

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHALLENGE OF ETHNOCENTRIC COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

The question of whether or not African Philosophy exists is no longer a question that plagues the minds of African philosophers. It is now taken for granted that Africa has philosophy. The most pressing issue now is how to develop African philosophy to rank at par with philosophies of other regions. Asouzu believes that philosophy is inhibited in Africa, because of the divisive mindset with which Africans pursue philosophy – a mindset after Aristotle. In his Metaphysics, Aristotle bifurcated being into substance and accidents, and exalted substance above accidents. He also bifurcated humans into – the wise and the less wise. The wise are those that know the cause of a thing. They are superior to the less wise. In the same vein, he divided science into two categories – the master science (Metaphysics) and the ancillary science (other subjects). Once again the master science is placed above the ancillary science. This divisive mindset Asouzu believes percolated through the West due to the influence of Aristotle on the Western thought. The West in their turn transported it to Africa through socialization, indoctrination and education. Africans now imbued with this divisive mindset now tend towards ethnocentric commitment in their philosophizing. Ethnocentric commitment has tended to limit Africans merely to attempts, to show how their philosophy or culture is equal or better than that of the West. This kind of spirit in which philosophy is pursued in Africa, Asouzu argues inhibits the mind from properly grasping reality and thereby unable to advance knowledge. This work therefore, presents Asouzu's proposed solution to this drawback in African philosophy, with the intent of charting a better course for African philosophy and thereby enhancing the speedy growth of philosophy in Africa.

Keywords: African philosophy, ethnocentric commitment, Ibuanyidanda, philosophy, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy according to Yekini, originated from questions about human existence; questions about knowledge and values, society and culture, man's origin and end et cetera (2004:7). If this is true, then the question of whether Africa has philosophy or not is no longer an issue. This is because Africans like other groups of human beings are also gifted with the capacity

to 'wonder' about their existence and happenings around them. To deny Africans of this capacity is to deny them of the capacity for ratiocination. This pattern of reasoning has played a great part in bringing a drastic shift from concerns and arguments as to whether or not Africa has a philosophy, to concerns as to what is African philosophy and what is its proper method.

In spite of this shift in focus of African philosophy from bemoaning of the past and debates on stolen legacies to attempts to formulate and build African philosophy, there is still so much to be desired from African philosophy. Innocent Asouzu believes the lingering growth in African philosophy, is a result of ethnocentric commitment that has been imbibed from Western education and socialization that was occasioned by colonialism. He believes that unless this tendency to ethnocentric reduction is erased from the minds of African thinkers, philosophy would forever remain an infant in Africa. He proposes Ibuanyidanda as a method and approach to philosophizing that would aid African philosophers to go beyond ethnocentric commitment to do authentic philosophising. Authentic philosophy to him is "a transcendent complementary ontological inquiry which seeks to grasp reality from the preceding conditions of its comprehensive determinations ... it seeks to transcend our limited horizons as these present themselves to us in our diverse cultural milieus (Ibuanyidanda 2007:10). This ontology urges everyone not to exalt his/her experience, ideas, theories, beliefs etc to absolute mode, in utter negation of other people's ideas and theories. This is because no being exist alone but rather in a complementary relationship with one another. Africans and their ideas must exist in complementary relationship with that of other regions of the world. When this admonition is imbibed, Asouzu believes, the supremacist mindset with which African philosophers presently pursue philosophy would be converted to an Ibuanyidanda (complementary) mindset.

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

What constitutes or should constitute African philosophy has been a topic of intense debate over the past years. Some believe it constitutes or should constitute African spirituality, religion, cultural tradition, and other distinctively African perceptions of concepts like time, personhood, immortality et cetera or uses methods that are distinctively African. Pantheon Iroegbu and C. Momoh are proponents of this view. Iroegbu argues that "African philosophy is the reflective enquiry into the marvels and problematic that confronts one in the African world, in view of producing systematic explanation and sustained responses to them" (2003:116). Momoh conceives African philosophy as "African doctrines or theories on reality (being) and the universe which is made up of things like God, gods, life, life after death, reincarnation, spirit, society, man, ancestors, heaven, hell ... conception, practices etc (2003:24). Others hold that African philosophy is true and authentic philosophy if and only if it is modelled after the Western method. Still others argue that a philosophy counts as African, if it is done by an African by descent or others engaged in the realm of African philosophy.

