

Plato's Theory of Knowledge and Its Implication on Africa's Quest for Emancipation

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ABSTRACT: Emancipation of oneself is the most important aspect in the journey towards self-realization of man. After almost half a century with most African states attaining independence, Africa still continues to suffer the problems of ignorance, bad roads, poor infrastructure, poor or no hospital facilities, food insecurity, war and terror, political instability among others. Though some of these have been attributed to effects of colonization, neo-colonization and Western influence, however, I am inclined to think that Africans have a solution to their deeply seated problems. This article attempts to analyze Plato's theory of knowledge in his allegory of the cave. It further analyzes each step in the allegory and their implications and relevance in Africa in the 21st century. The purpose is to show that Africans can emancipate themselves from ignorance that is bedeviling most of the nations. The recommendations are that the liberated Africans must climb down the cave and help the rest to get liberated; knowledge should focus on problem solving and the education systems in Africa should be goal oriented. Overall, this paper provides a framework upon which emancipation from ignorance can best be achieved in the African Education systems in the 21st Century.

KEY WORDS: *Colonization, Emancipation, Autonomy and Holistic*

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Africa is currently facing many challenges, such as ignorance, bad roads, poor infrastructure, poor or no hospital facilities, food insecurity, war and terror, political instability, among others. In most cases, some of these problems have greatly been attributed to effects of colonization, neo-colonization or Western interference with African states- national internal affairs. African states have remained bedeviled by these challenges even when they are self-inflicted by corruption and inept political leadership. Corruption by political leaders has denied Africans resources for social and individual development.

Some African statesmen like Nelson Mandela, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius M. Nyerere, Desmond Tutu, among others have articulated an African philosophy which is relevant today in addressing ignorance in African leadership. This paper examines Plato's allegory of the cave in attempt to tease out principles that could be incorporated in education in Africa. Education in the philosophy of Plato is a means of political emancipation or liberation from ignorance leading to enlightenment. Future African leaders need to be educated that there can be an alternative narrative where leadership should be approached as an opportunity to liberate Africa from her malaise but not an opportunity for personal aggrandizement at expense of common good.

EMANCIPATION

Emancipation can be understood as freedom from what inhibits or constraints in order to be able to actualize potentiality. To be emancipated from a constraint is to possess a tool or instrument by use of which, one can alter the environment to bring it to serve our needs. In our case here, education possesses that tool. Such education will be based on philosophical foundations established on principles of functionalism and a holistic approach.

II. PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

In his dialogue the *Republic* in book seven (514a and 520a) Plato narrates an allegory of the cave to illustrate "the effect of education and the lack of it on our nature":

Plato describes a dark scene. A group of people have lived in a deep cave since birth, never seeing the light of day. These people are bound so that they cannot look to either side or behind them, but only straight ahead. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a partial wall. On top of the wall are various statues, which are manipulated by another group of people, lying out of sight behind the partial wall. Because of the fire, the statues cast shadows across the wall that the prisoners are facing. The prisoners watch the stories that these shadows play out, and because these shadows are all they ever get to see, they believe them to be the most real

things in the world. When they talk to one another about men, women, trees, or horses, they are referring to these shadows. These prisoners represent the lowest stage on the line imagination.

A prisoner is freed from his bonds, and is forced to look at the fire and at the statues themselves. After an initial period of pain and confusion because of direct exposure of his eyes to the light of the fire, the prisoner realizes that what he sees now are things more real than the shadows he has always taken to be reality. He grasps how the fire and the statues together cause the shadows, which are copies of these more real things. He accepts the statues and fire as the most real things in the world. This stage in the cave represents belief. He has made contact with real things the statues but he is not aware that there are things of greater reality a world beyond his cave.

Next, this prisoner is dragged out of the cave into the world above. At first, he is so dazzled by the light up there that he can only look at shadows, then at reflections, then finally at the real objects' real trees, flowers, houses and so on. He sees that these are even more real than the statues were, and that those were only copies of these. He has now reached the cognitive stage of thought. He has caught his first glimpse of the most real things, the Forms.

When the prisoners' eyes have fully adjusted to the brightness, he lifts his sight toward the heavens and looks at the sun. He understands that the sun is the cause of everything he sees around him the light, his capacity for sight, the existence of flowers, trees, and other objects. The sun represents the Form of the Good, and the former prisoner has reached the stage of understanding.

