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PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE NATURE OF AFRICAN SOCIO-POLITICAL THEORY

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Abstract
The age-long crisis of whether there is African theory or not has over time become a critical issue in the history of human searching for reality in the midst of the Western Philosophers. To be fastidious, the controversy emerges as far back as early 1960's and 70's between those that see African theory as mere description of African belief and the school of thought that described it as a critical reflective and inquiry into African belief. More so, the argument was also put forward that Africans are not one but many races with different languages and cultural differences, traditions and belief systems, and if this is the case it is improper to talk of African theory. Asides this, it was even maintained that African is unreflective and traditional, thus it is impossible to have authentic African theory; this even reflects in Levy-Bruhl's and Robin Holton's notion of the African. For Hegel and Levy-Bruhl, African is excluded from this constitution of rationality. Contrary to various views on the subject matter, an attempt is made to debunk the unreality of African theory. It is on this note that the paper deems it fit to re-investigate the nature of African socio-political theory. For clarity of purpose, the paper through its conceptual, critical analytical and constructive criticism method re-examines the concept of African socio-political theory in relation to African context and some vital issues attached to the subject matter in an attempt to re-authenticate the existence of African Socio-political theory that is devoid of Hellenic theory. The paper therefore posits that the quest for an appropriate political model becomes pertinent particularly in Africa today because the existing socio-political structures are ineffective for the organization of daily human activities.

Keywords: **African Identity, Socio-Political Theory, African Epistemology, Theoretical Re-constructions, Political Structures.**

Introduction

Robinson Crusoe in his philosophical aphorism postulates that "no man is an island of knowledge". The interface of this notion implies that man depends on his fellow human beings for survival which invariably demonstrates his relations with others. More so in the society where man lives, his social relation with his fellow man makes him becomes socialized. In other words, an individual develops and sustains himself in a social setting through collective understanding that exists in the society. The possibility of man sustaining himself in a social setting makes man a product of his society and likewise the society which is the creation of man. Society in this form connotes many institutions like family, schools, religious organizations, polity etc. which are established to serve some specific purposes.

Man's inter-relationship with other people adds value to his meaningful life. It is so important that Aristotle describes man as a being who by nature is a political animal that lives in the midst of his fellow political beings within the state. Man is essentially a political being; his interdependence with his fellow beings distinguishes him from any other being. Thus, living in a state is so natural for man, that he who

lives outside the state or who doesn't need a state is either a beast or an angel (Garuba: 2007). As living in state is precious to man, likewise is the idea of politics paramount to him, which in our modern day connotes an institution and activities falling in the public sphere. The aim of this paper is to philosophically underscore the nature of African socio-political theory, however for better conceptualization; it is pertinent to underscore the concept of political theory.

The term "political" refers to something that is public which is distinguished from private or something applicable to a limited number of people. In his words, Parkes (1982) maintains that politics is to be thought of properly as a collective temperament to rule and be ruled and coming to public decisions that presuppose that sovereignty does not override, that a widely distributed capacity for self-conceptualization in the community is not harmed or destroyed.
The fundamental question that comes to mind whenever the expression "political theory" is heard centers on the nature of the subject. Often, many people have little understanding of what the subject basically focuses on. To some, fundamental concern of political theory centers on the nature of state and the citizen's obligations towards it, while others can maintain that political theory changes as society and government change. However, in the view of contemporary theorists; for example, D.D Raphael (1979), Andrew Hacker (1961), David Easton (1980) among others, political theory center on the principles specifying the ends of government which is based on the attainment of a just and peaceful state.

Political theory is further refers to as body of ideas that has examined issues and events relating to politics. It is made up of ideas about politics which have codified through the ages and handed down from generation to generation. It is obvious that every individual is a potential contributor to political theory in as much that every individual is a product of the society, to the extent that one is likely to have some ideas about politics and political processes.

