The African Philosophical Conflicts and Development

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Abstract: *The differences in African philosophical thinking between the ethno-philosophical and professional school of thought shows the involvement of philosophical conflicts in the African development process. The philosophical debate does no more than revive the entrenched views of development theories, namely the conflict between tradition and modernity. While ethno-philosophy thinks that the rehabilitation of African traditions, drive to successful modernization, especially after the disparaging discourse of colonialism, professional philosophy is of the opinion that success depends on the exchange of the traditional culture for modern ideas and institutions. This paper evaluates the major arguments developed by the two conflicting schools of thought in support of their position. The outcome is that both are right on their affirmations. Accordingly, the paper suggests that the conception of development as validation is alone able to reconcile the positive contribution of each school, since validation is how a traditional personality is judged according to modern norms, and thus achieves worldly success.*

I. Introduction

The involvement of African philosophy in developmental issues is not a common practice. It even causes uneasiness in view of the speculative nature of philosophy. However, philosophy either transcends developmental questions, or is little competent to deal with a topic requiring the involvement of positive sciences, such as economics, sociology and others. A more scrutiny would detect in African philosophy a negative reflection stemming from the very failure of African development. In the absence of concrete measures and advancement, it would seem, finding a substitute in a speculative diversion, which is a retreat from the practical world. Excessive preoccupations with speculative and literary matters manifest a profound discrepancy between the African mind and the exigencies of modernity, the mark of its alienation from the modern world.

This is a sufficient reason for trying to understand why in Africa the failure of development turns into a philosophical conflict. In order to clarify the role of African philosophy in issues of conflicts and development, this paper assumes the following tasks. First, it shows why and how the issue of African development expounds philosophical conflicts. Second, it demonstrates how African philosophical schools owe their divergence to the infiltration of development issues by definite philosophical stands. Third, it elaborates the philosophical framework liable to promote a positive process of culture change.

II. The Origin of Africa's Philosophical Problems on Development

Without even reaching the point of considering the African urge to development. Theories accounting for the underdevelopment of Africa have been riddled with philosophical questions. Issues are whether Africa underdevelopment is attributed to colonialism and neocolonialism or to properly African inadequacies or to both. Some scholars have argued that colonialism kept Africa away from modernity. In addition to the economic hardships in Africa and the establishment of inadequate social institutions, this meant that ideology of colonialism deeply disturbed and negatively affected the perception that Africans had of themselves. This is dehumanizing practice of colonialism whose outcome sent Africa into a deep and lasting crisis of identity. Summarizing the position of Africa, D. A. Masolo writes that the Africa philosophical debate;

expresses the epistemological roots of: the deep social, political and cultural crisis of muntu, the African person (Eboussi – Boulaga); Africans' continued servitude to Western domination (Towa); Africa's dependence on Western tutelage (Hebga); the invention of Africa at the margins of Western knowledge(Mudimbe).

Indeed, according to the racist ideology of colonialism, Africans are so alien to modern and rational life that they cannot be expected to make any progress without a close and corrective European tutelage. The category of primitiveness diverts African thinking of any inner impulse to liberate itself from irrationality, myths and obsolete habits. Only under the supervision and guidance of the West, can it be dragged into some kind of rationality, a theory that is also propagated by F. W. Hegel.

This model of development, otherwise known as Westernization, had a particularly negative impact on Africa, because, unlike other colonized peoples, Africans could not counter the disparaging discourse with the mitigating effect of a glorious past. Africa being the land of "those who invented neither gunpower nor

compass," to quote Aime Cesaire, nor gave birth to universalist religion, still less to expanding empires, the colonial discourse was bound to be devastating. No other race in the world was so reminded of its alleged inferiority, and assumingly no other race was so disarmed to combat such severe allegations than the inhabitants of the African content.

Quite naturally, the accusation of prerationality and primitiveness imparted a philosophical texture to the whole idea of African modernization. In particular, the question of knowing whether or not Africans are rational by nature triggered philosophical investigations into African cultures. On the presumption that the ability to think philosophically reveals a rationalistic disposition, the presence or lack of philosophy in Africa became the yardstick of the rationality of Africans. The merging of rational thinking with philosophy brought about discrimination and the task of disproving the charge of prerationality against Africa. This refutation had a direct effect on development, given that rationality is a prerequisite for scientific and technological abilities on which development depends.

