

ETHNOCENTRIC BIAS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY VIS-A-VIS ASOUZU'S IBUANYIDANDA ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper is of the view that it is not bad for the Africans to defend their philosophy and their origin, as against the claims and positions of the few African thinkers, who do not believe that African philosophy exists, and a great number of the Westerners, who see nothing meaningful in their thoughts and ideas, but in doing so, they became biased and elevated their philosophy and relegated other philosophies to the background. This charge of ethnocentrism against those who deny African philosophy can also be extended to those African philosophers who in a bid to affirm African philosophy commit the discipline to strong ethnic reduction. This paper using Innocent Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda ontology, observes that most of the African scholars are too biased and self aggrandized in doing African philosophy, and as such have marred the beauty of African philosophy, just in the name of attaching cultural value to it. Innocent Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda ontology is used in this paper to educate the Africans that in as much as the Westerners cannot do without them, they too cannot do without Westerners. This paper therefore, is an attempt to eradicate ethnocentrism in and beyond Africa in doing philosophy through complementarity and mutual understanding of realities, not in a polarized mindset but in relationship to other realities that exist.

KEYWORDS: Ethnocentrism, Bias, Ibuanyidanda, Ontology, Complementarity, Ethnophilosophy.

Introduction

The focus of African philosophy has recently undergone a paradigm shift, from question bordering on whether African philosophy exists and African origin of philosophy, to desperate attempt to elevate African philosophy from ethnophilosophy to rigorous individual discourse. The reason for this departure is not farfetched; philosophy, according to Alabi Yekini, originated in human history, in questions about the nature of existence, knowledge, values, society and the quest for wisdom (2004, 7). To this end, it is deemed to be a universal exercise whose constructs should also be universalizable. Thus as most of the early narratives in African philosophy were criticized as cultural philosophy, the

contemporary shift to a much more rigorous discourse becomes imperative. Philosophy therefore, as a discipline, is as old as humanity.

Basil Okolo defines African philosophy as the critical thinking on the African and her experience of reality (1987, 34). This could be in various forms, for example: Andrew Uduigwomen maintains that a nationalist ideological philosophy emerged from the attempt by African nationalists or freedom fighters to develop a new, and possibly, unique political theory, based on African traditional socialism and family hood (2009, 4). This is an ideological conception. Pantaleon Iroegbu in a broader sense says that African philosophy is the reflective enquiry into the marvels and problematic that confronts one in Africa world, in view of producing systematic explanation and sustained responses (1994, 45). In line with Iroegbu, Campbell Momoh, describes African philosophy as African doctrines or theories on reality (being) and universe, which is made up of things like God, gods, life after death, spirit, society, man, ancestors, heaven, hell, belief, conception and practices (2004, 23). Without gainsaying any of the submissions above, I wish to add that African philosophy encompasses the activity or the systematic enquiry into the African experience and interpretation of being or reality. What is left to be said is that the bemoaning of African past and stolen legacies have added little or no value to African philosophy. Hence, the elevation of African philosophy to a critical and individual level of discourse has become imperative for the development of the discipline in our time.

However, efforts have been made by some African philosophers, to show that we have our own philosophy, while others do not see any reason to argue whether African philosophy exists or not. Having observed this, the question is what is responsible for the claim that Africa should have something distinctively African, and the denial of African philosophy? This question brings us to our concern in this paper, which is about ethnocentric bias in doing African philosophy. Innocent Asouzu identifies ethnocentric commitment or bias, which have befallen African philosophy, and beyond as a heavy burden (2007a, 10) that emerges as a result of our instinct of self-preservation, which always deceives us to see reality in a polarized and dichotomized manner, and operate within the ambience of the super maxim the nearer the better and the safer. This paper will look at what constitutes ethnocentric bias and how it crippled the progress of African philosophy.

Aristotle's Ontology and the Rise of Ethnocentric Bias in Africa

Page 42 Aristotle adopted a polarizing and dichotomizing mindset in pursuing metaphysics. He sees metaphysics as a science that supersedes other sciences, both in eminence and grandeur. For him, therefore, others are ancillary sciences

that contribute little in the society. He captures the relationship between metaphysics and other sciences with the imagery of the relationship between the master worker and the mechanic, the wise and the unwise, the essential and the accidental. He observes that:

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 *Metaphysica* Bk A)

It is clear from this passage that Aristotle holds a discriminatory mindset, which makes us to think 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. Aristotle's mindset has actually made so many persons to derail from justice. Today, things are not done the way they ought to be done. This is exactly why Asouzu believes and accuses Aristotle of being the major instigator of ethnocentric reduction. Hence, Aristotle introduced a type of mindset that would determine the way most Westerners think and seek to achieve their desires. 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 (ASOUZU 2007a, 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 mindset that has influenced the way science and philosophy is done in the West, and by extension Africa.

