

Africa's future...how much does philosophy play a part?

For decades, Africans and the rest of the world have been discussing the reasons for which Africa has been unable to achieve the immense potential that many believe Africa has. This unrealised potential is a curse that has affected all African countries to a varying degree of severity.

For decades further, many have been searching for the solutions that can right these root causes that hold Africa back and instead place Africa on a path to growth and prosperity.

The reasons put forward, most of which you would have heard before, starting from the effects of the slave trade that started 500 years ago. During which, Africa was bled of her healthy human resources to be taken to foreign continents to face humiliation and torture. Then followed the decades of colonialization in which African land and its resources were pillaged and its people oppressed. During which time foreign religion, culture and language were in many instances forced upon these nations, often violently. Many African countries then faced civil wars and unrests that ensued post-independence and some still suffer under the hands of neo-colonialism that continues in many parts today.

It is impossible to argue against the logic that these reasons, which have been outside the control of Africa, have been significant contributors to some of the other more chronic issues Africa faces. Amongst these commonly assumed chronic reasons, many of which are interrelated, is the question around African leadership, both the quality and quantity of African leaders. Another common reason is Africa's inability and/or unwillingness to build and maintain strong trustworthy institutions. African countries also lead the list of the most corrupt in the world. Although corruption is a phenomenon experienced in all parts of the world, including the West, the sheer extreme nature of Africa's corruption makes it stand out amongst the world's worst perpetrators. All of this has a domino effect leading to low levels of education, a knowledge and skills gap, high income inequality, poor healthcare and poverty.

I am not going to address the issues above in this essay instead I am going to take a journey through time. I choose to start this journey during the Axial Age. Axial Age is a term coined by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. It refers to a period between 800 and 300 BCE when there was a pivot in the thinking of man, towards one of self-reflection and self-understanding. This development in thinking occurred almost simultaneously in Persia, India, China, Judea and Greece despite these areas having no obvious direct cultural contact. The key thinkers from this age had a profound influence on future philosophies, religions and political thinking, and there are characteristics common to each area from which those thinkers emerged. According to Jaspers the spiritual foundation of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently in these regions and should be considered independently of religious considerations.

All of these Axial Age thinkers showed great creativity and at the same time had striking similarities regarding their ultimate concern. Great philosophers and thinkers emerged. In India, there was Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha) that gave rise to Buddhism as well as Mahavira who revived Jainism, which at its core was the doctrine of Ahimsa (non-violence). A doctrine that had a significant influence on Mahatma Gandhi, who in turn had a material influence on India's independence and politics.

China saw Confucianism, Taoism, and the "Hundred Schools". These Chinese thinkers debated the appropriate "way" (Tao) in trying to unify the kingdom and avoid civil war. All of whom, in particular Confucianism, have significantly influenced the political landscape of China from the Han dynasty during the 4th century BCE to more recently the Chinese Communist Party.

In ancient Greece, there was Socrates who was the epitome of thinkers with regard to ethics and moral philosophy, whose student Plato was regarded as the father of Western philosophy. Aristotle, Plato's student, was the tutor of Alexander the Great (the King of the Ancient Greek Kingdom Macedonia) whose legacy includes cultural diffusion and syncretism. Later the Romans, who considered the Greeks, masters of philosophy, took Greek philosophers as their tutors and as such, philosophy influenced many of the Roman Emperors from Augustus Caesar, the first of the Roman emperors to Marcus Aurelius, the last of what was known as the "Five Good Emperors". These Emperors lead Rome (the greatest empire of that time) through centuries of relative peace and great prosperity. The writings of Marcus Aurelius, himself considered a great philosopher, acts as a significant source of the modern understanding of Stoic philosophy.

The key observation here is that there was an immense importance and significance (not without its issues) of philosophers during that time. These same philosophers took their place alongside kings and monarchs as leaders of the people for centuries to come. This played out through the centuries with great British philosophers like David Hume, John Locke and Adam Smith (to name a few) having a significant influence on the British Empire (the largest Empire the world has ever seen). John Locke himself and Thomas Hobbes (another renowned British philosopher) were key influencers of the American Founding Fathers. The phrase "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" was an idea first considered by Locke which was incorporated by Thomas Jefferson into the Declaration of Independence. Following the founding fathers, and lead by their strict implementation of the American Constitution, America continued to have many great leaders, many of whom were considered philosophers in their own right.

The key observation here is that there seems to be a very strong correlation between countries that sincerely value, nurture and adopt a strong philosophical culture into the fabric of their social and political environment and the level of economic and humanitarian wellbeing of their countries.

Although it is widely accepted that Africa has rich philosophy in its history it is also widely known that these philosophies were not widely documented. Africa, particularly Southern Africa, had an oral philosophical heritage. The period during which African philosophy was more widely documented started in the 1920's.

Socrates had suggested that philosophy begins with wonder, as documented by his student Plato. In Western philosophy there are considered two subsets of wonder, awe and the other being curiosity. African philosophy certainly shows manifestations of both awe and curiosity. According to Jonathan O. Chimakonam from the University of Calabar (in an article he published), there is an idea appearing in recent African philosophy stemming from frustration called "onuma". This frustration, according to Chimakonam's article, born from African scholars having experienced terrible racism and discrimination whilst studying abroad in the West. These experiences were further compounded by the characterisation of Africa as "culturally naïve and intellectually docile and rationally inept", by scholars such as Kant and Hegel. This lead to a school of African philosophy borne from frustration, which is easy to relate to and follow in the African context. It is thought, that much of this philosophical work was

done to counter act and disprove racially charged works from European philosophers (the core beliefs of these European philosophers, by the way differed to the great thinkers from the Axial Age) around Africans perceived inferiority.

The question is whether African philosophy in this form, stemming from frustration has muted the adoption, practice and permeation into the African political landscape of the African philosophy stemming from awe and curiosity. Has philosophy had as great an impact to the governmental, political, and economic set-ups of countries within Africa as it has in Europe the East and the U.S.? Are we as Africans more concerned with differentiating and or defending ourselves from certain Western philosophy than developing and inculcating an efficient philosophy that can uplift us from the plight we find ourselves in?

There are certainly Africans leaders, who are considered philosophers, that stand out as well. As one set of examples, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela...who were men who used their time to think and reflect wisely and who were instrumental in materializing a political transition in South Africa, of miracle proportions, grounded in ancient philosophical wisdom.

In today's world, we are also sadly seeing a recent trend (and not for the first time) of a rise of philosophies from Western countries that stem from fear, hatred and discrimination. Philosophies that are far removed from the roots of awe and curiosity. Philosophies that appear to be placing these countries themselves on a downward spiral, economically, culturally and spiritually. Time will tell where this lands.

We may very well be on the verge or actually in the midst of a new Axial Age. Technology has drastically alternated and transformed the way that we live our lives, both as individuals and as communities. The traditional religious and cultural worldviews are in flux and the world is experiencing greater communication and interaction than ever before. As opposed to the individual reflection of the first Axial Age, the world is now also focussed on a collective reflection and asking such questions like, who we are as a collective society? As we embark on this new age, do we as African leaders have the responsibility to adopt a philosophy borne from awe and curiosity? Do we have the responsibility to highlight and emphasise the importance of philosophical thinking in ourselves as young leaders and to spread this to the generation that will follow us? Do we have the responsibility to instil this into our political culture to help Africa reach her potential?