

THE CONCEPT OF AFRICAN HUMANISM AND UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN DESIGN OF THE WORLD

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Abstract – This article attempt to analyze the notion of African Humanism and Dignity in a world which is not giving it an adequate consideration. The question of undermining African dignity made us think about African Humanism. Our thought is to seek how we can create a society in which Africans will be regarded as having innate dignity, integrity, and value. We understand that the respect for human beings and mutual concern for each other is regarded as the fundamental principle of action in society, but it is not what is really going on in African Continent. Africans have been seen, since the trade of slaves, as means of exploitation. They have been reduced into instruments. Kwame Nkrumah motivated African against the West exploitation which is found in capitalism, the power of individualism over the others, a theory which is opposite to the native tradition of African. He helped to reclaim people's psychology by removing colonial mentality and defend the independence of States. It is also in his philosophical Consciencism whereby, he called Africans to their own liberation to establish their personal dignity.

Keywords: African, dignity, humanism, value

Introduction

This article helps us to understand the meaning of African Humanism. It explains the concept and understanding of being in the world according to Africans, an understanding related to Negritude. This knowledge of being gives full understanding of African Humanism, and how it is different from the world design of the west.

1.0 General Concept on Humanism

Humanism is an intellectual movement that appeared in Europe in the 15th century. It is a doctrine based on the integration of human values. It is a Renaissance movement whose aim is to turn to the Greco-Latin culture to restore human values. Humanism in general is a behavior or attitude that exalts the human race. This current of thought seeks the transcendence of the human being as a species. It is also a philosophy centered on man and seeks human well-being (Joseph, 2016). This would mean that the humanistic philosophy is opposed to all that denies human dignity. The objectification of man as a producer or consumer undermines his integral development and being. Renaissance humanism generally emphasized human dignity and reacted against the religious authoritarianism of the Catholic Church. Hence, we can notice the way both religion and secular world conceives humanism.

1.0.1 Christian Humanism

Christian humanism is the belief that human freedom, individual conscience, and unencumbered rational inquiry are compatible with the practice of Christianity or even intrinsic in its doctrine (Bequette, 2004), because Christianity is not against human well-being. Christianity is first of all a promotion of human being. In that way Christian Humanism can be seen as existing at the core of the Christian message. Jesus himself held the commandment, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself" to be essential. The parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates this principle in action, stressing that even a member of a despised social class can embody true religion more than priests. Elsewhere, Jesus emphasized that charitable works such as feeding the hungry and caring for the sick are more important than mere acknowledgment of him as "Lord" (Luke 10:27, Leviticus 19:18). We can see that Christian Humanism is a call of self-fulfilling within the framework of Christian principles.

1.0.2 Secular Humanism

Secular Humanism is an outgrowth of the 18th century, particularly with the Enlightenment rationalism. For the Enlightenment thinkers, the Enlightenment is not a historical period, but a process of social, psychological or spiritual development, unbound to time or place. Immanuel Kant defines "enlightenment" in his famous contribution to debate on the question in an essay entitled "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? (Kant, 1959)" as humankind's release from its self-incurred immaturity; immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another (Kant, 1959). Expressing convictions shared among the Enlightenment thinkers of widely divergent doctrines, Kant identifies Enlightenment with the process of undertaking to think for one self, to employ and rely on one's own intellectual capacities in determining what to believe and how to act (Malpas, 2012). Enlightenment philosophers from across the geographical and temporal spectrum tend to have a great deal of confidence in humanity's intellectual powers, both to achieve systematic knowledge of nature and to serve as an authoritative guide in practical life (Malpas, 2012). We can also show up modern atheism and the way it conceives humanism. It was born in the 19th century, when Ludwig Feuerbach built a system that inspired Karl Marx, Fredrick Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. In the nineteenth and twentieth century's, human thought found many reasons and ways to refuse God: atheism in the strict sense, agnosticism, positivism, relativism, humanism atheists. Technical and scientific progress will be the motif of the diffusion of ideologies absolutizing reason. The individual or history creates a world where man is his own end and the demiurge of his own history: Therefore, God does not exist, or at the very least is useless to men. Even in modern civilization, we can say that, it is too committed to earthly realities. It does not help the search for God (Shaw, 1972).

