Botho/Ubuntu Philosophy: Education From Childhood To Adulthood In Africa

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Abstract: African communities continue to experience social disharmony and disunity which result in their inability to independently address their political, economic and moral challenges for the communal well-being. This paper argues on the need for the mainstreaming of Botho philosophy in education provision in African schools in order to instill harmony and well-being among the African learners from a tender age. This philosophy is of paramount importance in facilitating political stability, economic security and good moral standards. It is also important for promoting personal and spiritual development.

Key Words: Botho, political instability, economic insecurity, moral standards.

Introduction

The contemporary Africa is characterized by extreme poverty. In this article, the contemporary Africa must be understood to mean the sub-Saharan Africa. The extreme poverty is influenced by high prevalence of violence, crime and corruption, poverty related diseases, hatred, disunity and unethical political leadership, to mention a few (BOTHO PELE concept paper). All these prohibit the African political, economic and moral development. However, the existence of these vices does not mean that they are new in the contemporary Africa. They existed even in the traditional African communities. The difference is that they were manageable and low in the traditional Africa as compared to the contemporary Africa. The sole reason behind this difference is that Botho philosophy is no longer taught in traditional institutions by elders as it used to be the case with the traditional indigenous African communities. The existence of these vices unfolds the prevalence of moral degeneration which in turn has ultimately resulted in an unending political instability and economic insecurity. This calls for the need for moral regeneration through the teaching of Botho philosophy. It is on this basis that the paper addresses the question: How was Botho philosophy taught and lived in the traditional indigenous African communities and to what extent could it be the basis of the existing education system for the African development? The traditional teaching of Botho philosophy which happened within communities at home and initiation schools benefited both an individual and the community. Mosweunyane (2013:52) argues that, “the traditional schools were used to provide the necessary skills and knowledge that African societies needed for their survival”. This is indicative of the important role played by traditional institutions from childhood into adulthood by instilling to children/initiates moral values and preparing them for their future adult roles. On the contrary, Botho philosophy is no longer taught and lived neither for the benefit of individual Africans nor for Africa as a whole.

This paper argues that Botho philosophy should be taught from primary to tertiary schools to ascertain moral regeneration, political stability and economic security. It is worth noting that there has been an attempt by the Lesotho government through the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) to introduce a new curriculum bearing the following learning areas, among others: Personal, Spiritual and Social development (MoET, 2009). The aim of the curriculum is to connect learners to real life challenges such as unemployment, poverty, HIV and AIDS, environmental degradation, human rights and democracy, to mention a few. These challenges also appear in other national policies such as Vision 2020, Poverty Reduction Strategy as well as in Education Sector Strategic plan (Raselimo and Mahao, 2015:5). All these policies could be practical through the teaching of Botho philosophy. The question of Botho will be addressed in the following section.

The definition of Botho

According to Ramose (1999:40), Ubuntu is the basis of African philosophy. Ubuntu flows from African epistemology and ontology. Given that Ubuntu is the basis of African philosophy, African epistemology and ontology are the basis of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is understood to be used interchangeably with Botho. The term Botho will be used consistently in this paper. The term “Botho” has its original meaning and it should be understood as having the prefix BO and the suffix THO in Sesotho language. This is identical with the prefix UBU and the suffix NTU in Zulu language (Ramose, 1999:43). The concept of Botho has its roots in the concept of Motho which means a human being (Munyaka et al, 2013:64). Ramose concurs with Munyaka and defines a human being with the maxim: umuntu ngabantu which means motha ke motha ka batho in Sesotho language. In English language this means that; “to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and on that basis, establish humane relations with them” (Ramose, 1999: 42). Therefore, the establishment of humane relations is Botho (humanness). Humane relations are understood in terms of a continuous relation of interdependence and interconnectedness of individuals in a community. Murove (2013:29) observes that, “another dimension of African ethics where relationality is strongly expressed is in the conceptualization of a person as existing relatively in a perpetual state of dependence and interdependence”. According to Nussbaum (2013:100), the concept of Botho
defines cultural values such as compassion, reciprocity, harmony, humanity and dignity of community for the purpose of building and maintaining the wellbeing of the community. Eventually, these cultural values are attributed to Botho by their positive contribution to the wellbeing of both individuals and the community. From the above discussion, it could be concluded that the concept of Botho is defined as the African philosophy which is expressed in relational terms of dependence and interdependence of beings for the wellbeing of the community. The discussion will now extend to Botho philosophy and the notion of relatedness.

