UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

Vol. 1, no. 1 (Feb 1999)

THE ZIMBABWE BULLETIN OF TEACHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

THE ZIMBABWE BULLETIN OF TEACHER EDUCATION

VOLUME 1 No 1 FEBRUARY 1999

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

AFRICAN CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHY: FACT OR FICTION?

BONIFACE CHENJERAI CHISAKA
DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

ABSTRACT:

The presentation attempts to examine the question of whether there existed in Africa an independent philosophical dynamic comparable to European or Western classical philosophy. It is argued in the presentation that, for any organised community to exist, that in itself presupposes the existence of a systematic thought framework -ie. a philosophy. The African, like the European, had a way of life at the post-primary (or primitive level) of existence that was governed by rational and dialectical thinking, and their (african) philosophy was expressed orally in proverbs and was also expressed through behaviour, attitude, values and beliefs. It is also argued that for there to be a system that allows one group of people to dominate another or even to oppress another, a philosophy to legitimize this status quo must exist. Pre-colonial post primary African society had well organised belief, thought and value systems, including religious and tribal philosophies which in some cases were similar to those of Western classical philosophy, and in other cases were quantitatively different from the Western type. The presentation also argues that African classical philosophy is unique and different from the Western variety in the sense that it emphasised <u>humanism</u> as central to human existence in all social activities ("Hunhu" in Shona and "Ubunthu" in Ndebele) while Western classical philosophy as identified with Plato and Aristotle, emphasised <u>individualism</u>.

Introduction

To tackle the question of whether African classical philosophy exists, it is imperative that one re-visits the definition of philosophy as given by various schools of thought. It is on the basis of an interpretation of what philosophy is in general, and on what classical philosophy should entail, that one can proceed to discuss the concept of African classical philosophy.

European Classical Philosophy

According to Ndunguru (1976;1) the concept "philosophy" is derived from the Greek words "philo" and "sophia", which literaly translate to love of wisdom. The explanations of this conception is that philosophy would be considered to be a process of thinking that seeks to explain the complex world that we live in. Another explanation is that philosophy is an activity that seeks to provide "some fundamental apparatus of understanding and criticism which illuminates all fields of enquiry: science, politics, morals, psychology, art". (Anderson: 1980;3) Hirst in Kerr (1968;39) gives yet another interesting definition of philosophy as a " distinctive type of higher order pursuit, an analytical pursuit, with the ambition of understanding the concepts used in all other forms of lower order knowledge and awareness". Yet another dynamic definition is given by Atkinson (1986;2), when he explains philosophy as an activity that concerns beliefs and an enquiry into the nature of these beliefs, but goes on to say that this activity attempts "to judge" and "to determine whether" these beliefs "are worth believing".

It is clear from the above explanations that philosophy is either taken as a process or an activity in enquiry. It is also considered to be an indispensable activity in making decisions concerning the validity of ideas, values or beliefs. But it should not be forgotten that there are those who take philosophy to be a serious tool in enquiry and in decision-making, while there are those who simply see philosophy as a "point of view" (Kilpatrick, 1951;3) . Perhaps it is also important to note that there are people like Hirst (op.cit) who see philosophy as a higher order thinking process that attempts to make sense of lower order forms of ideas like the simple points of view. The explanations above give philosophy the tasks of enquiry. In a nutshell, philosophy could be defined as an area of investigation that attempts to critically speculate and analyse the complex natural and social world that we live in and also to speculate and explain the intricate inter-relations of phenomena (natural and social).

European classical philosophy is basically characterized by a lot of speculative intellectual pursuits of Aristotle and Plato. It is also a philosophy that looks at individuals as existing in opposition to one another through class division. The inclination of European classical philosophy is clear in Plato's educational ideas when he sees the task of education as preparation of individuals for their natural or god 'ordained' roles as philosopher kings and ordinary workers and slaves (Curtis and Booltwood: 1977). Therefore, one can argue that European classical philosophy was created as an intellectual activity to justify the class society that had emerged. i.e. the slave society. Even those modifications and improvements made on classical philosophy by the progressivists like Froebel and Rousseau, did not change the philosophical emphasis on individualism - infact, progressivism seemed to have reinforced the thrust on individualism of the Western classical philosophy.

