

Tempering Irele's "In Praise of Alienation"

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Abstract

In response to Africa's tragic predicament, Abiola Irele advocates the emulation of Western science and technology, employing Hegelian alienation as a means of African development. However, this approach tends to overlook the significant difference between Hegelian primal Spirit and the condition of Africa. This article contends that while Irele claims it to be a pragmatic alternative to African development, it inadvertently risks reinforcing Eurocentrism and undermines efforts towards African cultural revitalisation and emancipation. Whatever its pragmatic purpose may be, Africa's self-alienation is methodologically, epistemologically and historically a failure in African context. For this reason, the article suggests a hybrid approach that acknowledges Africa's unique context. Specifically, it posits that Africa's progress needs not self-alienation but liberation from it. This act of liberation should involve decolonization-cum-selective appropriation, emphasizing the cultivation of indigenous cultural and scientific practices alongside creative adaptation of Western science and technology.

Keywords: Abiola Irele and the Praise of Alienation, African Development, Cultural Nationalism, Decolonization, Negritude, Weak Analogy.

Introduction

Postcolonial philosophical discourses on African development are responses to European colonial justificatory claims and the havoc wreaked on Africa. They have been intended to serve as Africa's self-defense and rebuttal mechanisms against Eurocentric denigration of Africa. Emmanuel C. Eze has noted that "the contemporary practice of African philosophy is driven by the brutal encounter of the African world with European modernity—an encounter epitomized in colonial phenomenon" (1997, 4). This implies that African philosophy is a reactive postcolonial enterprise. Some of the reactive discourses have aligned themselves with the move of Eurocentrism, and others have pinned all their hopes on African cultural nationalism to bring an end to Africa's predicament. Edward Wilmot Blyden, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor are among the key founding fathers of cultural nationalism. Therefore, a brief excursion into the ideas of these three figures is worthwhile to make out the kernel of cultural nationalism. Blyden claimed that there were times when Europe was devoid of holy sentiments, and there will be a time when Europe once again sits on the knee of Africa to revive the basic elements of faith and moral order (1905). Césaire also eulogized African culture and tradition. He asserted the dynamic, spiritual, and the organic character

of Negritude as an expression of African identity, as opposed to the attribution of blindness and passivity to Africa by the West (2013). Likewise, Senghor argued for the revival of the indigenous cultural values to reclaim the lost authentic African identity (1974). We can infer from the above claims that the affirmation of African culture and tradition is a way of resistance and emancipation. It is a way of self-consciousness. It serves as a springboard for Africa's development. Building on Boyd Shafer's understanding of cultural nationalism, Joel Adeyinka Adedeji defined it as a "consciousness for a national movement to retrieve a lost cultural identity and re-orientate the people towards a new image of themselves" (1985, 432). Cultural nationalism, in its most basic sense, is a self-conscious movement to extricate Africa from their colonial and postcolonial predicaments. It can be considered a comprehensive strategy to counter colonial and neocolonial hegemony and the denigration of the African people through the exhumation and reinvention of indigenous cultures and traditions.

This paper examines Abiola Irele's influential article titled "In Praise of Alienation" which was published in 1992. There she asserted alienation as a viable approach to African development. Disenchanted with the romanticization of cultural nationalism and its organic imagery of Africa's past, Irele employs the method of Western civilization to address Africa's enduring predicament. For him, Africa must exercise self-alienation to achieve its development. To be more precise, she argues that Africa must undergo Hegelian self-alienation to learn and emulate the spirit of Western science and technology and thereby to alleviate its ambivalent situation and alienation from world prosperity (1992).¹ However, I want to suggest that decolonization is more pragmatic than alienation to mitigate Africa's predicament. I will attempt to critically analyze the viability of alienation to end Africa's predicament—which includes a range of sociocultural, political, and economic problems and dilemmas confronting African societies, arising from colonialism and neocolonialism together with internal constraints, despite the continent's rich resources. Therefore, Irele's defense of alienation is examined from a methodological, epistemological, and historical point of view. Furthermore, I argue that in her defense of alienation—to imitate Western science and technology at the expense of Africa's tradition and cultural values—Irele is embroiled implicitly in scientific Eurocentrism. My intention is not to condemn Irele's effort and aspiration for Africa to emulate the scientific Spirit of European science and technology, nor is it to blame her for abandoning tradition and culture. Instead, it is to emphatically point out that decolonization, along with the cultivation of indigenous knowledge and creative adaptation of Western science, is an effective approach to mitigate Africa's ambivalent conditions and alienation.