Man as a Central Theme in Socio-Political Discourse
The question, 'what is man?' is an ontological question and one of the fundamental questions in philosophical discourses. Precisely, it is a metaphysical question. The question, 'what is man?' appears to be a simple one but, it is one that is very difficult to answer. This perhaps explains why man has been, or is still being studied from different perspectives, but all aimed at the same goal and that is, the discovery of the true nature of man and his place in the society. For this, man still remains a mystery in some way. In his work, Ali (1997) asserts that man is mystery in the sense that man cannot be studied in a particular form. Man can be studied experimentally, philosophically, sociologically, scientifically, culturally, phenomenological, religiously and in some other ways (Ali, 1997:53). The intellectuality of man has made him to discover himself as an intelligent being, because he is a unique member of animal kingdom, he has been able to find some explanation through religious beliefs, myths and legends and thoughts to answer the question "what is man?" .

But, no doubt, the essential nature of man is difficult to understand. What a figment of your imagination is man! Because, in the attempt to understand the true nature of man, the following questions must be asked: What is the origin of man? Why does he exist? Is he free? Is he completely part of nature or does he transcend nature? What is he living for? Does his life have any ultimate meaning? Has he any ultimate value? Is there a force over and above him who controls his existence? Is he an individualistic or a social being? Of what application is his existence to the society? In fact, a list of pertinent questions to be asked will be in exhaustive.
However, some answers have been given to these questions, which, may, in some way, indicate the nature of man. Take for instance the Christian ontology that sees man as a unique, conscious and free living being, created by God and occupying a special position in the universe. The Christian Bible makes us to understand that man is made in the image of God to have dominion over the earth and everything therein

(Ali, 1997). Opposing this position is the scientific view that traces the origin of human life to biochemical evolution. Let us recall here, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. According to this position, man is not specially created by some supernatural God but simply arose from a series of biochemical evolutionary processes. This view, therefore, does not see man as a unique and free entity but a collection of molecules; an accident on the stage of evolution whose existence is determined by biological, chemical and physical laws.

An identical notion is the Marxian theory on the nature of man. Here, man is also seen as just a natural phenomenon – *homo sapiens* – but Karl Marx says further that "the real nature of man is the totality of social relations" (Marx 1942). In our attempt to understanding the nature of man, we should also take cognizance of the existentialists' position on the nature of man. To the existentialists, epitomized by J.P. Sartre, man is essentially a free being – man is condemned to be free.(Unah, 2000) Furthermore, B.F. Skinner, the Behavioural psychologist, appeals to human behavioural patterns in the attempt to understand human nature and Sigmund Freud's psycho-analytic theory appeals to genetic and hereditary factors as ways to understanding human nature.
From various conception of man by these schools, it brings up the fact of the complexity of human nature. The reason is, all positions appear to say some truth about human nature and it may seem plausible then, to add up all these partial truths to get the whole truth about the nature of man. And this perhaps, is what Ogunmodede tries to do when he says:

> Man is a being and person, that is both homo sapiens and imago dei; a thinker and a reflection; rational and spiritual, logical and emotional, critic- deductive and intuitive-inductive, individual and social, contemplative and dynamic, scientific and metaphysical, moral and religious. (Ogunmodede, 1986)

Indeed, one cannot but agree with Ogunmodede, for a cursory look at man will indicate his material features as depicted in his biological or anatomical elements, and also his immaterial features, which are depicted in his rationality, consciousness, dynamism and freedom (at least, his ability to make choices). But in all we have said so far, it appears we have left, unrecognized, one very important nature of man, that is, man's social nature. In fact, this seems the most important factor of the human nature. This is because it is one essential nature of man that cannot be disputed. The others we have mentioned earlier may be disputed. But, it is not possible to deny the very obvious fact that man, essentially lives in a group of other men, no matter how small? Hence, man following the Platonian and Aristotelian conceptions, is a social animal. This is the most essential nature of man in respect of the totality of this essay. The Yoruba theory of human nature also emphasizes the sociality of man. According to Ali (1997), "the Yoruba idea of man embraces and emphasizes the sociality of man … corporate existence … in the society".