**Botho philosophy and the notion of relatedness**

Bujo (2001:3) emphasizes that, the African worldview (cosmology) is different from the Western worldview, hence their ethics as well. Generally speaking, ethics is concerned with answering the question of how human beings ought to lead their lives (May, 1998:4). In short, ethics is more concerned with human behavior in choosing between what is good or bad, right or wrong human behavior. These concepts of good or bad, right or wrong are very important in determining Botho. It is through these concepts that one could be regarded as a bad or a good person. For example, in the traditional Basotho (plural for Mosotho in the Lesotho population) community, the expression: “ke motho” is used to mean a good person. This expression is usually used when a person is honest, peaceful, respectful and polite towards other people (Ramose, 1999:43). On the contrary, the expression: “hase motho” is used to mean the opposite. This expression is used when a person is egoistic, cruel, dishonest and impolite towards other people (ibid). The difference between the African and Western ethics is basically that, on one hand the Western ethics is founded upon the rationality and autonomy of an individual. On the other hand, the foundation of African ethics is Botho demonstrated in a community. However, the conception of the rational and autonomy of an individual in the Western ethics does not mean that an individual does not exist in the African ethics but that, African ethics as compared to Western ethics sees everything related to man hence it is anthropocentric in nature (Mbiti 1996:68). The notion of relatedness is validated by the possession of force that exists in all natural beings. The possession of force must also be understood to mean possession of life. For this reason, natural beings are understood by Africans, as interrelated simply by virtue of their possession of force. If any of forces is endangered, the whole web of force is also endangered. This implies the interconnectedness of individual forces hence, humans are required to respect and live in harmony with each and every aspect of nature. Bujo (1998:22) argues that, “all natural forces depend on each other, so that human beings can live in harmony only in and with the whole of nature”. This is where the teaching of Botho philosophy through institutionalized processes becomes important. It is when learners are taught how to connect or relate with other beings in the hierarchy of forces. Furthermore, According to Tempels (1996:19), there is a huge difference between “Western” and “Bantu” worldviews. The difference is that; reality for Westerners is made up of “beings” while for Bantu is “forces”. In other words, for Westerners, “being” is separate and distinct from “force”. On the contrary, for Bantu, these two concepts – “being and force” are inseparable hence, identical to each other). Based on the above discussion, one can argue that all things have force/life that is interrelated and interconnected with other beings. That is to say, life is shared among beings. For example, a forest cannot exist on its own but, its existence depends on some other things such as air, water and sunlight. In this regard, the forest forms part of the web of force/life. This justifies the importance of Botho philosophy for the promotion of interdependence and interconnectedness of beings. The web of life can even extend to include spirits such as ancestors and the “unborn”. Ancestors can influence the present generation through their experience, teachings, suffering and wisdom. Bujo (1998:55) emphasizes that, “(...) African communitarian ethics functions in solidarity with the deceased, who remain alive among their descendants through their experience, wisdom and suffering”. In this regard, the web of life possessed by individual beings is understood in relatedness to all natural beings hence, the African worldview could be described as life-centered. It is further argued that the African worldview does not separate an individual human being from other things that form part of existence such as God, ancestors, other human beings, animals, plants and non-living beings respectively. This suggests that, for an individual human being to be valued as fully human, s/he should belong to the community. For example, the idea of communal belonging of an individual human being is found in the Basotho ontology of an individual which says: “motho ke motho ka batho”. Therefore, Botho philosophy is humaneness demonstrated in a community and this is what characterizes African Philosophy (Ramose, 1999:40). Botho philosophy emphasizes more on the importance of an individual in a communal life. An individual is understood to be equally important as long as that individual human being works towards the well-being of the community rather than to be egocentric. Individuals are considered independent but they also have a moral obligation to respect other human beings as well as non-living beings. Ramose (1999:111) observes that a human being, “(...) is truly human only in a context of actual relations with other human beings including the natural environment”. Indeed, the learning areas of personal, spiritual and social development mentioned in the Lesotho Curriculum and Assessment Policy require the knowledge of this relationship between an individual and the community. The equal importance of an individual in a community is realized through the Sesotho expression which says; “ha le fetse khomo le je motho”. The meaning of the expression is that;

(...) if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being then one should choose to preserve the life of another human being (Ramose, 1999:114).