We realize that all theories concerning humanism, value human being, none is opposed to human well-being but all celebrate the dignity of man. Hence, by humanism we can understand a theory that takes man as an end and as a superior value. It is understanding and conception which gives dignity to human being over other beings in the world.

So from this understanding, we will try to know how Africans conceive human being. First of all, it is important to underline that, according to Africans; life can never be conceived separately from the world in which they are living. They required the understanding of their cosmos before getting the knowledge of his humanism.

1.2 Negro-African Conception of the World and Man

1.2.1 The Conception of the Cosmos

The traditional African view of the cosmos is composed of the invisible and visible world. The universe is not composed only of things that interact with other things. It is seen, rather, as a world of forces interacting with other forces, a universal field of forces. Everything that exists, stones and plants and animals, and persons too, is the focus and expression of interacting forces. These forces are not seen, as in the materialist view, as simply physical (Murove, 1990).

The *Bantu Philosophy* (Tempels, 1948), shows the depth of thought and the coherence of the Negro-African vision of the world. The black African world is now presented with its ontology in a vision that only suggests coherence and happiness of life. The understanding of the ontology is the key to enter the world of Bantu, and from there to enter that one of all Africans. The ignorance of that ontology will push to the ignorance of the existence of the Bantu's world (Tempels, 1948). That ontology was revealed also by Leopold Sedar Senghor. According to him *Force* is inseparably linked to *being*, (senghor, 1960) and that is why these two notions remain linked in their definition of being. We can therefore say that, the Bantus would have a composed notion of being, which could be formulated: "Being is what possesses force". This means a world of vitalize. The world is not static, but dynamic (Komo, 2016). Tempels continue by demonstrating that where we (European) think the concept of "being" they use the concept "force", so where European see concrete beings, for Africans (especially Bantus) they see concrete forces. To exist in the world mean to be in harmony with the vital force which animates the world? Leopold Sedar Senghor had showed also, in an apologetic discourse, the coherence of the artistic vision, the African social and political systems. These systems are made up of community institutions or organizations such as family, tribe and kingdom, alongside which we find the fraternities of age, kinds of togetherness between brotherhoods with secret rites (Senghor, 1972). These secret rites have a social role, even political, especially religious. In truth all these organizations have a

religious foundation, that there is a force which is presents (Somé, 2002). To master that force, is to possess it by being in harmony with it because in this cosmogony, everything is related and linked, starting with the supreme being, extending to other beings.

1.2.2 Supreme Being

The belief of traditional Africans in the cosmos is that the cosmos was created by a Supreme Being, God. The cosmos is believed to be a total unit with no distinction between the visible and the invisible, the natural and the supernatural. Human beings are seen as part of nature and the two are constantly at war with each other (Harold Turner, 1994). We can admit that it is this permanent presence of Supreme Being which explains the constant force in the world.

The Supreme Being is distant and unconcerned with the creation having delegated that responsibility to spirits and lesser gods, such as rain, fertility, or forest gods. As God's representatives, these spirits and gods influence people and nature. This cause-effect belief is so strong that it overrides all events or happenings. African traditional societies therefore put emphasis on the need to know how not to disturb these forces. So among those spirits there are good spirits and are therefore worshipped while others are evil and are to be avoided (Burnett, 1990).

1.2.3 Ancestors

There is also a strong belief in ancestors. A living person is part of the ancestral chain. Death is not an end to a person's life but simply a move to the world of ancestors, what Mbiti calls "the living dead (Mbiti, 1982). Ancestors can transfer some aspects of their souls to living persons (Golka, 1993). They continue to live on through children named after them; in fact, some ancestors appear in dreams to demand that a parent name a child after them. The proof of such complex continuity is claimed to be in the resemblance of character and appearance between the child and the ancestor (O'Donovan, 1969) . As such, ancestors are seen as superior to people who are still alive. They demand respect, allegiance and worship by their living progenitors to maintain the delicate balance in the physical and spiritual world. In return, the ancestors are expected to protect and mediate on behalf of the living.

These two realities explain or demonstrate the reality of the interaction between the visible and invisible world. As our subjection is concerning the human being and his dignity to defend and to promote, we will think more about how man exists and relates with other being in world in the African mentality.

