

The Philosophy of Anton Wilhelm Amo as a Case Against the 17th Century Ideological Race Classification of Africa

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Abstract

During the 17th century, there was a wide and wild perspective among ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers that Africans cannot reason. It was believed that the African has not yet achieved self consciousness and thus is not able to distinguish between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being. It is therefore not surprising that the African was placed at the same level of being with the animal. This piece questions the veracity of these perspectives by engaging in a study of the philosophical perspectives of Africans in the 17th century. It precisely focuses on the works of Anton Wilhelm Amo. This research, using the historical and phenomenological methods of inquiry, discovered that, based on the works of Anton, the perspective among ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers which denied rationalist to the African was based on emotions and prejudice rather than on a sincere search for the truth.

Introduction

The 19th century was the age of racism par excellence. It was a season when theories and ideas about the nature of the human person were at cross-roads. Charles Darwin produced his theory on the "origin of species by natural selection" in which he stated that from all variations of life found in the world, nature selects certain of them for survival while others are marked for extinction. Drawing from the impact of the Darwinian racial ideology, Berge (1973) insists that evolutionary thought is the alleged rationale for the many evils and harmful practices of the 19th and 21st centuries. It swept through Germany in the 20th century and sowed in it one of the most heinous manifestations of racism in human history, culminating in the crematoria of death camps in the 1940's; and also through Africa, giving rise to the most widespread, enduring and virulent form of racism. This according to Masolo (1994), was based on cultural bias, expressed and intensified in the writings of Western scholars.

Linnaeus (1758), writing in the 18th century, stated that all creatures were arranged by God in a great chain of hierarchy with human beings at the head. He further indicated that human beings have their own hierarchy of being, with the black race closest to the lowest animals. In this hierarchy, the white race occupied the highest position and as such the superior race. The *Americanus* were considered as tenacious, contented, free and ruled by custom. The *Europeaus*, he says are light, lively, inventive and ruled by rites. The *Asiaticus* are stern, haughty, stingy and ruled by opinion. *Africans* are cunning, slow, negligent and ruled by caprice.

Like Linnaeus, Gobineau (1915), writing in the 20th century, also developed a biased anthropology. He placed human beings on a hierarchy with Africa at the bottom. He argued that Europe had attained civilization while others are yet to. Following the same line of thought, Hume (cited by Chukwudi 1998) wrote, "I am apt to suspect that the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even an individual eminent in action or speculation" (p. 214). Hegel (1956) also had a biased perception of the Negro. He wrote,

In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness had not yet attained to the realisation of any substantial existence.... Thus distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained. (p. 93).

He thus posits that the Negro is yet to go beyond his instinctual behaviour to identify a being outside of himself. Following the same line of thought, Levy-Bruhl (cited by Njoku 1993), questioned the veracity of an untutored African knowing about God. For him, the African way of thinking is non-logical and full of inner self-contradiction. Corroborating with Levy-Bruhl, Baker (cited in Richard 1964) wrote,

The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced in idolatry.... he has never grasped the idea of a personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a future state of reward and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress. (p. 199).

In the contention of Masolo (1994), at the heart of this debate on the identity of the African is the concept of reason, a value which is believed to stand as the great divide between the civilized and the uncivilized, the logical and the mystical. This research is concerned with investigating the veracity of these perspectives. It raises the question as to if there were no Africans around the same period who had made rational contributions to the development of knowledge. It is in this regard that the researcher studies the contribution of Anton Wilhelm Amo to knowledge in the 17th century to see if there was an absence or presence of rationality in his thoughts.

