

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY IN A SCIENTIFIC AGE: ITS RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE TO THE CRISES OF DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA.

BY

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Abstract

Trailing behind the backwardness of Africa in the spheres of modern science and modern technology, this paper is tailored to explicate the relevance and challenges of African philosophy in the contemporary world driven by modern science and technology. Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to unveil the greatest challenge of Africa's quest for scientific-technological development in the 21st century and the indispensable role African philosophy ought to play in order to overcome it. It also avers that this perception of knowledge via science and technology influenced the intellectual response to the crises of development in Africa. The question that logically erupts at this point is whether African philosophy has anything to offer towards the repositioning and transformation of the derogatory condition of contemporary Africa. The answer to this question could be said to explain the intellectual response to the crises of development in Africa. To wit, it is germane we examine the plausibility, relevance and challenge of African philosophy in the contemporary world. Against this backdrop, we uphold the view that the relevance of African philosophy to Africa in the age of science lies in its ability to generate and disseminate worthwhile ideas that will liberate Africans from all factors that have hitherto held them in bondage. Prominent among these factors are political instability, incompetent leadership, economic hardship, cultural alienation, brain drain and ethno-religious crisis in the destruction of African traditional institutions and values and the superimposition of inadequate Western institutions and values on Africa by the colonialist which not only led to cultural alienation but also the mis-education of African elites; which give birth to the , the uncritical acceptance, nay implementation of Western ideas in Africa. For African philosophy to be able to achieve this aim, it must be critical, deconstructive as well as reconstructive. I therefore present Afro-constructivism as the ideal method and systematic philosophy that is very relevant to the repositioning of Africa in the Age of Science.

Key Words: African Philosophy, Scientific Age, Crises of Development in Africa, Afro-Constructivism

Introduction

The human person is fundamentally a knowing being; a being that seeks to know, penetrate, explore and exploit nature to his advantage. The historical evolution of human civilization is a product of the application of human knowledge. The human person as a rational being necessarily seeks knowledge in order to understand, explore, exploit, manipulate and transform nature towards the improvement and preservation of human life. It is perhaps, in view of this fact that Aristotle choose to begin his monumental work, *Metaphysics* with the sentence: “All men by nature desire to know” (1).

However, in spite of the inherent nature of the desire to know, the question “what is knowledge?” is not an easy one. From the ancient period of philosophy till date, several erudite philosophers have in their attempts to explain the nature, source and criteria for knowledge proffered many conflicting arguments and theories. The question of knowledge is therefore by nature very complex, intricate and seemingly inconclusive. And it is this complex nature of knowledge and its indispensability for human progress that seems to make knowledge a perennial subject matter of philosophy. The branch of philosophy that is primarily concerned with the question of the nature, origin, source, validity, scope and justification of human knowledge is known as epistemology. Concerning the meaning of epistemology as a philosophical specialism, Kehinde elucidates:

Epistemology in its simplest sense is known as the “theory of knowledge”. It is so defined because it explores or attempts to expose the power or ability, or capacity of the human mind to know reality. The attempt to know reality (which is different from the search for reality i.e. metaphysics) is an attempt to acquire knowledge about the reality. However, in attempting to know reality, epistemology also attempts to evaluate or ascertain the “validity” as well as the limit of human

knowledge. The attempt to ascertain the validity and limit of human knowledge amounts to a search for absolute knowledge, of a kind of knowledge which is sure and certain. In this later sense, epistemology can be described as a “theory of truth”. In the first place, to have knowledge of something is to be sure or certain of it, and certainty or sure knowledge of thing amounts to truth i.e. true knowledge about a thing (94).