This says that, in a community, there is mutual care between individual human beings. For example, egoistic accumulation of wealth is not a priority. The normative emphasis on Botho philosophy and community that are prerequisites for leading a moral life in a community is expressed in many Sesotho maxims. For example, in good governance, there is a Sesotho expression which says,
Morena ke Morena ka batho" which means, "a King without the people is neither the symbol nor the reality of kingship" (Ramose, 1999:116). This means that the king has a moral obligation to rule in consultation and consent of the people. Concerning work and means of production where duties and responsibilities are bestowed in a community, a typical example is of the traditional Basotho community. In this community, agriculture was done through communal labor (letsema) where people served the chief and each other to cultivate fields. A field of a chief was known as ts’imo-khole which means a wide field in English language. It was cultivated by people collectively to produce food for the needy. During the time of hoeing and harvest, all people were dedicated to their communal duties and came to work at ts’imo-khole with their tools and food (Jingoes: 1975:173). Matsema (plural of Letsema) were used to instill the spirit of cooperation among people and this is an important attribute of Botho philosophy. With this, it is of great significance to acknowledge that Botho philosophy was demonstrated through active communal participation which ensured political stability and economic security for the common good. The concept of the common good must be understood as the good from which all individual beings benefit. Then, it logically follows that when the common good has been attained, the individual good is also attained hence there is no need for individual human beings to resist working for the common good since it ensures and guarantees basic needs for all members of the community. Nyerere 1996:298), notes that “If the tribe prospered all the members of the tribe shared in its prosperity”). The spirit of prosperity which is another attribute of Botho philosophy was instilled in children through the traditional African indigenous education system. Having discussed Botho philosophy and the notion of relatedness, it suffices to discuss the teaching of Botho philosophy through the traditional African indigenous education system.

The teaching of Botho philosophy through the Traditional African Indigenous Education System

The traditional education system of Botho was very instrumental in building and shaping a person who will be significantly beneficial to his/her society (Mosweunyane, 2013:50). On one hand, the Western education system is associated with the ability of knowing how to read and write. On the other hand, the traditional African indigenous education system is associated with the inability of knowing how to read and write. In the light of these two forms of education, those who underwent the Western education system are regarded by modern societies as more educated than those who did not and this is subject to a serious debate. In the context of the traditional African indigenous education system, the educated are those who are skilled, respectful, honest, cooperative and abide by the social order (Higgs, 2003:15). The traditional African indigenous education system was not done through writing but was verbally active. It was a form of education by which, knowledge was passed orally from elders to children through the instructional and practical processes. It was instructional because children were not allowed chance to question what was taught. For an example, a question of why one is taught how to do farming was irrelevant. It was also practical because children learnt by watching and doing for acquiring skills in art work, domestic work and farming to mention a few. Teaching was also done through the use of songs, legends, stories and riddles (Mosweunyane, 2013:51). Out of these, children learnt the African inherited knowledge, skills, cultural norms, values and all formed part of Botho philosophy. Skills acquired prepared children to be productive through self-employment. This form of education was relevant to the needs of the community hence it was a community based education aiming at solving concrete moral, political and economic problems. The traditional African indigenous education system was used to introduce children to real life issues for the purpose of solving their individual and social problems. By introducing children to real life issues, this prepared boys and girls by equipping them with the skills suitable for their gender since they were to play different roles in the society after marriage. For example, boys were prepared on how to become heads of their families, farmers and warriors to mention a few. Likewise, girls were prepared on how to care for their families.

Thus from about the age of six, the young girl would be taught how to clean the house, make fire and prepare the various meals. At the later stage she would learn mother-care from the mother or older women, while the young boy would begin to pick up the father’s profession (McWilliam et al, 1975:3).

The African inherited knowledge of skills, norms and values that were passed from elders to children through the traditional African indigenous education system really benefited the traditional Africa in two observable ways. First, it helped children to acquire skills that prepared them to use their natural talents properly in order to meet their basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing. Consequently, skills acquired were effectively put into practice hence children became self-employed and self-reliant. This implies that children were useful members of the traditional African society due to their ability to address the problem of unemployment which is a basic cause of dependence on other nations by many African countries today. Second, it also benefited children by teaching them communal over individual values and virtues. The most celebrated virtue was the respect for the elders and equals. This virtue was taught before the initiation ceremony and it was intended to induce personality and good character in children. Before the initiation, lessons were given for the development of the right character and personality. McWilliams et al (1975:3), notes that: “The elders would instill the concept of the respect for old age”. It was due to this virtue of respect that children were easily taught and the communal labor was done without any criticism coming from them. It then goes without questioning that all other individual and communal virtues such as patriotism, peace and justice and others followed the virtue of respect. It was through the traditional African indigenous education system that the teaching of Botho philosophy was relevant and successful in creating virtuous members of the traditional African society. Given that this education system was undertaken informally from elders to children, it became a life-long hence a sustainable form of education that was also affordable and accessible to all community members. In other words, it was education for all. Since it was
education accessible and affordable by all members of the community, it made all members of the community to be self-employed and self-reliant without depending on the mercy of foreign aid. In this regard, the traditional African communities were able to independently solve their real life challenges through the teaching of Botho philosophy. It logically follows that the traditional African indigenous education system had its strengths as well as weaknesses; hence it is now good enough to discuss its weaknesses.

