
PHILOSOPHY AS A TOOL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN CULTURE

OMALE, SIMEON ACHONU

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba

ISAIAH ADUOJO NEGEDU

Department of Philosophy, Federal University, Lafia- Nasarawa State

ABSTRACT: *As human beings, the first social group by which we are identified is culture. Being a way of life that brings out the uniqueness in a people, it is meant to be progressive. Philosophy is a tool that is necessarily needed to fine-tune culture in order to raise it to certain level of objectivity. Notwithstanding the influence of western civilization on Africa, critically analyzing certain concepts, we aver that the preservation of culture is hinged on progressive intellectual discourse, lest our cultures face threat of extinction and remains a dormant tradition.*

KEYWORDS: Philosophy, Tradition, Culture, Reflective, Dialectic

NATURE OF THE TRADITION OF THE AFRICAN PEOPLE

That tradition is the sum total of a people's way of life for safe-keeping is a clear indication that in tradition, there can be no novel ideas, only new persons who search into historical events, not for the purpose of invention but for the aim of discovering hidden truths of a people's way of life. History has shown that it is almost impossible to discuss the tradition of a people independent of their religion. These two elements that are major constituents of a people's way of life are inextricably interwoven to the extent that to delve into one is to tackle the other. Thus, the tradition of the African people is basically located in their ethnocentric outlook, which also involves their religious views. Since Africans are notoriously religious, an African carries his religion wherever he goes. Mbiti therefore notes that:

A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence... to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.¹

This peculiarity of the nature of the people of Africa does not only belong to the ancient, but extends to the present; hence the status of tradition is being attached to it. The denial of the possibility of the African people's ability to have a religion by some schools of thought is therefore considered as an attack on the tradition of a people. To hold on to the view that Africans are without a belief in a supreme being which makes their mind stagnant, or using colonial yardstick to relegate them to spiritually inferior beings hence making them animistic or fetish would have no foundation unless and until it can be proven that the African people are without any tradition. Acceptance of cultural inferiority goes to question the possibility of the existence of philosophizing in Africa. The philosophy of a people to some extent is hidden in their language. How can we hold as tenable

a belief that holds that a people have no philosophy long before one encounters the culture/language of such people as Hegel and some philosophers of the West did? But one must note that the colonization of Africa and its after-effect made it possible for the African to gradually mythicalize his culture. Having taken grip of the African mind, it was possible to take hold of their being. It became clear that the possibility of having a 'first order' philosophic activity was nullified since the African was considered to be incapable of reasoning. That was why the constitutional phrase that says that "all men are created equal" did not apply to the blacks since blackness for them represented that which was non-human. But as Africans became independent, the resistance from the colonial powers also strengthened, because having denigrated the African to the level of primitivity and denied the humanness of the people, the West only went ahead to look for attendant justification of that which they had preconceived. It was to that end that Jahn aptly noted that those who see some others as fools will go to any length to look for proofs that will confirm the attribute of foolishness that has been bestowed on them. Simply by applying a vocabulary, one can easily turn Gods into idols, faces into grimaces. But like in the African society where you have people of different skin colour, different intellectual capacity/background and varying degrees of civilization, so too in western cultures would you also find people who are primitive and some others who are civilized, honest and dishonest people alike, clever and stupid, geniuses and boneheads² and so on. Despite all these, they consider all persons to be born equal; the same is applicable to the African.

POINT OF DIVERGENCE BETWEEN TRADITION AND CULTURE

On a general level, there are always attempts by scholars and people in general to use the concepts of culture and tradition interchangeably. However, properly speaking, both concepts have their specialty. At first glance, it is worthy to note that the etymologies of both concepts are totally different. Since tradition means to transmit something exactly as it was presented from age to age, and the word culture implies cultivation, which in turn necessarily implies growth, it goes to mean that culture begins where tradition stops. For a tradition to be elevated to the level of culture, it has to necessarily pass through certain dialectical discourse. Culture does not therefore develop into tradition but tradition develops into culture. Behind every culture therefore was a tradition. Okere succinctly noted that culture as developmental is richer in meaning and not merely descriptive. It "involves a conscious effort, a common pursuit, a forward march towards higher values, towards more refinement."³ Culture therefore is not a matter of what is, but a matter of what could be. Logically speaking therefore, when we say that tradition should be dynamic, what it means essentially is that tradition should become cultural. For to be traditional in this sense is to be sterile, but to be cultural is to be civilized. Simply put, culture could then be defined as progressively refining tradition. Strictly speaking, the synonymous use of culture and tradition is therefore unacademic since culture does not necessarily means tradition but could spring from tradition.