The point buttressed here is that epistemology is the traditional branch of philosophy that is mainly concerned with issues concerning the meaning and nature of this all important phenomenon called “knowledge”. It fundamentally probes into the following interrelated questions: What is it to know something? Can the human person have a kind of knowledge that is certain and objective? If yes, how? If no, why? Consequently, modern science did not only affirm the possibility of certain and objective knowledge but also claims to possess the sole authentic and universal method for its acquisition. The fact that the application of the findings of modern science and technology have tremendously transformed and improved human wellbeing tend to give credence to the claim of modern science and as well validates the implicit call for the *scientization* of all disciplines. In this regard, for any discipline to be relevant, it must be scientific.

Trailing behind the backwardness of Africa in the spheres of modern science and modern technology, this paper is tailored to explicate the relevance and challenges of African philosophy in the contemporary world driven by modern science and technology. Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to unveil the greatest challenge of Africa’s quest for scientific-technological development in the 21st century and the indispensable role African philosophy ought to play in order to overcome it. It also avers that this perception of knowledge via science and technology influenced the intellectual response to the crises of development in Africa. However, before we delve into this, it is plausible we begin with a reflection on the scientific age and its major presuppositions.

The Scientific Age and Its Major Presuppositions

Science, which is the root word for scientific, can be used in two different senses. In a broad sense it refers to any rational inquiry that is comprehensive, systematic, coherent, objective and orderly organized. This sense of the word is associated with the etymological, nay traditional meaning of the term science. Used in this sense, all academic disciplines including Philosophy, History, Anthropology, and Literature are scientific. In another sense, science refers to only those inquiries that are based on observation, logico-mathematical explanation, empirical experimentation, and verification. This sense of science is associated with the modern conception of science. Used in this sense, only disciplines such as Physics, Chemistry, Physiology, and Geology can be rightly described as scientific. This is because these disciplines strictly adhere to the “scientific method”. In this modern sense, philosophy is not a science.

Prior, to the industrial revolution which ushered in the modern period, philosophy was considered to be not just a science but the supreme science. Tracing this conception of philosophy to Aristotle, Asouzu (2011:86) writes: “Metaphysics, for Aristotle, as the study of the essential or substantial structure of reality is wisdom per excellence and in this capacity the very ideal of science.” Ironically, while Aristotle considers Metaphysics a much more superior science than the natural sciences (natural philosophy) because it studies the substantial structure of reality while others studies the accidental qualities, the quest for a universal criterion for objective knowledge which started formally with Aristotle’s systematization of logic culminated into a technical conception of rationality (the scientific method) that dethrone Metaphysics (philosophy) from it exalted position as the queen of

science and replace it with the natural sciences which Aristotle considered as inferior science. According to this technical conception of rationality; “any form of knowledge that does not conform to the method of science or rules of logic is irrational” (Akpan, 2005:38). At this point one notices that “there is a reversal of fortune for those sciences Aristotle degraded to mere ancillary status” (Asouzu, 2011:88). Thus the scientific age is the age when the natural sciences claim to have overthrown philosophy and make the world to conventionally accept that its method is the ultimate tribunal of rationality, the harbinger of knowledge and the sole propeller of positive socio-economic transformation.

In a nutshell, the scientific method posits that true knowledge is empirical, observational, experimental, verifiable and cumulative. What this comes to is that empirical observation and logico-mathematical demonstration are the main canons of true knowledge. Accordingly, Newton-Smith (1981:1) elucidates:

The image that the scientific community likes to project of itself, and indeed the image most of us accept of that community, is that of rationality per excellence. The scientific community sees itself as the very paradigm of institutionalized rationality. It is taken to be in possession of something, the scientific method, which generates logic of justification. In addition it has even been claimed by some that the scientific method includes a logic of discovery which is to say that it provides devices to assist the scientist in the discovery of new scientific theories and in the noble (or perhaps it is Nobel) pursuit of some worthy aim (variously characterized as truth, knowledge, explanation, etc.).