In essence, for a comprehensive discourse on this work, the essential nature of the human person must be put into consideration. And, if one undertakes a study of different submissions that have been made on the most appropriate social order for the human society, by socio-political thinkers through the ages, one will find that they are all hinged on what such thinkers have considered as the most essential nature of man; and they have all concluded further that any appropriate social order must cohere with the essential nature of man.
But to us, one essential nature of the human person that cannot be disputed and which should also condition the social order is his sociality. Though some may want to object to this, however, we feel a denial of this is nothing but an attempt to disregard the most obvious fact of human nature. For one thing, every man is, at least born into a nuclear family, which is itself a unit of an extended one and on and on like that unto the larger society. Everyone is simply born into a group of other men. It is just impossible

to exist and live in isolation because, individual capacities are not sufficient to meet the basic human requirements (Gyekye 1987:155). And here, it becomes expedient for us to shift focus to a discussion on the nature of the human society.

Concept of Political theory

The emergence of political theory can be traced to the period of feudal lords in man's history when some human beings became powerful than others leading to the development of hierarchical relationships in society. Subsequently, this led to an attempt to answering certain questions relating to how some individuals, groups and institutions could control others in the society and why those being controlled acquiesce in these subordinate and superordinate relationships. Such questions as it relates to individual, groups and institution include those on why some people govern, how they govern, how they should govern. Other pertinent questions relate to the exercise of power and the securing of authority, legitimacy, and political obligation. Political theory has, as a central concern, an examination of the nature of the state as it has evolved since the need for political control arose in society.

Political theory can further be described as a systematic knowledge of political phenomena. It is concerned with the type of knowledge that will be required about the political phenomena in the realm of political theory. Its major concern is based on three statements which are empirical statement, logical statement and evaluative statement. In his view, George Catline (1965) maintains that the theory (of politics) is divided into political science and political philosophy.

It however shows that political theory is concerned with the types of knowledge that are adequate about political issues. Philosophers such as George Berkley and Thomas Aquinas have itemized various forms of knowing as the basis of human knowledge. Among the forms of knowing identified by the philosophers include:

Empirical knowledge.
Intuitive Knowledge
Mystical Knowledge
Knowledge of others; and
A priori knowledge.

However, in the realm of political theory, these forms of knowledge are summed into three basics which include:

Empirical statement
Logical Statement; and
Evaluative statement

By empirical statement, this is a form of statement that is observable in nature, knowledge discovered through observation which is based on sense experience alone. Empirical knowledge emanates as a result of the needs for the discovery of a theory of knowledge which would take cognizance of a new knowledge discovered by the practicing scientist of the time. In other words, empirical knowledge is said to be the continuation of the scientific endeavour. Various scholars among whom we have John Yolton (1970) maintains that empiricism evolved from the royal society whose members hold the belief that the most important task for science was a careful compilation of histories. It can be inferred that observation of nature could be described to be the aim of the empiricists.

The empiricists such as John Berkley and David Hume are of the opinion that man cannot have knowledge in isolation from experience of material objects. Empiricism maintains that the basic premises for knowledge must be provided by experience not by rational intuition. Thus, experience may have its origin from sense perception of the external world, which includes our present feelings or from reflecting on the inner operations of our own minds. Based on this, empiricists emphasize material being; the materialists are of the view that what is to be taken as reality has to be objects that we can see, feel, touch, smell etc. It can be suggested that empiricists had no alternative other than to contend that knowledge was based on

experience of material objects, because they are mainly the things they could observe in their immediate environment. John Locke in his article as translated by Skolmowski (1973) contends that, it would be sufficient to convince prejudiced readers of the false-lessness of this supposition, if I should only show how men barely by the use of their natural faculties may attain to all the knowledge they have without the help of any innate impression and such original notion or principle. Alternatively, John Locke as quoted by Roberts (2013) maintains that we do not have fore knowledge of things in this world but we come to have knowledge of those physical things only through the aid of the senses.