The other dimension of Western classical philosophy is that is was idealistic. Metaphysical discourse dominates this philosophy in that there is a lot of

speculation. All reality is considered by Western classical philosophy to be a mere reflection of the real thing. i.e. God. (Lawrence: 1970:27). According to Aristotle, Metaphysics was " the first philosophy" (Ndunguru, op.cit., page 2). This branch of philosophy focused on the relationship between matter and mind or the soul, speculating on what reality was or what it was not, meaning of "reality", on the existence of God and 'his' relationship with the universes. The focus of Western classical philosophy was therefore the spiritual world. Even the education of people was a reflection of the ultimate 'will' i.e. God. This means that God ordained the separation of education into one for the rulers and the other for the ruled and the nature of this philosophy perhaps comes from its linkage with beliefs in the scheme of God with 'his' individual creations. Christianity itself seems to have borrowed a lot from this philosophy in its emphasis on individualism, hence the everyday saying "each man for himself and God for us all."

African Classical Philosophy

In the presentation above, Western classical philosophy is said to be post-primitive and to have its thrust on individualistic values and beliefs. On the contrary, African classical philosophy did exist and had its own distinctive feature, different from Western classical philosophy

According to Nyerere (1968) and Kaunda in Meebelo (1973), the pre-colonial Africans had a philosophy that accommodated their interests and aspirations in relation to ownership of land and other forms of property, beliefs and values concerning their interaction with one another and with their natural environment. Their beliefs were that land belonged to the group or community and not to the individual (Meebelo, ibid:6). They also valued everyone in the community and according to Nyerere (1968:5), even visitors were expected to make a productive contribution after taking a day or two days' rest, because in Swahili there is a saying that "Mgeni siku mbili: siku ya tatu mpe jembe" - or in English, "Treat your guest as a guest for two days: on the third day give him a hoe." In Shona, there is a similar view concerning 'mweni' or 'muenzi' (visitor). The pre-colonial Africans also had in their philosophy the value or appreciation of what they considered to the good human relations, a wholesome existence and acceptable behaviour and attitude - all this is enshrined in the Shona/Ndebele philosophy of 'Hunhu'/Ubunthu' (African Humanism). Kaunda in Meebelo (ap.cit: 3) says that "the African could not think of himself apart from" his/her community. In Shona, there is a saying, "munhu munhu pane vamwe" (meaning, a human being is only human in the context of the group) or "Ishe ndishe pane vanhu" (you can only be a chief if there are people to lead). All this goes to show a world view (beliefs and the way they are interpreted) and also the values and attitudes of people towards one another. Perhaps one may adopt Cornford's concept of an 'unconscious philosopher' to describe our African classical thinkers, (Cornford: 1950). What is commonly described as African communal values, beliefs and attitudes seem to be the embodiment of remnants of African classical philosophy, the ideas that are normally said to be pre-colonial. But some researches have shown that African philosophy did not only exist at an unconscious level but also at the conscious level.

Oruka in Serequeberhan (1991) for instance, has argued that African philosophy existed at the conscious level and had philosophers like Sages, whose task was not only to preserve ethnic traditions and cultures, but who also to critically engage these traditions and cultures in a philosophical discourse - they reflected on these traditions and cultures. Bodunrin in Serequeberhan (ibid) also agrees with Oruka's observations.

