

AFRICAN SENSIBILITY: THE CONCEPT OF HUMANISM IN BLACKS

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Abstract

African Humanism like any of the other forms of humanism has the welfare or wellbeing of the human person as its key attribute. Nevertheless, in considering this, we should bear in mind that it is not all humanists that are atheistic, iconoclastic and religious. This precautionary measure becomes very crucial because since the 16th century, the term Humanism has been commonly applied to persons “with a set of entirely nonreligious beliefs and values” (Hinnells 225) and here we are making reference to Africans who are acclaimed worldwide as being “notoriously religious” and whose “traditional religions permeate all the departments” of their lives (Mbiti 2; Idowu 5). Among the attributes of African Humanism, it is most apparent that human persons who could be described as being “incurably religious” beings are found at its center. As a matter of fact, the major tapestry which runs through African Humanism in any part of Africa is quite discernible through their religion which informs their basic world views and/or ontology. The present paper exposed the African sensibility through the concept of humanism in blacks.

Key words: African Humanism,

INTRODUCTION

African Humanism like any of the other forms of humanism has the welfare or wellbeing of the human person as its key attribute. Nevertheless, in considering this, we should bear in mind that it is not all humanists that are atheistic, iconoclastic and religious. This precautionary measure becomes very crucial because since the 16th century, the term Humanism has been commonly applied to persons “with a set of entirely nonreligious beliefs and values” (Hinnells 225) and here we are making reference to Africans who are acclaimed worldwide as being “notoriously religious” and whose “traditional religions permeate all the departments” of their lives

(Mbiti 2; Idowu 5). Among the attributes of African Humanism, it is most apparent that human persons who could be described as being “incurably religious” beings are found at its center. As a matter of fact, the major tapestry which runs through African Humanism in any part of Africa is quite discernible through their religion which informs their basic world views and/or ontology. This is in turn principally anthropocentric. That is, virtually everything is weighed from the viewpoint of the human persons’ central position. Even God is said to exist for the sake of man (Awolalu and Dopamu 160). Booth harps on “how African Religion is centered more on man than God or nature” For the Baluba of Zaire, for instance, religion is best understood as a form of Religious Humanism (Booth 34). For them, religion is focused on the enhancement of human existence rather than on the natural world or the divine.

African humanism is a philosophical enquiry in the significance of African sense of respect for the human person. The traditional values of hospitality, primacy of person, respect for life, sense of the sacred, family hood, brotherhood, solidarity and other characteristic features of the communalistic life of an African person are brought into cognizance. Which applies the descriptive analytic and phenomenological methods of enquiry and spreading forth the scope of our coverage to include not only black negroes within the confines of the geographical configuration of Africa but also diasporas and those of any race and color within the continent, practical examples are sourced in order to illumine our subject matter salient questions are raised with respect to the essence of the centrality of the human person, his/her dignity right and the need for fair-play and sense of responsibility on the part of the citizenry and general leadership. The notoriety of Africa and Africans in relation to their being religions in all aspects of life is being latched upon as a launch-pad for this all important task. By and large, Africans are called upon not only to be more conscious of the latent potentials in this essentially humanistic light, but lessen and promote them assiduously and to give it a more cosmopolitan out looks as they anchor their lives on this rich cuter heritage. This, as it were, is expected to yield immense decidedness of not only curbing violence, terrorism, genocide and all forms of social ills associated with our contemporary world, but it is also hoped that it will bring about much needed peace, harmony and progress in its entire ramifications the world over.

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The cardinal idea of African humanism basically throws greater light on the human person’s life. In it a high value is placed on the life of a human being, high premium on dignity, compassion, humaneness and respect for humanity of another. African humanism stands against anti-social, disgraceful, inhuman and criminal behavior and encourages social justice.

EUROCENTRIC CONCEPT OF HUMANISM AND WESTERN WAY OF LIFE:

The European dominance of the modern world by virtue of specific European historical achievements is probably the fundamental explanation obviously by many scholars. Europeans in the last two to three centuries have unquestionably sat on top of the world. Convectively they have controlled the wealthiest and militarily most powerful countries. They have enjoyed the most advanced technology and were the primary creators of this advanced technology. These facts seem largely uncontested, and are indeed hard to contest plausibly. The issue is what explains this differential in power and standard of living with the rest of the world. One kind of answer is that Europeans have done something meritorious and different from people in other parts of the world. This is what is meant by scholars who speak of the 'European miracle'. Europeans have launched the industrial revolution

or sustained growth. They have launched modernity, dovetailed with capitalism, with Bureaucratization, or individual liberty. Europeans who launched these novelties once having established or at least asserted, they felt proud of it, something of which the rest of the world should be envious or appreciative. Whenever such a shift happened Europeans presumed their achievements very covetous in the modern world. They believed that for the most part they are Universalists. This was the era of the cultural triumph of science as a knowledge activity.

