

PHILOSOPHY AS MIRROR OF SOCIO-CULTURAL REALITIES: A CRITIQUE OF DANCEHALL.

Lawrence Bamikole

Philosophy in Africa and in the Caribbean.

The traditional conception of philosophy is that it is an abstract discipline that has little or nothing to do with our day-to-day activities in the world. This notion of philosophy has been a carry-over from Plato, who had demeaned the world of sense as mere appearance or even illusion. For Plato, reality consists of Forms, a world of concepts which particular things in the world instantiate. When Plato also talked about an ideal state where only the philosopher should rule, his philosophy has been tagged as utopia, using the term in a derogatory sense.

However, beginning from the time of Francis Bacon, who stressed the point that knowledge is power to Karl Marx's Eleven thesis on Feuerbach, to the African and Caribbean philosophers of the present, philosophy has been regarded not only as a discipline that merely engages in abstract reasoning but as an activity whose aim is to interrogate and possibly prescribe ways of changing the human condition for the better. This is the point at which the African and the Caribbean philosophers have found themselves. However, given this situation, the African philosopher and his Caribbean counterpart, have found themselves on the horn of a dilemma. This dilemma pertains to how the philosopher has to make his profession relevant to his society on one hand, and how he is to stick to the norms of his profession without compromising the standard of philosophic argumentation on the other hand.

The dilemma of the Afro-Caribbean philosopher has been well articulated by recent scholars in African philosophy and philosophy about Africa. For instance, Godwin Sogolo (1990) has observed that the dilemma of the professional philosopher in modern Africa (also in the Caribbean) has its roots in two kinds of 'predicament': (i) an inherited professional handicap due mainly to historical antecedents and (ii) the pressure to respond to the growing demand for utility which now forms the measure of the worth of academic disciplines in Africa (39). The import of this dilemma is suggested by the fact that most scholars in the department of philosophy in most African universities are either trained in Western universities or African universities whose philosophy programmes have been laced with Western ways of thinking, which sees philosophy as critical, analytic, and argumentative. On the other hand, to make philosophy relevant to Africa, it is required to philosophize in a way which focuses on African issues, concerns, and traditions. This may not necessarily be in consonance with the norms and traditions of philosophy as a distinctively academic subject. The philosopher would then have to make a choice between sticking to the norms of his profession and thereby jeopardizing the need for relevance or sticking to relevance and abandoning the norms of his profession.

The lesson to be learnt from this observation is that the philosopher operating within Africa and the Caribbean spaces cannot turn blind eyes to what has now become a duty of making relevant his research findings to the socio-cultural realities of his space. Thus,

Udo Etuk (1987) has observed that “there is a challenge to the newly established philosophy departments in developing countries to justify themselves by relating their philosophic activities to their immediate situation” (64). By the same token, Kwasi Wiredu (1980) has observed that “one of the hallmarks of an African orientation in philosophy must surely be sensitivity to what is specific to the African situation” (33).

However, given the fact that philosophy should be made relevant to the immediate situation of the philosopher, the question still arises, in what ways can this be done? To answer this question will take us briefly to the nature of philosophy as an academic discipline. In this connection, Sogolo’s earlier observation is apposite. It may be argued that philosophy is a universal subject in the sense that it has well defined aims and methods, but these aims and methods should reflect the concerns and problems of the immediate situation of the philosopher. Thus, it has been urged that philosophy “is essentially the study of arguments to tell which are good and which are bad ones” (Hare 1999: 57). Also, Raphael (1978) identified the aims of philosophy as (i) critical evaluation of beliefs and (ii) clarification of concepts. What needs to be pointed out however is that these features of philosophy cannot exist on their own; they are required to be applied to specific situations within the domain of the philosopher. Thus, we can reasonably say that part of the nature of philosophy is what constitutes the data for philosophizing and it from this perspective that philosophy would have to be seen as a cultural activity whose aim is to employ the methods of critical analysis and argumentation to examining and understanding the issues and concerns that border on the condition of a given people or culture.

It is against this background that Tedro Kiros’s view on African philosophy may be situated. According to Kiros (2001) “philosophy in the African cultural landscape is destined to be a critical/moral task, a task imposed by the tragedies of history” (4). Having catalogued the different kinds of misery that are bedeviling the African people, Kiros affirmed that to respond to the challenge of relevance made against the professional African philosopher, the latter is required to transcend his professional norms and wake up as it were to the practical/moral problems of his society. According to him:

Responding to hunger call only for the stimulation of my moral and practical imagination to act on behalf of the hungry. Ending poverty ... does not require me to know what poverty is before I can participate in projects ending the conditions that produce it (4).

Although we might question the attitude of making a distinction between theory and practice, a distinction which underlies Kiros’s view, this need not detract attention from his point that philosophy should be made morally and practically relevant to our immediate situation. While we appreciate Kiros’s concern about the importance of making philosophy morally and practically relevant, we need to emphasize the point of how this can be done in order to fully appreciate the unique role of the philosopher in relation to his immediate surrounding. Doing this requires a critical analysis of the conditions involved in the issue of poverty. Thus, there is the need to realize the fact that philosophy is essentially a critical discipline and we require this (internal) norm in order

to fully make philosophy relevant to the socio-cultural realities of our space. In this connection, R.M Hare, in many of his works (Hare 1963, 1979 1999.) has suggested that the only role which the philosopher is expected to play with regards to issues of practical affairs is to insist on rigor in argument.