Ethnocentric Bias and its Implications

Ethnocentric bias is the tendency of the mind to cling to those nearest to it, and seeks to protect their interest, against what it perceived as the external order. Ethnocentric commitment arises from the mind is tendency to misuse or misinterpret its ethnic consciousness or affiliation.

Ethnic group as defined by the Academic American Encyclopaedia, is "any group of people distinguished by common cultural, and frequently racial characteristics" (1997, 631). The members of these ethnic group are said to have a group identity; thus it is the consciousness of this group identity, and the tendency of bifurcation and polarization "imbibed through education,

socialization and indoctrination, that make us consider ourselves as best, and should have the best of everything, along with those who share certain characteristics with us” (ASOUZU 2007a, 129). According to Godfrey Ozumba and Jonathan Chimakonam, the seed of polarization and fragmentations of human society into antagonistic factions were sown by man himself. This has led to several wars, alliances, migrations, miscegenations and pockets of human societies, each seeking autonomy, identity, national personality, and today we are talking of races, nations, countries, continents unions, federations, republic etc., (2004, 75). The tendency to act from the background of ethnocentric bias or commitment, leads us to cling to those nearest to us, and our mind seeks to protect their interest against what is perceived as the external other. Asouzu writes thus:

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. (2007a, 130)

Here, we understand clearly that the instinct of self preservation, which implies, so that I may be alone, is the major causes of ethnocentric commitment, and the core reason we often secure ourselves at the detriment of others. Moreso, Asouzu avers that this tendency to act from ethnic commitment, can be said to be one of the major causes of conflict in our society, and one that influences greatly the way we do philosophy and science (2007a, 130). Ethnocentric bias, is rooted in our instinct of self preservation which serves as a negative facilitator of exclusiveness, and is boosted, according to Asouzu, by the kind of “ontologies” we espouse the ontologies after Aristotle’s bifurcating mindset (2007a, 131). These kinds of ontologies that Asouzu is pointing at can be found in all facet of our lives. You can see it in the market, here, the person very close to us is given the best product in the market while those distant to us are been cheated and given fake products. This mentality is equally obtainable in the church, family, school and association. We often regard our thing, and despise their thing, in many occasions, seeing what belongs to us as the best and what does not belong to us as useless and meaningless ignorant of the fact that ours cannot be complete without theirs and vice versa.

This ethnocentric reduction in thought has done more harm than good in developing ideas, and cross fertilization of thoughts. Hence, what other people are doing, is thought to be nonsense, and has little or no value to contribute to what we are doing ourselves. This will invariably retard the development and progress

of our thoughts, philosophies and ideas in doing African Philosophy in Africa and beyond.

Ethnocentric Bias in African Philosophy

When we talk of ethnocentric bias in African philosophy, the scramble for Africa in late nineteenth century by European explorers and administrators often comes to mind. The visitors on arrival on the shores of Africa took turns to distort the thinking and policy of the black man in his father land. The first thing was to set the different group against themselves in the name of tribal identification (AUDREY 1971, 4-7). Some tribes were considered as superior to another. In Nigeria, reference is made to the three major languages; Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. This was the origin of ethnic prejudices, dichotomization and segregation. This kind of spirit of superiority complex, inculcated into some Africans, by their colonial masters, has come to stand the test of time. It is functional in many societies in Africa.

According to Asouzu, most Western debates within the framework of what is called Western philosophy are usually done in this mindset of utter mutual negation (2007a, 169) after the mindset of Aristotle. African philosophers could also be said to be influenced by the Aristotelian mindset, considering the fact that leadership structure in Africa, both in learning, philosophy and administration is drawn from people who have a disproportionately Western type of education (ASOUZU 2007a, 169). This was made possible through colonial Western education, socialization and indoctrination (ASOUZU 2007a, 177). This colonial super imposition now colours the mind in which Africans approach ontology.

Thus, the impact of Aristotle's ontology on African philosophy could be vivid if one recalls that Europe is a continent of colonizers and religious proselytizers. They transmitted this mindset in some way to the Africans. Having imbibed with this type of bifurcative mindset, Africans now approach reality, through most of their works in literature, politics and history, with the mindset of showing how superior, and excellent Africans and their cultural heritages are. These sentiments are clearly noticeable in works like Consciencism of Nkrumah, Ujamaa socialism of Nyerere, Pan-Africanism of Nkrumah and Dubois, Neo-welfarism of Azikiwe, etcetera. These works are directed against external intervention and exploitation, and thus are ethnocentric in character. However, most works in Africa, operate within the scope of we-and-them spirit, and the nearer the better and the safer, forgetting that anything that exists, serves a missing links of reality. And that anything that has head, has a tail-end. They tend to paint an idyllic picture of an African and contrast this with the Western.

