

ON THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN EXPERIENCE: TOWARDS A HUMANISTIC MODE OF PHILOSOPHY FOR AFRICA

Abstract: There is no doubt that Africa today is confronted with many economic, political, social, and developmental problems. The big question and the basic challenge is therefore how best we can tackle these problems especially as we begin and forge ahead in the third millennium. This paper attempts to elucidate a fundamental role that philosophy can play in this regard. It holds that philosophy, as a discipline in the humanities, can help shape fresh ideas that are humanistic in nature in the sense that they encourage free enquiry and social agreement which are vital pillars for a fair and prosperous society; for a society without such genuine humanistic values will show many of the symptoms which are present in contemporary African societies.

Key words: Humanism, Africa, philosophy, free inquiry, social agreement.

Introduction

The choice of focus for the present paper is informed by the consideration of some practical problems identifiable in the socio-political, cultural and economic realities of contemporary Africa. The paper does not place emphasis on goals to pursue as individuals, but on reasonable and realistic ambitions to embrace as a people. Thus, as Africa begins the third millennium of the Calendar, a major stage in human history, it has become imperative for us to take stock as a people, reassess our situation in history, and where necessary, shape fresh ideas about directions in which to move. To this end, one relevant question which must be raised and answered is this: What mental or intellectual posture must we adopt in order to recognise and select

wise attitudes and policies for effectively responding to the present condition and for confronting the future? To refuse to raise such a question or to ignore it when raised is to leave matter to some unrealistic prophets and irrational activists. In this paper, I argue that in addressing the contemporary African condition and confronting the looming future of the twenty first century, what is required is the adoption of a philosophical framework of a humanistic mode. Perhaps the proper way to begin is the exposition of some facts of experience.

Aspects of the African Experience

A rather bleak picture emerges from today's Africa. This is informed by a number of factors which include the following:¹

- The shallow developmental legacies of European imperialism.
- Blistering poverty, hunger and disease (now including a calamitous AIDS epidemic).
- The repressive, corrupt, and inefficient governance of African States by their own elites since independence.
- Steep economic decline across the continent.
- Crises of political legitimacy due to (1) – (4) above.

This list is by no means exhaustive of the African predicament. It only reveals the complexity of the situation. For instance, the steep economic decline has brought many national economies to the verge of collapse. It has led to material deprivation in the land, with situation degenerating to outright destitution in many countries.

In Nigeria, for instance, the situation is such that financial matters gained prevalence over production matters. Even within companies and organisations the value of financial managers has replaced that of production managers. Medium to long-term productive investments are less popular, with the concept of economic change switching in meaning from expectations of growth to hopes of survival.²

Meanwhile, the reduction of productive investments and the insufficient creation of jobs in the formal economy, together with other factors (such as bureaucratic obstacles, tax evasion, every low

¹ Irele 1992: 32.

² Alonso-Concheiro 1991: 74.

minimum wages etc) have created informal or underground economies.³ The result of all these is the emergence of a less governable society, as an increasing amount of activities occurs outside controlled channels. There is, all over the land, a high level of social tension expressing itself sometimes as internal conflicts. In a more general sense, there abound, evidence of accumulated distress leading to a growing despair- a phenomenon which has assumed the dimension of existential angst.⁴

The gloomy economic reality is compounded by an unfavourable political climate.⁵ This situation is underlined by graphic television pictures of starving refugees fleeing the ravages of civil wars in Rwanda, Somalia, Zaire, Sudan, Sierra-Leone and the now violence-ravaged Libya, Cote d'Ivoire, Tunisia, and Egypt, including other ethnic and political violence. Indeed, a popular image of Africa now is that of ongoing politically induced disruption of life with the attendant insecurity and constant misery. Now, just as the political orientation of any society is correlated to the prevailing economic condition, so are they inevitably tied together in the African experience. Any attempt to proffer solution to the identified problems must keep this fact in view.

A very important component of the antecedent condition of Contemporary Africa can be located in the colonial experience. This as a matter of historical fact, constitutes a dividing line between the African past and present. It is, in the opinion of Peter Ekeh,⁶ an epoch whose enduring significance beyond the life span of the colonial situation lies in the social, political and economic formations, developed from those changes provoked by the confrontations, contradictions and incompatibilities in the colonial situation. Among the profound changes which Ekeh had in mind are emergent social structures which were neither indigenous nor migrant, but emerged to meet social needs of the new colonial environment such as tribalism and ethnicity. Colonialism came, therefore, with new state structures, strange to diverse and sometimes incompatible groups of

³ Alonso-Concheiro 1991: 75.

