

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY (A CASE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY)

Joseph Paul Essien
University of Calabar

Abstract

Culture is directly connected with the development of an individual, group and the whole society. It is the culture of the society that is fundamental including all the characteristics, activities and interests of the people. Philosophy is the quest for an understanding of the world and man's place in it. Culture and philosophy find their dynamic expression in this intellectual venture. Thus an African philosophy destined to be authentic must therefore be a personal critical reflection on the African reality as African culture is the bedrock of African philosophy.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

Culture may be termed as that which is concerned with whatever a man expends his energy and care. It is directly connected with the development of an individual, of a group or class, and of a whole society. This implies that the culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. In other words, it is the culture of the society that is fundamental which basically includes all the characteristics, activities and interests of the people.

Culture is synonymous with a common way of life which involves a common view of life, common standards of behaviour and common standards of value. Consequently, Dawson points out that "...a culture is a spiritual community which owes its unity to common beliefs and common ways of thought far more than to any uniformity of physical type" (48-49).

Culture could mean total way of life of a people as clearly expressed by Taylor when he explained culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society" (237). Different European histories have also given different meanings to the term culture. During the period of the Renaissance of the 16th Century, culture meant the intellectual development of man after the pattern of the classical philosophers. During the 18th -19th Century times, culture meant education in the sciences, thus man's development through the sciences makes for culture.

In the Romantic period, the men of the Enlightenment reacted against the prevalent notion of culture. For them, culture is not only intellectual but is also an emotional aspect of man. This led to the modern man's conception of culture as a people's way of life with special regard to their political, emotional, social, economic, mental aspects of man's life.

For R.C. Onwanibe culture "... denotes the ensemble of activities or state of a people development with regard to intellectual, aesthetic, religious, moral, scientific and technical achievements and the environments which further them for man's creative springs as he poses and endeavours to answer question around and beyond himself, it is man's way of life as he meets his physical and spiritual needs" (62). Consequently, culture is basically understood as a people intellectual acumen and development; a way of perceiving things or reality. Culture also deals with a people's thought, a product of their act of thinking, a people's way of reflecting about reality. It is only when thought concerns a group of people that we talk or think of their culture. Culture is seen as that which gives meaning, direction and sense to man, its bestows upon man a sense of self-esteem.

From the foregoing, it is possible to conclude that culture as a world view of a people is unique and dynamic self-actualization and expression.

The culture of a people contains the custom and tradition of the people; it is through these customs and traditions that individuals are able to form their world views of the world from their collective experiences, expressions and beliefs. The values and norms inherent in a particular culture also prescribe ethical principles that guide the moral conducts of the people. Thus no matter the level of education and technological sophistication of a people, their behaviour especially their routines of life are guided by the standards and principles traditionally transmitted to them by their culture.

Myths and mythologists play a very important and significant role in culture transmission and succinctly the preservation of the perennial wisdom of the fathers of the land. A myth is a story which is believed to be true and which has its origin in the far distant past history of a people and their culture. Myths are man-Made and are found in literate cultures. On the other hand, every people and culture, in the world has their own myths and folklores which serves to give explanation to questions of facts of nature like death, creation, evolution or origin of living things, phenomena like day and night and man's relation to man. Thus in myth, which starts with wonder, the

people's traditional philosophy is created and preserved, hence, Idowu, articulated myth "as a vehicle conveying a certain fact or a certain basic truth about man's experiences with man's regard for man's relation to the super-sensible world"(84). However, there are other contents of culture or cultural values like rituals, symbols, but let's be content our self with the ones above in the attempt to establish the relationship between culture and philosophy.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

A significant aspect of culture is language; culture and language are closely related. It is through language that man registers his thoughts expressing and communicating them to others. In other words, through language human beings transform their pattern of thought for others to understand. Language presupposes man's ability to hear, speak and understand, it is a means by which man expresses himself as a vocal and social animal. The localization of man intertwined culture and philosophy in language. Language therefore is a medium of transmitting thoughts and expressing culture. It is then possible to see language as specific manifestation of culture and philosophy. Language is a sign of intellectual knowledge, which in turn is the sign of the real, of everydayness and ordinariness. Man's thought is handed down in spoken or written words. The numbers of words existing in the language enable man to communicate his thoughts, conditions and intellectual expressions. The existing vocabularies therefore conditioned philosophy and configured it to the real in a particular culture. To this end Cole and Scribner maintain that, "language is both the medium through which we obtain a great deal of our data concerning culture and cognition ... the major determinant of our thought processes" (39).