1.3 African Conception of Man

Better understanding of humanism of Negro-African comes out when we get to know who the Negro-African is, and how he sees and communicates with the world, and not trying to see him through the frame (mirror) of West. We understand that, being in the world of the Negro-Africans is not the same with the West conception. By this statement we will try to define how the Negro-Africans conceive the "being" before we talk about "man" and how he relates with the world.

1.3.1 African Conception of Being

The African personality is itself defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlies the traditional African society (Adesoye, 2017). Humanistic principles are claimed to be embodied in the communalism of the traditional practices. So "being" in the African's mentality, is in the rapport of communalist life. Thus according to Ebénézer Njoh Mouelle, (Njoh-Moelle, 1980) being is not a natural datum, it is acquired and expressed by the actions of the individual, not separated individual but as an individual linked to the community. The work of the individual must be aimed at the well-being of all and the nature, that is to say, the well-being of the individual and that of his similar. Also, the being of each man must be guided by the positive values. Values are said to be positive when they are of general interest and not personal, universal and not particular. The aspiration to being requires working in the direction of actions that are beneficial for the individual and for others.

That is why the man who aspires to exist as a member of the community, should transcend the inclinations of his ego, his selfish nature to perform, should adjust his ego in the direction of values of the community. This requires an aptitude to freedom: hence the need for the individual to free himself from his bad nature to access a better nature, one that seeks the well-being of the individual and that of others. In addition, the latter must have a high sense of responsibility. The human being, who aspires to be accepted as a person in the community, should be responsible for himself and for his fellows in the community. "Being" then requires the individual to free himself from his ego, then to ask actions that go in the direction of universal values and finally to be responsible for himself and others (Njoh-Moelle, 1978).

The question of being refers, to the concrete, to the implementation of certain skills: knowing how to free oneself from all negativities, to take positive action and to take responsibility for oneself and others. The individual who aspires to be so has the duty to positively impact his society through what he is doing. By the way, in the African mind, it is difficult to dissociate the subject from his works: here, the subject and his works are one. This understanding of being in the African world will be expressed in the real existence of man. It will help to define who can be called a man and consequently how African Humanism is lived. For this we will use the Bantu's conception of man.

1.3.2 The Concept of Man, "Ubuntu" in the Bantu World

The definition refers to *Ubuntu* is talking about a person (Meiring, 2016). It is best translated in English as "humanness or being human" (Khoza, 2006). *Ubuntu*, by using this word, we request a disposition that every human being is supposed to possess, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and of community. Having Ubuntu, or being human, is identified with behaving according to one's human nature and, by implication, in a manner that benefits a human being. In other words, Ubuntu represents a kind of human behavior that is inculcated in the individual by society, through established traditional institutions over a period of time.

We can say that Ubuntu is more than just a manifestation of individual acts. It is a spiritual foundation or an inner state, an orientation, and a disposition towards good which motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel and act in a humane way towards others. It is a way of life that seeks to promote and manifest itself and it is best realized or made evident in harmonious relations within society (Munyaka and Mokgethi, 2009). The characteristic of Ubuntu is that, a person is a person through other persons. This is one of the basic and central tenets of the ethic of Ubuntu. It helps to diffuse the individual ego and makes Africans less prone to acts that do not contribute to community building. This quality distinguishes a human person from other creatures (Munyaka and Mokgethi, 2009).

A person in the Ubuntu world view is the basis, center, and the end of everything; all other things make sense in relation to persons. Regardless of their social status, gender or race, persons are recognized, accepted, valued and respected for their own sake. According to Steve Biko, a person is the cornerstone of society. He elaborates that man is valuable in himself or herself: "not just his welfare, not his material, not his material wellbeing but just himself with all his ramifications (Biko, 1977)."

According to this world view, all people have dignity, which makes a person divine and therefore to be respected and valued (Munyaka and Mokgethi, 2009). This conception is strongly rooted in the African mentality that considers a person sacred because is created by God. It is equally believed that life is the highest gift from God to humanity. Anything which may undermine, hurt, threaten or destroy human beings is not accommodated in this way of life. This value and consideration of the human being in the Negro-African mind shows that a person is not a thing nor a number but something much more valuable. Whether a person is known or not, it is expected that he or she should be accorded respect. Respect for a person, accompanied by acceptable good behavior, is crucial. It signifies recognition of another person's humanity; this means also that no one is either superior or inferior in humanity. By saying this, mutual respect is also highlighted what is important is not just the individual but his or her human worth (Munyaka and Mokgethi, 2009).