Modern Europe considered itself to be more than nearly one civilization among several but unique. For some, civilization was encompassed in 'modernity' that is, in the advance of technology and the rise of productivity as well as the cultural belief in the existence of historic development and progress. For others, civilization meant the increased autonomy of the 'individual' vis-à-vis all other social actors- the family, the community, the state, the religious institutions. For others, civilization meant non-brutal behavior in everyday life, social manners in the broadest sense. And for still others, civilization meant the decline or narrowing of the scope of legitimate violence and the broadening of the definition of cruelty. And of course, for many, civilization involved several or all of these traits in combination.

The set of values, however we prefer to designate them—civilized values, secular-humanist values, modern values—permeate social science, as one might expect, since social science is a product of the same historical system that has elevated these values to the pinnacle of a hierarchy. Social scientists have incorporated such values in their definitions of the problems—the social problems, the intellectual problems—they consider worth pursuing. They have incorporated these values into the concepts they have invented with which to analyze the problems, and into the indicators they utilize to measure the concepts. Social scientists no doubt have insisted, for the most part, that they were seeking to be value-free; insofar as they claimed they were not intentionally misreading or distorting the data because of their socio-political preferences. But to be value-free in this sense does not at all mean that values, in the sense of decisions about the historical significance of observed phenomena, are absent. This is of course the central argument of Heinrich Rickert about the logical specificity of what he calls the 'cultural sciences'. They are unable to ignore 'values' in the sense of assessing social significance. To be sure, the Western and social scientific presumptions about 'civilization' were not entirely impervious to the concept of the multiplicity of 'civilizations'. Whenever one posed the question of the origin of civilized values, how it was

that they have appeared originally—or so it was argued—in the modern Western world, the answer almost inevitably was that they were the products of long-standing and unique trends in the past of the Western world—alternatively described as the heritage of Antiquity and/or of the Christian Middle Ages, the heritage of the Hebrew world, or the combined heritage of the two, the latter sometimes renamed and respecified as the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Many objections can and have been made to the set of successive presumptions. Whether the modern world, or the modern European world, is civilized in the very way the word is used in European discourse has been challenged. There is the notable quip of Mahatma Gandhi who, when asked, ‘Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western civilization?’, responded, ‘It would be a good idea.’ In addition, the assertion that the values of ancient Greece and Rome or of ancient Israel were more conducive to laying the base for these so-called modern values than were the values of other ancient civilizations has also been contested. And finally whether modern Europe can plausibly claim either Greece and Rome, on the one hand, or ancient Israel, on the other, as its civilizational foreground is not at all self-evident. Indeed, there has long been a debate between those who have seen Greece or Israel as alternative cultural origins. Each side of this debate has denied the plausibility of the alternative. This debate itself casts doubt on the plausibility of the derivation. In any case, who would argue that Japan can claim ancient Indic civilizations as its forerunner on the grounds that they were the place of origin of Buddhism, which has become a central part of Japan’s cultural history? Is the contemporary United States closer culturally to ancient Greece, Rome, or Israel than Japan is to Indic civilization? One could, after all, make the case that Christianity, far from representing continuity, marked a decisive break with Greece, Rome, and Israel. Indeed Christians, up to the Renaissance, made precisely this argument. And is not the break with Antiquity still today part of the doctrine of Christian churches?

However, today, the sphere in which the argument about values has come to the fore is the political sphere. Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia has been very specific in arguing that Asian countries can and should ‘modernize’ without accepting some or all of the values of European civilization. And his views have been widely echoed by other Asian political leaders. The ‘values’ debate has also become central within European countries themselves, especially within the United States, as a debate about ‘multiculturalism’. This version of the current

debate has indeed had a major impact on institutionalized social science, with the blossoming of structures within the university grouping scholars denying the premise of the singularity of something called 'civilization.'

Migration is the movement of people from one place or area to the other. The present day distribution of world population is a result of large scale migration of people from a few areas where the human being involve in early phases of history. One of the regions of early evaluation of humans is believed who have been tropical Africa. In the past migrations help in easing the problem of overpopulation on the local resources, people moved in search of new areas. Migration thus ever contributes people migrate due to a verity of reasons such as economic, social and political reason. Generally people move away from areas of harsh environmental conditions, lack of cultivable land, unemployment, poverty and religious or political persecution to areas of availability of cultivable land, minerals, religious or political freedom and the areas where the chances of improving once economic conditions are better. As a consequence of the migrations and settlements the evaluation of human culture has taken place. What we may call cultural evaluation has assumed much importance for the future as natural evaluation.