Also, while we can speak of the superiority of one culture over another, it may be impossible to speak of a tradition that is superior over others inasmuch as it emanates from a people's way of life. All traditions are at par with each other to the extent that it is transmitted the way it is. What makes it possible to speak of the superiority of a culture over another is the fact that while they are all constantly evolving, some evolve better and faster than others. Since all cultures are tending

towards progress, those that have higher degree of logic are able to provide rationale for their existence that stands the test of time.

MacDonald opines that culture is not just something that belongs to the past but an essential part of what we are today and what we would become in the future. It is an association or the summation of what a people have in common, "their shared experiences, shared perceptions and values, shared consciousness."⁴ However, he goes ahead to tell us that one of the best possible ways for cultural preservations is through the museum that stores relics and various heritage of a people. Through such process culture can be recreated to belong to all ages. Culture is not to be viewed in isolation of existing way of life of a people. To speak of the various cultures of the European people for instance, it has to be in the light of the people of Europe. Also, proponents' African culture as a theoretical discipline must take into cognizance the way of life of the people of Africa for it to be practically authentic. One wonders if it is even possible at all to conceive of the cultures of the African people. Since the culture of a people cannot be isolated from their language, we aver that it is impossible to conceive of an African culture that is wholesomely holistic, as in Nigeria which is just a country in Africa there are over 250 ethnic groups and we can be certain that the cultures are as many as the ethnic groupings. However, we can speak in terms of a commonality that binds the different groups together. That is why Africa is seen as a communalistic society in the midst of its differences. That is why Jahn noted that there has never been a traditional African culture but only a plurality of different cultures. For him, cultural differences rest on some basic features that are not necessarily biological. The dynamic nature of culture shows that culture is not something that is static and biologically inherited; people can choose to abandon a particular culture since it is not innate in man.

PHILOSOPHY'S ROLE IN CULTURAL REAWAKENING

The role philosophy plays in the shaping of cultures lies in the very function of philosophy which is reflective, conceptual and dialectical in various degrees. We must clearly make the distinction here that the philosophy of a people is totally different from philosophy's role in cultures, since the philosophy of a people is not necessarily critical in the strict sense of philosophizing. It implies that philosophy could be used in the loosed sense of the word and also in its strict sense. However, for the purpose of this work, we speak of philosophy in the strict sense of the word. The interaction between philosophy and a people's culture has a long existence in different thought system ranging from Platonic idealism, German idealism, American pragmatism, existentialism and so on. It is on this note that Makinde notes that philosophers are effects of cultures, beliefs and the circumstances of their time. Being philosophers therefore, also means that they could be causes of changes in beliefs and circumstances in a culture.⁵ Philosophy's historiography has always followed this pattern. Goldstein avers that the quest for a theory of culture and its practical aspect are two different things. While the study of the practice of culture belongs to certain empirical disciplines, that of the theory of culture is metaphysical in its approach. Hence, it is a branch of speculative philosophy, whereas the concern of the anthropologist is to offer explanations to cultural phenomena.⁶

The role of philosophy in the development of cultures can be gleaned properly from the task of philosophy as that which clarifies ideas and concepts. Tradition without philosophy is dead culture

because the critical attitude of philosophy makes it possible for it to constantly probe into the realm of culture. The question of philosophy will not come to an end except we envisage an end to cultural reawakening. Since the task of philosophy primarily lies in philosophizing, it will continually aid our culture and our civilization to the extent that what is handed down from one generation to another is not just a tradition that has remained unchanged, but one which through critical discourse has evolved from age to age. A purpose for the existence of history is so that we can envisage a robust or sterile future in the eye of the past and the present moment. Culture may be a people's way of life and philosophy in its informal sense will also embrace a people's culture. However, properly speaking, without professional philosophy, the tradition of a people remains dormant. It is on this note we aver that a people without philosophy is a people without culture and a people without any culture cannot be said to have a history. History is not just accumulation of the past gullibly handed down with no alteration. It is itself knowledge acquired through investigation. So the unraveling of history cannot be done in isolation of philosophy. If the existence and activities of the world as it has been from time immemorial will remain the same throughout eternity, then we cannot speak of history. Any practice of a people that has been handed down in its original form from age to age without due regard for change cannot be historical, it is barely traditional. We are not better defined by the past, we are best defined by what we hope to achieve and where we hope to go in the future and any worthwhile account of history must take into cognizance that ideal.

