

ISSUES
&
PROBLEMS
IN
PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER FOUR

Philosophy, Culture and The Quest for Social Order in Africa

B. ADENIRAN ALUKO

Closed societies – societies which have very little contact with the outside world – are usually very traditional, and as such they are usually quite stable in their beliefs and do not develop philosophy!

Bodunrin, 1991

The challenge to traditional culture in Africa came from our exposure to the beliefs and practices of other peoples. Colonialism, capitalism and the current wave of globalisation have presented us with reasons for comparison. All these cultural interminglings present us with reasons for reflection and cause for projection on how our culture can sustain the society and cope with challenges of the future. The fundamental problem that African society faces today is that of how to produce a cultural system that will sustain the community. The problem of attaining social order on the continent therefore ought to be topmost in our intellectual agenda.

Against this backdrop, it is the intention of this paper to critically examine how philosophy can be of use to culture as an instrument for the enthronement and sustenance of social order which we need for the development of Africa.

What is Culture?

Culture, it must be pointed out is at the heart of human civilisation and development. The reason is that any meaningful human development takes place in a cultural milieu and to a very large extent, the degree of development in any society is a function of the degree of dynamism of the culture of that society. It is pertinent to point out that not a few people believe that the world 'culture' refers only to artifacts, mode of dressing, how marriages and naming ceremonies are conducted. It is more than this.

For L. A. Thompson, "culture can be defined as the way of life of a given society or the universe of values and artifacts in which a given people live or standardized and expected behaviour within the framework

of a given system of social organisation".² To broaden our knowledge of the meaning of culture, let us take a look at another definition. Culture has been conceived as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment which gives meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation thus distinguishing them from their neighbours".³ Simply put, culture can be referred to as the way a group of people interpret their environment, express their feelings and order their lives to enhance their survival and flourishing in society.

The primacy of culture to human existence in society cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed many social scholars and philosophers have argued that our interpretation of reality is culture-bound. This of course explains why G. S. Sogolo conceives culture as the means through which people interpret reality. According to Sogolo "Reality itself does not change. But its conception is mirrored through the medium of language which itself is culture-determined."⁴

Having given us this background, it is important to bring to our attention the essential features of culture. The first is the dynamism of culture. Culture is indeed a dynamic concept. In other words, culture is not a static concept that can be confined to history. It is capable of change and adaptation. This is because of the dynamic nature of the society itself. Second, every culture has two constitutive elements, i.e. material and the mental elements. While the material element on the other hand refers to the mind (thinking and feelings) of the people. It is however instructive to point out that there is a constant interaction of the two constitutive elements. As a matter of fact, the material aspect of culture is an expression, in concrete terms, of the mental aspect of culture. It should be noted that it is because of these characteristics of culture that philosophy is interested in culture. The fluid nature of culture demands constant critical thinking on the various developments that it generates. In this respect the present discourse seeks to examine some of the functions of culture in the society.

The Role of Culture in Society

The role of culture as a vital instrument for the control and sustenance of human society was beautifully articulated by Ali. A. Mazrui in one of his works - 'Cultural Forces in World Politics'.⁵ In this book Mazrui identifies seven functions of culture in the society.

The first one is that it helps to provide lenses of perception and cognition. Historical experience has shown that the way people view the world is to a very large extent conditioned by one's cultural beliefs and practices. It is on the strength of this common view of reality which culture characteristically promotes that culture is said to be an instrument of social integration. It is a known social fact that when a group of individuals subscribe to a common view of reality, which culture promotes, understanding and cooperation among such individuals are not only facilitated, but their social integration is strengthened. Culture, thus, help to prevent conflict which could have arisen among individuals and groups in society if there were no common view of reality.

The second function of culture identified by Mazrui is to the effect that culture provides motives for human behaviour and thus serve as an instrument for the control of change in society. This role, no doubt, is vital to the survival of any human society, especially in recent times.

The third function of culture identified by Mazrui is that it serves as a criteria of evaluation. It is the means through which historical events, moral behaviours and general issues in human society are scrutinized with a view to passing judgement. In other words, what is judged to be good or bad, moral or immoral, praise worthy or condemnable is partly determined by culture.

The fourth function of culture according to Mazrui is that it serves as a basis of identity. In this age of globalisation, it is the means through which people project to the world around them who they are and where they come from.

The fifth function is that culture is a mode of communication. While we acknowledge the fact that language, which of course is part of culture, is the most elaborate mode of communication, it is instructive to point out that culture as a mode of communication could take other forms which includes music, mode of dressing and ideas which people generate.