⁴ Irele 1992: 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ekeh 1983: 11.

people.⁷ It trust the colonised people into the world capitalist system dominated by metropolitan forces operating under harsh individualism: a new world in which the people were ill-equipped to compete. As a result, barely after independence the affected political and geographical unit is enmeshed in a predicament marked by underdevelopment, fragile state structure and the crisis of legitimacy.⁸

It has been argued however, that the African contact with Europe was to expose the former to the values of modernisation, an important stage of development.⁹ The people were introduced to a new world order, sucked into a vortex of social and cultural change. There was a reconstitution of the traditional modes of production and governance, social organisation, cultural expression and fundamental norms. In short, the colonial experience was seen as a confrontational with triumphant Western modernity.¹⁰ The point made in this paper is that the supposedly transformative colonial experience did not yield in Africa the type of society that industrial transformation created in Europe. This is the point of the humanistic consideration. The argument is that certain humanistic values shaped by the enlightenment are known to have constituted an important component of the Western model of modernisation. But in introducing the Western model of modernisation in the context of colonialism, these values were missing.¹¹

The Humanistic Consideration

The consideration takes human nature, its limits and interests as its theme. It recognises the dignity of man, making him the measure of things. The humanistic project always aims at discovering for man and in man, the spirit of freedom. This alone provides justification for man's claim to rational autonomy, allowing him to see himself as involved in nature and history and capable of making them his realm.¹²

⁷ Ekeh 1983: 31.

⁸ Ekeh 1983: 32.

⁹ Masolo 1992: 67.

¹⁰ Koka 1995: 50.

¹¹ Irele 1992: 34.

¹² Blackham 1963: 10.

The permanent roots of the humanistic consideration are recognisable in tow related fundamental quests of universal import. These are: (1) Free inquiry and (2) Social Agreement.¹³

Free Inquiry

According to the notion of free inquiry, each must think and decide for himself on questions concerning the life he has and his conduct of it, and nothing is exempt from human question.¹⁴ In this understanding, there is no inmemorable tradition or authority which can be used as a standard for interpreting human experience. Experience is to be interpreted in the light of further experience, the sole source of all standards of reason and values for ever open to questioning. Free inquiry however, is not irresponsible thinking. It is methodical and systematic, having established agreement, and tradition.¹⁵ In other word, it has its own criteria and system of control. It may be a free inquiry, but an organised free inquiry.

In effect, if the validity of a policy or idea remains always open to question, if the results remain always subject to falsification by further experience, then we shall be able to continuously have some provisional, corrigible, progressive ideas which alone constitute the standard of attainable certainty and reliability. This is an important characteristic of the mental framework to be adopted if we must recognise and select wise attitudes and policies for responding to the present condition and confronting the future. Another is social agreement.

Social Agreement

The humanistic consideration emphasises that social agreements is a principal criterion for values as well as for facts, and for rules which concern everybody in a society.¹⁶ Human beings, become human in being socialised, and any society is instituted in the rules, customs, procedures by which conduct is regulated and cooperation

¹³ Blackham 1963: 14.

¹⁴ Shuttle 1996: 199.

¹⁵ Inquiries as a matter of fact are usually guided by rules, procedures and methods. Thus, even a free inquiry is an organised free inquiry.

¹⁶ Raskin 1986: 30.

secured, facilitated and maintained. For, if I am a party to a given set of rules or policies then such rules or policies are binding on me, and I am responsible for upholding and enforcing them on other parties as well as for conforming to them. If these rules remain open to question and revision, and agreed procedures are provided by means of which to put them in question and try to obtain revision, then they are rational.¹⁷ In other words, the rules are rational and binding in so far as they are provisional. Thus, we have the positive correlation of rationality and obligation with the provisional character of rules. Indeed, the kind of agreement needed for living together is agreement such as about conventions (such as high way code), about procedures (such as parliament), about rights (as with Civil liberties) and about mutual expectations (from common honesty to neighbour help).¹⁸

Upon this foundation of social cooperation, different ultimate beliefs governing different ideals of life and styles of living may co-exist in equal security. Not only is such a social foundation good for order, it is also good for the productive cooperation which furnishes means and multiplies opportunities. In other words, it creates that practicability of purpose which is the concrete content of freedom.¹⁹ Combining both criteria of free inquiry and social agreement, the humanist would note:

By all means, let the struggle for men's minds and heart go on, by all fair and peaceful means. But let it be remembered that the renunciation of all other means is a matter of social agreement; and this is a condition that has to be worked for.²⁰

The point of a humanistic mode of philosophy for Africa (and for any people) proposed in this paper rests on the ground that the problems before us are (universal) problems of human life and existence; and any philosophy that must be taken seriously is that which will enable each individual to think independently. Beyond this, a humanistic mode of philosophy encourages open-mindedness,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Raskin 1986: 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ This is the reading of Voltaire's *Treaties On Tolerance* rendered in 1949 by Palmiro Togliatti, Secretary of Italian Communist Party in a Preface to a party reproduction of Voltaire's *Works*: exert from H. J. Blackham, op.cit., p. 21.

civil responsibility, understanding and tolerance among individuals and groups. Thus, we would have independently-minded, thoughtful people, prepared to shoulder their responsibilities with regards to the great questions of contemporary African world. To enhance this, the humanistic mode strengthens our capacity for judgement by stimulating our insight in different cultures, comparison of what each has to offer, analyses of what brings them closer together and what separates them. Our proposed humanistic mode of philosophy, in encouraging free inquiry, does not consider any truth (about human condition) as final, demanding respect for the convictions of individuals and accepts no doctrine that denies the liberty of others or that affront human dignity.²¹