There is also the issue of dialogue of cultures. Any tradition that remains sterile overtime comes in conflict with the civilization of the age and with the cultures of other societies. Philosophy does not examine the world from a subjective perspective, if it does, then there would be plurality of worldviews so uncoordinated that it would make the unification of the world an impossible task to achieve, the world in turn would be chaotic with many different ethnic groupings as the number of cultures and persons that exist.

Being an objective discipline therefore, it carries the same level of objectivity into cultural inquiry. This is because though unique to a particular people, culture should have a global impact. As others strive to get themselves acquainted with our cultures, we should also not be dwarfed by our own worldviews to remain stunted since growth is a necessary phase in the definition of culture. In a world that constantly and rapidly evolves with the fact that cultures contest for relevance, if African philosophers refuse to act quickly, there would be a race to the bottom approach in issues that deal with the civilization of the African people, which will make us incapacitated to measure up with the globalized world. It is on this note that we aver that no culture in itself is objective, it is unique to a particular people at a particular point in time. But the romance between philosophy and culture would set the pace for wholesome participation in historical events. Even though from the anthropological perspective culture is a people's way of life, anthropology itself is in need of philosophic tools of criticality and objectivity for it to see how different world views can search for a unifying point in the midst of their various diversities.

Though philosophy is a specialized field of study, any discipline that uses the methods of investigation through dialectics or hermeneutics necessarily engage in philosophic activity. It is the process of philosophizing that makes it possible to speak of a unified African culture that sees its meeting point in communalism. Whether the cultures of the African people when put together

can actually be termed communalistic is another issue for determination, since the democracy as practiced in African societies does not reflect that communalistic concern.

A principle to consider in the development of African culture is the language of a people. To speak of a people's culture is also to speak of the language of a people. To develop our culture is to develop our language not with the primary aid of any other language that is foreign to a particular people, but with the language of the African people. Thus, in a multi-lingual society like Nigeria with over two hundred dialect, how can the society better develop when the language of analysis is foreign to the people? It becomes clear that colonial contact has made it impossible for the African people to speak of an African culture devoid of western influence. It is on this note that Odimegwu notes that:

To kill a language therefore, is to kill the culture whose heart and soul it is...to educate a person in a particular language is to plant in him the heart and soul of its culture, and by implication, to export and expand the frontiers of the culture.⁷

From this therefore, we can see that the question of the existence of African philosophy and African culture is incontestable. To destroy the culture of a people requires first of all colonizing their minds and imposing on them a language that is alien to them. It is worthy to state at this point that the purpose of relegating the African languages to the background was primarily for the purpose of colonial transaction, its aim was not to build but to destroy all existing structures on ground that carries with it elements of the African spirit. However, it is not without its advantage especially in terms of western education. African culture was not altogether bad; we therefore envisage a cross-cultural dialogue of the west and Africa for the benefit of the African.

CONCEPTUAL, REFLECTIVE AND DIALECTIC ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN CULTURE

There are different schools of thoughts in philosophy and they are all tailored towards solving problems that we encounter in our world. Not every school of thought will necessarily take into cognizance the strict application of the conceptual, reflective and dialectical nature of philosophy. However, in a more general sense, all philosophizing engage both in reflective and dialectical role of solving problems. Here, we look at the interwoven nature of this trio in the development of African culture. Conceptual analysis is a veritable toll for philosophizing since it is a fundamental category of the existence of the material or immaterial reality that it envisions. Thus, since the culture of the African people is interwoven with their entire system of belief in the meta-empirical, analysis of basic thematic aspects of the African worldview becomes pertinent. The process of analysis will necessarily take into cognizance reflective thinking or critical thinking as the case maybe. We cannot reflect on mere abstraction, else philosophy becomes speculative that would be too remote from the plight of the human person. The process of reflection would necessarily lead to dialectic if there is going to be progression in thought. By dialectics, we mean building a thought system that either affirms or negate previous systems and because this is not done without taking into cognizance the social status of inquiry, reasons are advanced as to why a system is better than another. To the extent at which rationality comes into play at every stage of inquiry, it becomes objective, as though emanating from the belief of people, it is done with a critical attitude.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a discipline, philosophy cannot be studied in general. It must take into account the contextual situations and way of life of the particular society it thrives. In this way, philosophy becomes a tool that aid in the process of cultural appropriation and through that it becomes enculturated in the culture of a people. Thus, the more rigorous a people's philosophy is, the more progressive their culture should be, since the task of philosophizing will necessarily be done within the context of culture.

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