Similarly children do not possess any knowledge about the things around them. They only come to have knowledge of them through the method of teaching and learning which they undergo as they grow into adulthood. An attempt to accept that man is born of innate ideas will imply that education would turn out to be a wasteful venture, for it is generally believed that through education, knowledgeable ideas are imparted to individuals. Thus, David Hume, John Locke and George Berkeley, among others contend that knowledge comes from experience from which all our knowledge is founded and from that, it ultimately derives itself. So, empirical statement indicates that we cannot do away with experience. For, it is through this medium that we come to know what we know. Upon this basis, political theory operates on the assumption that political decisions and political institutions stand in need of justification; that the general principles, decisions and actions that arise from them are in need of rational justification.
The exponents of logical positivism, among whom are Ludwig Wittgenstein, A. J Ayer, Moritz Schlick, and so on have argued that evaluative statements have no empirical content or logical structure. Rather, they are expressions of subject with reflections or emotional preferences. This position is also maintained by the champions of scientific method for the study of politics, exponent of this group include Bertrand Russell, Bradley and others. They insist on value free or value neutral approach to the study of political theory. This now indicates that political theory cannot be confined to the so-called scientific knowledge. Instead, it is concerned with determining values which comes within the scope of Philosophy. This implies that determination of values is the basis of sound public policy or decision. Hence, political theory comprehends both political science and political philosophy.

It must be noted however, that for a theorist to make a lasting contribution to human knowledge, it may have to work in the realms of both science and philosophy. This indicates that the nature of political theory can be identified by pointing to its two components: political science and political philosophy. While political science deals with facts of political life which include the real situation and which laws govern our actual behavior, the other, political philosophy is concerned with values that is, what is good for us. Political theorist or political scientist aims at describing and explaining the realities of political behaviour by attempts to draw up generalized propositions about the actual relations between the state and its citizens as well as the role of power in society. Political philosophy is concerned with prescribing the goals which citizens, states and societies ought to pursue. Its aim is to generalize about right conduct in political life and about the legitimate use of power. Hacker (1961) points out that the philosophical parts of a theory must be informed by a profound understanding of the fact of political life.

However, it is pertinent to note that anything called political theory is bound to reflect historical changes. The search for values and critical review of human position when it comes to formulation of theories is an ongoing process which justifies the continuing pursuit of political theory. In fact, political philosophy itself arose from a critical reflection of political activities which existed long before the advent of political philosophy. In other words, any concept called political theory changes with time. The epoch of a given period dictates and defines the philosophical orientation of that historical epoch. Kolawole Ogundowole buttresses this view when he asserts that:

> The emphasis made by each philosopher depends on the major problems prevalent at a given historical period of the development of mankind.

> That is why a good grasp of what philosophy is, demands that we approach and view philosophy epochally. Epochal comprehension of the essence of philosophy enables one to realize that philosophies differ in content depending on the nature of problems tackled by the given philosopher at a given time and space: as well as the overall level of comprehensive awareness of the society and mankind in general and the ability to relate such special awareness to the development of philosophy (Ogundowole, 2004: 23).

Nature of African Socio-political Philosophy

As many African countries gained independence during 1960s, some of the newly formed governments rejected the ideas of capitalism in favour of a more afrocentric economic model. The advocates of African socialism claimed that it was not the opposite of capitalism or a response to it, but something completely different from all forms of existing political theories. Common principle of various version of African socialism were based on social development guided by a large public sector, incorporating the African identity and what it means to be Africa, also the avoidance of the development of social classes within society (Friedland 1964). Senghor however claimed that Africa's social background of tribal community life not only makes socialism natural to Africa but excludes the validity of the theory of class struggle, thus making African socialism in all of its variations different from Marxism and European socialist theory.

Perhaps the question is raised for the reason why is there need for political model in Africa today. The simple answer is that Africa is our real experience, our actual view and mind, based on our cultural, political and social system, as well as the level of development the African have attained. It is also due to our achievement in our constant search to cognize the cause of all things existing in our environment. One of the aims of every political thinker is to reflect on the existential political reality of his or her environment and come up with political ideology that can be used in solving societal problems. The quest for an appropriate political model becomes pertinent in most continents and in particular Africa today, because the existing socio-political structures are ineffective for the organization of daily human activities.

