African Humanism and the Challenge of Postmodernism

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There has been a dominant and persistent basic issue in African Philosophy, which has become disputation for over fifty decades now. This issue is raised in the question; in what sense can a philosophy, thought or idea be described as African? In an attempt to answer this question scholars have presented a specific brand of philosophy that had a fall back on humanism – African humanism.

Every philosophy has an orientation and existential base, an acceptable mood, general enough to serve as canon for identification. There is always a certain minimum of organic relationship among its elements. It is along this line that British philosophy for example is seen as Empiricism, American as Pragmatism, French as Rationalism, German as Idealism, Russian as Materialism, Indian as Spiritualism and Chinese as Humanism. So, there is always a spirit or a style of a philosophy, the persistent and dominant orientation of a people’s philosophy, which can be seen as primary. It is precisely along this line that we are also talking of “African Humanism” with respect to African philosophical scholarship.

This paper examines the problems, limitations and perspectives involved in the idea of African Humanism. It makes a comparative study of African and Western Humanism and concludes with the position that what characterizes African thought system is not just its humanistic essence but the African tradition of scholarship, which is found in its existential base. But before embarking on our task, it is rather imperative for us to clarify some key concepts, namely, ‘African’, ‘Humanism’ “African Humanism” and ‘Postmodernism’.
The term 'African' is a racial geographical entity. ‘Africa’ is a continent inhabited by a people of a particular race, which could be black, white Arab, Negro, etc., but definitely with similar culture, custom, common history of colonial experience and tutelage. (Azenabor, 2002:7).

The Concept of Humanism

Humanism was first started as a revolt or protest against the idea of personal immortality of Christianity, it is a call to man to make the best of life in this world and delight in earthly achievements and build a better life here on earth. It maintains a morality or ethics that grounds all human values in this earthly existence and experience. So, man has no conscious survival after death. It enjoins us to place our hopes or aspirations in this world. “On ethical and social side, Humanism sets up service to one’s fellow man as the ultimate moral ideal” (Lamont, 1965: 15). In this respect, Humanism has simply been referred to, as “human-beingism – that is, devotion to the interests of human beings. It repudiates discrimination and re-affirms the spirit of cosmopolitanism, the spirit of international friendship, brotherhood and compassionate concern for fellow human beings throughout the globe.

Humanism as a philosophical theory “stems from the perennial need of human beings to find significance in their lives, to integrate their personalities around some clear, consistent and compelling view of existence, and to seek definite and reliable methods in the solution of their problems” (Ibid, p. 3). Humanism is a philosophy in which man, his nature and problems are the central focus. Humanism maintains an attitude towards the universe that considers all forms of the supernatural as myth and regards nature as the totality of being. Humanism draws upon the laws and facts of
science, believing that man is evolutionary product of nature. Humanism is really an attitude of mind, which places man at the centre of the universe, it aims at improving human condition and welfare. Humanism in philosophy is anchored, perhaps on the feelings of many who think and "feel that philosophy by its very nature is unprogressive discipline. Philosophers continue to discuss with all seriousness, --- the same questions that were discussed in Greece thousand of years back" (Sogolo, 1993: 18). Humanism became a central focus in philosophy because it is "when philosophical concept and principles are not discussed just for their own theoretical interest, but are discussed and applied to the understanding and improvement of the conditions of human life", (Oruka, 1990:128) that makes for interesting study. This is precisely why Marcien Towa tells us that philosophy should not be a mere abstraction but Humanistic. "Philosophy must be practical to the point of being able to transform society" (Masolo, 1994: 170). A humanistic goal of thought is sensitive to human feelings, behaviour and existence.

At the heart of the theory of Karl Marx is this idea of humanism. Marxian idea of philosophy is making philosophy practical and relevant to human problems and changing the world. The point is that there must be a connection between philosophy and the problems of society. Philosophy must serve society and humanity. So, the concern for humanism is not a new pre-occupation. Man is always concerned with the problems of the society and of humanity.

