

---

# **An Insight into African Political Philosophy: Problems and Branches**

Philosophy as we have come to know is a reflective and critical activity that can be undertaken by man. Man cannot avoid philosophizing, because philosophy is an integral part of him. Every tribe, race or people have their own notable philosophers. In a wider sense, every man is a philosopher in as much as he reflects over fundamental problems of life or existence in one time or the other. A thought is said to be philosophical when it expresses a critical attitude towards a world's view. It is scientific or philosophic when it is an expression of individual investigation. Thus, African philosophy can be defined as a reflective and critical attitude of the world's view of Africa. African philosophy can also be defined as a reflection by Africans on the fundamental issues of their experience. It is also the way in which African people of past and present make sense of their existence, of their destiny, and of the world in which they live.

## **Problems faced by African philosophy**

Few decades ago, some scholars asked, "is there anything as African philosophy? What is it that should be identified as African philosophy?" these questions arose because there were no ancient African documented works on critical reflection of the world view of individual Africans. What is largely open to scholars was oral tradition through idioms, fables, folklore, myths, artifacts, etc. since they were no hidden traditions, it became an obstacle to view the African worldview. Issues such as the nature of truth, existence, the nature of knowledge, science, ultimate reality, beauty, human freedom, etc. are philosophical problems which are lost due to lack of written documents. All that remained and can be reconstructed are oral traditions. One major problem recognized in African philosophy is the Eurocentric bias and claims that Africans are intellectually inferior, hence cannot philosophize. They seem not to bother about distinguishing the difference between the philosophy of the African people (common belief as it differs from culture) and African philosophy (critical and reflective enterprise on African experience). The camp of scholars claim that there is no philosophy in traditional Africa and that what can be identified was the collective worldviews of proverbs, fables and wise saying. These to this camp are not philosophical reflections but cultural anthropology. As regards this, professor Ruch stated that

"What goes under the name of name of African philosophy is nothing more than cultural anthropology decked out for the occasions in the cloak of philosophical jargon."

These claims are due to the Eurocentric orientation of the scholars, because non-Africans scholars believe that Africans are intellectually inferior, thus refuse to consider African thought as philosophical.

However, it must be emphasized that philosophy is about dealing with problems. And the problem that has been was the question of the existence of African philosophy. Now that the issue as regards what is African philosophy has been reflected upon, and also the problem faced as early development has been viewed in a nutshell, it is pertinent for us to see the challenges philosophy has posed to African philosophers. It is worthy to note that different

---

problems challenge philosophers at different times, and is the nature of a particular problem that marks the different periods in the history of philosophy. With the dawn of literacy and written culture, the modern African philosophers are more rational and scientific in approach, thus; to engage in African philosophy is to raise questions about the African and his issues, knowledge and perception of reality.

## Contemporary African Philosophy

Philosophy generally reflects the socio-political situation or structure of a people in a given time. This socio-political situation generally raises many questions in the minds of people. Thus, to understand a people or philosophy of a given area, one has to know the socio-political climate from which the philosophy emanates.

African nations under colonialism suffered domination and exploitation by their colonial masters. They were exploited in all ramifications, but thanks to education which infiltrated through the cross and the sword. This education brought rise of nationalist movement and the struggle for independence was masterminded by notable nationalists like; Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, etc. These notable African thinkers focused their attention on political freedom, intellectual and cultural emancipation from colonial mentality. In trying to reflect on the fundamental issues and problems of Africans, they are thus propounded social and political philosophy for the benefit of Africans.

Nnamdi Azikiwe (popularly known as the Zik of Africa) in his book "ideology for Nigeria; capitalism, socialism or welfareism" propounded a political philosophy which he called Neo-welfareism. His political philosophy is that of compromise. He examined the systems of capitalism, socialism and welfareism and found problems in each of them. However, behind these dark clouds of political systems is a silver lining of good ideologies.

Zik in his political philosophy accepted what he identified as Eclecticism. This acceptance was motivated by the fact that he believed that these three political ideologies of capitalism, socialism and welfare are embedded in our African politics. Its inherent nature in the traditional African politics has been a success. He talks of eclecticism as a term used in philosophy to identify a composite system of thought which incorporates ideas selected from other systems. It does not modify but blends opposite views. He worked towards the harmonization of these ideologies into what he called neo-welfareism. This political ideology he hoped would be suitable for contemporary Nigeria.

Leopold Senghor of Senegal is known for his philosophy of Negritude. Negritude is a philosophical ideology which rejects the French colonial policy of assimilation. He asserts the absolute value of the African culture and identity and propagated the distinctive outlook of African life and culture. He was antagonistic to the individualistic and capitalistic nature of the foreign culture of the French people as against the African communalistic culture.

Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana developed a political philosophy known as "philosophical consciencism". This political philosophy is opposed to capitalism which he believes is not peculiar to African society, and being aware of how colonialism began in Africa and how they fought for independence and emancipation, he encouraged and warned that "it is by the sweat of the peoples brow that nations are built. The people are the reality of national greatness. The

---

people must not be insulted by a dangerous flirtation with colonialism.

Julius Nyerere of Tanzania based his political philosophy on the Ujama principle in his book titled Ujamaa: essays on socialism, Nyerere agrees with both Nkrumah and Senghor that capitalism and individualism are aliens to the Africans. Hence, he advocated for the communalism he argued does not base on conflict and tension but on what he identified as “family hood” and “family relationships”. To him, when colonialism, exploitation and inequality has been eliminated, individuals will be liberated.

## **Main Branches of African Philosophy.**

African philosophy can be grouped into the following branches; logic, epistemology, aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics.

### **a) Logic:**

Logic thinking is an integral part of mankind. The degree of logical thinking differs from one person to the other. Logic in African philosophy does not mean or imply the thinking process of the African but the application of logic to worldview and culture of the African. This application is seen in his language, interaction, and social discourse. Logic is clearly identified in speeches or orations and in dispute settlement.

### **b) Epistemology:**

Epistemology as a theory of knowledge asks questions such as; what can we know? How does man obtain knowledge? What are the sources of knowledge? How can we distinguish true from false knowledge?

Knowledge includes what we know and how we come to know it. This implies that knowledge is determined by the source, and these sources differ from one another.

### **c) Aesthetics:**

In this branch of African philosophy, the nature of beauty is studied. What is African aesthetics? How do we identify African works of art, drawings and paintings? Philosophers seem not to have shown much interest in this area of philosophy, but Africa has made great contributions in the area of aesthetics.

### **d) Metaphysics:**

Metaphysics is one of the most important branches of African philosophy. It investigates the African worldview especially the area of ultimate reality of the African. It goes further into the relationship between seen and unseen beings or forces of nature. What metaphysics in African philosophy does is to articulate the nature of African reality. The nature of reality however differs from one culture to the other.

### **e) Ethics:**

---

Ethics deals with the study of human conduct with emphasis on African concepts of good and evil, moral obligation, justice, etc. it also deals with the African person and his relationship with God and people in general. Since ethics is a practical philosophy, it means it will deal with the practical way the African deals with morality.

edubirdie.com