Henry Orika is a proponent of the former view, which is evident in his comment that in Africa “what in all cases is a mythology is paraded as African philosophy, and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy” (1978:60),

Henry Odera Orika taxonomies African philosophy into six trends (initially four but he added two shortly before he died) namely:

1. Ethnophilosophy: This is an era that saw the collective ontological world-views and assumptions of African societies as African philosophy.
2. Sage Philosophy: this covers individuals who were originators of the ideas that became the ontological world-views of the people.
3. Nationalistic/Ideological Philosophy: this group contains national and political figures who engaged in independence and nation-building projects. They include Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Azikiwe, Awolowo et cetera.
4. Professional Philosophy: This group encompasses those trained in Western universities and thereby employ western methods in philosophising.
5. Literary/Artistic Philosophy: This is a category that contains philosophers who dwell on philosophical issues within essays and other writings. Philosophers in this category include: NgugiwaThiongo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Okot 'Bitek, Taban lo Liyong. Et cetera..
6. Hermeneutic Philosophy: This comprises philosophers who dwell on the analysis of African languages with the intent of sorting out philosophical content in them. Such philosophers include: Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo, Kwame Gyekye etc. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_philosophy)

There are other taxonomies given by other philosophers which would not be captured in this work. It is important however to note that, these taxonomies paint the picture of an African philosophy that is still evolving. Thus, the question is not whether African philosophy is growing, rather the question is how well is it growing? Innocent Asouzu believes African philosophy has been slow in growth because of tendencies towards ethnocentric commitment.

ETHNOCENTRIC COMMITMENT

Ethnocentric commitment arises from the mind's tendency to misuse or misinterpret its ethnic consciousness or affiliation. It is the tendency of the mind to affirm and uphold the interest of those it perceives to be nearest to it and negate those it perceives as external to it. Every member of an ethnic group has a group identity. It is the consciousness of this group identity, aided by a bifurcating and polarising mindset that makes the mind to tend to cling and uphold the interest of those nearest to it in utter negation of those not so close (Bisong, 2019:49). The consciousness of ethnic identity would make for instance, an Igbo man to tilt more towards those who belong to his ethnic enclave than to a Hausa man or those who are not so close. Thus, he would seek to uphold and preserve the interest of the Igbo people first, even if doing so would mean a total negation of that of the others. However, when this interest is between

an African and Westerner, this same Igbo man would chose to preserve the interest of the African first, even if it means negating that of the Westerner. Ethnocentric commitment therefore, is the tendency to uphold and affirm the interest of those perceived as nearest and closest. Asouzu believes this is a function of our primitive instinct of self-preservation which is energized by the kind of onthologies we espouse. He writes:

Since we tend to act under this impulse of our primitive instinct of self-preservation always and often unintentionally, one can say that in most multicultural and multiethnic contexts, there is often the tendency for the mind to act in an unintended ethnocentric fashion, in view of securing certain interests and privileges it defines as very important for the inner circle (*Ibuanyidanda2007:130*).

The instinct of self-preservation leads the mind to assume that ‘the nearer is better and safer’. This assumption Asouzu believes is raised to a super-maxim that guides our inter-relationship and other kinds of relationships in the world. The nearer an individual, idea, culture, beliefs etc is to us, the more likely we would cling to it and preserve it, even in total negation of the ideas, culture and beliefs of other regions of the world. This tendency to act from ethnocentric commitment according to Asouzu can be said to be one of the major causes of conflict in the society and influences the way philosophy and science is done in Africa. It is the major cause of the supremacist approach to philosophy that is visible in Africa and the world at large. It is the reason why African philosophers have made it their primary occupation in philosophy, to show why African philosophy is superior to other philosophies or why philosophy should be believed to originate in Africa. This tendency to ethnocentric commitment though is arguably rooted in our instinct of self preservation; is however boosted by the kind of ontology we espouse. Asouzu accuses Aristotle of being the precursor of this bifurcating ontology.

Asouzu sees Aristotle’s approach to ontology as an approach that has influenced greatly the way most westerners see the world and relate to other people. According to him, Aristotle “introduce a type of mind-set that would determine the way most westerners seek to define themselves within the context of those whom they adjudged less wise to themselves” (*Ibuanyidanda2007:146*). Aristotle adopted a polarising and divisive mindset in his pursuit of metaphysics. He sees metaphysics as a science that supersedes and is more supreme to other sciences. He pictured the relationship between metaphysics and other disciplines with the imagery of the relationship between the master worker and the mechanic, the wise and the unwise, the essential and the accidental. He asserts;

The master workers in each craft are more honourable and know in a truer sense and are wiser than the manual workers, because they know the causes of the things that are done ... the man of experience is thought to be wiser than the possessors of any sense perception whatever, the artist wiser than the men of experience, the master worker than the mechanic and the theoretical kinds of knowledge to be more of the nature of wisdom than the productive (*Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1926: 1*).

