
FROM AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY TO AFRICAN BIOETHICS: ON THE INTERACTION OF STRUCTURES

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Abstract

This piece is a comparative study that investigates the impact of the structure of African philosophy on the historical development of African bioethics. It discovers that the question of whether there is an African bioethics or not is strongly connected to that of African philosophy. Both were largely borne out of the popular Western portrayal of Africa in books by ethnologists and historians in derogatory terms. They popularized the face of an Africa that was savage, who could do nothing, develop nothing or create nothing, even historical. The bastardized image of Africa raised the question as to if the people so described could develop a philosophy of their own, or if they could conceptualize the divine. It further studies the interaction of the schools of African philosophy and African bioethics, and discovers that African bioethics relies heavily on the schools of African philosophy for the development of the trends in African bioethics. Both have adopted the Professional/Universalist, Ethno-philosophy/Particularist and Eclectic schools. This piece, therefore, argues that the question whether or not African bioethics exists cannot be addressed without due cognizance of the answer to the question whether or not, an African philosophy exists. The comparative and analytical methods of inquiry are employed for the purpose of this research.

Keywords: African, Bioethics, Philosophy, Structures, Particularist, Universalist, Eclectic.

Introduction

One of the questions that has engaged the minds of African philosophers for decades, and which has defied a particular season, is the question of the nature of African philosophy. This has been the preoccupation of Tempels (1959), Jahn (1958), Mbiti (1969), Gyekye (1987), Edeh (1985), Oruka (1991), Iroegbu (1995), Masolo (1995), Hountondji (1995), Odhiambo (1995), Asouzu (2013) etc. Gyekye (1987), therefore, avers that the issue of the nature of African philosophy became recurrent in the reflections of contemporary African philosophers. While this remains a fundamental question within the parameters of African philosophy, this study makes a crucial shift, veering into the domain of the influences of African philosophy. And the area of choice is the influence of African philosophy on the development of African bioethics. It investigates the impact of the structure of African philosophy on the historical development of the structure of African bioethics.

A cursory glance reveals that the question of whether there is an African bioethics or not is strongly connected to that of African philosophy. Both were largely borne out of the popular Western portrayal of Africa in books by ethnologists and historians in derogatory terms. They popularized the face of an Africa that was savage, who could do nothing, develop nothing or create nothing, even historical. The bastardized image of Africa raised the question as to if the people so described could develop a philosophy of their own, or if they could conceptualize the divine. It further studies the interaction of the schools of African philosophy and African bioethics, and discovers that African bioethics relies heavily on the schools of African philosophy for the development of the trends in African bioethics. Both have adopted the Professional/Universalist, Ethno-philosophy/Particularist and Eclectic schools. This paper, therefore, argues that the question whether or not African bioethics exists cannot be addressed without due cognizance of the answer to the question whether or not, an African philosophy exists. The comparative and analytical

methods of inquiry are employed for the purpose of this research.

African Philosophy and the factors that Undermine African Bioethics

The question of whether there is an African bioethics or not was largely born out of the popular Western portrayal of Africa in books by ethnologists and historians in derogatory terms. They popularized the face of an Africa that was savage, who could do nothing, develop nothing or create nothing, even historical. The bastardized image of Africa raised the question as to if the people so described could develop a philosophy of their own, or if they could conceptualize the divine. Benjamin (2010) observes that for centuries, there was a systematic and ruthless attempt to deny Africa the fundamental human right of self-determination and self-identity. The *Black Consciousness Movement* in Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, South America, and throughout the Pan-African world was a reaction and an attempt towards reaffirming the identity of Africa and its people. Three factors are relevant in this regard.

a. Ideological Race Classification

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. The systemic unity in the African way of thinking, among other factors, diverse from that of the west was at the root of the denial of reasoning to the African. This perception of the Negro by Western scholars have made Negrohood a burden for the Negro, accounting for why many have denied their identity, while some live with the regret of being one. All these basically were prompted by prejudice, and it is not surprising that scholars like Levy-Bruhl renounced his theory of pre-logicism before his death. In the contention of 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).

b. Slave Trade and the Dehumanization of Africa

Having classified the Negro as backward, inhuman, primitive, illogical, emotional and capricious, and by no way equal to the white race, the West had no qualms in exploiting Africans to their benefit. With the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the Western hemisphere, the European expanding empires lacked manpower to work on new plantations that produced sugar cane for Europe, and other products such as coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton. Contrary to the native Americans, Africans were excellent workers: they often had experience of agriculture and keeping cattle, they were used to a tropical climate, resistant to tropical diseases, and so the Atlantic slave trade became an integral part of an international trading system which was then guarded by international laws (Kanu 2015a).