In this presentation , it is the author's submission that philosophy deals with abstract thought. Oruka, Serequeberhan and Bodunrin (1991) share the same view. Therefore, the question to ask is whether abstract thought existed in pre-colonial Africa? The author's answer to this question is in the affirmative, because, as Onyewunyi in Serequeberhan (op.cit; 37) correctly observes, every "culture has its own worldview" and, philosophising "is a universal experience". Onyewuenyi further argues that philosophers generally differ in the way they define philosophy, but all agree on one thing, i.e. that philosophy "seeks to establish order among the various phenomena of the surrounding world, and it traces their unity by reducing them to their simplest elements". It is the view of the author that all human beings seek to create an understanding of phenomena around them, and Africans could not be the exception to the rule. In further clarification of this debate, Wiredu in Serequeberhan (op.cit; 87) submits that philosophy may not have existed in pre-colonial Africa as an academic discipline in the way we know it today, but that it certainly existed "as a habit of reflection." Hountondji in Serequeberhan (bid) also shares the same view. But the author would like to argue that, if philosophy existed as a tool in reflection by African philosophers then certainly it must have existed as a discipline, although ideas might not have been written in many parts of Africa. But, it also has to be borne in mind that Western philosophers refuse to give Africa credit as having been among the first people to invent the art of writing by presenting Egyptian classical achievements during the Nile civilisation as Western rather that African. It is the contention of this presentation, like Keita in Wright (1984) argues, that the classical African thought of ancient Egypt was essentially African and expressed the African world view. Although the greater part of African classical philosophy was expressed and processed orally, Egyptian classical ideas of African classical philosophy were written down. It would appear that the colonialists saw the need to suppress knowledge about and the activity of African philosophy if colonialism was to achieve mental conquest of the African as a pre-requesite to economic and political domination of the African continent.

Like Onyewuenyi (op.cit) argues that the central concept in African philosophy is Muntu, this presentation submits that 'Hunhu/Buntu' is basically the classical philosophy of the African, particularly the so-called Bantu, south of the Sahara Desert. This is a world view that seems to be crystalising among Africans in the post-primitive era, but with some values borrowed from the very primitive society. Meebelo (op.cit p.5) argues that African philosophy accommodated both values of communalism and those of individualism in the sense that "in African society individual enterprise was synchronised with socialised action (co-operation) and the communal use of factors of production (communalism.). " In the economic practices of the Shona, this translates to co-operation (humwe/nhimbe) in lending productive labour to a neighbour's field during ploughing or cultivation. Infact, it

would look like the African, through his/her philosophical enterprises, succeeded to create social relations among people that accommodated both individual and collective interests. The concept that a human being's humanity can only be realised in the context of collective aspirations is very unique to African classical philosophy - this is the philosophy of Buntu that seems to run through most Bantu social relations. If one behaves in the accepted manner, like greeting elders, giving them way, being helpful to those in need, sharing the little one has, e.t.c. that person is said to be noble and humane. In the Zimbabwean classical African context they would say: "Ane hunhu" or "ule buntu".

African classical philosophy also has dialectic materialist qualities that Western classical philosophy does not have. For example, in Shona and Ndebele, they have a saying "chisingaperi chinoshura/okungapeliyo kuyahlola", which means life is dialectical or dynamic in that everything is in a state of flux (constant motion). Another Shona saying is: "chara chimwe hachitsvanyi inda" (literally: one finger cannot destroy a louse). Here, the dialectics of the figurative language is in the capture of the effectiveness of co-operative endeavour. But, to demonstrate the dynamic capacity to accommodate both the interests of the individual and those of the collective in the same social context, there was A figurative language in Shona that exalted exploitation of one person by the other, i.e. "Shiri yakangwara inovaka dendere rayo nemanhenga edzimwe shiri" (a clever bird uses other birds' feathers to build its own nest). The contradictory philosophical pronouncings may demonstrate the complex nature of some African societies; of accommodating both classless and class values hence showing the socio-economic dynamic character of these societies. Rodney (1972) and Ranger (1967) indicate that feudal states existed in Africa, such as Ghana, Dahomey, the South African Zulu state and the Zimbabwean Mutapa state. The existence of such states suggests the presence of a philosophy to justify and sustain the state, hence the 'philosophy' of 'a clever bird using other birds' feathers to build its own nest. But the existence of a 'philosophy' that ulogised co-operation in production along side that which promoted exploitation, may suggest either the existence of a society in transition from one characterized by co-operation in production to one characterized by competition and exploitation, or a "mixed economies type of society that Meebelo (op.cit; 5) says was the typical pre-colonial African Society. Whichever way it is taken, classical African philosophy is clearly a dynamic philosophy that accommodated both idealistic and materialistic thinking and that clearly demonstrated a dynamic existence and expression. This philosophy was expressed orally through figurative speech or through proverbs. This philosophy was not the intellectual monopoly of one or a few individuals like western philosophy was . African philosophy was in the minds and on the lips of everyone who loved and enjoyed to express their world view in figurative speech or orally. It was not a philosophy for the pastime of rulers and their intellectual extensions but it was meant to express the real experiences of everyday existence. African classical philosophy was also expressed through values, beliefs, attitudes and through practical behaviour, and this was complimented by comments such as "ane hunhu/ngu muntu" (meaning his/her behaviour is humane or noble, within the acceptable norms). Therefore, one may even argue that African classical philosophy may have moved ahead of modern