Many ancient philosophers have been able to formulate one political ideology or the other based on the problems of their societies. Plato's socio-political philosophy, for instance, cannot be relegated when it comes to the issue of an ideal society. Neither will Thomas Hobbes's political philosophy be categorized as irrelevant. Hobbes propounded the doctrine of political absolutism or despotism as a necessary antidote to the prevailing chaos, fear and insecurity of his time. Nor will Rousseau's doctrine on socio-political philosophy be condemned in his society. Rousseau (1963:292) in his work asserts that "My purpose is to consider if in political society, there can be a legitimate and sure principle of government taking men as they are and laws as they might be".

Based on his doctrine, Rousseau's socio-political philosophy aims at reconstructing and reforming the French society considered to be artificial, corrupt, unjust, sick and decadent all-through. Rousseau's political philosophy is centered on a concern for man's dignity and well-being. Likewise, can any economic situation of a given society be discussed without making reference to Marxist philosophy whose socio-political philosophy centers on classes and class struggle. From his own perspective, Karl Marx (1859) believes that socialism which is seen as the ultimate is in fact a scientific approach to a community's problems. Thus, Marx interprets man in scientific form but in a familiar way which later poses some difficulties.

The flurry of intensive debates and controversies surrounding the existence or otherwise of African philosophy in the 1960's through 80's is by no doubt over, as concrete philosophical issues and problems are now dominating the African philosophical scene. On the increase now are volumes of research by African philosophers revealing various philosophical issues and problems characteristic of the African cultural experience.

Socio-political theory is not novel or anathema to Africa and Africans. While the Greeks and Romans were busy trying to fashion out the best socio-political order and organizations for their respective city-states and political formations, African socio-political thinkers and philosophers were also found neither sleeping nor slumbering. One of the reasons why Africans had been denied initially by some scholars is because there is no available written literature to justify it. Most of the works on African philosophy are based on oral tradition. However, Makinde (1989:93) posits that there cannot be a philosophy of a people without its history. It is for this reason that African theory is being denied, because it does not have history, especially because it was an age of unknown and unidentified philosophers. Notwithstanding the denial of earlier African scholars the fact remains that man is historical, and his socio-political life his fashioned according to his societal norms. The nature of African socio-political theory is not different from that of western thought, except that the issue is directed to African orientation. Many issues and problems have gained prominence among scholars in contemporary philosophy. Yet, there are still other fundamental issues and problems that African socio-political philosophy and indeed African philosophers are silent on. Pertinent in this regard and of immediate philosophical interest to this work is the socio-political discourse on democratic socialism of Obafemi Awolowo.

Some of the fundamental questions that pre-occupy the minds of socio-political philosophers are: the aim of political life, how man ought to live in the state and why should man obey the state. This pre-occupation is in line with the fundamental and ultimate aim of philosophy which is to examine the problems and issues that arise within the universe especially those problems or conditions that confront human beings.

The efforts of the ancient political philosophers must however be referenced. Their contributions shed light to most of the problems of politics. Ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle hold that human beings are by nature political animals. From the conception of human nature by Thomas Hobbes, it shows that man by nature lives in the state of war of all against all. The conception of state of nature shows that man in his state of nature wants honour but does not want to give honour to others. Apart from Plato and Aristotle, many other ancient philosophers to our day have given considerable attention to the central questions of politics. Among the notable philosophers are Nicollo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Karl Marx, John Dewey and John Rawls. The efforts of these philosophers are essentially to develop elaborate philosophical systems in support of principles they believed would give us the answers to the problems associated with human existence in a given society. However, their postulations seem to be full of lapses and are unattainable. Our examination of the works of these philosophers later in this work will justify this claim. Then, the question is, in spite of the efforts of African political philosophers, will socio-political thoughts of Africans serve as a new era for contemporary African state? Nonetheless, basic questions keep ringing in human mind concerning the attainment of an ideal society, even in an atmosphere of hopelessness.