This period of carnage lasted for about five hundred years during which an estimate of 12 million viable Africans were enslaved from their home lands to locations around the Atlantic. The vast majority went to Brazil, the Caribbean, and other Spanish-speaking regions of South America and Central America. Smaller numbers were taken to Atlantic islands, continental Europe, and English-speaking areas of the North American mainland. For about 200 years Portugal dominated in this trade (they are said to have begun slave trade at about 1440), and were not long after joined by the Spanish, French, Dutch, after 1560 the English also joined in the trade and merchants from Liverpool were not exempted. Kanu (2008) avows that it is estimated that during the five centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Portugal was responsible for transporting over 4.5 million Africans, which is about 40% of the total. During the 18th century however, when the slave trade accounted for the transport of a staggering 6 million Africans, Britain was the worst transgressor - responsible for almost 2.5 million. This was a trade in which human nature was depraved and fellow creatures manipulated in infinite variables. This historical experience told on the image of Africa, and placed her at a realm that is incapable of higher order thinking.

c. Colonialism and the Exploitation of Africa

Since Africans were regarded as sub-humans, Njoku (2002) states that colonialism became a gospel of redemption and elevation of the black man to some human status. Before 1830, Mountjoy and Embleton (1966), argued that European settlements were for the most part restricted to small coastal trading stations. Both physical and economic factors combined to retard penetration. However, during the mid 19th C, Hodder (1976), observes that European Explorers began to make significant advances into tropical Africa. As a result, the great puzzles of African geography for Europeans – notably the course of the Nile, Niger, Congo and Zambezi rivers – were solved within the space of half a century.

Missionaries took an increasing part in extending European interests. All this exploration and evangelism frequently led to trade. Yet it soon realized that profitable trade depended on maintenance of peace and that this peace could not be assured without administrative intervention and control in the hinterlands. Kanu (2012) holds that because the explorers came from several different European countries – Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, Belgium and Germany – Africa soon became a field for the conflicting ambitions of the major European Colonial Powers. By the early 1880's these conflicting ambitions were beginning to be expressed territorially. Sections of the coast were being claimed by traders and administrators of one or other of the European powers. Missionary, trading, military and administrative activities were beginning to

expand. In the contention of Hodder (1976), the stage was now set for the European scramble for Africa, finally to be set in motion by the 1884-5 Conference and Treaty of Berlin. According to Walter (1982), the decisive effect of colonialism is that fact that one's power of self-determination was taken away from the other, and by that loss one society is forced into underdevelopment.

African Philosophy and the approaches to the Study of African Bioethics

In this study, the concepts: trends and schools are used interchangeably. As such, when trends is used, it signifies schools and vice versa. The schools or trends to be discussed in this study have been grouped into the Professional/Universalist, Ethno-philosophy/Particularist and Eclectic schools of African bioethics. This categorization is based on Mbugua's categorization, in which he maintains that,

the question whether or not African bioethics exists cannot be addressed without due cognizance of the answer to the question whether or not, an African philosophy exists. A negative answer to this question would imply a negative answer to the former. Similarly, since bioethics is one branch of ethics, to assert the existence of an African philosophy is to assert the existence of an African bioethics, which in turn is one of the traditional branches of philosophy (p. 3).

