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The Uniqueness of African Philosophy

Jaja, J. M. - Institute of Foundation Studies, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, P. M. B. 5080, Port Harcourt

E-mail: jonesalali@yahoo.com

Tel: +2348033168998

&

Badey, P. B.

Institute of Foundation Studies, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, P. M. B. 5080, Port Harcourt

Tel: +2348056049778

Abstract

To Western scholars, Africa has no history no philosophy and as such do not possess the cognitive power of philosophizing. This falsehood has relegated Africa to the backdoor of world development and history. However, the history of world development reveals Africa as the cradle of world civilization. It becomes more glaring when we view development as multi-

dimensional. In all facets of development, Africa and Africans have made tremendous contributions. Africans through their reflective attitudes to society, environment and nature have helped to add value to African societies and the world at large. This paper therefore, attempts at reflective activities (philosophy) thus adding value to our society (development). It also attempts to establish a historical foundation for its existence and how it has furthered development in various facets of human existence.

Introduction

Eurocentric scholars believe Africa has no past, no culture, no history and possesses no philosophic mind, to make any meaningful contribution to world and African society. This intellectual insincerity, historical fallacy and development dilemma has been confronted and challenged by African Historians and philosophers which resulted in the idea of African philosophy, which dates “back to the 1960’s and 1970’s (Oladipo, 2008).

This great debate successfully led to the establishment of the fact that, there is indeed African philosophy. The debate was not so much as the existence of Africa philosophy but on the nature and role of African philosophy. This is because philosophy is generally reflective and every society, including Africa has people that reflect on human experience and nature in an effort to provide answers to some “fundamental questions”. Finally, philosophy is culture specific and this cultural specificity transcends philosophy and is made prominent in science and technology (Jaja, 2012).

This paper is of the view that there exists African philosophy in all their elements. It also shows how African philosophy has made contributions to African and the world just as African history did.

African philosophy

What is African Philosophy?

According to Okolo (1990:10) it is:

A path to a systematic coherent discovery and disclosure of the African as a being in the African world. Through this knowledge or disclosure of himself and his world by critical reflection, the African grasps reality that is to say attains the truth about man and the cosmos in its entirety.

Etuk (1993:63) simply argues that:

It is the application of the philosophical tools of analysis, criticism and logic to the problems of Africans in all aspects of life.

While for Momoh (1998:40) African philosophy is;

African doctrines or theories on reality (Being) and the universe which is made up of things like GOD, gods, life, life after death, reincarnation, spirits, society, man, ancestors, heaven, hell, things, institutions, beliefs, conceptions, practices etc .

In the strict sense of the word African philosophy is essentially an activity a project, a systematic and coherent inquiring into African experience in the African environment and how African reflects, conceives and interprets the world and his place in it. It re-echo's Oruka's argument that African philosophy is a way of thinking or a conceptual framework that is wholly African and radically departs from the European style of thinking (Oruka, 1990:13).

African base of philosophy

African philosophy dates back to the medieval era in Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria was an intellectual centre where a school of philosophy and theology flourished (Omogbe, 1985:13) during the medieval era African philosophers were primarily theologians who employed philosophy to aid theology. One of such philosophers was St Augustine whose idea of "Time" is still unrivaled. Africans influenced European civilization through her "ancient and glorious sons and daughters of Egypt; Nubian, Cush and Carthage", before the advent of Christianity. The University of Sankhore in Timbuktu and through Tertulian, Cyprian and Augustine contributed immensely to "educational glory of the church". Tertulian was the first African writer who made Latin the language of caustanity and St. Augustine of Hippo said to be the first African pope was one of the most influential fathers of the Christian faith. The theological school at Alexandria was described as "a centre of Christian scholarship without rival in the Christian world (Ekanem, 2002:17).

Africans have contributed to the development of world history in various ways. The Greeks were said to have been influenced by Africans through the Egyptian mystery which they studies under learned priests. The black Egyptian imhotep who lived about 2900BC during the third dynasty was

credited have built, the first pyramid of pharaoh Zoser (Gabriel et al., 2009). He was said to be a physician of antiquity. Indeed, the mystery and history of architecture cannot be complete without his name. the stepped pyramid and the terraced pyramid of Sankara and other marvellous structures. Similarly, the history of medicine is traced to the European Hippocrates upon which the medical Hippocratic Oath is based.

Philosophy, history and colonization

Contemporary African society was faced with the scourge of colonialism, African philosophers and historians were primarily concerned with how to use their craft to help solve the socio political situation. It will be recalled that at the Berlin West African Conference of 1884/5 African nations were dissected on the table without an African representative. The continent was divided on the table among the European powers, thus giving credence and authority to dominate, exploit and subjugate Africa.

Every effort was directed to the termination of colonial domination. Philosophers, historians and African leaders championed the course of nationalism. They developed philosophies and pragmatic ways of dealing with the African socio-political situation. These include electism and pragmatism of Azikiwe, Awoism of Awolowo, Wiredu's "concept of truth" "Negritude" by Senghor, "consciencism" of Nkrumah and Nyerere's "Ujaama"

African nationalist, or drum and trumpet historians responded to Western propaganda on colonialism (Enemugwem, 2007:95) prominent among them were E.W. Blyden's *West African before European*, J.C. Casely – Hayford's *European unbound*, Nnamdi Azikiwe's *Renascent Africa*; J.C. de Craft – Johnson's *African Glory* and *African Empires of the past* and Mokwugo OKoye's *African Response* (Ajayi and Alagoa 1980: Enemugwem 2007:95). These scholars identified African civilizations and polemically analyzed how it accounted for their histories. Leopold Senghor used his Negritude to infer that Africa originated the cultural angle of humanity.