The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education

Marxist dialectical philosophy by accommodating dialectical thinking even before this thinking was embraced by European philosophy.

Distinctions and Similarities between Western and African classical philosophies

The writer would want to argue that there are more distinctions than similarities between the two varieties of philosophy.

First and foremost, the main similarly is that the two varieties of philosophy are post-primitive and pre-capitalist. The second is that both seem to accommodate belief in the supernatural, since some pre-capitalist Africans also believed in the existence of a supreme being, "Mwari" or "Umlimu" in Shona/Ndebele.

But, these two are distinct in the sense that unlike the idealistic social-class based Western classical philosophy, African classical philosophy is materialistic, dialectical and collective or society-based. African classical philosophy appears to accommodate both individual and collective values, whereas its Western counterpart mainly accommodates individualistic values.

But, one would submit, both varieties reflected the environments in which they were born and developed. Both responded to their specific environments and both have made contributions, particularly to educational ideas and practices as shall be shown below.

Contribution of African classical philosophy to Educational Theory and Practice.

In this presentation, it is being argued that, where two cultures and ideas meet or clash, even if one emerges victorious and takes over as THE IDEA OF THE CULTURE, the impact of the clash or meeting is dialectical and both cultures will influence one another.. Therefore, even if African classical philosophy (particularly in education) was supplanted by colonial philosophy which borrowed from Western classical philosophy, the African experiences in their own classical philosophy did influence the development of education in Africa during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Some ideas may be easily accepted by African teachers such as approaches and methods of teaching/learning like group work or concepts of collective responsibility because of the influence of African classical values on African scholars who therefore readily embrace the educational progressivist and preconstructionist views of John Dewey and Nyerere than they do of Aristotle, Plato, Froebel and Rousseau, probably because of their background (in remnant form) of the humanist African classical philosophy (Ubuntu)

But, it is also clear that there are many values in African classical philosophy that modern educational theory and practice can benefit from. Sifuna and Otiende (1994) show that the African classical curriculum (although they do not mention the word "curriculum") emphasised the values of group aspirations more than those of the individual, and that the focus of beliefs, values and skills to be imparted was collective as opposed to the individualistic one. As Sifuna and Otiende (1994;134-

135) say, every "child was brought up to be .... a social atom which was capable of entering into social relations with other social atoms" and the curriculum made every learner a jack of all trades and master of all. Socialist educational Theory in China saw the value of none-specialisation in skills development, and this indeed vindicates African classical curriculum philosophy. This philosophy (African) emphasised a variety of ideas and learning experiences for the good of society, and not the division of learners into those learning for the roles of leadership and those learning for the roles of followership as proposed by Plato. Infact, today, no one openly advocates division of pupils on class lines in curriculum practice - the Africans had opposed it long back.

African classical educational philosophy has a contribution to make in almost all areas of the curriculum. It has a contribution to make in its conception of holistic education i.e. that education should aim at moulding the whole person (Sifuna and Otiende, 1994). This meant that the child was to be equipped with intellectual skills, social skills and manual skills. These skills are as good as they were ***. African classical educational philosophy has a contribution to make in the concept of providing relevant education (Nyerere:1973). The classical African educationalist offered skills to the young that were relevant to community interests and appropriate to the environment.