The point buttressed here is that the scientific method is a unique mode of inquiry that incarnates the capacity to: epitomize rationality in its purest form, capture universal and eternal truths, describe the fundamental structure of the world, and present reality exactly as it is (2005:117). It is therefore the scientific method that enables the scientific community to approach reality “dispassionately and disinterestedly” until they arrive at knowledge that is

true, objective and universal and it is the application of this knowledge that “takes us a further step on the royal road to the much esteemed goal” (Newton-Smith, 1981:1) of exploiting reality for social transformation and human well-being. Perhaps, due to the apparent success of modern science, the scientific method became the acceptable adjudicator and overseer of all modes of knowing. Hence, Russell rightly avers: “almost everything that distinguishes the modern world from earlier centuries is attributable to science, which achieved its most spectacular triumphs in the seventeenth century... the new conceptions that science introduced profoundly influenced modern philosophy” (1971:512).

From the foregoing, one will understand that the Scientific Age, which is also known as the Age of Reason, was formally inaugurated in the 17th century. The age of science is therefore characterized by the universal conventional acceptance nay reverence of the colossal image of science as the final arbiter of human knowledge, the accelerator of social transformation and the guarantor of human wellbeing (Agbo, 2004:164-66). Hence, there arose a clarion call for the promotion of the natural sciences over and above all disciplines. This call is currently more pronounced in the 21st century Africa. What accounts for this situation is the dehumanizing socio-economic and political condition in contemporary Africa. The assumption is that the solution to the problems of Africa in the contemporary world lies with the scientific method. In order to unveil the validity or invalidity of this assumption, it is necessary we take a look at the predicament of Africa in the age of science.

The Condition of Contemporary Africa

The 21st century Africa is a continent in search of a veritable tool for sustainable development. This is because it is a continent where factors that degrade human life, truncates innovative thinking and stifles social transformation are highly prevalent. In sum, Godwin Sogolo (2010:2) lucidly attests:

Virtually all African societies remain in a condition of underdevelopment in spite of the various development plans and structural adjustment programmes that have been executed over the years in an attempt to facilitate development. These societies are characterized by diverse problems such as extreme poverty and unfulfilled elementary needs, famines and widespread hunger, a high rate of deaths, preventable diseases, illiteracy, lack of access to potable water, poor sanitation, geopolitical fragmentation, corruption, violation of elementary political freedoms and basic liberties, bad governance and various forms of violent conflicts and their attendant ills.

Consequent upon the forgoing, contemporary Africa is classified and stigmatized as a Third world country. In attempt to explain the rationale for this classification, Akpan (2006:265) elucidates:

In this contemporary world, science and its application, technology, provide the most important index for distinguishing a developed society, country or continent from an undeveloped one. Africa has been tagged “a third world” continent because of her underdeveloped status in the sphere of science and technology. The reason is that Africa is mainly dependent on the ‘first world’ (Western or developed world) in its scientific and technological need. The corollary of this is that scientific categories of the West, in whatever shade and colour, whether it is congenial to the African worldview or not, have been imposed or dumped on Africans. The Africans, satisfied with their dependent status have sat back and swallowed everything from the “developed world” without harnessing their own path to development. Based on this demeaning situation, our developmental rate has often been tied to this dependent status.

The question that logically erupts at this point is whether African philosophy has anything to offer towards the repositioning and transformation of the derogatory condition of contemporary Africa. The answer to this question could be said to explain the intellectual response to the crises of development in Africa. To wit, it is germane we examine the plausibility, relevance and challenge of African philosophy in the contemporary world.

African Philosophy in the Age of Science

At this point, it is obvious that the condition of contemporary Africa is a great challenge to all African intellectuals. This is because intellectuals are in a fundamental sense the vendors of ideas for social transformation. As a vendor of ideas, the intellectual is essentially a think-tank and a path-finder who necessarily explores the way which others follow. Thus, the intellectual “seeks to provide the bright light that gives direction to all human undertakings in society” (Asouzu, 2004:7). This task or duty of the intellectual is inherently derived from the meaning of the word intellectual. Hence, any individual who does not seek to provide the bright light that gives direction to human undertakings in society cannot be said to be an intellectual irrespective of his/her educational qualification. In this regard, Okere (2005:131) explains:

Intellectual comes from the Latin *intelligo, intelligere*, to choose, to discern, to discriminate, to understand. *Intellectus* means understanding or intelligence. Intelligence is man’s distinctive feature. ... The action of intelligence leads to an understanding, a vision, a seeing clear and through, a defining and a comprehending of the object. It is associated with learning and reason from which comes logical, ordered and right judgment. It is the highest form of that curiosity that connects and unites the I with the non-I by letting the one assimilate the other. ...It is the systematic application of the mind to every facet of reality in order to comprehend and tame reality by reason.

The point buttressed here is that owing to the etymological meaning of the term intellectuals, anyone who is worthy to be called an intellectual must to a large extent engage in the task of exploring, understanding, exploiting and unveiling the nature of reality. He or she must have the passion to seek and generate worthwhile ideas that will help human beings to exploit reality to advantage. What this comes to is that one is said to be an intellectual not just by the mere possession of the intellect, the faculty of reason and intelligence, nor the possession of a Ph.D. One is said to be an intellectual by virtue of his/her approach and disposition towards reality. Consequently, Okere (2005:132) writes:

But so to be intellectual because one is human does not amount to being an intellectual. For one thing, an intellectual must have a certain level of formal education, though again a Ph.D does not make the intellectual any more than the habit makes the monk. What counts most is the temperament, the disposition, the interest, the bent and the knack to engage with ideas, to analyze, to synthesize; the curiosity to wonder articulately at the mystery of reality. The intellectual is more a state of mind than a mind full of information. He is inquisitive and articulate, a man of theory with an eye for the large picture, more interested in the wood than the trees. Intellectuals form the intelligentsia, the thinking elite of a place or society, that

class or segment of a population that best represent the effort to project man the knower, *homo intelligens*.

The point envisaged in the foregoing is that an intellectual is necessarily a lover, seeker and disseminator of truth and wisdom. It is the responsibility of intellectuals to wage war against the diseases that impair human reasoning by seeking, generating and disseminating emancipative knowledge. These diseases include ignorance, presumption, prejudice, vagueness, beliefs, authority and lies (Okere 2005:132). In this sense, a true intellectual is necessarily the architect and harbinger of worthwhile ideas and ideals that have and will continue to improve the well-being of humanity. Even a cursory glance at the history of the evolution of human civilization will confirm the validity of this position. However, given the position that philosophy is purely a theoretical discipline that is totally concerned with abstract realities, one wonders if philosophers can propound ideas that will help Africa to overcome its contemporary condition. Appositely, Asouzu (2004:6) veraciously notes:

A philosopher, according to Mason, “changes nothing but ideas” but ideas we know change the world. A person who is capable of changing ideas has all it takes to change the world. He can do this, however, if he does not stop merely in changing ideas as an end itself. He must be capable of translating changed ideas into action. One can therefore say that, if a person were to change ideas for the sake of changing ideas alone, his task would be incomplete. The ultimate aim of any authentic philosophizing subsists therefore in changing ideas such that through the possession of new or better ideas human beings can effect change in the world through their actions. What this means is that ideas are intricately related to action since any ideas that cannot be translated into action remain virtually dead. Just as both ideas should lead to action, both are intricately related to those interests that inspire and energize them.

Against this backdrop, we uphold the view that the relevance of African philosophy to Africa in the age of science lies in its ability to generate and disseminate worthwhile ideas that will liberate Africans from all factors that have hitherto held them in bondage. Prominent among these factors are political instability, incompetent leadership, economic hardship, cultural alienation, brain drain and ethno-religious crisis in the destruction of African traditional institutions and values and the superimposition of inadequate Western institutions and values on Africa by the colonialist which not only led to cultural alienation but also the mis-education of African elites; which give birth to the , the uncritical acceptance, nay implementation of Western ideas in Africa (C.f. Oguejiofor, 2001:29 – 49; Agbakoba, 2004:149). For African philosophy to be able to achieve this aim, it must be critical, deconstructive as well as reconstructive. In line with this view, Asiegbu (2008:47 – 48) explicates:

After a century of colonialism, definitely, Africans have imbibed quite a lot of the European colonialist and neo-colonialist ideas. It is the task of the deconstructive challenge to explore and expose such ideas, attitudes, beliefs and ideologies that remain ever ingrained in the African psyche. Mainly repressive and subjugating of the Africans, such ideas sub-served the colonialist goals in the established socio-economic, political, and cultural institutions in African societies. ... As a result, there arises the need for African philosophers to rethink the principles, concepts, attitudes and ideologies that forged those institutions with the aim of exposing them for what they are – exploitative and oppressive of the Africans. ...An essential part of the reconstructive challenge ... is that of whittling down the universalism of European philosophy by opening up other possibilities ... a reconstructive challenge entails creatively originating Africa's discourse in Africa's own categories, systems of thought, models and conceptions. It requires African philosophers to surpass all foreign conceptual frameworks and their limitations to rewrite, and so alter, the African condition.

Put differently, Oladipo re-affirms:

Africans have, for too long, been misled in our efforts to reconstruct our societies and revitalize our peoples. Now is the time to remake our world and renew ourselves, by regaining the capacity for self-conscious, self-directed change towards freedom, justice and human well-being. Let the intellectual sentries of our societies – scientists, philosophers, historians, writers, journalists and so on – earnestly rise to this challenge, by contemplating new dreams and envisioning better prospects for our societies. To do this is to rekindle hope in the possibility of another Africa and enhance our human status. History is still unfolding! (2009:137).

However, our position is that authentic deconstruction and reconstruction of contemporary Africa must be totally neither Afrocentric or Eurocentric; rather it should be what Chukwuokolo (2010:59 – 70) christened “Afro-constructivism”. That is, it should be based on a critical synthesis of an objective analysis of our historical experience and all possible alternatives. Indeed, a reliable philosophy for the deconstruction and reconstruction of contemporary Africa “should be one that is rationally chosen after considering the importance of having basic and secondary ideologies that can insulate us against crass exploitation” (Chukwuokolo, 2002:227). Hence, such a philosophy must be a product of an objective historical, dialectical and complementary investigation. I therefore present

Afroconstructivism as the ideal method and systematic philosophy that is very relevant to the repositioning of Africa in the Age of Science.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Afroconstructivism as a Philosophy for the Development of Africa

Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism have dominated the African development thought for over three hundred years without the desired results. Africa has not broken the jinx of its developmental conundrum. Many questions arise; is the issue of development in Africa a unique case study? Why does it appear that Africa is uniquely undevelopable? What is the ultimate cause of this developmental challenge? The ultimate challenge before any African scholar is therefore to find ultimate answers to the questions posed above. This paper finds the answer in crass materialism that arose at a certain period of African history before colonialism. It goes further to agree that this materialistic stance was responsible for the weak response of the Africa during its contact with the West as it capitulated for superior materialistic ideology. It argues further that unless there is a complete recognition of collective agency as a way of exerting the will to change and the creation of an internalist-externalist development ideology for Africa, it will continue to wallow in total underdevelopable movement as it is currently doing. In doing this, the paper concludes that there is the need for spiritual healing arising from the acceptance of guilt for slavery and the propitiation of this guilt as the only way forward for African development. It also avers that African Philosophy should guide African development. All these the paper summarizes in a single concept – Afro-constructivism. Afro -constructivism is the perception that in African thought we do not apprehend an independent metaphysico – social reality, but construct a system of principles or norms governing right perception of the social order. Such construction is constrained by rationality and human nature to allow for reasoned perceptions of the Africa social order. This presupposes the idea of a Masonic construction from a set of ideas in the metaphysico-social reality of a people with the aim of expressing reality as it really is constituted.

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