III. PRISONERS

3.1 PRISONERS

In the allegory of the cave, Plato talks of prisoners who have been chained inside a cave since their childhood. All they can see and hear are only shadows and sounds but not the real objects. They take the sounds and shadows to be the true reality. It is true that these prisoners are suffering of ignorance. All they take to be true reality are just but shadows of what really exist in the real world. Due to the chains, they are not able to come to contact with true reality hence they need to be liberated so as to know that what they perceive as real are mere shadows.

Africa is today suffering from a serious state of ignorance. There are many parts in Africa where there is a serious challenge of ignorance, bad roads, poor infrastructure, poor or no hospital facilities, food insecurity, war and terror, political instability among others. In most African countries, people continue to suffer illiteracy yet very little is being done to uplift the people from the poor state. The poor infrastructures in schools that are built by the respective governments and NGOs have not been of great help. In most of the places, we have students walking for several kilometers to attend schools and these has led to massive school dropouts.

In most African cultures, we still have female circumcision that is commonly known as the female genital mutilation (FGM) being practiced. Some of these cultures equally champion for early marriages which eventually lead to young boys and girls dropping out of school to go and get married. In war torn nations, children cannot travel for kilometers to attend classes due to insecurity.

With these practices, Africa continues to wallow in a great state of ignorance. The state of ignorance calls for long- term solutions to the problems by implementing practical educational policies that can help the people to alleviate from their suffering states. The liberative initiatives should come from within African continent, other than depending on other continents.

3.2 AN ESCAPEE FROM IGNORANCE

Plato captures this in the escaped prisoner. Immediately the prisoner frees himself from the chains, he realizes that all that he had taken to be reality were just but shadows of the real objects. The process of escaping is quite a long and painful process. It needs perseverance and patience to be fully liberated. The prisoner realizes that his eyes are pained at the sight of light because he was used to staying in a dark cave. He is not able to look directly at objects but prefers to look at them from their reflections in water. It is only after some time that he will be able to look at the stars, moon and finally, the sun.

For Africa to be liberated, we need to go through some painful experience. This might require that we sacrifice part of our cultural values and morals so as to go through the process of liberation. Our African scholars must be well disposed to sacrifice their time and lives for an intellectual journey so as to put Africa in the same scale with the rest of the world. The traditional values that no longer make sense in the 21st century must also be sacrificed, some of which include: female circumcision, wife inheritance, biases against women, tribalism, corruption and nepotism. Our current leaders should be ready to put their lives in line, even accepting to go to jail, like Nelson Mandela together with the African fore fathers did, so as to liberate the continent.

3.3 PERSONAL EFFORT

Personal effort is required so as to get out of the comfort zones. The prisoners in the cave appear to be contented in their states and the illusionary life seems to be giving them all that they need. This is why it is observed that, should the escaped prisoner try to go back to the cave and inform them of the reality outside, they can even kill him. This is an indication that they are comfortable in their states.

For Africa to be emancipated, personal efforts of the Africans themselves is required so as to get out of the contentment and to move towards a better life even though it contains much struggle and pain. As Aristotle says, *the roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.* African must put personal their own personal effort and demonstrate spirit of willingness to get out of the cave of ignorance. It is evident that most of the aid Africans have been receiving to get out of ignorance has been coming from the West, but still there is not much that has been achieved yet. This article is a call on Africans to stand up, define their destiny and walk through the path of emancipation as they best wish to achieve.

3.4 THE ATTAINMENT OF LIGHT

After the painful experience and coming to terms with the reality that entire one had known before in the valley, were but mere shadows of the real objects, one is now fully liberated and can now enjoy the real picture of himself, and of reality as it is. He is now aware of the things as they exist in their real nature and can now perceive them.

This state can be likened to our African scholars who have gone through the formal education. From their scholarly view they are able to see the problems bedeviling Africa and offer practical solutions. For example, they can do their studies in agriculture and know the type of soil and what crops can be planted in such lands; they can advise the people on what kind of plants that can prevent soil erosion, what kind of trees can bring about rains, what kind of technological developments can be implemented in Africa that will not pollute the African environment and so on.

The scholars equally know what kind of political works in Africa. Practically, most of the African states have faced political turmoil since their attainment of independence. We have had political leaders clinging to power and refusing to relinquish their offices; most of which leads to attempted coups, mass and street protests, just to mention but a few. Africa has also faced challenges of series of constitutional amendments but still, peace and tranquility is still not realized. The paper is a call on the African scholars to step in and offer serious political advice and pose challenges that can help bring peace and prosperity to African states.