Discussing Irele's "In Praise of Alienation" may seem anachronistic and insignificant to some, but neglecting it would be a critical scholarly mistake. According to Tejumola Olaniyan, Irele stands as one of the giants in postcolonial discourse, deserving a central place in our discussions due to her unique literary prowess and impactful contributions to postcolonial discourse (2019). However,

¹The term alienation in its positive sense, as used by Hegel and Irele, is the moving principle of self-consciousness. The Self has to alienate itself from itself and project itself toward the other to become conscious of itself and of others.

just as the positive contributions of these giants can have profound effects, so too can their mistakes carry adverse consequences. This paper will be useful to correct these mistakes. Furthermore, despite the passage of time since the publication of Irele's article, the African predicament remains almost unchanged and African intellectuals are still deeply divided on the method of Africa's development, underscoring the timeliness and importance of engaging with her work. Additionally, the prevalence of complementary literature alone eclipsed her outstanding contribution, arresting the momentum of the debate in postcolonial discourses. This paper will stimulate the debate on African development by challenging the dominant trend. Finally, it will pinpoint a new alternative for African development.

The paper is organized in the following manner. First, Irele's arguments in defense of alienation are outlined. Specifically, the kind of alienation which he advocated and her critique of cultural nationalism, as presented in her "In Praise of Alienation," are explicated precisely. Then, I set forth my tripartite counterarguments to show the misguidedness and impracticality of the method of self-alienation in African context. To this end, Irele's method of alienation is demonstrated to be a unique form of Eurocentrism. Following this, the nature of science is explained because Irele's conception of science is, I believe, the premise upon which "her" Eurocenterism is based, and the concept of scientific progress is disentangled from that of human progress. Furthermore, the inapplicability of the method of Hegelian alienation in African context is asserted, given that Hegelian primal mind and the African condition are fundamentally dissimilar due to epistemological and historical reasons. In short, Irele's choice of Hegelian alienation as a means of African development is based on a weak analogy. Moreover, decolonization along with creative adaptation is presented as a viable and pragmatic approach to Africa's predicament and development. Here, I argued that the scientific spirit inheres in African cultures, though eclipsed by colonial incursion. The idea is that decolonization and revitalization of indigenous cultures and scientific practices must precede the appropriation of Western technology. Additionally, a brief rebuttal to potential counterarguments will be provided. Finally, the conclusion follows with a cautionary claim that any effort to assuage Africa's predicament and to take forward its progress must begin by disapproving alienation.

The Argument of "In Praise of Alienation"

Africa's encounter with Europe resulted in radical cultural deprivation. Irele states that imperialism and colonialism created a "profound ambivalence" and disruption of African societies and traditional culture (1992, 202). The ambivalence, she continues to assert, is that "traditional pre-colonial culture and way of life continue to exist as reality...in a forced march, dictated by the demands of modern scientific and technological civilization. And Western civilization provides the paradigm of modernity which we now aspire" (IRELE 1992, 202). In responding to this ambivalence, cultural nationalism endeavors to revive pre-colonial African cultural values and tradition. Irele criticized this point scathingly for two

fundamental and interrelated reasons.² First, she claims that cultural nationalism risks “the refusal of history [which] is a failure to recognize the radical discontinuity between the pre-colonial past and the present direction of African life” (IRELE 1992, 206). The cultural basis of the current African existential condition is Western in character. Cultural nationalism repudiates the historical fact that the African Past radically differs from its present life-orientation. This repudiation, Irele argues, is due to inability and unwillingness to see:

...the epochal character of colonialism.... The colonial experience was not an interlude in African history.... It marked a sea change of the historical process in Africa; it effected a qualitative reordering of life. It has rendered the traditional way of life no longer a viable option for our continued existence and apprehension of the world. (1992, 207)

An irrevocable and terrible cultural transformation(alienation) befell Africa during colonialism. The colonial condition thrust postcolonial Africa into a dilemmatic impasse wherein neither rejecting nor accepting Western culture nor reverting to pre-colonial African culture is viable. Second, Irele disparages the romantic/organic/ attitude of cultural nationalism, i.e., its static view of culture, and claims about the uniqueness and superiority of the pre-colonial African culture (1992, 208-209). Indulgence in cultural nationalism cannot extricate Africa from its predicament. Quite the opposite, it left African in a state of intellectual and moral bankruptcy. Culture and traditions, Irele believes, cannot help Africa’s effort to get out of its predicament nor can they cope with the reality of modern life. Instead, the claims of cultural nationalism “unfit us mentally for the urgent tasks we have...to create a new and viable society” (1992, 213).