Among African philosophers, many became convinced that the best way to counter the imputation of prerationality was to support the concept of pluralism. The need for extended humanity, the very one able to offer a place for those who did not invent anything, for the sake of accommodating Africa. The more this became pressing, the more the records of African failure to catch up with the West were accumulating. The confrontation between the African legacy and the requirements of the modern world acquired the spiritual dimension of alterity. This, in turn, placed the issue of difference, the connection between race and the human nature, at the centre of African philosophical reflections. The need to define humanness in a world dominated by Eurocentric models imparted to African Philosophy an acute sense of subjectivity in search of a new definition. According to Descartes, he is not his body, but his subjectivity is thought, which transcends aloofness from bodily determinations. In other words, he is the captain of his ship. This is not the case to Africans who see to what extent their body sticks to them, how it's being held in closeness to their thinking and prevent them from identifying themselves with a non-corporeal subjectivity. As emphasized by Lucius Outlaw, the deep issue of African philosophy;
is a struggle over the meaning of 'man' and 'civilized human', and all that goes with this in the context of the political economy of the capitalized and Europeanized Western world. In the light of the European incursion of Africa, the emergence of 'African philosophy' poses deconstructive (and reconstructive) challenges.

Whether Africans accept the inability to join the modern world due to the inappropriateness of their legacy or to the ruin of their original identity, in both cases they are compelled to take the West as an unavoidable challenge inducing them to reexamine their legacy and culture. As stated by Serequeberhan, "the indisputable historical violence effected by colonialism and the continued 'misunderstanding' of our situation perpetuated by neocolonialism… calls forth and provokes thought in post-colonial Africa." The addition of the dereliction of post colonial Africa to the disparaging discourse of colonialism deepens even more the crisis of identity and obliges philosophical thinking to be nothing more than a haunting quest for identity. Should Africans feel that they have lost their identity, and therefore, engage in the task of restoring precolonial links? Should they decide that the precolonial heritage obstructs advancement or would they feel compelled to adopt a critical attitude with the view of strengthening universal leanings to the detriment of particularism? In either case, they are at variance with themselves as suggested by some scholars that African philosophy draws its breath from "the experience of internal tear."

The issue of modernity versus tradition has created a serious conflict and it emerges as the basic concern of African Philosophy. It should be noted that the conflict between tradition and modernity is the core question that demarcates the various schools of development. Thus, while the school known as modernization theory explains underdevelopment by the persistence of traditional thinking and institutions, the trend known as dependency school rejects the vulnerability of tradition, arguing that the satellization of African societies by the powerful Western is the real cause of underdevelopment. Another school, called the mode of production approach, attempts a synthesis by suggesting that underdevelopment occurs when traditional methods and structures complete with the advanced systems to perpetuate themselves. In all these positions, the friction between tradition and modernity remains the core problem.

Nothing could better illustrate the overlap between development issues and philosophical questions than the fact that the conflict between tradition and modernity generates similar divisions in African philosophy. Speaking of the displeasure of professional philosophers with ethno-philosophy, Oyeka Owomoyela remarks that "development is the powerful end that orients all their arguments." For those who argue that the present powerlessness of Africa is due to its straying from its legacy, some kind of revival of the past is seen as a remedy. Termed as ethno-philosophers, their position has instigated a vigorous critique of the modernists or professional philosophers including Paulin Hountondji. This attitude is designed to maintain Africa in its backward beliefs and practices. Pointing out the real issue at stake, Kwasi Wiredu writes:
This process of modernization entails changes not only in the physical environment but also in the mental outlook of our peoples, manifested both in their explicit beliefs and in their customs and their ordinary daily

habits and pursuits. Since the fundamental rationale behind any changes in a world outlook is principally a philosophical matter, it is plain that the philosophical evaluation of our traditional thought is of very considerable relevance to the process of modernization in our continent.

Clearly, the conflict between tradition and modernity highlights the philosophical texture of the terms of African development. Besides, this should not come as a surprise. The encounter of African philosophy with the problems of development is not particular to Africa. Whatever the purpose, theories of development are sooner or later confronted with the basic problem of philosophy, namely the question of the primacy of mind or matter. So when theories explain development either by economic or environmental causes or by spiritualist and cultural considerations, they inevitably come under materialism or spiritualism. For instance, as Marxism ascribes social evolution to economic determinism, it represents the most accomplished materialist theory of development. In return, when Max Weber typifies a spiritualist approach, to him religious anxiety explains the European capitalism.

The attribution of underdevelopment to economic dependency is consistent with a materialist approach, while the appeal to cultural reasons tends to conform to a spiritualist assumption. It is this philosophy of development, most of the time implicit in the mind of social scientists, which erupts in the debate dividing African philosophers. The question of knowing whether the lasting effect of colonialism and neocolonialism in African is to be found in socio-economic or spiritual disabilities is an important aspect of the African philosophical debate.

III.   No Modernity without Heritage

It is normal to distinguish four schools of thought in African philosophy. They are: (1) ethno-philosophy, propagated by Placide Temples, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti and others (2) philosophic sagacity, defended by Odera Oruka and his followers; (3) national and ideological philosophy, to which Cabral, Nyerere, Nkrumah and others, are said to belong; (4) professional philosophy, which has such scholars as Hountondji, Wiredu, Bodunrin, and others.

