something to contribute to national development. And beyond stating that African philosophy has a contribution to make in national development, it encourages African philosophers to be more concrete in their analysis of reality in such a way that it would bring about the transformation of society and persons.

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