The Man Anton Wilhelm Amo

Anton Wilhelm Amo was the first recorded African philosopher or thinker to be active in Europe, the former German Democratic Republic, during the modern period. He was given birth to in Awukena, the coastal region of Axim in Ghana. He was transported to the Netherlands at the age of four and was given as a gift to Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbützel (1633–1714), who in turn gave Amo to his son, August Wilhelm (1662–1731), who in 1708 christened him Anton Wilhelm. Makumba (2007) has two hypothesis on his coming to the Netherlands: one, that he was taken to the Netherlands by a preacher in Ghana for religious education to be a priest and a teacher; second, he was kidnapped by sea pirates, some records say the Dutch West Indian Company and taken to Europe as a slave. He was raised as a member of the duke's family and was given all the educational benefits thereof. It is believed that while at the palace, he must have met with Gottfried Leibniz who was a frequent visitor to the palace. Between 1717 and 1721, he studied at the Ritter Academy of Wolfenbützel. In the year 1727, he went to Halle University, where he studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, German, and Dutch. He graduated from Halle with a degree in law in 1729. He continued his studies at the University of Wittenberg, where he focused on philosophy, history, and medicine, and earned his doctorate of philosophy in 1734. Amo subsequently taught philosophy, psychology and natural law at Halle Wittenberg where a statue has been erected in his honour and has been described as "the Master Amo, who hails from Africa and more particularly from Guinea, and is a genuine Negro but a humble and honourable philosopher"; and a cursory glance at history reveals that he was the first African philosopher to teach in Europe. In 1938 he was made a professor, and in fact the first black professor in Germany. In Halle, he showed how patriotic he was of Africa by adding *Guinea-Afer* or *Guinea-Africanus* to his name. Although Hountondji (1983) avers that he made the additions to his name so that he and his circle will not forget his African origin and ties, it is very unlikely.

However, in 1740 Amo resigned from lecturing at Halle University and took up a post in philosophy at the University of Jena. It was during his days at the University of Jena that he experienced some unfavorable and unpleasant happenings in his life, namely: the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbützel had died in 1735, leaving him without his long-standing sponsor and protector. Unfortunately, that happened at the same time when Germany was becoming intellectually and morally narrower and less liberal. Thus those who argued against the rights of Africans in Europe were gaining grounds over those who campaigned for greater academic and social freedom. With the experience of racial abuses in Europe, he finally decided to return to Africa where Abraham (1964) avers that he lived like a hermit and acquired the reputation of a soothsayer. On his arrival in Ghana in about 1747, his

father and a sister were still alive. He probably died in about 1759 at Fort Chama in Ghana. Sephocle (1992) describes him thus,

Amo is known as the black thinker, who, in spite of his exalted status, never came to feel quite at home in 18th century Europe. Consequently, in the later part of his life, he returned to his native Ghana, where he worked as a goldsmith. (p. 182).

He basically has two works: *Inaugural Dissertation on the Rights of Mores (Africans) in Europe (1726)* through which he fought against slavery and for the rights of Africans in Europe; *Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Human Mind (1734)* and *A Treatise on the Art of Philosophizing with Sobriety and Accuracy (1738)* a work he produced from his numerous lectures in Halle University, in which he developed an empiricist epistemology very close to but distinct from that of philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume. It is on the basis of these works that Nkrumah (1978), Hountonji (1983) and Osuagwu (1999) refer to him as an African philosopher.

The Thoughts of Anton Wilhelm Amo

Descartes, who had died in 1650 was a remarkable thinker and a towering figure in European philosophy and mathematics, which perhaps, from my consideration, was one of the reasons why Amo decided to deal with his analysis of the mind and body in his *Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Human Mind (1734)*. First of all, he adopted the Cartesian Dualism arguing that the mind was distinct from the body because the body was sensory, changing and contingent; while the mind is linked to cogitation or thinking, which reveals the essential or necessary invisible feature of reality that are not sensible but comprehensible. While the body is destroyed after death, thinking continues. In thinking, we are linked to God who thinks reality in its clarity and distinctness. However, criticized Descartes's dualism, the opposition between mind and body, which he found problematic. Amo did not reject the assumption that mind is a substance, but suggested, that there was inconsistency and confusion in Descartes' terms – how two fundamentally different substances can be in union. Taking an agnostic stand, Amo also argued, that "Although I do not know in what manner God and disembodied spirits understand themselves and their operations and external things, I do not think it probable that they do it through ideas." According to Amo, "it is the peculiarity of the human mind that it understands and acts through ideas, because it is very closely tied to the body." Nkrumah (1964) wrote thus about him,