The sixth function of culture refers to its role as a basis for stratification. Our status, image and what we become in society is partly defined by our cultural background.

The seventh function of culture identified by Mazrui refer to its function as a system of production and consumption. This function is very important in this age when socio-political arrangements are largely determined by the system of production in the society.

In the light of these functions which culture performs in a society, it is an incontrovertible fact that culture is vital to the achievement of social order in any human society. Having highlighted some of the functions of culture in a society, it is important to reflect on the linkage between culture and the philosophical enterprise given the role that the latter plays in shaping culture.

What is Philosophy?

The question 'what is philosophy' is one of the most difficult questions in philosophy. It is just not easy to give a precise definition of what we do in philosophy. However, since it is imperative in a work of this nature to define philosophy, one will attempt to do what one may call fishing in troubled water by giving a definition. Most importantly, we need a definition – framework – that would assist in employing the services of culture to achieve a stable social order.

It is instructive to point out that philosophy is generally used in two senses. First, philosophy in the loose sense or general view – which in a way underlines what people do – and philosophy in the strict or technical sense – which demands rigor and criticism. Here, we are going to concern ourselves with philosophy in the strict or technical sense.

Philosophy, originally, was coined from the Greek word *philosophia* which means 'love of (*philo*), 'knowledge' (*sophia*). For Ludwig Wittgenstein, "philosophy is an activity, and this activity is the clarification of thoughts".⁶ Wittgenstein's view of philosophy represents the logical positivists view of what philosophy is. H. S. Staniland in an essay aptly titled "What is philosophy" has a much broader view of what philosophy is. For Staniland, "philosophy is the criticism of the ideas we live by".⁷ In other words, philosophy is seen as criticism of the ideas that govern the organisation of our social, economic, political, scientific and cultural life. To another scholar, J. I. Omeregbe, "philosophy is essentially a reflective activity. To philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to some fundamental questions".⁸ However, philosophy can be seen as a critical reflection on our beliefs system with a view to cleansing it of inconsistencies, contradictions and elements that are inhibitive to the development of the human personality or dignity.

In the light of the foregoing, it will not be out of place to posit that our conception of philosophy confers on us the freedom to see philosophy as: (1) philosophy as an instrument for the clarification of our language

and, (2) philosophy as an instrument for the evaluation of our beliefs system (culture).

Philosophy and Culture

What is the relationship between philosophy and culture and how have they interacted in history to promote social order? It will certainly not be out of place to affirm that the relationship between philosophy and culture is complex and deep. There is a sense in which the two can be perceived as synonymous, or better still that philosophy is a cultural activity. Philosophy is a cultural activity because its reflection is always geared towards improving culture and sustaining social order.

Societies all over the world are striving to achieve a stable social order. This is simply because a stable social order is indispensable to human existence. The importance of a stable social order cannot be over-emphasised. This explains why philosophers and social scientists have devoted so much of their attention to achieve a harmonious social relationship among individuals and groups in societies. Plato's *Republic*, for instance was an attempt to prescribe how a just social arrangement can be attained.

What does the idea of social order imply? According to J. Messner, "Social order refers to the social systems and schemes of social relations that define the political, economic and social roles, rights and duties of people in a society".⁹ Social order refers to the individuals and groups that cohabit in a social system. In the light of the foregoing, a stable social order, therefore, refers to a state of harmonious relationship among individuals and groups that live in a society or State. While on the other hand, an unstable social arrangement refers to a social system that is inhibitive of the flowering of human personality and fulfilment.

The question is: do we have a sustainable social system in Africa? Or how do we arrive at a system of social harmony in Africa. In a way social order can be explained with Plato's idea of the interrelationship between the three categories of people in the society. What Plato refers to as justice in the society is synonymous with the idea of social order. How then can we realise this Platonic state in Africa? Can we say that the social arrangement in Africa as it is can protect the human instinct of survival and good life? If the question is not easy to answer then it is imperative to demand for a means of realizing this idea.

The social climate in Africa to say the least is gruesome. From Liberia to Sierra-Leone, from Angola to Nigeria, the socio-political life is

chaotic. In virtually every country in the continent, primitive and vicious wars are going on. Neighbours have been pitched against neighbours. The destruction of life and property we (African) are witnessing to say the least, are horrendous. Infrastructures have collapsed, the effects of urbanization have been carelessly handled thus leading to a general break down of law and order. In short, there is flagrant disrespect for social norms in most nation-states of Africa.