One significant characteristic of language is that, it is innovative. To the non-skillful in linguistic technology and manipulation, language exercises a compulsive role; it is the compelling forces of the intellect. Many intellectual vices are rooted in the poverty of language. The innovative dimension of language forces analytic philosophers to consider philosophy as analysis of language. According to Fann, philosophy is "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (87). Hence, philosophy is the logical and rational articulation of linguistic conclusions.

At this juncture, as a prolegomena to linguistic revival it is possible to remark that the central problem of African philosophy is that of language. The Western exploiters have radically disorganized the utility of African language in academic and scientific venture by a steady programme of colonialism. The utility of African tongue had been disfigured and had deprived us of the native intellectual touch to our heaven assigned culture. Consequently, we have become superficial Africans; assimilation had inflicted grave wound on our culture; our language had been unmade. Neither English

nor French is native to African; the colonial masters forced these languages on us. Africans are at home with them through strenuous learning. This is the apex of colonialization; therefore, if there must be purity of philosophy in African alongside with linguistic revival in the continent, Africans must take philosophical cognizance of their language and try to articulate an African philosophy in an African language.

THE CONCEPT OF PHILOSOPHY

Mbiti among other definitions defined philosophy as the relative attempt to present a systematic and complete view of reality. For Descartes for instance, as cited by Rorty, philosophy is a method of reflective thinking and reasoned inquiry, an attempt to think through one's problem of life and to face all the facts involved. Hence, philosophy presents its analysis into the deeper problems of human existence beyond what eyes can see or ears can hear. Ellis on the same point underscore philosophy as the critical analysis of trivial pre-occupation that characterizes human life everywhere in the world with the view to discovering their ultimate meaning and harmonization of them into a working nature. For Wired Philosophy is the most general aspect of man's answer to the problem raised by his being and his evolution. As quest for the truth of being as calling into question of the order of reality, philosophy is not the prerogative of any people. Titus joins this analysis by articulating philosophy as the logical analysis of language and the clarification of meaning of words and concept. Consequently, it is logical to assert that philosophy is the quest for an understanding of the world and man's place in it and the way we apply this understanding to the right conduct of reason. Frequently, philosophy can be said to have two important aims; first, it tries to give people a critical and unified view of the universe in which they live and secondly, it seeks to make people critical thinkers by sharpening their ability to reason clearly and precisely.

Thus philosophy seeks to give a critical explanations or answers to the questions that ravel the human mind and existent. It attempts to give answer to the age old question of God, origin of life or evolution, creation, death and other phenomena. Philosophy is problem solving in attitude, therefore, philosophy could be defined as any kind of systematic inquiry about the world that attempts to examine the nature of things and the principles which guide human behaviour.

LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY

Language ipso factor is the foundation of philosophical discourse as linguistic resources provide the fountain for philosophical pursuit. Omoregbe underscores this when he opined that the nature of a given philosophical position may be influenced by the structure and other characteristics of language in which it is formulated. Linguistic resources are the vital forces

and condition sine qua non of philosophy. It is the pivot in which the culture cognition of philosophy revolves. There is possibility of consuming being, concealing being and rendering reality vague in language. Philosophy therefore, rescue being from the consuming power of language and thus enlightens reality buried under linguistic framework. Therefore, philosophy is a critical search for reality hidden in language. To this end, volumes of philosophy can emerged from the examination of language. Thus language is enlightened philosophy as philosophy expresses itself in language. And African philosophers can develop tremendous philosophy from the investigation of his native words, symbols and interpersonal relationships in the everyday experiences of man among men.

Words are the main core of language and their “magic power” over human intellect is reasonable. It is the link between intellect, word and object that is the concern of philosophy. Words therefore exercise signifying role, they point at something beyond themselves and no word exists in a vacuum. In words both actual and possible beings are invested with existence and are made accessible to the human intellect. As conventional reality, word is plunged into the socio-cultural dimension of human existence; it becomes accepted mode of human communication and relationships. Linguistic meanings are governed by socio- political enactment; and for one to express oneself legibly; he must be within the meaning context of the language and conformed to all linguistic necessities of the language. This brings out clearly the necessary connection between philosophy, culture and language, they are inter-related.

According to Omoregbe, all higher levels of thinking are structured by language and language is structured by environmental influences. Language therefore is the primal source of philosophy. African philosophy can as well develop its language and this will be ad rem to African experience and expressions.

CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

Here effort is made to give foundation to the relationship between culture and philosophy or the mutual inter-dependency of culture and philosophy especially as it pertains to Africa. Being can either be static or dynamic, the notion of culture and philosophy fall under the dynamics precisely because they are in evolutionary process. Culture generally, is the way of life of people, thus human actions and interactions as well as thinking of people lie at the basis of their cultural symbols. These actions of the individuals as it were need to be guided by ideas and philosophy as they seek to elucidate these ideas. Thus according to Frost it could be taken as axiomatic that action by an individual or group of individuals needs to be guided by ideas and that philosophy attempts to elucidate the most fundamental of such ideas. Thus philosophy is a rationalization of the problematic aspect of culture, that is, it

makes culture intelligible. It is therefore interwoven in cultural evolution. Philosophy paralyses culture while culture paralyses philosophy. To this effect, there is need for mutual understanding of the two to eliminate possible parochialism. Again, culture is the modifications and materialization of ideas and these ideas are illuminated by philosophy; this is the basis of culture and psychical notion of mankind.

Culture and philosophy find their dynamic expression in this intellectual venture. In this dynamism of culture and philosophy, it can be asserted that culture and precisely African culture is dynamic and its dynamism seeks the good of the people. In the same vein, the philosophy of a people seeks to express to reality embodied in culture of the world for the better. Thus Block observes that all the major philosophers of the world have tried in one way or another, successfully or unsuccessfully, to change the world for better.

Philosophy has to do with reasoning or rational thinking; culture on the one hand, has some thing to do with a people's thought, which is the product of their act of thinking. However, from the point of view of culture, thought or precisely African thought is the way Africans reflect about reality. On the other hand, it is only when thought concerns a group of people that we think of their culture. Therefore, at the basis of people's thought lies the articulation of a philosophy. On the contrary, it is worthy of note that African thought is not African philosophy but there are certain aspects of African culture, which can eventually be articulated into African philosophy.

TOWARDS AUTHENTIC AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

For Osuagwu philosophy" is essentially the endeavour and affair of the human reason in its insatiable search for truth and detection of error in its bid for the knowledge of any and all reality in itself and as it in itself"(30). In the same vein Kinyongo defines African philosophy "as an explicit reflexive procedure of the human mind aiming at a rational, critical knowledge and tending to elucidate reality by a rigorous coherent discourse in which the rationality, subtlety and refinement of the human mind becomes transparent" (59). Kinyongo further articulates that "to be African, the ideal project of philosophy in Africa dose not only imply geographical but also historical, sociological and cultural connotations.... It is within such an ambiance that a philosophy that wishes to be African, Negro African, must be born" (57 -58).

To be African , Kinyongo added "is for philosophy in Africa, to become the way by which African philosophers duly prepared and realise their determination to create, in conformity with the demands of attested philosophically, their proper criteria of evaluation of themselves and their riches, and to project themselves from perspectives"(58). For E. A. Ruch & K. C. Anyanwu, African philosophy, for any reflection of reality to be considered African such philosophy must have their roots in an existential

experience of the African way of life, but they are also contribution to the 'civilization of the universal' in as much as they are relevant to mankind as a whole. In that sense they are truly philosophical in the existential sense: on the bases of a concrete and phenomenological analysis of concrete man in his historical and socio-cultural setting, they propose an intuitive vision of an ideal that transcends the narrow confines of that particular setting. (224). Hountondji in the same vein presented a textual definition of African philosophy as "a body of literature whose existence is undeniable, a bibliography which has grown constantly over the last thirty years or so. The limited aims of these few remarks are to circumscribe this literature, to define its main themes, to show what its problematic has been so far and call it into question" (33).

African culture is and should be the bedrock of African philosophy; it contains in itself some rich values embedded in it which if rationally articulated will give rise to a systematic philosophy relevant to Africa and to the world of philosophy. Thus divorced from an African culture, a relevance philosophy will be speculating on the air without any relevance to Africans. For no philosopher ever speaks in a vacuum. Thus according to Wiredu, the African philosophy student should be steeped in his own heritage of philosophy before looking elsewhere. Also B. Okolo affirmed this assertion as he writes: "there is indeed an obligation on the part of the African to know himself ... and to know the environment in which he lives, through this knowledge, the African attains the truth about, all reality as much as is possible to him..." (37).

Thus the task of African philosophy will be to reconstruct the past from which we emerged, for a man who does not know where he comes from and hardly knows where he is going. Though there are various cultures in Africa, they still share some dominant traits that identify them as African. These common traits are their perception of the world or world view, the social systems, (kinship, Marriage and affinity etc.), religion, political organizations, arts and crafts. These serve to provide the socio-political and religious resources of African philosophy. Thus an African philosophy destined to be authentic must therefore be a personal critical reflection on the African reality question. Again African philosophy should not be approached or studied from a Euro-centred point of view, that in an African should articulate an African philosophy, not European doing it for us. However, we are not opting for complete elimination of western influence, for philosophy though culture-relative, is still objective.