On Hamitic hypothesis, four African scholars, Cheikh Anta Diop, Theophile Obenga, Reverend J.O. Lucas and Ben Jokana challenged them. Diop, a Senegalese medical expert discovered a black spot, melanin, in the Egyptian which exist in black people. Lucas of Nigeria and Obenga, a Congolese historical linguist, compared all religions and languages in Africa to that of Egyptians; as a result, the Egyptian civilization is Negro invented. Jokana of

Ethiopia stated that Europeans initiated the African contact with Europe but later turns and forced them into colonialism because of the rich, Africa economic resources (Afigbo, 1981:39).

The decolonization work took four processes: According to Enemuguem (2007), these are the emergence of academic historians and the introduction of African history as an academic discipline, establishment of national archives, historical societies and journals and the UNESCO and Africanist Historians. This need not delay us here, the point being made here is that the pioneer academic historians trained in Western Universities emerged in the 1940s and 1950's and saw the decolonization of African past and the training of more historians as their immediate task.

Kenneth Onwuka Dike, the first Nigerian who had a doctorate degree from the University of London, using archival records and little oral sources published *trade and politics in the Niger Delta, 1830 – 1885* in 1956. He thus laid the foundation for the decolonization of African history.

Saburi Biobaku followed Dike's example with his pre-colonial community history of the Yoruba. *The Egba and their neighbours (1842 – 1871) in 1957* reconstructed mainly from oral sources. They took the lead in making African history an academic discipline at the University College Ibadan in 1948.

Dike was the pioneer African head of Department of History. Those he graduated became pillars that established other departments of history in Africa. And they include Monday B. Abasiattai who decolonized Liberia and Sierra Leonia history. Adu Boahan and Bethwell Alan Ogot accomplished same feat at Legon in Ghana and Nairobi in Kenya, in 1964. Terence Ranger established history at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, with Isaria Kimambo's *History of Tanzania*, as a decolonization work in the nationalist system.

Enemugwem (2007) points out that a number of scholars like Roy Bridges, Godfrey Uzoigwe, Merridc Ponansky, Anthony law, Kenneth Ingham, Divine Amenumey and Cherry Gertzel introduced African History at Makerere University of Uganda in the late 1950s (Bridges and Ponansky, 2004:480).

In reality the historical process that led to socio-political changes in Africa was made possible by these notable Africans who reflected on their existential situation and sought to change the direction and generate the

consciousness that placed African countries on the world map. Their reconstruction guaranteed freedom equity, justice and unity in diversity.

Several Africans reflective indemnity resulted in the works they provided in morality, law, medical ethics, science and technology among others. These include *Ethics and development* by Omoregbe, *Trends, Perspective and problems in Ethics, issues in Biomedical Ethics*, and studies in *philosophical jurisprudence* by Udulgwomen, philosophy and National Development by T.E. Ogar, *History of Science in Perspective* by A.O.I. Gabriel et al, *Indigenous Technology* by Bassey W. Andah, *Philosophy, Science and Technology* by Ayo Fadahunsi, *Philosophy, Education and Environment* by Oshita O. Oshita. The *phenomenology of individual freedom* by Joseph Ogar, the *epistemology of witch craft* by bassey Ifekwe, the *ethical implication of Technological Development in Nigeria* are some important works worth reading.

These works have had various impacts on the intellectual development of Africa. Indeed the importance of philosophy in National Development has been realized and this informs their pride of place in Nigerian universities.

Philosophy rediscovered

Philosophy defined as the pursuit of wisdom can be understood as the desire to arrive at ultimate knowledge – the knowledge of the whole but it neither is the knowledge of the whole nor posits devotional engagement towards itself. It can be subjected to critical objective and unsympathetic examination. Philosophy is the love of wisdom which presupposes effective engagement with the world, but it may be rejected by an indifferent or cynic sophist. In the long run, philosophy in its original form tries to make up for the inadequacies of the present existence (Wlodzimierz, J. Korab-Karpowlez, 2001:41).

Conclusion

African philosophy has helped to sharpen the intellect of Africans. It has enhanced the critical thinking of the people and prompted curiosity which is the beginning of all knowledge (Jaja, 2012d). Moreover, the socio-cultural life and moral value had been of tremendous elevation. These speculative and reflective activities of Africans have brought tremendous improvements and changes into African societies. But more important are the volumes of intellectual work churned out daily by Africans on man, society and the universe.

The critical nature of African comments the actions of government functionaries and the predictability of their actions are all a product of this consciousness of Africans.

This short historical analysis of the various epochs of African philosophy demonstrates the developmental strides of African philosophy. Each epoch contributed to the development of African society, and each kept faith and improved on the preceding one. We submit with all amount of historical responsibility that African philosophy has made immense in-roads and left indelible footprints on the development of Africa and the world. That the reservoir of intellectualism within the continent is of great value to humanity and cannot be easily shoved aside.

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