Mbugua (2009) distinguished four trends of African philosophy: professional philosophy, ethno-philosophy, sage philosophy and nationalist-ideological philosophy. However, for the purpose of the categorization of African bioethics, he employed the professional philosophy and ethno-philosophy for his categorization. While this categorization makes a difference, the researcher adds a third categorization, namely, the eclectic school; thus, implying that there are three schools or trends in Africa bioethics.

a. Professional or Universalist Philosophy Approach

The argument of the Universalist or professional school of African bioethics is linked with the arguments of the Universalist or professional school of African philosophy. What is the content of their argument? This trend was promoted by scholars such as Bodunrin (1975 and 1985), Wiredu (1991), Oruka (1991 and 1997) and Hountondji (1995). Their thought is grouped into a school because they share fundamental positions and assumptions. They argue that philosophy is the same everywhere and uses the same methodology, and thus African philosophy should be critical and not a descriptive record of Africa beliefs. Bodunrin (1985), a leading figure in the universalist trend, brought out the basic features of this school.

- i. They agree with Jenny (1999), that philosophy deals with problems which are ultimate, abstract and very general. These problems cut across geographical and cultural divides. Bodunrin (cited by Uduigwomen, 1995) wrote, "Philosophical systems are built up by systematic examination of specific features of the world out of the relationships that are perceived to obtain between them" (p. 3). It is therefore not surprising that when Sodipo (cited by Uduigwomen, 1995) described the idea of cause and chance in Yoruba ontology, Bodunrin (1985) would reject it as philosophy on the grounds that it only allows scholars to see how the Yoruba concept of cause and chance fits into the Yoruba traditional system of thought and not in the general or universal corpus of literature called philosophy.
- ii. If any literature must be categorized as philosophical, it must contain within itself the energies of criticism and argument. In this case, to put out traditional ideas that have not been criticised or cannot be argued, or ideas that are not logical in its presentation and scientific in nature, cannot be regarded as philosophy. Thus, when logic, science, criticism and argumentation are not the hallmark of a body of thought, they cannot be regarded as philosophical (Kanu 2015b).
- iii. For a body of thought to be philosophy, this school also argues that it must follow the analytic or dialectical pedagogy of enquiry. In this process of presentation, one's ideas must be well and clearly articulated, so that your audience would know what they are invited to believe. Thus, the thinker must show how his theory addresses the problem at stake more than other theories. Like the dialectics of Hegel, ideas to constitute philosophy become an antithesis to an already existing thesis, to give birth to a new thesis.

The Universalist approach to the study of African bioethics uses the methodology of Western bioethics. Andoh (2012) refers to it as an academic approach to bioethics. They adopt a universalistic definition of bioethics. This trend has, however, not developed in Africa as it has in West. According to Mbugua (2009), “It would be a collection of logically argued ideas of individuals about bioethical issues rather than a body of communal thought” (p. 3). He however observed that the professional trend is yet to be developed in Africa. He writes:

Unfortunately, academic bioethics, like professional philosophy, is still largely foreign in most African countries. Indeed, despite the rapid growth of bioethics research centers in Europe and North America, there are still relatively few places in Africa where one can obtain formal bioethics education even at the certificate level. This is hardly surprising considering that even in the West bioethics as an academic discipline did not become established until a few decades ago. (p. 4).

Andoh (2011) made the same observation:

... bioethics as an academic discipline is a domain in which Africa is still lagging behind. The current growth of bioethics in Africa at this level can be characterized as sailing in rough ocean using archaic technology and one is never sure where one is or what direction one ought to take. This field's development in this area has been very sluggish as bioethics is not yet an escalating tradition of thought and talk by ways of books, journals, classroom teachings, and conferences in Africa. For instance, in the past years, bioethics has been about finding arguments to support the recommendations to stop, or at least slow down, take care, beware, meanwhile, Africans are still to develop the means and mechanism to develop this kind of assessment. A lot still need to be done to enable the field of bioethics flourish at this level in Africa and to empower the capacities of bioethicists and institutions to function optimally... the future of bioethics in Africa here is bleak as bioethics is not taught in many higher educational systems of learning (pp. 72-73).