Aristotle holds a discriminatory class consciousness which leads us to understand that the wise are destined to rule the unwise. When this type of polarization and categorization is applied to societal or ethnic relationship, it easily induces the mind to tend towards ethnocentrism. Also in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle separated being into substance and accident. Substance, he held, subsist independent of accident and therefore is essential and indispensable. Accidents on the other hand depend on substance for their existence and are thus inessential and dispensable. Asouzu believes, this divisiveness that was set in motion by Aristotle has percolated through the length of the history of Western philosophy and has also caught up with Africans through education, indoctrination and socialization by the West. This is why Asouzu accuses Aristotle of being the major instigator of ethnocentric reduction. He writes: “following the dictates of Aristotle’s approach, the mind would be inclined to create a picture of human interpersonal relationship, where some human beings are perceived as essential and others merely as accidental and inconsequential entities” (*Ibuanyidanda*2007:145).

Thus, by instigating a kind of tone concerning the nature of metaphysics in comparison to the rest of the sciences, Aristotle initiates the kind of hegemonic mindset that has influenced the way science and philosophy are done in the West and by extension Africa. Also, by bifurcating being, and exalting substance above accidents, Aristotle initiates the kind of bifurcating mindset with which philosophy is operated with today.

ETHNOCENTRISM IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Asouzu is of the view that “most philosophical debates within the framework of what is called Western philosophy are usually done in this mindset of utter mutual negation” (2007:169) after the mindset of Aristotle. African philosophers he argues are also influenced by this Aristotelian mindset, considering the fact that “the leadership structure in Africa, both in learning, philosophy and administration is drawn from people who have a disproportionately western type of education” (*Ibuanyidanda* 169). This he believes was made possible through western education, socialization and indoctrination (2007:177). The line of argument of Asouzu could be understood, if one understands that Europe was a continent of colonizers and religious proselytizers. Therefore, through colonialism which came along with western education and socialization, this Aristotelian mindset which had beclouded the colonizers was transmitted to Africans. Wiredu corroborated this when he commented on the impact of Western education on African way of thinking. He writes: “The African who has learned philosophy in English, for example, has most likely become conceptually westernized to a large extent not by choice but by the force of historical circumstances. To that same extent he may have become de-Africanized.” (<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.htm>). Western education therefore, baptized Africans with a divisive and bifurcating mindset.

Thus, imbued with this type of bifurcating mindset, Africans now approach reality through the divisive mindset of superiority – inferiority. Most of their works in literature, politics and history are geared towards showing how superior African heritages are to their western counterpart. This is noticeable in works like *African Socialism and Ujamaa* of Nyerere, *Consciencism* of Nkrumah, *Pan Africanism* of Nkrumah and Dubois, *Neo-Welfarism* of Azikiwe etc. These works and most others are directed against Western intervention and exploitation and thus are ethnocentric in character. Thus, most works in Africa carry the ‘we-them’ mentality. They paint an idyllic image of an African and contrast it with that of the Westerner. This is the spirit that drives the projecting of communalism as something uniquely African in contrast to the individualism of the West. It is the same spirit behind the fronting of three-valued logic as a uniquely African logic in contradistinction with two-valued logic that is supposedly uniquely Western. It is the spirit behind the projecting of transcendentalism as uniquely African as Momoh avers, “any work that claims to be an African philosophy, is not an African philosophy, if it is actually not in harmony and congruence with the spirit of Africa, which reality is primarily spiritual” (66). Both the West and Africans have inherent moment of oscillation between transcendence and world immanence; there both experience an oscillation between three-valued logic and two-valued logic. To claim one for Africa and the other one for the West is a function of a divisive hegemonic mindset. This divisive hegemonic mindset is behind the formation of theories concerning African science, African philosophy, African ethics, African logic et cetera. It is the driving force behind the Black Athena Debate, Afrocentricism, the Philosophy of Stolen Legacy, Copy Cat Philosophy et cetera. For Asouzu, holding the view that Africa is the sole originator of philosophy as the philosophy of the stolen legacy argues, would tantamount to negating the raw primary cognitive ambience of other geographical areas. It is a complementarity of ideas from different regions of the world that brought forth philosophy. No region therefore, can honestly have an absolute claim to the origin of philosophy as the philosophy of the stolen legacy and other philosophies tend to argue. Ethnocentric commitment makes individuals to argue in favour of their inner circles which would not produce authentic knowledge. All knowledge claims for it to be authentic and true must relate to the totality and comprehensiveness of being as the foundation of all existent realities. Thus, “any truth claim that ignores the relativity of human existential situation as to state apriori and apodictally what the case would be in all situations and fails to acknowledge the fragmentary and referential nature of all missing links of reality is bound to err” (*Complementary Reflection* 2004:315). The truth and authenticity of all knowledge claims, depends on how far the mind of the claimant recognizes the total, comprehensive and ultimate foundation of reality. To exalt Africans experience of reality to an absolute mode, is the same as to exalt the experience of one blind man who upon experiencing the tail of an elephant, held that the elephant was absolutely like a snake. Unless this blind man concedes to other ideas as regards the elephant, he would forever be mistaken in his idea that the elephant was like a snake. Unless African philosophers concede to the equal importance of other ideas and experiences of reality from other regions, they would never grasp or present reality truly and