When employed in economic policies, the humanistic mode discourages unlimited free-market economy which insists that the distribution of wealth must occur entirely according to the dictates of market forces. The central dogma of this theory (as expressed by Adam Smith, the founding father of capitalist theory, in his *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776) is the belief that in an entirely free economy, each citizen, through seeking his own gain, would be “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was not part of his intention,” namely, the prosperity of society. This does happen sometimes; but to say that it invariably must happen as if ordained by a given natural law is a view which can mount to a form of economic superstition. Thus, the humanistic posture rejects automatic beneficence of market forces: the end result of market forces must be scrutinised, and if necessary, corrected in the name of natural law, social justices, human right and the common good.²² Left to themselves, market forces are just as likely to lead to evil results as to good ones. A most important point always overlooked is that Adam Smith did not envisage markets operation in a value-free society, but assumed that individual consumer choices would be governed by moral considerations.²³

When properly regulated in the name of the common good, market forces can constitute efficient mechanism for matching re-

²¹ *The Common Good: A Generla Statement of Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales*, published by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, Lagos, 1996, p. 21.

²² *Ibid.*, p.21

²³ *Ibid.*, p.21

sources to needs; for no other system has so far shown itself superior in encouraging wealth creation and hence in advancing the prosperity of the society, and enabling poverty and hardship to be relieved. In contrast, centrally commanded economies will be inefficient, wasteful and unresponsive to human needs, nor can they foster a climate of personal liberty. In a market economy, the existence of wide variety of consumer choice means that individual decisions can be made according to individual wants and needs, thus, respecting certain aspects of human freedom and following certain social and political arrangements.²⁴

On the fundamental features of society, the humanistic mode embraces two features of a modern society: democracy and human right. In the case of democracy, the position is that democracy can never be a self-fulfilling justification for policies that are intrinsically evil. If it is to be healthy, democracy requires more than universal suffrage: it requires a system of common (humanistic) values if it is not to become a democratic tyranny in which the majority oppresses the minority. It is necessary for the public to have an understanding of the common good and the concepts that underlie it. Otherwise, they will be unlikely to support actions by public authority that is not to the immediate advantage of the majority. Furthermore, public confidence is undermined, and democracy subverted when the members of public authority responsible for the common good are not appointed democratically or an objective merit, but in order to ensure that the authority in question has a political complexion favourable to the government of the day. To avoid such a situation, the humanistic mode encourages that decisions are taken as close to the grass root as good governance allows; emphasising the point of solidarity-that we are all responsible for each other.²⁵

With regards to human rights, these are sometimes advanced to support claims to individual autonomy which are inappropriate, morally speaking. The proliferation of alleged 'rights' can devalue the very concept. So is the amplification of right without same conception of the common good to which all have obligation to contribute.²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.10

²⁶ Graneb 1997: 120.

Conclusion²⁷

The African people are perhaps, not alone in facing the problems to which attentions is drawn in this paper. But they should be aware of the tendency to look outside for solution. Yet, to reduce the 'solution' to 'African', as its leasers seem to push, is to fall into the contradiction of unlimited relativism. Furthermore, the problems are not simply political, neither are they reducible to economic only.

The crisis concerns loss of individual beliefs and confusion over personal moral behaviour. The identifiable moods of African nation- states display a society ill-at-ease with itself. There is a loss of confidence in the public arena. And so, people seek space for personal fulfilment by turning increasingly to their private world. There is a retreat from community involvement to the domestic and individuals spheres. Thus, the very place where satisfaction and security are sought becomes the place where they are less likely to be obtained. The philosophical framework outlined in this paper is a necessary condition for a fair and prosperous society. A society without genuine humanistic values will show many of the symptoms which are present in contemporary Africa.

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²⁷ This is a domestication of the position of Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, op.cit., especially, as the position holds for the African Society.

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O SAVREMENOM AFRIČKOM ISKUSTVU:
KA HUMANISTIČKOM VIDU FILOZOFIJE ZA AFRIKU

Rezime

Nema sumnje da je danas Afrika suočena s mnoštvom ekonomskih, političkih, društvenih i razvojnih problema. Veliko pitanje i osnovni izazov, otud, jesu koji je najbolji način da se uhvatimo u koštac s tim problemima, posebno kako sve dublje zalazimo u treći milenijum. Ovaj članak pokušava da osvetli temeljnu ulogu koju filozofija može igrati s obzirom na pomenuto. On zastupa stanovište da filozofija, kao humanistička disciplina, može pomoći u oblikovanju svežih ideja koje su po svojoj prirodi humanističke u smislu da podstiču slobodno istraživanje i društveni sporazum koji su vitalni oslonci za jedno pravedno i napredno društvo; jer, društvo bez takvih genunih humanističkih vrednosti pokazivaće mnoge simptome koji su prisutni u savremenim afričkim društvima.

Ključne reči: Humanizam, Afrika, filozofija, slobodno istraživanje, društveni sporazum.