

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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Abstract

The present work is an attempt to systematically articulate briefly an African philosophy of history. The work draws from African metaphysics and epistemology to explore the principles that undergird historical development in the African life-world and the African's historical consciousness or apprehension. Here, the phenomenon of vital force, its strengthening and diminution vis-à-vis historical changes and historical apprehension via African epistemic scheme are curated. The African sense of time and eschatology are equally explored. Furthermore, contrary to the view that the historian is not to be burdened with the ethical concerns of history, given the pervasive and chronic corruption bedeviling most African nations and considering the exigency of arresting the glaring decadence in public morality, the paper deems it expedient that African philosophy of history pragmatically incorporates an ethical dimension. A meaningful and critical engagement with the above key tripartite considerations vis-à-vis the African historical experience could serve to provide a framework for systematic articulation of an African philosophy of history, the paper submits.

Keywords: African philosophy of history, ontology of history, vital force, historical knowledge and ethics.

Introduction

The importance of history and philosophy of history in the development of the human society notwithstanding, these are yet to receive proper attention from African philosophers and historians alike. Understandably, one may argue that, in a continent that is given to quest for scientific and technological development, with attendant hype on sciences and corollary downplay of arts and humanities, the above scenario is inevitable. Historical scholarship in Nigeria presents a case that is pathetic and *sui generis*. This is as a case of unrivaled onslaught on the discipline by the Nigerian government. History as a discipline, which in a way provides the substrate for philosophy of history, has had a somewhat checkered history in Nigeria ranging from vicious attacks launched against the discipline in the 1969 National Curriculum Conference (and subsequent adoption of National Policy on Education) that resulted to unprecedented decline in teaching of

history, to the final onslaught which is the arrant ejection or banning of history from the basic school curriculum initiated in 2007 and fully implemented in 2009 and 2010 (Ripples Nigeria). Though presently history has been re-introduced, the discipline is yet to receive adequate attention, even as the adverse effects of the previous ban continue to hunt us.

Though history, as already stated, constitutes part of the substrate for philosophy of history which in itself is a second order activity, the essence of history transcends mere history. This is the task of philosophers of history to unravel. The articulation of African philosophy of history remains a mirage unless philosophers apply their tools of trade to African history or African historians per chance become philosophers. The primary focus of the present paper is African philosophy of history rather than material African history or history of any part of Africa. A critical survey of some of the efforts that have been made in this direction finds some of the works wanting in systematic and analytic tests. How do we properly articulate the African historical consciousness or awareness? How do the African perceive and interpret the trends, causes and effects evidenced in historical progress? What should be the disposition of the African historian and African philosopher of history on the pervasiveness and proclivity to corruption on the part of a number of African leaders and some key figures in African history? To what extent can African historical scholarship remain ascetically neutral on the prevailing low ebb of public morality? These concerns constitute the engagement of this paper.

In a nutshell therefore, the present work sets out to articulate in a brief manner the structure of African philosophy of history. The approach is predominantly analytic. This is to say that the issues and concepts involved are broken down into its necessary component parts. Toeing the path of the three dominant traditional branches of philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology and ethics), the work engages the core philosophical issues in African history. Indeed, it has become fashionable to broadly streamline philosophical inquiries on history into two-pronged reflection on the nature of history *per se* and the nature of historical knowledge. Their intersection notwithstanding, the former, which is also termed substantive or speculative philosophy of history, falls within the ambience of metaphysics whereas the later, critical or analytic philosophy of history is part of epistemology. The above division possibly inheres from the ambiguity that trails the meaning of the term 'history', which for Heidegger (430), stands simultaneously for "historical actuality and the science of it." In addition, the

paper incorporates a third part which is the ethical dimension. Indeed, history has not been entirely stripped of its simple and aboriginal moral and practical functions.

Accordingly, the first section does a brief review of selected authors and a few seminal works on African philosophy of history. The second section examines the metaphysical foundation or the essence of African history. The African concept of time, development and eschatology as vital factors in understanding of African concept of history are explored in the third section. The fourth section examines the epistemological underpinnings of history from an African perspective. Attention is also here given to the phenomenon of oral tradition and historiography of African history. Ethical burden of the African historian and philosopher of history is discussed in the fifth section. Then comes a critical summation of the work in the final section which equally serves as the conclusion.