authentically. Unless they become more open minded in their philosophising, they may never make any laudable progress in philosophy. This according to Bisong (2018:62), implies that “the pursuance of one’s interest in total negligence of others has an indirect repercussion”.

To become more open minded, African philosophers would need to do away with ethnocentrism. The need to come to the realization that the super-maxim, the nearer the better and safer is not always correct. This is because the nearer is not always better and safer. The farther may sometimes be better and safer. To come to this realization, Asouzu believes a transcendent existential conversion must take place in an individual.

TRANSCENDENTAL EXISTENTIAL CONVERSION AS THE HOPE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Asouzu is of the belief that ethnocentric reduction tends to cloud our minds and thereby making certainty in knowledge to elude us. To overcome this ethnic bias, Asouzu proposes *Ibuanyidanda* methodology. *Ibuanyidanda* (which means no load is insurmountable for danda the ant) is Asouzu’s coinage which is derived from three Igbo words: *ibu* meaning load or task, *anyi* meaning not insurmountable and *danda* which means a specie of ants. This idea of *Ibuanyidanda* Asouzu argues, connotes to the traditional Igbo people the importance of mutual dependence and interdependence in complementarity. As the ants when working in unison and complementarity could lift loads that appear heavier than them, the traditional African philosophers believe that humans could achieve or solve difficult tasks when acting in complementarity. Thus they hold that, “for anything to claim existence, it has to fulfil a minimum condition, which subsists in its commitment to a mutual complementary relationship between it and the other units with which it shares a common framework” (Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda* 2007:11-12). *Ibuanyidanda* ontology therefore, is an attempt to redefine, refine, reconstruct and free our system of thought from all ethnocentric commitment, making the mind of all to see reality from the windows of missing links. Missing links are fragments of existence consisting of units and units of units, things and things of things, essences and essences of essences, accidents and accidents of accidents, forms and forms of forms, ideas and ideas of ideas, thoughts and thoughts of thoughts etc. As these relate to each other in time and space and with regard to other modes of this complementary relationship in quantities and qualities, in kind and in differences as these seek to build an intrinsic harmonious whole in mutual service (*Ibuanyidanda* 2007:267). *Ibuanyidanda* ontology assumes that if humans act in complementarity they could gain certitude in knowledge. But if they work as they currently do, in divisiveness and polarization they would not achieve much. The Africans need the West and the West needs the Africans and other regions of the world to lift up the tablet of knowledge from its hiding place to the fore. Just like ants in divisiveness cannot achieve much until they work in complementarity, the humans (as missing links) until they realize that they share the same complementarity horizon with one another and act in complementarity would not achieve much. The mind

therefore, must begin to see being as missing links without which it cannot affirm its own existence.