Irele proclaims that her intention is not to “bury traditional culture” nor “sing the praises of Western civilization” (1992, 219) but to go beyond the trap of cultural pietism in search of a “new spirit of adventure fired by a modern imagination; a new state of mind” that can turn the current African condition of alienation into an advantage (1992, 214). Furthermore, she strongly argues that the positive sense of alienation is a condition for the fulfillment of the mind, its self-recognition and self-development. It is an instrumental stage of self-consciousness. In cultural terms, it implies a willed movement out of the Self and a purposive quest for a new horizon of life and experience. Thus, it is a practical necessity that Africa’s development requires self-alienation: Africa has to alienate itself “in the direction of Western culture and civilization”, i.e., Western science and technology (IRELE 1992, 214-215). Alienation, in this context, represents the condition in which consciousness estranges itself from itself in order to encounter other consciousnesses, thereby acquiring self-knowledge. It is a process of self-detachment for the sake of understanding and development. Alienation, as Irele conceives it, refers to Africa’s epistemological and methodological imperative

² Cilas Kemedjio suggests that Irele’s defense of alienation represents “the anxieties expressed by an entire generation [of black renaissance cultural movements] in the face of the collapse of the dreams sparked by the anticolonial struggles” (2019, 2). It is an admonition to the bandwagon support of African scholars for the unproductive cultural nationalism.

to abandon its cultural preoccupations in favor of imitating Western science and technology in order to achieve prosperity. But, is not embracing alienation a form of Eurocentrism? Does technological advancement require abandoning indigenous culture?

Shortcomings of Irele's Argument and Counterarguments

Irele's Complicity in Eurocentrism

As already indicated, Irele claimed that Africa should imitate and import the *spirit* of European science. Africa has no choice but to adopt the mindset of Europe and willingly follow in the direction of European development. Self-alienation is a viable means of Africa's development. However, this is an insidious intellectual engagement in line with the myths of Eurocentrism. One of the myths of Eurocentrism is the belief that Western culture, along with its science, is the only model for all other human cultures and sciences. David Hume, Immanuel Kant, George Hegel, Levy Bruhl, Edward Tylor and other modernization theorists can be enlisted in the register of Eurocentric scholars. Irele engages in an unconditional defense of alienation for the sake of Western culture and science. D.A. Masolo claims that Irele's "defense [of alienation] was expressed in the imitation of the dominant Western culture as the validation standard" (1994, 40). Additionally, Irele's "In Praise of Alienation" goes little further than the cultural nationalism of Négritude, which he bitterly criticized for its *refusal of history* and its complicity in Eurocentrism. The criticism that Senghorian Négritude is a form of cooperation with colonial ideology and discourse can be applied to Irele's defense of alienation.³ As Senghor accepts the emotivity of African personality attributed by self-arrogating Western scholars and writers, Irele avows to model completely Africa's scientific civilization on European science. Irele is hoisted with her own petard of the critique of cultural nationalism.

I do not condemn Irele's aspiration for Africa to emulate Western science and technology. I also understand Irele's fierce indignation and agony at Africa's disproportionate lags behind the Western world. However, a wholesale imitation of Western science while abandoning one's own culture is totally unacceptable and counterproductive. It cannot end Africa's predicament. It will be an intricate complicity with Eurocentrism. Irele's undeclared but persistent complicity in Eurocentrism is due to his refusal to accept the multiculturalism of science, to discern scientific progress from human progress, and to acknowledge the dissimilarity of Africa's condition and the original condition of Hegelian Spirit. Is Western science the only model of science? Does scientific progress designate human progress (development)? Is the condition of the African mind sufficiently analogous to that of the Hegelian Spirit? To answer these questions and debunk Irele's failure of refusal to acknowledge his complicity in Eurocentrism, I will elaborate on the nature of science, human progress, and the alleged equivalence between the African mind and Hegelian Spirit.

³ Irele states that radical critics accused Senghorian Négritude of collaboration with colonialism, even though she does not subscribe to this position (1992, 213).