On another note, there can be no philosophy existing in a vacuum. It is cultural experiences that are gun powder which causes philosophical quest to explode at times in terrifying frequency. Wiredu writes: "...philosophy seeks to be comprehensive and endeavours to transcend the ordinary levels of insight in both accuracy and depth. As a result it is complex and often technical in a tantalizing way, because it deals in uncommon ways with ideas which are common stock of our ordinary thought and experience" (172).

Thus the March towards the intellectual aggrandizement of the African in philosophy demands, or implies a marriage or a symbiosis between philosophy and culture, more still a steady and systematic articulation of our cultural values. Intelligence is a matter of societal and environmental conditioning not based on race, colour or Creed. Hence Africans of tomorrow must be delivered from humiliation through a steady process of education and not indoctrination. Let us be courageous to tread the path of intellectual exploration knowing that critical intelligence is the best therapy for pre-logicality.

CONCLUSION

According to Wiredu: “One way in which a man can lose his soul is being prevented from trying to think for himself or even more terribly by being rendered, unable to think for himself”(54). Africans are bound by conscience to think for themselves and philosophies to redeem and explain their own situations. There is need to revolutionaries the status quo of our society. Our culture is suffering a grave infiltration and we are still babies in political life and neophytes in scientific orientation. It is tragic to import European or American into Africa without harm to what is African.

Meanwhile, it is undeniable that “the degree and domain of man’s intellectual activity must be culturally domain. This is an existential tragedy which must be endured momentarily but caught not to be the datum of intellectual life. Man by nature is an auto-transcending being, always ahead of himself and his environment. To this end, there is need for “cultural mulatte”, the history of mankind is that of mutual, this history of mankind is that of mutual borrowing for no man has the monopoly of knowledge.

Copstone underscores this when he stresses the need “for cultural interaction and this reminds the west-the cosmic culture policemen that they can learn from other cultures”(170). Therefore, the African student should not be ashamed to conduct his research. In foreign languages and tap from their cultures. It is only a historical accident that his ancestors left him on written philosophical corpus. They should strive earnestly to alleviate the burden of posterity.

We seriously anticipate an epoch when philosophy will say final farewell to culture specifically and assume universal and cosmic character. We maintain under the pain of violating the “culture-bound” slogan that culture is a barrier, a block and annihilating force to philosophy as objective philosophy qua philosophy deals with universal, transcendental and cosmic truths and it is not limited to a cultural milieu. No culture has monopoly of truth or wisdom and it is a violation of intellect to confine it to a particular culture.

WORKS CITED

- Block, Green, "African Philosophy" *African Philosophical Inquiry*. vol., 1, No.2. 1987
- Cole, M. & Scribner, S., *Culture and Cognition*, New York: John Wiley & Son Inc. 1974
- Copleston, F. *Philosophies and Cultures*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980
- Dawson, C. *Religion and Culture*, London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1948
- Ellis, Thomas Katen, *Doing Philosophy*. New York; Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973
- Fann, K. T., *Wittgensteins Conception of Philosophy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971
- Frost, S.E. *Master Works of Philosophy*, vol. 3, New York; McGraw Book Company (1972).
- Hountondji, Paulin. *African Philosophy. "Myth and Reality"*, London: Hutchinson: 1983
- Idowu, E.B. *African Traditional Religion*. London; S. C.M. Press Ltd. 1973
- Jekki Kinyongo, *Epiphanies de la Philosophie Africaine et Afro Americaine*. Munich-Kinshasa- Lubumbashi: Presse Universitaires Africane. 1991
- Okolo, B., *What is African Philosophy*, Enugu: 1987.
- Omogbe, Joseph, *Knowing Philosophy; A General Introduction*. Lagos. Joga Educational Research & Publishers Ltd. (1990)
- Onwuanibe, R.O. *The Colloquium* Vol. 1. N. 1, Ikot Ekpene: NASP, 1985. The New University Library, Vol. VI, London. (1967).
- Osuagwu, Maduakolam, *Early Medieval History of African Philosophy*. Imo State: Amamihe Publication, 2001
- Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969
- Rorty, Richard. *Essay on Heidegger and Others*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1997
- Ruch, E.A. & Anyanwu, K.C. *African philosophy. "An Introduction to the Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa*. Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1984
- Taylor, E.B. *Primitive Culture*. London. *The New Universal Library* 1971
- Wired, Kwesi *Philosophy and African Culture*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1980