The Eurocentric philosophy of humanism which was universalized by western thought through the wonderful ferment of European man finally produced the inevitable consequence which today we observe in America and other part of European dominance. We come to know that the code of development of western civilization or western humanism or Eurocentric humanism is due to its political and social order; it is broadly based on the concept of governance of law and democracy. White people believe that the human society must follow the western judicial and legal order which appears through unanimity of reasons for establishing the political order, (state) namely mass participation for establishing the state. In such a world nothing is able to stand against this endless courage or escape from it, rather everything must have been down in the presence of this legal order.

Among all human ancient and dominant worlds, all these self-sufficient and proud Eurocentric believed that they know the eternal truth and by living in the presence of this 'truth', thought themselves to be superior to the others with their whole culture, history, language, literature, geography and the nature of their perimeter, must appear again under the microscope of the endless curiosity of modern technological and scientific cultural

advancement. This concept of enlightenment of Eurocentric philosophy has shattered the African institution. The emergence of pseudo-modern Eurocentric culture has made the other cultures namely African and other migrated culture invisible.

CHINUA ACHEBE AND HUMANISM:

Western scholar like Purvey had criticized Achebe from being seen as a humanist in his writings, but his criticism the author feel is born of racial discrimination and the imperialist mind that nothing good comes from the black race. One basic aspect we must all acknowledge in Achebe as an African humanist is the fact that he chose to give out what he knows that the world may learn and understand for posterity. This act has been depicted in all encomia showered over his singular book that has been translated in so many languages for people of Africa, the West, Asian and Africans in the Diaspora.

The setting of the book “Things Fall Apart” is a vivid setting of African way of life. Before the arrival of the white man Africans have lived in peace as they encourage one another in life. Part of the way in which Africans live possibly made “Unoka” Okonkwo’s father to be a weakling which also led to the development of Okonkwo to live a life above his father. This also explains why Africans strongly believe that a child shall grow higher than the father. Achebe x-rayed humanism in the character of Okonkwo in the adoption of the young lad Ikemefuna who grew under his roof to call him father. Ikemefuna was very much loved by his foster father. That he was killed by Okonkwo bedevils ethical and naturalistic fallacy. What is important to our studies here is that humanism thrives at a time and to the point that Okonkwo was even given a cautionary word by his best friend saying “this child calls you father: do not have a hand in his death” this is an act of humanism which is not far from the west. That Ikemefuna was slain by his father is nothing barbaric as different from all traditions of the world. Even in the holy books there practices abound as depicted in the demands of God of the father of faith (Abraham) to offer his only son. God himself so loved the world that he offered his only begotten son to be sacrificed through crucifixion a very shameful death on a cross.

This is a clear picture of a caring and committed teacher, a person dedicated to his family and the entire community, worthy of note. An example of such teachers abounds in African communities. They were treated

with reverence by both adults and children. Such a teacher was an epitome of African humanism. In his work “No Longer at Ease,” Obi Okonkwo’s act of demanding or accepting of bribe is an aberration to African humanism. For it is an African way of life to go an extra mile to help a stranger who he knows not where he comes from. This explains the hospitality extended to the white man when he came to Africa and he refused to go. Rather he chose to give Africans funny names and human resources which he took away as slaves. Leaving the book of life (Bible & Qu’ran) with a bunch of contradictions as they only represent the life culture and traditions of other nations of the white race.

The study has so far examined humanism, giving its meaning from the view that it is a philosophy that has placed man (human being) as the first thing in the line of importance. Though it sounds ambiguous *ab-initio*, philosophically its meaning can be drawn from the super natural or the higher authority for the wellbeing of mankind. African humanism is not far in meaning from western humanism. They only differ in a few varied ways, especially in terms of religions. Historically, Achebe can be likened to Homer of the Greek Roman, who has laid a foundation for Greek literary tradition. He can also be likened to Pushkin, regarded as the father of Russian literature; Achebe is African Shakespeare (Nwala, 2013). As Nwala pointed out, “these were the men of comparable status in history of human civilization”. Africans, see Achebe in a like manner if they have not so far done. Nwala described Achebe as “*a teacher, a great philosopher and a great humanist. He was an idol and a symbol, which we all hoisted for the guidance of the civilization of our youths*”. He must have been a man with resilient spirit, and a man of history and destiny.

CONCLUSION

African Humanism like any of the other forms of humanism has the welfare or wellbeing of the human person as its key attribute. Nevertheless, in considering this, we should bear in mind that it is not all humanists that are atheistic, iconoclastic and religious. The study has so far examined humanism, giving its meaning from the view that it is a philosophy that has placed man (human being) as the first thing in the line of importance. In spite of all the studies made so far in the field of Eurocentric humanism and African sensibility and various religious philosophies and the social reformers humanism has become a topic of debate. It has to be scientifically studied in a multi-disciplinary perspective.

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