Ethnophilosophy refers to the works of those philosophers who present the collective worldviews of traditional Africa as philosophy.   Professional philosophy rejects this identification of philosophy with collective thinking, arguing that only works based on rational and critical argumentation deserve to be called philosophical. Accepting the challenge, philosophic sagacity attempts to identify individuals who crown their traditional background with critical assessments of traditional beliefs. For its part, national and ideological philosophy prefers to emphasize the African primacy of collective destiny and its main corollary, namely the need for a theory rooted in traditional African socialism and family hood to achieve the authentic and effective liberation of Africa.

These classifications pose many conflicts in African philosophy. The classified schools overlap in major issues and, in some cases, distinct trends of thought are not recognized, as for instance the existence of the hermeneutical school of thought.   Moreover, the classification is not based on proper philosophical consideration matching the Western categorization of rationalist, empiricist, materialist, idealist, or other schools of thought. However, our purpose, being demonstration of the relevance of African philosophical debate to issues of development, does not need an elaborate type of classification. The broad distinction of ethno philosophy on one hand and professional philosophy on the other is enough to articulate our problem. The two schools do reproduce in philosophical terms the splits caused by the conflict between tradition and modernity in development theories.

Viewed from the angle of development, ethnophilosophy handles two positions namely; the criticism of the Western conceptions of Africa and the rehabilitation of Africa cultures. The task is regarded as the major condition of African renaissance and hence modernization. The premises of this thinking were started by Placide Tempels, though he came round to the idea of African philosophy through the purpose of evangelizing Africans, but his problem still meets the issues of African modernization in general. He registers the failure of missionary work in Africa by remarking that the work has only succeeded in creating the evolue. The evolue is a failure or conflict lacking stability and firmness. The reason for this superficial Christianization is that the evolue, according to Tempels, "has never effected reconciliation between his new way of life and his former native philosophy, which remains intact just below the surface." Because he/she has not reached a synthesis, Christianity and the native philosophy conflict and a deep and firm conversion is blocked.

Temples sees the deep reason for this failure in the colonial discourse describing African beliefs as "childish and savage customs." This characterization, he boldly states, imputes to the colonizer "the responsibility for having killed 'the main' in the Bantu." Evidently, Temple's view extends to the general problem of the modernization of Africa. It inaugurates a mode of thought which discards the method of Westernization as well as the depreciation of African traditional cultures, arguing that modernity cannot take root if it dehumanizes the African. It even suggests that underdevelopment is just the product of the

dehumanization of Africa. The superficial adoption of Western culture and the subsequent conflict with the native personality can hardly support a successful process of change.

To reverse this trend, there is no other way than to refute the colonial insult by exposing the philosophical dimension of the traditional thinking. Accordingly, the question of the existence of African philosophy must be answered by a loud and clear yes. Anything less than the demonstration of the prior existence of African philosophy to the colonial incursion, ethno philosophy warns, would fall short of being a pertinent defense of the humanity of Africans. This clears the way for an African road to development, which rejects Westernization and conceives of modernization as an assertion of African personality. The whole idea turns modernization into a restoration of the pre-colonial norms of Africa.

The restoration of Africa's precolonial philosophical thinking and cultural references will allow Africans to interpret and organize the modern world from their own standpoint. Far from being an assault on tradition, modernization requires its reinstatement, which is then an act of empowerment. The distinct message of ethno-philosophy is thus clear that modernization does not implicate a flight from one's cultural legacy and the alleged conflict between tradition and modernity is but fallacious.

This thinking puts ethno-philosophy and the West on a collision course. Already, as is obvious with Nyerere and Nkrumah, there is an attempt to throw back the insult. Africa is labeled as primitive, yet the alleged superiority of the West is but a sham: it cannot hide how squarely its "superior" civilization is built on the exploitation of "man by man." There is nothing noble about it, and Africa will prefer its poverty to a mode of life that portrays as virtue and unspeakable crime. If Africa is backward, the West is barbaric, and so even less civilized since real civilization is unthinkable without humanism. As Nyerere says, "the creation of wealth is a good thing and something which we shall have to increase. But it will cease to be good the moment wealth ceases to serve man and begins to be served by man."

There is, therefore, a deliberate attempt to rehabilitate Africa by emphasizing its humanistic values as opposed to the exploitative relationships of Western capitalism. The revelation of African humanism counters the colonial affront, but more yet, it falsifies it in the very terms of the civilizing mission. This polemical course is inherent in the position defending the existence of African philosophy, and its purpose is to create what Mazrui called "cultural nationalism."