3.5 THE LIBERATIVE ROLE OF THE ESCAPED PRISONER

Plato noted that, wisdom is only important if it is placed at the service of the community. The escaped prisoner, after attaining full light, goes back to the cave and informs his fellow prisoners of the reality outside the cave. He should be able to explain to them that all the things they take to be the real objects are just but mere shadows of what really exist. Even though, Plato notes that the process of explanation can be difficult, the other prisoners can scold or even kill him because of their contentment with their state of ignorance.

Those who have reached the apex must make sure that they climb back to the valley and liberate their fellow kinsmen. This is an indication that education can only be important if it is for the service of the community. The liberated individuals should not see themselves as withdrawn from the society, but they should come back and try to alleviate their fellow kinsmen who are still languishing in the state of ignorance. It is in line with Plato who states that:

the primary duty of the philosopher is to liberate a prisoner from the cave, to liberate man from physical, material world, that is, the world of appearance, from the shadows of unreality and to bring them into the realm of true being the world of ideas.

The African scholars who have had an exposure outside their local villages must make sure that they help their brothers and sisters who are still in the cave to overcome all the challenges that their society is faced with.

5.1 Sound and Authentic Education as a tool for Liberation

An authentic and sound education is that which produces a liberated person in whole aspects. It is the kind of education that liberates all the aspects of human person, that is, psychological, economic, political and social dimensions. In his latest speech in 1998, a year before his death, Julius Nyerere talked about a sound and authentic education. A speech that was delivered to the students of Open University, he asserted that: a sound and authentic education should be universal and relevant. Universal applies to all; relevance, it must be for liberation for man and society. Not just an instrument which alienates one from himself/herself or even the society.

Such an education should be competitive in the global world. An education that can make one to work anywhere in the world. Education that enables one to attract potential foreign investors to come to Africa, and enable Africans to compete globally in the free global market. Paul Frere seems to concur with this point when he says that a liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferable of information. The sound and authentic education is that which emphasizes dialogue; the teacher- of- the- students and the students- of- the- teacher relationship. This kind of education produces a learner who is a creator and not a creature.

5.2 A Holistic Education

Education has to make the person more of a human being because he is aware of his potentials as a human being and in a positive sense, life enhancing relationship with himself, his neighbor and the environment. Plato says that if we are to educate our young ones, the first thing is to consider what virtue is. And to him, virtue designates excellence, the excellence of anything, in any field whatsoever.

IV. FEATURES OF A LIBERATED PERSON AS A LEADER

An educated leader is he who becomes an active member of the society; gives a larger contribution to it and he is aware that, it is the society, which has educated him. As noted by Plato that a fully educated person possesses not only knowledge but also wisdom as well; and he will see the moral necessity of putting the wisdom of his knowledge into use for the common good of the society. Second, a leader should be able to fit into, to serve, the communities from which they come. Third, the liberated political leader is who uses his education properly for the benefit of the society not as a tool for the exploitation of others. Fourth, an educated political leader is a self-reliant person who can be creator and productive in the society, for the sake of his own community. Fifth, a liberated political leader is he who integrates himself with the masses, does not isolate himself from the community, and tries his level best to counteract the temptation of intellectual arrogance. Sixth, a liberated leader is he who fosters the social goals of living together, working together and having a sense of commitment to the total community. Seventh, a liberated political leader is he who has an acquiring mind; ability to learn from others and reject or adapts it. Eighth, a liberated political leader will attempt to find solutions to poverty, disease and ignorance in the same way as he rejects slavery, knowing that these destroy the humanity of man. Ninth, a liberated political leader is a self-reliant and creative person whom education has transformed him into an integral person, has received a holistic formation.

V. CONCLUSION

According to Plato, the most important solution towards the above-mentioned challenges is through education. Africa needs educated liberated leaders to do away with the above problems. Political turmoil in Africa can be compared with the state of a prison in the cave and valley. Plato used an example of enlightenment or escaped prisoner who liberates himself/herself and acquires a moral calling to go back to liberate others. After liberation, his/her role is to serve the common good of the society. The primary duty of the philosopher is to liberate a prisoner from the cave, from the shadows of unreality and to bring them into the realm of true being the world of ideas. Therefore, Africa requires ethical and servant leaders to serve. Plato offers theoretical framework of reconstructing education as a tool for liberation in Africa from political corruption. We need African leaders who are enlightened as philosopher kings or queens who at the service of the people. Africans should reform the education system to include values of servant leadership. More philosophical theories can be included in school curriculum to inculcate principles of responsible citizenry. Philosophers in Africa should engage with policy makers in education to have their views considered on how to make education liberative.

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