When we really examine the term "Humanism" we see that it is a term be-devilled by its several clashing meanings. One may not be too sure in which sense the term is being used. First, there is an ethical sense of the
word. Here, humanism means the belief that human beings should be accorded compassion and respect. Second, there is the sociological sense, meaning that social structures are best viewed as the product of human agents. Third, there is a historical sense, denoting periods such as the Renaissance, in which man became the centre of scholarly attention. This third meaning may or may not involve yet another sense of the term; the belief that there is an important distinction between human and other animals, perhaps though not necessarily with the corollary that the former should rule sovereign over the later. Fourth, the word can also suggests the sovereignty of the human as opposed to the divine or supernatural, in which case, it becomes a rather more positive synonym for atheism or egotism and merges into the idea of a naturalistic world view. Here, humanism becomes the opposite of supernaturalism. The position here is that man should rely upon his own capacities, rather than on some transcendent power. This, in turn is coupled with an affirmation of human self-development or self-perfection. It is in this later sense that someone like the late Tai Sholarin of Nigeria was referred to as a humanist. Hence, humanism has its ultimate faith in man, believing that man has the power or potential of solving his own problems, especially if he relies on power of his reason, courage and vision. Man, here, is said to be the master of his own destiny. The fifth sense, is that of placing primacy or value on human essence or nature, in the sense of certain properties which human beings importantly share by virtue by their humanity (Eagleton, 1996: 128-30) and which have metaphysical, ethical and political implications. It is in this sense that we talk of “Africanity” or “Africanness”. And it is precisely here that controversy is at its fiercest. It is this meaning of humanism that post-modernism refuse and it is this I am keen to promote, argue for and defend in this paper.
Generally speaking, the essence of humanism is that:

(1) It places value in this life and in man.

(2) It emphasizes justice here and now.

(3) It is committed to intellectual freedom – i.e. free inquiry without limitations or boundaries. It believes in human reason.

(4) It insists on individual differences and the right to think differently.

(5) It insists on pluralism, multiplicity and many ways of knowing.

The first notable humanist was Protagoras, a Greek teacher and philosopher of the 5th C BC, who opined that “man is the measure of all things”. Also Socrates brilliantly expanded a typical humanist maxim; “man know thy self”. Other Humanists are Erasmus, Santayana and Naturalist and materialist philosophers, like Karl Marx, Engels, Feuerbach, August Comte, Darwin, etc.

It is instructive to note that Humanism is a global universal phenomenon. It is present in all civilizations. It is a stage of development, where man and his ideas become the centre of active intellectual, religious, philosophical, historical, ideological and artistic concern. Humanism exposes the ideas of the dignity of human nature. But then, every man is part of a social and cultural context. We all have a country, a colour, a history and a tradition. Hence, we posit that Humanism, in spite of its global nature, is also cultural. It is specifically along this line and spirit that we conceive and talk of “African Humanism”.

African Humanism has been a recurrent theme in discussions of African intellectual culture in the past quarter of a century. African Humanism is an adaptation of Humanism to the concrete situation of the African. It attempts to identify values and life practices indigenous to African peoples, which distinguish them from others. African Humanism sets the pattern of African thought and define its style, methodology and terms of expression. It bears on the problem and welfare of Africa and Africans. African Humanism is the belief in and theory of the worth and possibilities of the African. Its emphasis is on the African man, his dignity and culture, rather than on science and technology per se. African Humanism, as an African thought system stresses on defining relationship among people in society, that is, *inter-dependence*, rather than bold description of individual events in human experience or *individualism*.

African Humanism is anchored on the idea that African scholarship should demonstrate a concern for human interest in Africa, committed to problem solving, in order to achieve Africa’s hopes and aspirations. African Humanism is aimed at creating a sense of authenticity and dedicated not to abstract thinking and conceptual analysis but to finding purpose and meaning in the African life and existence. So, African Humanism enables us to appreciate the significance of philosophy within the context of African life. African Humanistic philosophy is geared towards helping to positively develop and deepen the African sense of solidarity and fellowship.

In fact there has always been the humanistic essence in the African culture. To appreciate this, Sophie B. Oluwole, invites us to take a look at
and study the African traditional thought system, which bears on the problem of human existence, in order to unveil the literary tradition in the African rational endeavour. Her position, simply put, is that we should look into African literary past with the aim of discovering the humanistic tradition. African Humanists include, S.B. Oluwole, Kwesi Wiredu, Olusegun Oladipo, etc.

Western and African Humanism Compared

Wait a moment. What then are the essential differences between Western and African Humanism? First, African Humanism does not and cannot take analysis as its central focus as it is in the West. Oluwole points out two basic features of Western intellectual culture, as those of “the love of system building” and “the search for certainty”. These two, according to her, constitute the intellectual pulse of the West and both define it as a distinctive authentic culture, which requires the ability to analyze, explain, understand and promote, the ability to control and eventually dominate nature – including every living thing within it: Societies, cultures, tradition, etc. (Oluwole, unpublished paper, 8) whereas, the African literary culture takes as its own central focus interpretation and interdependence (not emotions, feelings and intuition as made popular by Sedar Seighor in his “Negritude”). The attitude of interpretation and synthesis constitute a viable alternative goal to pure analysis of the west. And the African feature of interdependence stands in opposition to the individualism of the West.