This is the spirit behind the fronting of the concept "communalism" as uniquely African, as against the individualism, of the West. The impression

here is that ‘there is something uniquely African, which sets Africans apart from their detractors and tormentors (ASOUZU 2007a, 178). These detractors and tormentors are meant to be the West who have dumped ideas and products to ruin our lives (ANYAEHIE 2007, 162). Thus, most philosophical debates in Africa are carried out with a highly compromised mindset. This paper in line with Alabi Yekini’s position, disagrees with Wamba dia Wamba, who asked if the philosopher or philosophy exists or not (2001, 227). This question does not hold water hence we cannot do without philosophy, the wisdom itself. The paper to an extent equally disagrees with Peter Bodunrin, who argues that the concept of philosophy in terms of the methodology and subject matter of the discipline, should be the same in both the Western and African senses (1984, 56), but argues that there should be a nexus between both the Western and African senses and advices that both should exist to complement each other. As a matter of fact, It only sees a mutual relationship between both thoughts, and that non can do without the other. This submission questions Placid Temples’ notion of thought that the Africans cannot know being from its attribute but we the West can and Paulin Hountondji’s rejection of ethno- philosophy as a genuine philosophical discipline hence it is more of the west than African (2002, 17). According to him, ethno- philosophy confuses the method of anthropology with those of philosophy, producing a hybrid discipline without a recognisable status in the world of theory. It is quite appalling that most African thinkers often forget that their philosophy is built upon another philosophy. Tell me what a particular writer have said that another writer have not said? Is there anything like that? For me, there is nothing like that. Then it becomes nonsensical, to claim uniqueness the way most African philosophers do. Unless we understand that there is nothing uniquely African and nothing uniquely Western, we can never make any head way, but as soon as that is introduced our consciousness about the issue of superiority stops, mutuality and interpersonal relationship would be established.

Here, Asouzu’s notion that everything that exists has a head and a tail-end would be acknowledged and cherished. Asouzu’s *ibuanyidanda* philosophy aims at decolouring this compromised and polarized mindset, with which philosophy is being done in African and beyond.

Ibuanyidanda as a Veritable Tool for solving the Problem of Ethnocentrism in African Philosophy

Asouzu maintains that ethnocentric reduction clouds our minds, and makes certainty in knowledge to elude us. *Ibuanyidanda* recognizes the fact that all missing links, are windows to reality, and the way we manage them determine the level of truth we arrive at (2007a, 94). It admonishes all stakeholders thus, “never elevate a world immanent missing links to an absolute instance”

(ASOUZU 2007b, 197) rather being is to be captured “in a comprehensive, total and future referential and proleptic manner” (ASOUZU 2004, 316). Ibuanyidanda or complementary reflection is an attempt to redefine, refine, reconstruct, and free our system of thoughts, from all ethnocentric commitment, making the mind of all, to see reality, from the windows of missing links.

An ethnocentric mindset operates under the influence of the super maxim, the nearer the better and the safer. Moreover, for the mind to begin to see being as missing links of reality, it has to go under a process Asouzu calls “existential conversion”. This process of existential conversion brings the subject to full awareness of the limited value of this super maxim. When existential conversion has taken place, the mind becomes aware that the super maxim, the nearer the better and the safer, has only a limited range of application’ (ASOUZU 2007b, 329). This super maxim, Asouzu stresses, is at the root of most clannish and ethnocentric tendencies in Africa, and indeed, the whole world. Nevertheless, when existential conversion, is in place, the subject begins to discover that the nearer is not always the better and the safest, as the maxim suggests. It is at this moment of discovery that an individual comes to the realization that the joy of being, lies on its limitations. At this level of consciousness, the mind no longer sees reality, as absolute fragments, as it is presently done in Africa, but on a platform of comprehensiveness and universality. Here, the mind sees being not in a limited frame, but with a global or totalizing mindset.

The mind begins to operate in keeping with the dictates of what Asouzu calls “the transcendent categories, grasping being in its fragmentation, unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future reference” (2007a, 323). However, for a subject to be able to capture being, in its fragmentation, unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future reference, the harmonizing faculty must be in charge. The harmonizing faculty called in Igbo language, Obi/Mmuo eziokwu “is a faculty that harmonizes all forces that tends toward bifurcation and exclusiveness” (ASOUZU 2007a, 316). As a matter of fact, when the harmonizing faculty is in control, the tendency of the mind to be led astray to ethnocentric bias or commitment would not be there, for this faculty harmonizes all differences, leaving no chance for polarization and bifurcation, which lead to ethnocentric bias. Obi/Mmuo eziokwu enables the mind to encounter 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 bias can be checked and eliminated in African philosophy.

Conclusion

Ibuanyidanda philosophy has as its major task, the liberalization of human reason from all forms of ethnocentric impositions and self aggrandizement. It is a call on African philosophers and all philosophers, to see reality, through the windows of missing links of reality, and never as an absolute mode of existence, for every individual or being, is a missing link that serves other missing links. Viewing reality in this way, eliminate the “we-them” mentality. When this we-them ethnocentric mentality is rejected from all stakeholders, then and only then, could philosophy in general and African philosophy in particular, be operated, devoid of ethnic biases, sentiments and misinterpretations.

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