Having critically examined various postulations of these western philosophers, it appears that their positions are far away from African modes of living. However, Oladipo (1998) asserts that philosopher must seek to put his knowledge to the development and progress of his or her people spiritually, politically economically and sociologically. He further asserts

> … Nor is it the problem of a division between those who advocate a strong western orientation in African philosophy and those who take a deviant route. Rather the problem is that of the extent to which African

> philosophers have been able to put their philosophy in the service of the struggle and destiny of African people (Oladipo, 1998:111).

Oladipo's position is that African philosophers have a practical mission in contemporary Africa, one that is socio-political in character. They are to be committed to fulfilling their scholarly obligations to their societies. In addition, Oladipo (2000) states that human conditions in Africa offer the philosophers the opportunity to contribute to the process of de-mystifying the forces and institutions that work together to stifle the African premises. Based on Oladipo's assertion, one may raise the question whether the contemporary African philosophers have risen to the task. Alternatively, can African philosophers produce an authentic socio-political thought that is deviated from our colonial masters? Falaiye (2000) also emphasizes that philosophy must transcend the boundary of pure thought even though pure thought is its primary raw material. He is of the opinion that the contemporary philosophical thought must be taken to the practical level. In other words, philosophy must be in connection with society and its cultural practices.

In spite of the emergency of African political philosophers, will socio-political thought of Africans serve as a new era for contemporary Africa state? With the rise of some African nationalists and philosophers like Nnamdi Azikwe and Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania among others in Africa, can we say that Africa has been able to come up with an authentic political ideology free from Hellenic or European indoctrination?

Given concession that these men acquired their higher education abroad, the fact still remains that political ideology postulated by these African philosophers is indirectly tailed toward neo-colonialism. Although most of these African philosophers affirm that there is need for an indigenous ideology, yet their efforts toward propounding a plausible one devoid of Hellenic conception has failed. The question now is: has African political problem been resolved? Or has colonialism really ceased in Africa? These and many other questions are yet to be answered and thus create lot of controversy within the contemporary socio-political philosophy in Africa.

Thus, the various chaos in Africa today is as a result of the European injection of some poisonous liquid in African thought in the name of socialization and colonization. It was this intoxication that caused low-level of its socio-political affairs which most of the African continent is passing through. Claude Ake in his book titled *Social Science as Imperialism* (1982:184) asserts that:

> We have also seen some of disadvantages associated with the imperialist character of the social science. It reinforces dependence, it inculcates an inferiority complex, it weakens the will of Third World people to take their own destiny into their hands and it renders them more available to exploitation (Ake: 1982:184).

Rodney (1972) also adds that we cannot talk about the present African continent without making reference to the injustice of colonialism. It can be said affirmatively that colonialism has played a crucial role in Africa's underdevelopment (Rodney: 1972). Hardly will any writer on contemporary issues in Africa today proceed without relating whatever he has to say to the colonial experiences of African people. This is because Africa would not be what it is today if the colonial phase of its history was erased. This implies that one cannot say with certainty what the present state of Africa affairs could have been. Alternatively, with all what the European did to the continent, has the African really benefited positively from the European encounter? Or has she ever learnt one or two lessons from her encounter with Europe? Is colonialism really an act of under- developing the African continent? Even after colonialism, has African really rediscovered itself? If the answer is in the affirmative, what will be the effect of colonialism on African civilization which is now being pursued by contemporary thinkers? This question is pertinent

because it is assumed that colonialism is regarded as a civilizing mission in whom the colonizers see themselves as performing a humane duty directed towards the uniform progress of mankind in general.

Conclusion

However, socio-political discourse has relatively contributing to the development of different ideologies on a matter that has to do with human society. Some of the early thinkers are called sage based on their different postulations which are in line with their society. Surprisingly, leaders and governments in our contemporary society have not practically utilized sufficiently the latent principles and ideas developed by some of the early thinkers. This has been so, not because contemporary society conceives such theories as absolute and archaic, but because of the dynamic nature of human society, which needs new inventions and theories for its ever changing structure. In this regard, old theories are sometimes discarded for new ones or integrated with contemporary theorizing in order to meet the needs of the newly evolved societal structure.

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