The value and dignity of persons is best realized in relationship with others. Ubuntu is the basis of African communal cultural life. It expresses the interconnectedness, common humanity and the responsibility of individuals to each other (Koster, 1999). One cannot be a human being alone, but only in a community or one cannot be human by undermining or threatening others.

1.3.3 Man in the Community

The community life is very important and it is the synonymous of togetherness. It is an obligation to family and the wider community (clan or tribe) to supersede personal needs. Major decisions are made communally. Individualism is despised. The value of an individual is in the community, which echoes the philosophy of togetherness. This is what O'Donovan rightly refers by saying that

Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny. The reality in Africa may be described with the statement: 'I am because the community is (Resane, 2017).

In regard to the harmony of togetherness and the value and the dignity of every person, it is the family or community which determines what constitutes good or bad, right or wrong (Burnett, 1969). In this consideration, to go against the community is considered as serious betrayal which merits various categories of punishment. Banishment is the ultimate punishment, in which case the person loses all value and ceases to exist in the terms of the clan. This conception draws and set up the limit of actions. So everyone is expected to follow without questions what has been done before, tested and proven effective. In such a context, right and wrong depends on what the society has decided depending on its traditions. Thus, "Sin is usually socially defined (Loewen, 2000)."

It is necessary to remember that, this humanism, way of living and conceiving the world and human being is always in conflict with west civilization. Negritude, expression of the black, was the advocate of African Humanism. Everywhere in Europe and America, the voices raised up to condemn the undermining view and inconsideration about Africans in general. Negritude was the best way for African to show and prove their humanism to the world.

1.4 Definition of Negritude

Negritude is defined as being-in-the-world-of-the-black: a way for the black man to assume his position as a degraded man, crushed by history, and to reconstitute himself by a gesture of self-affirmation, through the development of a liberating project (Sartre, 1948). This word refers also to Black Existentialism, as defended by W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin. We can say that the course of the debate on the movement of Negritude has launched indigenous ideas and themes that have given rise to identity discourses. These ideas have served as a starting point and have gradually given way to other topics of reflection to situate the African man at the heart of the historical becoming. This led to the search for a new humanism rooted in the African soil, but still being open to other cultures and civilization.

With Leopold Sedar Senghor in "*Qu'est-ce que la Negritude?*" (*What is Negritude?*), he was one of the great pioneers of Negritude, we get to know that:

It is normal that each human group develops its means of adaptation to nature and adaptation of nature to him, to say it all, his means of expression, his language. It is the evidence, every human society has its civilization, more or less rich, more or less original, according to its personality. This civilization is made up of a sum of answers before the riddles of nature, of approaches to the demands of "human energy". It is based on metaphysics, ontology and a spirit, which is its culture, and it includes mores, sciences and techniques, arts and letters. It is the daughters of race, geography and history which explain the ways of feeling, thinking and acting of each human group (Senghor, 1966).

We understand that the Negro-Africans, like all the other ethnic groups of the earth, have a specific or particular set of qualities and practices, which is its spirit and culture, in a given situation, has produced an original, unique, irreplaceable civilization. No doubt, some of its qualities can be found with other peoples, but certainly not all together under this light, in this equilibrium and to the same understanding: Negritude is therefore the set of values of civilization of the black world as expressed in the life and values of blacks. Negritude therefore is the way of seeing and living in the world, it is the humanism of the Negro-Africans. This meaning of Negritude will help us to understand better the battle and the rise of personality of Negro-Africans.

1.4.1 Negritude, Quest for African Dignity

If Negritude was against the way the West was undermining the black and its values in the world, comparing to theirs, it was to claim first of all the dignity of the Negro. By saying this, it is important to bring out that Negritude is not racism, or a complex of inferiority. It's nothing more than a desire to be one-self to blossom (Senghor, 1966).

First of all we should claim that the Negro-Africans have different identity, a different trend of history. Thus according to Aime Cesaire Negritude is to demonstrate that fact and to show that Negritude is a fight for African dignity, history:

The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, and I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago (Fanon, 1955).