Second, apart from interpretation and inter-dependence, the African prized holism of experience for the creation of social values than atomism. In holism, the whole is greater than the parts. The holist upholds systems. It is
with the holistic mode of thought that we are able to establish a synthesis of human knowledge. Lancingary Keita summed up this African holistic ontology, when he wrote that:

*the distinguishing feature of African thought--- is essentially holistic in the sense that it accepts the material world, thus making possible empirical science, yet recognizing at the same time that metaphysical elements constitute the ontological supports and motive force for movement and motion in the world (Keita, 1984, 72)*

So, the African humanistic scholarship insists that things should be seen in the light of the whole.

Third, in African Humanism there is always the drawing from a common pool; the African traditional or indigenous source or past. This going back to seek inspiration and drawing from the traditional source of African past or indigenous knowledge, is another fundamental difference between African and Western Humanism. The sources of inspiration and influences differ.

Fourth, in African Humanism there is the urge to *co-exist* with rather than *conquer* man nature and the world, as it is in the West. In fact a deep-seated need exists in the mind of the African, the need to feel at home in the universe. Consequently, existence – in relation, being – for self and others, sum up the African humanistic endeavour.

Fifth, is the existential base which has its anchorage in African cultural experience and reality, which is metaphysical in outlook. The ontology of African thought system is replete with the idea of *being*; both spiritual and ancestral and also with forces; both visible and invisible,
concrete and abstract. In fact, the idea of "spiritual empiricism" is the foundation of African reality. Here, even nothing becomes something, when the right spiritual apparatus is utilized. The Gods, the Spirits, the Ancestors and vital forces, are theoretical schemes and explanatory models in an African reality. (Azenabor, 2002: 117).

Finally, African Humanism is based on the two premises, that:

1. Values derive from human interest – what is good is what promotes human interest, what is decent for man, what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy to man and his community. And what is morally bad or objectionable is what brings misery, misfortune and disgrace and what is hateful to both the spiritual and ancestral beings. So, African Humanism is founded exclusively on the consideration of the African human well-being.

2. Human fellowship/communion is the most important of human needs. Hence inter-dependence and communalism rather than individualism. This is an offshoot of African cultural ontology, which is holistic – there are no isolated individuals, man is a being in relations to others, life is sharing. This spirit is important to uphold human dignity which is the basis of African Humanism – the conscious attempt to demonstrate a concern for human interest and problems in Africa in order to enhance progress and development.

Humanism is therefore a concern for a necessity of finding a harmony between cultures. It is an attitude of accepting the other for what he is, simply as a human being, irrespective of his individuality or characteristic. But post modernism is opposed to this harmony or commonness.
The challenge of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a style or form of culture and thought. As a form of culture, it emphasized pluralism and the belief that we should celebrate difference. As a form or style of thought, it is postmodernity, which is suspicious and skeptical of the classical notion of truth, reason, identity, objectivity, universalism and a single frame work or ultimate grounds of explanation (Eagleton, 1996: 1)

Postmodernism is a theory, essentially opposed to absolute thinking. “In postmodernism, everyone has a point, there are no centres and margins” (Masolo, 1994: 16 & 17) so, postmodernism has a strong objective of checking absolutist excesses. Furthermore, the postmodernist movement questions the validity of taking any model of reality as the yardstick for judging others. The postmodernist position, simply put, is that truth has many sides to it. So, the idea of a dominating mode of thought, like Humanism-African or western, really needs deconstruction, because no specific system in the world provides an absolute. There are no “be-all or end-all system in the world” (Oluwole, 1997: 36). And “since every intellectual tradition is culturally limited both in time and space, non can serve as a universal paradigm by which every other intellectual alternative is to be assessed” (Ibid., p. 39). The point is that postmodernism is against essentialism, universal reason, identity or sameness and an immutable nature or type. To postmodernists there is no essence; human or common in the sense of certain properties which human beings importantly share by virtue of their humanity or Africanity.
Postmodernism is a radical challenge to any system, which depends on absolute values, culturalism, metaphysical foundations and identity. Against these, it mobilizes multiplicity, non-identity, anti-foundation and cultural relativism. It is therefore argued that “anyone who believes that intellectualism is a universal search for ONE absolute certainty is supposedly intolerant of claims, about truths different from the ones sanctioned by a system he regards as ideal” (ibid, p. 28) so, postmodernism is a challenge to Humanism.

The basic propositions of postmodernism are:

a. There is no such thing as absolute or universal truth, knowledge, reality and morality. Put differently, philosophy should close shop, because epistemology, metaphysics and ethics, the core of philosophy are unattainable.

b. What we have are just interpretations; and we are biased by our race, class and gender in our interpretations.

One of the chief proponents of postmodernism is said to be Richard Rorty. (Jackson, internet pp. 1-25).