However, for the mind to begin to see being as missing links of realities, it has to undergo a process Asouzu calls ‘transcendent existential conversion.’ Existential conversion is the “process through which human consciousness attains the highest level of experience or intuition of being, as that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality” (*Ibuanyidanda 2007:329*). Existential conversion helps the mind to operate with a global mindset (Bisong 2014:43). This process of existential conversion Asouzu believes brings the subject to full awareness of the limited value of the super maxim, ‘the nearer the better and safe.’ When existential conversion has taken place, “the mind becomes aware that the super maxims the nearer the better and safer has only a limited range of application” (Asouzu *Ibuanyidanda 2007:329*). This super-maxim Asouzu believes is at the root of most clannish and ethnocentric tendencies in Africa and the world at large. But when existential conversion has taken place in an individual, the subject begins to discover that the nearer is not always the better as the maxim suggests. It is at this moment of discovery that an individual comes to the realization that all individuals across all ethnic groups form one indivisible horizon of being outside of which nothing has meaning that claims existence (*Ibuanyidanda 2007:329*). Transcendent existential conversion therefore, is a “process through which human consciousness attains the highest level of experience or intuition of being, as that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality” (*Ibuanyidanda2007:329*). At this level of consciousness, the mind no longer sees reality as absolute fragments as is presently done in Africa, but on a platform of comprehensiveness and universality. When existential conversion has taken place the mind no longer sees being in a limited mindset but in a global or totalizing mindset. Existential conversion therefore, is the inward conversion of the mind from divisiveness to complementarity. It is a conversion from hegemony to egalitarianism. It is a conversion from a ‘we-them’ mentality to a ‘we-we’ mentality. At this point the super-maxim, ‘the nearer the better and safer’ would cease from having a limited application, but would begin to have a universal application – everybody would become the better and safer. At this point the desperate effort by African philosophers to carve out a distinctly different philosophy for Africans would cease. Rather they would seek a totalising philosophy – a philosophy that is all-encompassing and comprehensive devoid of ethnocentric reduction. When existential conversion has set in, the question of which philosophy is superior and which is inferior would no more be relevant. The task would become, how do we advance the frontiers of knowledge?

When existential conversion has taken place the mind begins to operate in keeping with the dictates of what Asouzu calls ‘the transcendent categories of unity of consciousness.’ These transcendent categories are “fragmentation, unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future reference” (*Ibuanyidanda2007:323*). When existential conversion has taken place the mind will no longer divide and bifurcate reality but operates in keeping with the dictates of the transcendent categories. That is, the mind would grasp being in its

fragmentation, unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future reference.

However, for a subject to be able to capture being in its fragmentation, unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future reference, the harmonising faculty according to Asouzu must be in charge. The harmonising faculty is a transcendent “faculty that harmonizes all forces that tends toward bifurcation and exclusiveness” (Ibuanidanda 2007:316). It is active when a being has undergone existential conversion. Thus, when the harmonizing faculty is in control, the tendency of the mind to be led astray to ethnocentric commitment would not be there, for this faculty harmonizes all differences, leaving no chance for polarization and bifurcation which lead to ethnocentric commitment. The harmonizing faculty enables the mind to grasp the totality of being, and thereby leaving no chance for bifurcation. Therefore, when being is grasped with the aid of this faculty that one could be said to be operating in a global mindset. It is from this global or transcendent mindset that we are capable of encountering the opposite other in its otherness and embrace this otherness as an extension of ego without discrimination. It is from this mindset that we are capable of seeing the opposite others not as ‘them’ but as ‘we’. It is from seeing the world in this mindset that ethnocentric commitment is erased.

CONCLUSION

Ibuanidanda philosophy has as its major task, the liberation of human reason from all forms of ethnocentric impositions. It admonishes all stakeholders to “never elevate a world immanent missing link to an absolute instance” (Asouzu Ibaru, 2007:197). Rather being is to be captured “in a comprehensive, total and future referential and proleptic manner” (Asouzu, Complementary Reflection 2004:316). Any experience of reality according to Ibuanidanda ontology that do not encompass the universal, total and comprehensive whole would hardly give us any insight into the being we inquire after. So also any philosophy that does not operate from a global totalizing mindset fails to give authentic knowledge.

Asouzu’s Ibuanidanda is a call on African philosophers and all philosophers to see reality through the windows of missing links of reality and never as absolute mode of existence; for every being is a missing link that serves other missing links in a complementary mode of existence. Viewing reality this way eliminates the ‘we-them’ mentality that has plagued philosophers in Africa and in the whole world. When this ‘we-them’ mentality is eliminated from all philosophers, then and only then would philosophy in general and African philosophy in particular be operated devoid of ethnic bias and sentiments.

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