It is true that bioethics as an academic and professional field is not developed in Africa, however, it is pessimistic to say that its future is bleak. African bioethics as an academic discipline is not impossible in Africa. And every year that passes by, with the new developments, one can begin to think of a new age of bioethics in Africa. Already, the UNESCO Regional Centre for Documentation and Research has been established at the Egerton University in Kenya, and in 2008, an International Bioethics Conference was hosted in the same University. In 2011, an International Bioethics Institute was opened at Enugu, Nigeria. Since 2011 to 2014, international Conferences have been organized every year. This is obviously a step in the right direction. Thus, the professional approach to bioethics is growing in Africa.

b. Ethno-Philosophy or Particularist Approach

The particularist approach to bioethics would develop an African bioethics from the African people's culture and worldview. It is an ethno-ethics. It is inward looking- focusing on the categories of a particular culture, that is, African culture as a significant factor or power for the shaping of and transformation of meanings attached to the experience of health and illness. The argument of the Ethno-Philosophy or Particularist Philosophy Approach to African Bioethics is patterned on the arguments of the proponents of ethno-philosophy (Kanu 2016).

The proponents of ethno-philosophy include Tempels (1969), Mbiti (1970) and Senghor (1964; 1973). They argue that the different African worldviews properly constitute what could be regarded as African philosophy. They would define African Philosophy as the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas. It places emphases on local relevance or context. This perspective was expressed in Placid Tempel's work, *La Philosophie Bantou* and John Mbiti's piece, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Segun (1991) criticized this perspective when he argued that Tempels' primary motivation was not to define African philosophy, but to help European missionaries understand the thought pattern or worldview of the Bantu people. This he believed would make the work of

evangelization easier for the European missionaries. Segun's criticism does not suffice here, because that a man has not set out to do something but still does, does not mean that what he has done is not worth it. If we move beyond Tempels to Mbiti, his purpose is clear. Mbiti (1970) wrote that the primary motivation for documenting his work was to put down the:

Philosophical understanding of African peoples concerning different issues of life. Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through word and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind. (p. 1).

Hountondji (1995) would also insist that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy because it is a communal and collective thought and it is not written down. Even here, the criticism of Hountondji that is based on the idea of oral tradition cannot be sustained. Philosophy is not philosophy because it has been written down; it is philosophy because it is first an idea. This would question the philosophiness of the ideas of Socrates who never wrote down his thought, but were later put down by his disciple Plato. Writing is not the only way of transmitting information, oral tradition is one. As has already been done by Tempels and Mbiti, professionals can collect the African wealth of ideas and critically analyse them, especially for the enlightenment of many traditional Africans who are yet to be persuaded on the distinction between philosophy, religion, mysticism and telepathy.

From the foregoing, the ethno-philosophy approach in African bioethics, according to Andoh (2011) would argue that:

African bioethics is found in the African people's culture or worldview. This is what might be referred to as ethno-ethics and consists of a set of shared beliefs, values, categories, and assumptions that are implicit in the languages, practices and beliefs of African cultures. The sources of such bioethical principles will include popular sayings, proverbs, maxims, tales, songs, mythology, folklores and other cultural practices. (p. 69).

Factors that would distinguish such an African bioethics would include the African spirit of community life, the sense of good human relations, the sense of the sacredness of life, and the general sense of the sacred.

c. Eclectic Philosophy Approach

The Eclectic school of African bioethics would define African bioethics as the combination of the approaches of the universalist and particularist schools. This would involve sifting the thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc, and reflecting on them by professionally trained African bioethicists. They believe that at the point of this romance between the professional and unprofessional, authentic African bioethics is realized. It argues that both schools of African bioethics will do better if they put heads together. Uduigwomen, (1995) while describing the eclectic interplay between the two schools, raised points that would be of great relevance to the area of bioethics:

The universalist approach will provide the necessary analytic and conceptual framework for the particularist school. Since this framework cannot thrive in a vacuum, the particularist approach will supply the raw material or data needed by the universalist approach. Thus, it will deliver the universalist approach from mere logic-chopping and abstractness. There will be a fruitful exchange of categories and concepts. (p. 6).

The eclectic school is a moderate position. It combines the approaches of the particularist and universalist schools. This is the path that would give birth to a standard bioethics that is African.

Concluding Remarks

Since the emergence of African philosophy as a scientific enterprise, it has continued to influence the development and structuring of thoughts. The foregoing has studied the particular influence of African philosophy on African bioethics. It understands African bioethics as a dimension of African philosophy and, therefore, points to the reality of how the major factors that undermined the study of African philosophy has also undermined the development of African philosophy, and how the trends of African philosophy have shaped the schools of African philosophy.

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