Evaluation/Critique

Evaluating the idea of African Humanism, Kwesi Wiredu agrees with the view that traditional African outlook was intensely humanistic – in so far as the basis of the traditional ethics is concerned. After all, traditional thinking about the foundation of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalist (Wiredu, 1980: 6). Wiredu, however, disagrees with the view that one can find in traditional sources elaborate theories of humanism. Rather, he
opined, traditional African society is pre-occupied with what is decent for man – what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy to man and his community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune and disgrace. So, traditional African societies, according to Wiredu, were rather more existentialistic than humanistic. But then, a critic may counter argue that after all Humanism is also a feature of existentialism. Indeed, Humanism is “the apex of human thought, the inevitable end of rational endeavours to understand man and nature as they relate to each other” (Oluwole, 1989: 228).

The idea of tracing and equating African Humanism to African traditional or indigenous culture or thought system of the past has also been criticized as a backward looking endeavour which will keep Africa behind. This criticism is a pressing one because in philosophy, like in every discipline, there is always the call for relevance (Bodunrin; 1985: viii). But then, the idea of tracing African Humanism to traditional culture or thought system of the past, can be understood against the background that a people that do not have a good knowledge of their past can never have a clear vision of the present and of the future. Africans must look at their past to understood their present so that they can formulate a clear, progressive, relevant and positive idea for the future. The point is that the knowledge of the past is necessary in adequately defining African scholarship (Azenabor, 2002:58).

Still on the backward looking literary endeavour, Senghor cautions that, just as an African tradition cannot be realized by merely copying foreign models, however perfect such models may be in their original setting. Also an authentic African thought system may not be realized by an
artificial and impossible return to a traditional past, which could not be truly lived today (Senghor, 1964: 83). The point is that while a glorious past may be important for national self confidence, we must also discriminate between the glorification of anachronism just for the sake of establishing a past on one hand, and the challenges or obvious realities of our time, on the other. This is precisely the idea of "de-constructive and re-constructive challenges" in African philosophy (see outlaw, 1987: 9-44) so, we are being requested to modernize and reconstruct our traditional culture, if we must use and make reference to it. We must now take into cognizance the structure and exigencies of urban life as against traditional family life that is now been dislocated.

In order to modernize and reconstruct the African culture, Wiredu enjoin us to avoid three evils:

(1) **Anachronism**: This is the stress on ceremony and rituals in our social life. These should be kept within reasonable bonds, and also the undue emphasis on kinship relations, etc.

(2) **Authoritarianism**: This is the undue hindrance in the development of a person's will. It is the principle of unquestioning obedience to superiors, especially the authority of the elders.

(3) **Supernaturalism**: This refers to the tendency to seek the basis of morality in some supernatural source and unalterable human destiny.

The point is that these three things, are hindrances to the development of African culture, modernization and scientific orientation. They are no longer
relevant or existentially rewarding to cultural expression and contemporary life in Africa.

We note that the challenge of postmodernism is really an overreaction and a subversion of value system. It throws out human essence. It is dogmatic of postmodernism to insist that concepts of a shared human nature are never important (Eagleton, 1996: 49 & 101).

The main contradiction of postmodernism is that it has forgotten that in order for it to hold all its potential anarchy (“of anything goes” or “many things goes”) in place, it requires a strong foundation or framework. This is precisely where its theory appeals to metaphysical values to legitimize itself. Consequently, the paradox of postmodernism is that it can neither abandon the metaphysical element, which is a common essence and the foundation of its theory, nor properly accommodate it. This is why postmodernism has been described as a self-distructing theory.

In fact, to most people, the ideas of postmodernism are simply too bizarre to be worth further consideration. Its claims have been described as a sort of “intellectual masturbation”.

**Conclusion**

It has been my objective in this paper to broaden the discussion and understanding of Humanism, so as to highlight the manifestations of this phenomenon in Africa, just as in any part of the world and to juxtapose with postmodernism and show the limitations of both humanistic and postmodernist scholarships.
From our analysis we see that the models, of *traditionalism* and *westernization* cannot help solve African problems; they cannot serve as models for understanding the Africa of today. So, “while it is important to admit that it is no longer possible to rely entirely on traditional culture for solutions to our myriad problems, we also need to see that it is not possible nor desirable to reject this culture in its entirely” (Azenabor, 2002: 103). Consequently, we have to pick on the essentials, we have to determine those aspects of our culture that are humanistically rewarding and *modernizing* and conducive to human existence and African development.

The humanistic essence of African thought is not sufficient to make it authentically African. We must also take into consideration the tradition, history and cultural experience which are founded on an:

(i) holistic ontology

(ii) existential base and the

(iii) drawing of inspiration from a common pool; the African traditional source or past, which is interdependent, penetrative and communistic.
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