African classical educational philosophy also offered skills to conquer one's environment in terms of manual skills, intellectual knowledge about the environment and social skills to assist the young to interact in a more meaningful way.

On the other hand, one can also decipher a certain element of conservation in African Claassical Philosophy. For example, the classical African adult did not encourage children to ask too many questions and social values were meant to be conformed to and not to be rebeled against (Malherbe: 1937). This does not quite encourage critical thinking and an enquiring mind. But, if one considers its dialectical character, African classical philosophy cannot be said to stifle enquiry. Perhaps it is typical of human practice that one sometimes finds processes that are contradictory of each other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author in this presentation has argued that, in post-primitive but pre-capitalist (colonial) Africa, a philosophy did exist that was uniquely African. But it had some similarities as well as many distinctions with Western classical philosophy. It had the unique characteristic of accommodating the interests and values of both the individual on the one hand, and those of the community on the other, but giving emphasis to collective values. The philosophy also was unique in its ability to appreciate materialistic dialectical concepts and practice as opposed to its Western counterpart which appears to have been dominated by idealist concepts of Aristotle and Plato. It has also been shown that African classical philosophy was largely oral and almost everybody could show that he/she has knowledge of it through uttering idioms or proverbs. In addition to oral representation, it has been argued that African classical philosophy was expressed lively through beliefs,

The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education

values, behaviours, attitudes and practical existence. This African classical philosophy has been identified as African Humanism or Hunhu/Ubuntu (or Hunhu-ism or Ubuntu-ism), taking after the Bantu dialects of Shona and Ndebele. It accommodated spiritual and material interests, and it also embraced political and intellectual values. Therefore, African classical philosophy has a role to play in the world of ideas and practice, both social and academic. It has its own metaphysical side to speculate about the natural world, and the relationship between humans and nature. It has its own concepts of rationality and dialectics. The only weakness presently, is that it has not been systematically developed as an activity of learning and decision-making. This is what this paper has attempted to do. It is the hope of the author that this paper has provided a challenge for research to be done in this area of philosophy, so that more light is shed on the content and quality of this philosophy and we can debate more on its contribution to our contemporary social endeavours.

References

1.   Anderson, J.(1980) Education and Enquiry, Basil Blackwell. Oxford.

2.   Atkinson, N.(1986) Handbook of Curriculum Determinants (Unpublished), Harare.

3.   Cornford, F.M. (1950) The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

4.   Curtis, S.G. and Booltwood, M.E.A. (1977) A Short History of Educational Ideas, University Tutorial Press, Slough.

5.   Kerr, J.F. (1968) Changing the Curriculum, Hodder and Stoughton, London.

6.   Kilpatrick, M.O. (1951) Philosophy of Education, Macmillan, New York.

7.   Lawrence, E.S. (1970) The Origins and Growth of Modern Education, Penguin, Middlesex.

8.   Malherbe, E.G. (Ed) (1937) Educational Adaptations in a Changing Society, Juca and Co., Capetown and Johanesburg.

9.   Meebelo, H.S. (1973) Main currents of Zambian Humanist Thought, Oxford University Press, Lusaka.

10.   Ndunguru, S. (1976) Educational Essays for Teachers, East African Bureau, Nairobi.

The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education

11. Nyerere, J.K. (1973) Freedom and Development/Uhuru na
    Maendeleo, Oxford University Press, Dar Es Salaam, Nairobi,
    London, New York.

12. Nyerere, J.K. (1968) Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism, Oxford
    University Press, Dar Es Salaam, Nairobi, London, New York.

13. Ranger, T.O. (1967) Revolt in Southern Rhodesia; 1896-7,
    Heineman, London.

14. Rodney, W. (1972) How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,
    Tanzania Publishing House, Dar Es Salaam.

15. Serequeberhan, D. (Ed) (1991) African Philosophy, Paragon
    House, New York.

16. Sifuna, D.N. and Otiende, J.E. (1994) An Introductory
    History of Education, University Press, Nairobi.

17. Wright, R.A. (Ed) (1984), African Philosophy: An Introduction, Third
    Edition, University Press of America, London, New York.

Institute of
Development Studies