The Nature of Science: Misidentification of Scientific Progress with Human Progress

Irele is fascinated by the methodological, epistemological, and theoretical soundness, objectivity, and success of Western science. For this reason, he deemed it to be an archetype of Africa's scientific and technological practices. But Western science is just one of the many scientific practices upon which historical luck bestows success over others. Sandra Harding's claim encapsulates this point. She argued that all scientific claims and assumptions are local production; *universality*, *objectivity* and *rationality* are not "transcultural" *raison d'être* of science. And modern sciences are "ethnoscience" (1997, 45). Messaye Kebede also notes that the identification of *rationality* and *universality* with Western science is just a manifestation of "Western idiosyncrasy," which is untenable primarily because "all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is a construction." And the doctrine of "objective reality" is a human construction (2004, 18). Moreover, scientific progress is not human progress.

Human progress refers to the progress of all aspects of human life. As Max Horkheimer correctly pointed out, 'it [scientific progress] is above all an auxiliary means of production, one element among many in the social process; [it does not necessarily mean the realization of humanity]' (2004, 40-41). Another scholar also notes that "[human] civilization is progress in human personality" (Placide TEMPELS 1969, 171-2: qtd in Tsenay SEREQUEBERHAN 2002, 78). As a result, human progress should be all-encompassing. In line with this, Denis Goulet states that authentic development is an integral 'ascent of all men and societies in their total humanity'. It must emancipate people from the 'thrall of misery' and meet their necessities (Denis GOULET 1972: cited in Karl De SCHWEINITZ 1973, 718). This implies that development involves moral, political, cultural, economic, technological, and spiritual excellence and the emancipation of society. Furthermore, Amartya Sen defines development as the "expanding of freedom" and the "removal of major sources of unfreedom" (2003, 3). Human progress encompasses multidimensional advancement in all societies, as noted by Horkheimer, Tempels, Goulet and Sen. It involves holistic advancement of individuals and societies, freeing them from suffering and meeting basic needs across moral, political, cultural, economic, technological, and spiritual dimensions. Scientific and technological advancement serves only to extend the depth and frontiers of these dimensions. It is against this truth that Irele claims for the alienation of African cultural traditions and values in favor of the imitation of Western science and technology. Therefore, given that we endeavor to foster human development, Western science is not the only legitimate scientific practice, and technological advancement is only an aspect of human development, the exclusive focus on Western science and technology would lead to self-abandonment and, self-pauperization. Similarly, the doctrine of Africa's self-alienation in the direction of Western science and technology will not be methodologically and logically sound.

Weak Analogy: The Inapplicability of Alienation

Irele's selection of alienation as a means to end Africa's predicament emanates partly from her mistake in making analogy between the alienation of Hegelian

Spirit and that of the African mind⁴. However, there is a glaring discrepancy between the two Minds; the difference lies in the nature of their alienation. The Hegelian world spirit alienates itself, i.e., distances itself, to get out of its alienation in nature, which we may call original alienation.⁵ This original alienation is positive, necessary and inevitable in the historical process of the development of the Spirit towards self-consciousness. In contrast, the African mind alienates itself to escape not only its alienation in nature but also the alienation resulting from its encounter with Europe and colonialism, which we may term as derivative alienation.⁶ The alien (European) culture has already suffused African values. The African mindset is bizarrely and forcefully interwoven with the European mindset. In other words, unlike the Hegelian primal mind, which is entirely unconscious of the other mind and immaculate in its initial movement towards self-consciousness, the African mind is not purely unconscious of the European mind. George Hegel states that at its initial stage, consciousness is a “sheer undifferentiated” entity. And in its “desire” to know itself, it negates itself and others (2019, 90). Each consciousness became aware of the other and itself through reciprocal recognition, as typified by master and slave relationship. In contrast, African mind is already colored by the imprint of Western culture. Moreover, what is pressing in this sense for the African mind in the current situation is the derivative alienation that is incurred upon Africa by colonialism. Africa is already in self-alienation. If so, the use of alienation as a means of development would end up in wishing Africa’s predicament away and in complete failure. Even if alienation works, it should not be applied to the mind to imitate the work of others but to invent a work of its own. However, Irele’s alienation refers to imitation, specifically the imitation of the European scientific practice. Mere imitation does not take Africa out of its agonizing predicament. Therefore, Irele’s project of alienation is methodologically unfeasible and perhaps backfires. The methodological failure of alienation as a means to develop Africa is matched by its epistemological and historical bankruptcy.