African Philosophers on Philosophy of History: A Brief Review

Among the seminal works that deliberated on African sense of history is J. S. Mbiti's *African Religious and Philosophy*. Mbiti (15-16), like Augustine, a medieval African philosopher, opined that, "God is the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things." This, however is not a theocentric universe rather an anthropocentric one since man is at the center of all things and events. "Man is the centre of this ontology," says Mbiti (16). Meanwhile, it is Mbiti's opinion that Africa has no sense of future time. He has been severely criticized for this. At the twilight of colonialism, the Dar es Salaam School of African history made appreciable efforts in x-raying the undergirding philosophy of African history. Their attempt which built on Marxism was largely a nationalist response to the then prevalent anticolonial milieu. Undeniably Marxism might have ideologically contributed to the African liberation and interpretative platform for nationalist historians (Bethwell Obot). However, such theoretical tool as employed by the Dar es Salam school which is historical materialism seems ineffective in grappling with cultural realities of the African live-world.

Bonaventure Anetoh and Ifenna Paschal presented a critique of Hegel's conception of Africa. They decried Hegel's claim that Africa had no history. It is their contention that there is no group of people without a history. Remarkably, as at the time that Hegel wrote, apart from existing oral tradition, the then

scantly known written history of the black Africa was simply the much written by the non-indigenous Western or European authors. Of course, there could have been available sources of African history existing then, especially the oral tradition. But these do not translate to organized history. The position of the present paper is that having an amorphous materials or sources of history is different from historiography which is critical examination and selection of relevant materials from the available right sources and fashioning a systematic narrative from same. It further differs from philosophical gurgitations or reflections on the said narrative.

In his work whose title the present paper partially mimics, E.A. Ruch sets out to prove that a philosophy of African history is a possibility toeing the traditional dual concepts of history as sequence of human events with societal significance and, secondly, the knowledge of same events. For him, the philosophy of African history builds on African socio-cultural cum environmental specifics. These constitute the distinctive feature of African history as different from say Western or Chinese history. Of great interest is what one may term substantive issues in Ruch's submission which are his exploration of the ontology and epistemology of African history. Ruch harps on the characteristic scientific luster of Western history and the humanistic fervor of African history and calls for a *mélange* to yield a critical, yet humanly relevant history that simultaneously serves a science and art.

Of all the above authors reviewed, Ruch appears to be most organized and philosophical in his approach and advocacy for African paradigm in articulating African philosophy of history. This credit must be accorded to him. However, Ruch's submission that Africa lacks sense of future and his contention that the attestation of living eyewitnesses as key factor in determining the truth or veracity of historical knowledge leaves much to be desired. Similarly, he is totally silent on the ethical dimension of African philosophy of history. Inasmuch as the present paper does not subscribe to Ruch's concept of time and his epistemology of "living eyewitness", the paper re-affirms and elucidates in a more systematic way Ruch's input on the philosophical foundations of African history. In addition to this, the paper takes a further step and explores the ethical dimension of Africa philosophy of history.

X-Raying the Essence of History from African Perspective

As a second order activity, philosophy of history is not contented with the givens of history. It rather goes further to probe and gurgitate on the essence of history. The concept of 'essence' (*Wesen*) is to be understood from Heideggerian (3) point of view to stand for not just the meaning (of history) but also the way in which history pursues its course; the way in which it remains through time as what it is." This refers not just to the meaning of history but also the force that propels history. A task of this nature properly falls within the ambience of metaphysics since metaphysics, according to Aristotle, studies being as being, nay the first principles and the highest causes (Metaphysics Bk 4, (1003a). It treats reality as a whole. This equally serves as a point of affinity between history and philosophy as both fields, according to Wilbur Urban (264), not only deal with the whole but also consider and evaluate the whole in relation to the totality of other existing realities in the world or the cosmos. This is the dynamics of philosophy of history. On this note, Maurice Mandelbaum (1) averred that an attempt to perceive history as a whole and seek its ultimate meaning or essence amounts to articulation of philosophy of history.

The African philosophy of history is an aspect of the bigger umbrella of African philosophy. The attempt raises some intriguing questions as to which Africa history, since Africa has no uniform culture and history? Ironically, African philosophy *per se*, is also in search of historiography (Ademola Kazeem Fayemi). African philosophy of history thus becomes an aspect of the unfolding and self-realization, nay the history of African philosophy. Indeed, both the history of Africa and African philosophy are never done and dusted. They continue to unfold. Pliny the Elder was right to have concluded that, *ex Africa semper aliquid novi* (there is always something new out of Africa). History is a continuum and always rooted within a context.

The African worldview, cultural and environmental peculiarities provide the horizon for the investigation on the principle that undergirds historical development or process. On this note, Achebe et al (9) aptly remarked that, the study of history is tantamount to the study of a people's beliefs and desires, practices and institutions. The search for the underlying principle or force that propels historical development has always been a key problem in philosophy of history. Things do not just happen. For Augustine, a medieval African philosopher of history, the goal of history lies not within history but *au dela* (beyond) historical time and the driving force that propels history is attributed to

direct and unmitigated intervention of divine will. Augustine's submission is highly theocentric and no doubt, vitiates human freedom.