Taking into account the primacy of a stable social order to the development of any society. It therefore becomes important for us to marshal both our intellectual and material resources towards achieving a stable and sustained social order in the continent. The essential point of concern to scholars, particularly of philosophy, is how do we redirect our culture to sustain social order? How can philosophy be of use to culture to achieve the enthronement of social order in Africa?

First, philosophy, as we have pointed out, engages in clarification and evaluation of the ideas by which we organise our lives. This critical approach to issues which philosophy characteristically engages in is, more than any other time in our history, relevant as a tool for cleansing our culture. The truth of the matter is that some aspects of our traditional beliefs system are due for overhauling because they are no longer adequate for the needs and demands of contemporary society. These negative aspects of our culture are constituting serious threat to social stability. For instance, there is the urgent need for a reconstruction of the African conception of woman in the light of the current democratization going on in Africa. Or how do we reconcile our traditional view of the woman as inferior human being with the concept of political equality which democracy demands. The inability of some elements of our culture to meet contemporary demands was recognised by Abiola Irele when he argues that "the resources in ideas, techniques, and in certain respects, values, offered by our traditional cultures are simply not adequate for our contemporary needs and interest".¹⁰ We have seen the effects of this manifesting adversely in our social, economic, political and scientific endeavours.

What philosophy can do and should do in the light of the above, is to take a critical look at our culture. This calls for a critical examination of our world-view, reinterpret the society by exposing the theoretical underpinnings or assumptions of our world view. We need to show the inadequacies in our culture with a view to refining and reinforcing our world-view and making it capable of meeting contemporary demands

particularly the ideal of social order.

More than any other time in the history of mankind, there is the urgent need for us (Africans) to moderate our notoriously religious outlook to life and cultivate the appropriate scientific attitudes with a view to giving science and technology the attention it deserves in contemporary human affairs. The importance of science and technology in the ordering of human affairs was recognised by Kwame Gyekye in his book *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* when he argues that "the material and survival of human society depend on the ability of humans to make at least simple tools and equipment and to develop techniques essential for the production of basic human needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and security".¹¹ The availability of these basic needs are crucial to the survival and stability of any human society. Thus, the need to imbibe the scientific attitude (science and technology) that are required for their production.

Furthermore, philosophy can help to promote a culture of dialogue that is germane for achieving a stable social order. Dialogue is a vital social instrument that can help to promote peace and understanding between individuals and groups in societies. Philosophy, thus, promotes this culture of dialogue by exposing the fundamental assumptions governing the cultures of people cohabiting in a polity. It is only when individuals in a society have a fair knowledge of the guiding principles of the world-view of the people they are relating with that it can reasonably be said that enough grounds have been prepared for them to interact peacefully towards achieving a stable social order.

The greatest task which philosophy must tackle in order to realise a stable social order in Africa is to develop and define clearly a social vision, without which the society will only drift, thus setting the stage for instability. The social vision among other things must spell out the social norms of the society and the goals and values which the constituent of the society must uphold.

The need for a social vision in our society becomes imperative in the light of the emergence of what A. O. Anya calls "hedonistic materialistic culture",¹² that is threatening to submerge our rich sense of communalism and values of hard work, human dignity, honour and integrity, which are crucial to the achievement of a stable society. This negative attitude needs to be challenged by superior argument especially because its propagation will turn the African society into the Hobbesian state of nature – chaotic and brutish.

Apart from the fact that development of a social vision will help to check the threatening 'hedonistic materialistic culture, that is driving hard a significant number of our people to violate social norms and undermine the security and stability of the society, the development of a social vision gives direction and meaning to our social engineering strategies. The relevance of a social vision to the achievement of social order in society is one of the important issues raised by Appiah's seminal text. *In my Father's House, Africa in the philosophy of Culture*. In this book, Appiah's argument is that "society without norms could hardly exist not simply because the concept of a society is connected with the idea of a shared norms, but because without common norms it is difficult to conceive of any collective action".¹³ How then do we achieve a common norm that will produce the collectivism needed for social order? Philosophical reflection in its manifold dimensions should concentrate on this project in the coming millennium. Briefly stated, the idea of common norms depend on the idea of common interests. We need to achieve a state where the divergent interests of individuals in the society are harmonised. This can only be possible through dialogue.

The truth of the matter is that any society without an organised system of thought, be it on politics, social or economy, will always be at the mercy of societies who have one. Thus, the African society needs to give attention to realizing a social vision and give expression to it by constantly propagating it. It is only when this common vision becomes popular that the interests of the individuals in the society can be harmonized and the ideal of social order becomes a reality in Africa.

Notes

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