Epistemologically, alienation involves distancing oneself and approaching other *Selves*. Self-consciousness presupposes one’s consciousness of others. This implies that the knowledge of others, at least an encounter with the other, logically

⁴ In her review of Irele’s “In Praise of Alienation”, Richard Bjornson remarked by way of conclusion on Irele’s questionable analogy as follows: “How valid is the analogy between Rome and Europe, on the one hand, and Europe and Africa, on the other?” (1989,144).

⁵ Gavin Rae tells us that, for Hegel, “consciousness does not immediately understand that it is composed of a subjective and an objective aspect and that these are unified by spirit [i.e., consciousness is consciousness *of the object* and *consciousness of itself*]. Because consciousness initially takes its object to be something strictly other than itself, it initially maintains that an aspect of itself is purely other than itself. It is, in other words, alienated from itself” (2011,143).

⁶ The term original and derivative are used to indicate ontological condition of alienation, not their magnitude and severity. While the former is one necessary step in the epistemic metamorphosis of the mind, the latter is negative, ruinous, and more akin to Marxian alienation.

precedes self-knowledge. How can a being unaware of itself know the other first and foremost? At most, the “I” must know itself first. Cartesian epistemology is worth mentioning. Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” tells us that the “I” logically as well as historically knows first “itself” and it is only later that the “I” comes to be aware of the other minds. At least, it must be aware of itself and other concurrently, as typified by African metaphysics of personhood.⁷ It states that a person is a person because of the other person. Mogobe Ramose avers 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” (2002,42). A single human being cannot be a human being without recognizing, and being recognized by, others. African Self is relational. The relational self, in this sense, does not detach itself from itself in order to attach itself to others and rejoin itself. It is already with others. Here we should be careful of the fine line between Hegelian conception of self-affirmation, as typified by master-slave relationship, and African personhood. African personhood does not put an ontological divide between the ‘I’ and the other. The ‘I’ is not a quarrelsome and dissociated entity. For this reason, its self-affirmation does not require self-estrangement and a brutal encounter with the other. It ontologically exists as a Heideggerian “Being-with”. Martin Heidegger affirms that Dasein is ontologically “Being-with” others (1996, 107). She made a distinction between the ontic structure of Dasein (what a being is) and its ontological structure (how a Being behave). Following him, my emphasis here is on how an African exists, but not what an African is. Epistemologically, it is conscious of both itself and others. From this point of view, Irele’s proposal that Africa’s alienates from itself and its values to imitate Western science and technology is impractical.

Historically, alienation occurred in colonialism and neo-colonialism. It is clear that during colonialism, Africa was conquered, enslaved, and systematically trapped to accept Western values. In other words, in the name of *modernity/civilizing mission*, Africa was forced to alienate itself, to *distance itself*. As the heir of colonialism, neocolonialism has kept Africa under constant alienation through its pauperising systems. V.Y. Mudimbe avers that:

The underdevelopment of dependencies is not only the absence of development but also an organizational structure created under colonialism by bringing non-Western territory into the capitalist world...colonialism inevitably led to the colonizing structure responsible for producing marginal societies, cultures and human beings. (1988,16-17)

Neocolonialism has continued to enforce the colonial exploitive capitalist system through its executive arms of financial institutions, development agencies, NGOs, and other international arrangements. However, neither colonialism nor neocolonialism succeeded in their respective *civilizing/ development mission*,

⁷It is clear that epistemological claims are closely related to metaphysical claims.

although they did well in the process of keeping Africa under alienation.⁸ Furthermore, there is only striking distance between African Self and its culture, while the distance between African Self and alien (others' culture) is not negligible. It is easier to project oneself into one's mindset than into the mindset of others. It is easier to cultivate one's culture than to plant, domesticate, and cultivate the values of the alien culture. Thus, Africa should turn inward and examine its values rather than alienate itself from its values to appropriate Western scientific spirit. Generally, alienation—whether self-alienation of Africa as conceived by Irele or alienation of Africa by Europe—as a method of scientific progress is not practical in the condition of Africa. Therefore, the appropriation of Western science and technology must be preceded by decolonization. Indeed, I do not mind if they can be done concurrently. In line with this, in somewhat different phraseology, Adeshina Afolayan maintained that African modernity can be meaningful if there is a “renegotiation of ethnophilosophical reason” and “valorization of science and technology” (2018,4). African development can be achieved through a critical appropriation of both indigenous culture and science and technology without subscribing to either romantic enchantment with culture or technoscientific Eurocenterism.