IV.   No Modernity without Denial

In light of the West identifying itself with reason, the slightest successful move towards modernity becomes conditional on Africans being endowed with the same human potential. Ethno-philosophy insists on the peculiarity of Africans, the higher becomes their separation from the development process. Paradoxically, by making Africans into a strange people, ethno-philosophy, contradicting its own principles, justifies and calls for the civilizing mission. Obviously, being alien to rationality by nature, Africans cannot be put on the track of development without the imposition of an external model. Consequently, the critique of ethno-philosophy by professional philosophers revolves around three points; (1) that ethno-philosophy is an endorsement of the anthropological discourse on Africa; (2) that it is based on a misconception of the nature of philosophy; (3) its implications are most detrimental to progress.

The endorsement of the anthropological theory is indeed the apex of self-contradiction. The affirmation of African difference does no more than reproduce the anthropological view of irrational and mythical Africa. It supports the colonial reasoning according to which Africans are unable to acquire the rudiments of modern life without the permanent tutelage of the West. By subscribing to the idea of African's "otherness", ethno-philosophy defines reasons as the prerogative of the "white man," hence Hountondji's indictment that it is "nothing but a revamped version of Levy-Bruhl's 'primitive mentality.'" Far from retrieving Africa's pride and rehabilitating its culture, as it claims, ethno-philosophy is an "accomplice" upholding the disparagement of Africa and its subordination to the West.

What is demanded from African philosophy is, according to professional philosophy, the radical rejection of Africa's alleged "otherness". The restoration of the pride and creativity of Africans depend on the recognition, not of their strangeness, but of their universal virtues, which they share equally with the rest of human kind. Since the colonial and neocolonial discourse contests the membership of Africans in the normal human order, African philosophy must denounce this invention of difference for the sole purpose of marginalizing Africa. The staunch critique of anthropology, not its sanction, should be the main focus of African philosophy.

How does professional philosophy repudiate the colonial discourse on the prelogical nature of Africans and reinstate their pride and humanity? Since the claim of difference and the relativization of Western pretensions to universality result in a backfiring strategy, the best way is to demonstrate that the science on which the perception of Africa is based in a fake, a "pseudoscience," as Hountondji says. That is why professional philosophers lead the battle on the epistemological ground rather than on metaphysical and ethical grounds, as ethnophilosophy does. The idea is to pinpoint invention, construction where the colonial mind

professes an objectivist reading. This method of discrediting the colonial descriptions of Africa makes the school dependent on the philosophical premises of the Frankfurt school and French structuralism.

Does this mean that professional philosophy disputes the existence of African philosophy? If we are to believe Hountondji, the answer is no. Ethnophilosophy is the proof that African philosophy exists by "the same right and in the same mode as all the philosophies of the world: in the form of a literature." Simply, in the case of ethnophilosophy, the individual views are hidden under a collective veil and identified with an ethnic group. It is "a philosophy which, instead of presenting its own rational justification, shelters lazily behind the authority of a tradition and projects its own theses and beliefs on to that tradition. So what is being offered as a collective philosophy is the view of an individual African philosopher.

V.   Conclusion

In the light of these serious drawbacks of ethno-philosophy, the progressive thinking is the one that admits that African philosophy "is before us, not behind us, and must be created today by decisive action." It must be critical not only of the West, but of African cultures and customs as well, by avoiding any snugness about African vices and shortcomings in the name of identity. As Mudimbe proposes, this philosophy "should be critical of the other discourses….and, at the same time by vocation, one which should be autocritical." Above all, it must discard the idea of African otherness so as to inaugurate philosophical systems defined as African only by "the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content."

For professional philosophers, this amount to saying that development can neither be positively theorized nor practically engaged if the conflict between tradition and modernity is not accepted as an essential ingredient of the problem. The undermining of folk thinking and past beliefs and practices is the first step towards modernization. Development lies in transition from particularism to a universal, scientific culture. Many scholars have come to reprove the Western model because it has so far failed. Failure exposes the bare fact that Westernization is merely a continuation of the colonial model. The fact that in post-colonial Africa the model has become the goal of native ruling elite which does not change its nature. So long as Africa is not after its own self, armed with its own beliefs and myths, development is still a civilizing mission.

To conclude, the dismissal of the conflict between tradition and modernity and the conception of the latter as wordly corroboration of the former advise the replacement of the suppression of traditions. In this way, culture change is promoted through the commitment to tradition rather than its denial. Neither Westernization nor careful borrowings really change an inherited personality; they simply burden it with dualism. Also, the attempt to wipe out the legacy is futile and humanly suicidal. In return, what is viable is the alteration of the past, the manner the legacy is received. This amounts to renovating identity, and not solving any conflicts.

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