The traditional African metaphysics of history is rooted in the conception of what reality is. Generally speaking, Africans have dynamic rather than static ontology. African philosophers may disagree on a number of issues. But there seem to be a general affirmation on relational and complementary ontology. This is evidenced from the father of African philosophy, Placide Tempels. For the Bantu (African), "being is force [energy] and force is being" (Tempels 1959). Subsequent African philosophers toed similar part as they cumulatively project a relational ontology as evidenced in E. A Ruch and K.C Anyanwu (1981), C.B Okolo (1998), Pantaleon Iroegbu (1995), Innocent Asouzu (2004, 2007), Jonathan Chimakonam (2015, 2017, 2018 and 2021), to name but a few.

In African ontology, realities are said to be in relationship with one another rather than isolated. This sharply contrasts with western static ontology. The dynamic principle of forces or reality is that "All force can be strengthened or enfeebled. That is to say, all being can become stronger or weaker" (Tempels 38). Accordingly, historical development revolves around the principles of strengthening and diminution of vital force which is the basic constituent of reality or all that exists. This opinion finds a resonance in John Ekei who strongly affirms that, traditional African concept of development is rooted on the notion of reinvigoration of vital forces (151). This in way accounts for historical progress and/or retrogression. The above thesis calls for further investigation on the place of human freedom and will in the historical process. Can this submission be interpreted to be deterministic? The above problematique could be partly addressed by a brief consideration on the African concept of time and eschatology.

African Concept of Time and Eschatology

African concept of time and eschatology are vital elements in the discourse on African philosophy of history. A people's concept of time shapes their view about history. This is in consonance with Ruch's assertion that, consciousness of time is crucial and to a great extent determines a culture's historical consciousness (116). The same opinion is re-echoed in Meier et al (72) who further observed that,

Questions about the relationship between time and lived experience have long concerned individuals and communities in their quests to

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make sense of what it means to be human. Does time, for example, "flow" from the past through the present and into the future, like a river? Or is it an eternal constant that only "moves" in our perception of the world? Is the pace of life a subjective experience or do the laws of the universe shape it?

African concept of time is said to combine the "cyclic reading of time with linear sense of progress (Ruch 117). Time, in African context is not just an abstract mathematical entity rather it is highly socialized. Mbiti and Ruch's submission that time moves backward and not forward is not tenable just as their contention that the future is unreal is as unrealistic as McTaggart's proof unreality of time. Time is real and future oriented. Mbiti and Ruch might have been influenced by the pivotal function of the ancestors in African culture. Understandably, the ancestors are quintessential source of vital force as Tempels (13) and Ruch (118) had opined but this does not amount to retrogressive living or history. At most, the ancestors and the lived experiences serve as the root or foundation for the present. On this note, Heidegger remarked that history is not so much the past in the sense of that which is past or foreclosed but the derivation therefrom since anything that has history stands in the context of a becoming (430). Philosophy of history is not exclusively about the past. It is also a common prayer of every African parent, nay the ancestors that, the new and oncoming generation achieve greater progress. A popular Igbo prayer says, *Nke echi ga-aka*, this literally means that the future holds greater potentials.

Considerations on the essence of human existence on earth often incorporate questions and reflections about origin (where do we come from?); what are we doing and where are we going (our ultimate destiny)? These tripartite considerations impinge on one another. History is an engagement with the past in relation with the present and possible future. Historical consciousness involves large-scale evolutionary *cum* civilizational experience comprising the most times moorings on the human *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*. Unlike other religions which have got linear eschatology, African traditional religion advocates cyclic eschatology. This belief is further reinforced by the phenomenon of reincarnation. This is to say that, the notion of linear and terminal eschatology that is characterized by great cataclysm and terminating in either eternal bliss or suffering is strange to African traditional religion. According to Judith Wolfe, eschatology "is not so much a system of beliefs as an attitude to the future"(7). In my work "Igbo Eschatology and

Environmentalism”, I had highlighted the intersection between African eschatology and history in these clear words: “The African eschatology unfolds within the present existential realities hence no radically new heaven or earth nor anticipated cataclysm that would usher in the end of world or history; even the dead rejoins the cycle of the present existence via reincarnation” (Ufearoh 99). History is therefore a continuum. Eschatological hope shapes human life and activities and in the case of Africa, encourages optimistic disposition towards the future and thus guarantees continuity of history.