Decolonization-cum-Creative Adaptation As Pragmatic Alternative

The development of the already-alienated Africa demands not self-alienation but emancipation for both theoretical and practical purposes. We need recognition of our alienation, as commented by Bekele Gutema, during a seminar presentation on the ideas of “In Praise of Alienation”.⁹ Nevertheless, we do not need self-alienation for our alienation. We need decolonization to address our alienation while being cognizant of its lingering effects and undeniability as a historical happening. We have to go beyond the praise and recognition of our alienation; we have need to take emancipatory action that establishes a solid mental foundation. I believe that decolonization will do the emancipatory practice. Kwasi Wiredu defines decolonization as:

the elimination from our thoughts of modes of conceptualisation [or “undue influences”] that came to us through colonisation and remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to reflective choices...that African philosophy, both in gestation and dissemination, is done mostly in western languages. (2002,56)

Though it is fundamental and necessary, decolonization should not be confined to Wiredu's *conceptual-cum-linguistic* level. It should go beyond the discourse of

⁸ I do not intend to blame Africa's underdevelopment totally on colonialism and neocolonialism, even if they inflicted significant harm. It is to indicate that alienation as a means of Africa's techno-science development is doomed to failure.

⁹ In 2016, I was attending my second degree in Philosophy at Addis Ababa University. Professor Bekele Gutema was delivering the course *Critical and Postcolonial Social theory*. I was assigned by him to do a reflection on Irele's “In Praise of alienation”.

intellectual circles and affect ordinary people. That is to say, the task of emancipation should not be restricted to sifting the *undue influences* on *conceptual frameworks* of intellectual languages. It should include the cultural, moral, political, ideological and economic dimensions of the life of the societies. Thus, decolonization of the alienated mind and society is necessary and expedient. Similarly, the process of decolonization should involve self-understanding because self-understanding is essential to understand another's culture. Consistent with this, Richard Bell states that knowing the experience of others requires "looking into ourselves for some analogous experience" (1997,200). Moreover, learning and importing the scientific spirit of Europe, as aspired by Irele, is possible after we understand and cultivate Africa's traditional scientific practices and values, thus preparing a fertile ground for plantation and cultivation. Therefore, decolonization -cum-self-understanding is important for the process of what Claude Sumner termed as "creative incorporation" of Western scientific spirit (2004,180).¹⁰ Otherwise, any attempt to imitate and import any part of scientific practice without making the hosting field smooth and fertile would be like sowing a grain of maize on arid soil in which they will start to bud but do not grow well and set their seeds.

To be clear, what I criticized is Irele's postulation of Africa's self-alienation as a viable means of imitating and importing Western science and technology. The primary task of African scholars should be to thoroughly explore the African mental landscape to creatively adapt Western scientific spirit in African intellectual and cultural soil. We must cultivate indigenous cultures and scientific practices intensively in tandem with decolonization. If the indigenous (host) culture is barren and non-adaptive, it would be the case that either the host culture will be engulfed by the imported science and culture and hence the death of the root culture, or the imported science and culture will die before their adaptation and growth. Therefore, decolonized cultural and intellectual frameworks should precede the acquisition of Western technologies. Kwame Gyekye says:

Ideally, technology [and science], as a cultural product, should rise from the culture of a people, if it is directly accessible to a large section of a population and if its nuances are to be fully appreciated by them...one approach to creating modern technology in developing country is to upgrade or improve existing traditional technologies. (1997,7)

Science and technology are cultural in their origins. Cultures and traditions have scientific practices and spirit. The question is how to cultivate them. Hence, what Africa lacks is not the scientific practice, but the cultivation and systematization of such a practice. Gyekye is again worth quoting:

¹⁰ In her description of the method of Ethiopian philosophy, Sumner states that "creative incorporation" which is a characteristic of "The Ethiopian Response" to "outside" influences has come to its peak in Zera Yacob. The incorporation has become an identification, so that the "outside" has been transformed into the "inside" (2004,179-180).