The eighteenth-century African philosopher from Ghana, Anthony William Amo, who taught in the German Universities of Halle, and Wittenberg, pointed out in his *De Humanae Mentis Apatheia* that idealism was enmeshed

in contradictions. The mind, he said, was conceived by idealism as a pure, active, unextended substance. Ideas, the alleged constituents of physical objects, were held to be only in the mind, and to be incapable of existence outside it. Amo's question here was how the ideas, largely those of physical objects, many of which were ideas of extension, could subsist in the mind; since physical objects were actually extended, if they were really ideas, some ideas must be actually extended. And if all ideas must be in the mind, it became hard to resist the conclusion that the mind itself was extended, in order to be a spatial receptacle for its extended ideas. (p. 64)

The mind thus must be living, and it could be so only by virtue of the body. Amo's critique of Descartes' suggests that he may have been drawing upon an Akanan understanding of the subject from his early years in what today is called Ghana. The metaphysics of the language so to speak, worked its way into his investigations of philosophy written in Latin. Wiredu (2004) had analysed Descartes' interactionism of mind and body in categories that illustrates this point. The Akan would have a problem with the expression; I think therefore I am. He or she would ask: you are what? Where? Wiredu explains: "he is the Akan rendition of exist. Without the "ho", which means "there", in other words, "some place", all meaning is lost. "ho", standing alone does correspond to existential sense of the verb "to be", which has no place in Akan syntax or semantics. Returning now to "I think therefore I am" and consider the existential component of attempted message as it comes in Akan. In that medium the information communicated can only be that "I am there, at some place"; which that spatial location is essential to the idea of my existence.

In his piece on *Inaugural Dissertation on the Rights of Mores (Africans) in Europe* (1726), Amo concerned himself with the rights of Africans in Europe. This Inaugural Dissertation, which was directly related to his being an African, earned him candidature in both private and public law. He argued that African kings, like their European counterparts, had been vassals of Rome. By slave trade Europeans were violating the common heritage of Roman law, the principle that all the Roman citizens were free, including those who lived in Africa.

Conclusion

Smith (2013) reported that after Anton Wilhelm Amo defended a philosophy dissertation at the University of Halle in Saxony, written in Latin and entitled "On the Impassivity of the Human Mind." A dedicatory letter was appended from the rector of the University of Wittenberg, Johannes Gottfried Kraus, who praised "the natural genius" of Africa, its "appreciation for learning," and its "inestimable contribution to the knowledge of human affairs" and of "divine things." Kraus placed Amo in a lineage that includes many North African Latin authors of antiquity, such as Terence, Tertullian and St. Augustine. If this I so, then the racial

prejudices of Hegel and Immanuel Kant are emotionally based. One of Anton's greatest contributions to mankind and the black race in particular is fighting, through writing, the end of the deadly and unhonourable Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. In fact, Grégoire (1808) describes him as one of "all those courageous men who have pleaded the cause of the unhappy Blacks and half-breeds, either through their writings or through their speeches in political assemblies, and to societies established for the abolition of the slave trade, and the relief and liberation of slaves." The rational baselessness of the thoughts of Western thinkers is evident in the fact that a scholar like Levy-Bruhl, who was at the fore of the denial of rationality to Africans, renounced his theory of pre-logicism before his death. According to Jahn (1958) in Levy-Bruhl is found "a rare example of scholarly integrity. In his posthumous notes, he asks himself how he could have ever conceived so ill a hypothesis, and he comes to the conclusion that 'the logical structure of the human mind is the same in all men'" (p. 97).

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