The Epistemology of African History

The dialectics of historical consciousness is such that, on the one hand, epistemological and linguistic tools are employed in the apprehension, presentation and interpretation of historical experiences. On the other hand, a conglomeration of experiences within a given life-world serve to provide the substrate for a given epistemology, that of history inclusive. Hence the African is replete with sweet and bitter, beautiful and ugly experiences of slavery, colonialism, political independence, neocolonialism, pluralism of culture and nations, ethnicity and marginalization etc. How does the African perceive and interpret the unfolding significant experiences of life and interactions in the African life-world? According to Kanu and Ejikemeuwa (v), every society or culture has peculiar ways of knowledge acquisition which most often evolve in the attempt to solve societal problems. African approach to knowledge acquisition has got to bear on African history and historiography. Toyin Falola and Abikal Borah, affirmed that, the inclusion of African indigenous epistemological formations into historical scholarship has transformed the scope of African historiography.” Accordingly, it is said that the hallmark of epistemological breakthrough in African history was recorded in the sixties when African historians, in an unprecedented manner, harped on Africanization of African history (Keto 452). This called for a move from Eurocentric approach to African centered (Afrocentric) paradigm. The epistemology of African history ought to be complementary and conversational rather than bifurcating or dismissive; integrating and holistic and above all de-colonial in approach.

One of the outstanding features of traditional African history is the fact of being encapsulated and transmitted via oral tradition and most often couched in poetic-religious language. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Similarly, some highly significant experiences are also dramatically re-enacted at intervals in

order to perpetuate the memory and history of such events. In absence of written documentation, the African had to rely on webs of eyewitness account, folklore, stories, proverbs, idioms, legends and myths for its historical documentation. The present paper does not subscribe to Ruch's epistemology of "living eyewitness". So at the death or absence of the living witness his or her account becomes null and void? Must the society solely rely on the testimonies of living witnesses? Is reliable circumstantial evidence admissible? As clumsy as the above oral approach may be, it could serve to complement other sources of history such as archeological materials.

Finally, the linguistico-philological demand which advocates that historical facts and data be studied or interpreted within the ambient of the original language and context so as to guarantee their undiluted originality and flavour sounds positive. A good study of African history ought to yield to the above demand.

African Philosophy of History and Moral Judgment

The impression is often created that the historian should be solely concerned with the facts of history and not to probe the characters of the *dramatis personae* of history. In the face of the quest for objectivity and scientific methodology, it seems all the more that the practical or moral significance of history is de-emphasized. For instance, quoting Ranke, Carr (8) averred that the role of the historian is "simply to show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).” This is a call for strict adherence to the canon of objectivity ascetically divested of any judgmental, moral or personal input. Meanwhile, prior to the period of Enlightenment, history was highly prized for its didactic value (encyclopedia.com). History has never been radically divested of its aboriginal practical and moral functions.

The present work therefore makes case for reactivation of didactic function of history by African philosophers of history and historians alike. Given the prevalence of moral decadence in the African continent as evidenced in deep seated corruption, if African philosophy of history is to be of relevance rather than mere intellectual gymnastics, it has to pragmatically incorporate an ethical dimension. Today in Nigeria for instance, there are cases of repatriation of looted public funds stashed abroad as well as cultural artifacts plundered by white colonialists who were on the so called 'civilizing mission' to Africa. Do African philosophers and historians simply adopt an impassioned approach in their

account and analysis of such brazen immorality? This can only yield declamatory history.

The above stand is not meant to relegate the vital place of objectivity in historical writing. In fact, an African artist, philosopher, writer or historian who thwarts, bends or manipulates facts of history simply does great disservice not only to the present society but also to posterity. At the same time, it has to be emphasized that moral sensitivity is also a factor in maintaining the integrity of history. Aristotle had submitted that truth is the synchronization of reality there with the object of the intellect. This synchronization is important in determining a good history and a bad history; a good historian and a bad historian.

According to Maurice Mandelbaum (74), the motive behind philosophy of history is essentially, "to satisfy the need to come to a reckoning with the philosopher-historian's own times, to justify or condemn social or political life by setting it off against background of the recorded past." On this note therefore, African historians and philosophers, ought to be morally sensitive and critical of the historical figures. Where there are substantial evidence and facts, they should not hesitate to pass proper judgment on such maladies as inordinate avarice or extravagance and corruption on the part of the historical figures. Possible ugly consequences of such malfeasances should be highlighted. Conversely, exemplary figures ought to be praised. It's in so doing that the past can effectively illuminate the present.

Conclusion

The present paper has presented in a concise or skeletal manner a systematic articulation of African philosophy of history. The paper x-rays the ontological and epistemological foundations of African history. Here one finds a relational and integrative ontology, the reinvigoration and weakening of which accounts for the dynamics in historical development. The place of human freedom and will, indeed human agency in the above historical process calls for further investigation. The complementary and de-colonial epistemology was highlighted. The imperative of ethical dimension in African history was also underscored. The paper affirms that the authentic African philosophy of history builds on the socio-cultural milieu in the African life-world. This not only serves as the substrate but also an eloquent and incontestable way of addressing the age-long misconception that Africa has no history.

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