We understand again that Negritude was a reaction against a certain lower view on blacks and particularly on the Africans caused by the colonization. Also, in the vision of Aime Cesaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor, Negritude is seen as a form of resistance, rejection, rehabilitation, the construction of a self-identity that is not withdrawn, hostile to the outside world, aggressive and dominant. It is a quiet force that affirms common values without wishing to impose itself on others, except in the minimal form of respect for its existence. Negritude is also the right of man to live according to his culture, without being crushed by an external steamroller from Europe, America or elsewhere. It is first of all a question of dignity, the imposition of respect by peaceful means, socio-cultural, historical and spiritual values of multiple ethnic groups, of which the common denominator is the color of the skin (Mabana, 2009). Thus by dignity, the pioneers mean identity of the Negro-African which does not make them look like others, but shows the riches of the humanity made with different cultures, race and people.

1.4.2 Negritude as Black Identity

When the members of a social group self-define, as Negritude have done, they put forward their common properties, by which they are distinguished from other social groups and other ways of doing things. This categorization then produces an accentuation of the intra-group similarity and an accentuation of the intergroup differences. Thus Negritude is African movement of setting up the African personality which have been denied by the Westerners. It is not different from the black personality discovered and proclaimed by the American New Negro Movement. As the American Negro poet, Langston Hughes wrote after the First World War emphasizing that,

We, the creator of the new generation, want to give expression to our black personality without shame or fear. We know we are handsome, ugly as well. The drums weep and the drums laugh. Perhaps our originality, since it was the West Indian poet Aime Cesaire who coined the word Negritude, is to have attempted to define the concept a little more closely, to have developed it as a weapon, as an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the 20th Century (Senghor, 1993).

The claim of identity shows a certain way of living and existing which is necessary for a group to define itself. The humanism of the group will come to categorize itself. So above all with the definition and the understanding of Negritude, we get to know what humanism of Negro-Africans is made of.

1.4.3 Negritude and African Humanism

Talking about humanism in general, it is considering and valuing the being of every person and setting it in the center of everything which can be done or said. It is valuing and promoting the being of every person before any means. It is important to remind ourselves that if man is a natural being, he also has a specificity that makes him "human", we mean different from other beings, and for Karl Max this specificity is "sociability", we mean the tendency to form a society, where every person depends on one another (Touboul, 2019). By this we understand

that any group of human beings identifies itself differently with the other. He goes further by saying that the human essence does not reside in the individual, but in the social community, just as the essence of the bee or the ant does not reside in every animal, but in the hive or in the anthill (Puledda, 1999). Man ceases to be "human" when his natural sociability is denied, as it is the case in capitalist society where his work is taken from him for the benefit of a minority. We understand that the real "humanity" of Negro-Africa has been taken away from them by imposing on them another way, another way of life.

Through the understanding of what is said above, the values of a certain society can make the humanity of a group to have certain specificity. We understand also that the human being is strongly linked to the social group in which the person is living. So from the social group or the community, the individual can be recognized as a member or part of the group. Thus the understanding of humanism is more about a social group than the individual.

This definition is pointing out the real view of African about humanism which is said by Mbiti that: *I am because we are.* (Mbiti, 2009) The being is more in the group than the individual. And every person is related to his group. Indeed Negro-Africans have their own way of existing and their civilization which is very different from that of the West. In the same sense, Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, tries to show a "different civilization" (Achebe, 1958) of an African humanism totally unique in character that is different from the capitalist Western civilization:

Ethnologist and sociologist today speak of different civilization...who would deny that Africa too have a certain way of speaking, singing and dancing, of painting and sculpturing, and even of laughing and crying? Nobody probably, for otherwise we would not have been talking about Negro art. (Rubin, 1984)

Senghor also has emphasized this view by affirming that, Negritude is the sum of the cultural values of the black world, which is a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe. It is a certain "way of relating oneself to the world and to others" (Reed and Clive, 1984). It is essentially relation with others. That is the humanism of African in the world.

Conclusion:

We have come to understand that for Africans, the human being has an important and essential place in their realities. The consideration of life, of existence of every person in the community is an obligation to all. We can even say that anything cannot for any reason undermine the existence of human being. That is why due to the fact of colonization; Negritude reacted against Westerners undermining thoughts and acts against the blacks. Africans have their being as other people. They have their view of the world which has its specificity different from others: civilization, tradition, culture and customs. It is those backgrounds which explains their humanism and make their existence proper to them. This difference of being in the world should not be a reason of undermining Africans as pre-logic or prehistoric persons and to exploit them as means.

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