Weaknesses of the Traditional African Indigenous Education System

It has been mentioned above that the traditional African education system was a verbal form of education. This means that the inherited knowledge and skills were orally imparted from elders to children. Furthermore, children learnt by watching and doing without writing anything and they were prevented from critically reflecting on what was taught. In this regard, professional philosophers such as Hountondji realize the weaknesses of lack of writing and critical reflection on African philosophy. They see the need of writing and critical reflection as a prerequisite of African philosophy. Hountondji (1984:33) argues that, “By ‘African philosophy’ I mean a set of texts specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves”. This suggests that the weakness of not preserving the inherited knowledge and skills in a form of writing for future use is potentially dangerous to the African philosophy such as Botho philosophy. However, some philosophers such as Oruka object that writing is a precondition for philosophy. Oruka (1996:181) observes that,

*Writing is a good way to store thought and so to store philosophy. But writing in not thinking and philosophy is thinking, and one can think even if one is incapable of or has no facilities for writing.*

On the other hand, the practice of prohibiting children from asking critical questions on what was taught prevented children from developing critical and analytical minds. On this issue, professional philosophers concur that critical reflection is necessary. According to Ochieng’-Odhiambo (1996:74), representatives of professional philosophy argue that African philosophy must involve critical reflection. This implies that the denial of children to reflect critically on what was taught was a serious problem on the part of children and the development of African philosophy. In this regard, these two major weaknesses suggest that Botho philosophy and Africa as a whole could have been long developed if it was written and children were allowed to reflect critically and analytically on what was taught. Given that the traditional African indigenous education system had weaknesses, it is necessary to discuss the significance of the teaching of Botho philosophy from primary to tertiary schools in Africa where writing and critical reflection are basic requirements.

The significance of the teaching of Botho philosophy from primary to tertiary schools in Africa

One would expect that when the colonial governments and Missionaries arrived in Africa with their Western education system, they would continue with the teaching of Botho philosophy. On the contrary, they taught their worldview and philosophy which aimed at civilizing Africans (Mosweunyane, 2013:54). This alien education to Africa excluded the teaching of Botho philosophy which was embedded in the traditional African system. Consequently, Africans started to be unable to independently solve their real life challenges due to the alien Western philosophy containing a new worldview. The inability continues even in the contemporary Africa. Now, the question arises, is it possible for Africa to dissociate itself from the prevailing Western education system? The answer to the question is no because the whole world has become a global village where cultures have merged (Welsch: 2004). According to Mosweunyane (2013: 57), Africa will never escape from the Western education system that has been globalized but it is left with an option of using it in the manner that it can address moral, intellectual, political and economic interests of Africa. In other words the Western education system can significantly play a vital role in preserving, strengthening and educating Botho philosophy. Moreover, the Western education system could also be used in order to allow students to critically reflect on Botho philosophy. The writing and critical reflection of Botho philosophy will result in its development and spreading in Africa and beyond. In this manner, the teaching of Botho philosophy through the current education system will facilitate political stability, economic security and good moral standards in Africa. It will also promote personal and spiritual development of Afri cans. Therefore, it is exclusively important to urgently teach Botho philosophy from primary to tertiary schools in Africa.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that Botho philosophy should be taught from primary to tertiary schools in Africa since it emphasizes on the importance of relatedness, interdependence and interconnectedness between an individual and the community. The community is the hierarchy of forces which starts from God down to ancestors, human beings, animals, plants and inanimate respectively. Botho philosophy is demonstrated in a community and realized through active participation of individual human beings in a community for the well-being of the community. The teaching of Botho philosophy from childhood to adulthood in Africa will be important for facilitating political stability, economic security and good moral standards.

References