[The problem with Africa is not lack of scientific spirit but insufficient attention to science]....This attention to science is considered appropriate in view of the fact that lack of technological advancement, to the ossified state in which the techniques of production found themselves, in the traditional setting of Africa and, in many ways, even in colonial and postcolonial Africa, is certainly attributable to the incomprehensible inattention to the search for scientific principles by the traditional technologists.(1997,26)

We must revive neglected African scientific practices. We must be conscious of the logics of indigenous science and technologies from which we are alienated because of historical misfortune. Therefore, self-conscious decolonization and creative adaptation of Western science and technology will be effective means of ending Africa's predicament and fostering its development. In order to strengthen this position, potential counterarguments will be addressed in the following few paragraphs.

To begin with my critique of Irele's argument in defense of alienation might be viewed as an uncharitable interpretation—she is not totally opposed to engaging in African traditions and cultures, but stresses conscious engagement with alienation to realize African development. I also believe that Irele's opposition is not out of contempt for tradition and culture as such. However, in the first instance, she invited African intellectuals to totally alienate themselves in favor of Western culture and civilization, which bear the spirit of science. By doing so, she advocated Eurocenterism in the name of comprehending the spirit of western science, including western culture—the soil wherein science germinated, grew up and come of age. Additionally, she asserted the “epochal character of colonialism,” which rendered African tradition and culture insignificant for today's Africa, and hence we should not waste our time on African traditions and culture. Clearly, Irele wanted Africa's forced alienation to come to its logical conclusion—total alienation, which amounts to total rejection of indigenous cultures. Does alienation matter whether forced or consciously chosen?

Furthermore, my critique of Irele's method of alienation may be construed as indulgence in the eulogy of indigenous culture and values. However, I just claimed for careful appropriation of Western science and technology as well as African cultures and traditions—calling for critical engagement without risking blind culturalism or Eurocentrism. The emphasis on indigenous culture is to clear away Africa's imposed alienation.

Additionally, one may doubt the effectiveness and applicability of hybridization in the form of decolonization and selective adaptation. I believe that science and technology proceed by way of hybridization. As a matter of fact, Western science borrowed, adapted and transformed considerable portions from non-western epistemologies. Moreover, modern science can greatly benefit from cultural scientific practices. The case of Chinese acupuncture is obvious. Needless to say, a traditional herbalist in Africa can effectively treat snakebite envenomation. Priests in Ethiopian Orthodox Church effectively treat internal hemorrhage. So, should we abandon these practices or blend them with modern medical science?

I may also be accused of making a big mistake by charging Irele on Eurocentric complicity provided that she is an ardent advocate of African modernity. I acknowledge her relentless devotion and seminal contributions to postcolonial African discourse. As Anjali Prabhu correctly declared the presence of the passion of Negritude in blood of Irele—binding him with the cause of Africa (2020), and Ato Quayson (2019) granted him ancestral veneration, I have even come to believe that postcolonial discourse on African development matured with her critical writings. However, out of her pragmatic conviction and perhaps dismay at a repugnant ethnocentric bandwagon after independence, she fell prey to the allures of Western civilization—proceeding with an embrace of total alienation of Africa. She confessed that despite her critical examination of African culture, she found no relevance to the contemporary Africa. And she spent much of her mature intellectual life in the USA, carefully examining the trajectory of Western culture and technology. There she discovered a relevance that alone can address Africa's current problems. Is this not downplaying African culture in favor of Western culture? What is Eurocentrism other than downplaying indigenous culture and tradition?

Conclusion

Irele's "In praise of alienation" tends to justify the primitivity and inferiority of Africa's culture and scientific practice, and to perpetuate Eurocentrism. This scientific Eurocentrism stems from a failure to acknowledge the difference between the conditions of Hegelian Spirit and Africa, and between scientific advancement and human progress. In short, in the name of pragmatic relevance of alienation, "In Praise of Alienation" tends to glorify Western epistemic paradigm and belittle the move toward a self-conscious cultural emancipation of postcolonial Africa. By the same token, the applicability and success of alienation as a means of realizing Africa's development is questionable. Thus, any genuine philosophical discourse about the development of Africa should temper alienation and defend anti-alienation. In Kevin Frank's parlance, she who aspires to Africa's prosperity "censures the praise of alienation" (2011, 1088). Provided that Africa's values are tragically fused with Western values and cultivating indigenous scientific practice must precede emulating Western science and technology, mitigating Africa's tragic predicament demands decolonization and **revitalization**. **Decolonization along with creative adaptation can transform** Africa's intellectual and moral landscape which Irele likened to a "wooden" structure, into a golden, bright, and fecund horizon.

Declaration

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