What distinguishes the philosopher, from the practicing politician, for instance, is his ability to analyze, examine and critique situations to enable the individual, a group or a nation to make reasonable and well informed choice among alternative courses of action that present themselves to them. Thus, it can be said that to analyze, to prescribe and to act are not necessarily separable. They work together in order to realize the ultimate goals for which societies are established. Consequently, a more balanced view of philosophy may be found in Etuk's words:

It would indeed be a luxury which developing countries can ill afford if philosophy were no more than armchair theorizing and hair-splitting while it would be captious for anyone to attempt to muzzle those philosophers who enjoy hair-splitting and armchair theorizing, it would appear that an obsessive preoccupation with mental games with little or no social import in the face of the harsh social, political, moral, and scientific challenges of our times is a sign of philosophic impotence (64)

Etuk's view has a replica in Hare's (1999) claim that philosophy may be exciting for its own sake, but if we limit ourselves to this excitement alone, we do not get it because what is exciting is the philosophy, not the excitement, just as what is pleasurable in music is the music, not the pleasure. His suggestion is that we should transcend the excitement which philosophy gives and use philosophy to reason about important problems. (57).

However, we will like to make a disclaimer in respect of the forgoing conception of philosophy and the duty of the philosopher in developing countries of Africa and the Caribbean. It is not expected of the philosopher to take over the role of a priest or a man of religion to inculcating good morals. Rather than moralizing, the philosopher is expected by means of cogent arguments and critical analysis of situations to present credible alternatives to the public and the public will be left to make the final choice. This is necessary in virtue of the fact that nowadays, societies have become so complex such that one cannot just impose a view on the entire population of a given nation. Rather, what is needed is to make available credible positions through persuasion, policies that are grounded on well-established rational criteria and then allow the public to make a choice among competing alternative courses of actions that are opened to them.

Dancehall Culture and the Philosopher.

From our discussion of the nature of philosophy and the role of the Afro-Caribbean philosopher, it should be clear that philosophy has a role to play in the social realities around him. In this section of the paper, we intend to examine the role of the philosopher with regards to some of the social, political and cultural issues raised by dancehall culture which is one of the major cultural phenomena in Jamaica. Dancehall culture is of concern

to the philosopher because the issues raised by the phenomenon border on other phenomena like violence, inequality, social justice, aesthetic feelings, morality: phenomena which are of utmost importance for the peace and stability of the state. Because of the constraints of time and space, we cannot discuss all these issues; rather we shall focus on one of them, namely violence and its relationship with dancehall culture.

It has to be remarked that the issue of the connection between dancehall and violence has created a forum for debate among persons of different social strata in Jamaica. In this paper, we shall identify two commentators on dancehall culture; namely Ian Boyne and Carolyn Cooper. Ian Boyne is a well-known journalist, who, evidently, is one of the fiercest critics of dancehall, while Carolyn Cooper is a professor of Cultural Studies at UWI, Mona Campus, who has defended dancehall against its major charges.

The central focus of debate among these two persons is the connection between dancehall and violence. While Boyne believes that dancehall promotes violence, Cooper tries to discharge dancehall of this accusation. However, the first question which philosophy wants to ask is what is the kind of disagreement between Boyne and Cooper? Is it a disagreement in belief or a disagreement in attitude? According to Copi (1968), two people may disagree as to whether or not something has happened, and when they do they may be said to have *disagreement in belief*. On the other hand, they may agree that an event has actually occurred, thus agreeing in belief, and yet they may have strongly divergent or even opposite attitudes toward it. One who approves of it will describe it in a language which expresses approval; the other may choose terms that express disapproval. There is disagreement here, but it is not disagreement in belief as to what has occurred. The disagreement manifested is rather a different in feeling about the matter, a *disagreement in attitude*. Copi went on to claim that any attempt to resolve disagreement in belief will entail ascertaining the facts by calling witnesses, consulting documents and examining the relevant records. But a resolution of disagreement in attitude will take the form of consulting things like motives and the intentions of the persons involved in the disagreement. From the various writings of these two personalities it may be said that their disagreement is that of attitude. (But on a further reflection their disagreement may be regarded as inconsequential.) This is because both agree that there is indeed a kind of violence associated with dancehall but they disagreed about the nature of such association. While Boyne believes that dancehall promotes violence, Cooper holds a contrary view because, violence in Jamaica has different origins outside the dancehall culture. In order to adjudicate between these two positions there is the need to ask at least two questions: What is violence and what does it mean to say that dancehall promotes violence? We shall respond to these questions in turn.

The word 'violence' admits of two types of definition; there is the narrow definition and there is the broad or extended definition. The narrow definition limits the definition of violence to the physical actions of human beings which inflict painful and physical injuries on their victims. Thus J. Ball-Rokeah (1972) defines violence as "the threat or exertion of physical force which could cause bodily injury" (101) There are three features of this kind of definition. One is that it limits violence to the intended action of an agent

or agents. The second is that it sees violence as an act of aggression against the objects at which it is directed. The third feature of the definition is its moral neutrality.

One of the merits of the narrow definition of violence is its concreteness. The paradigm cases of such definition include: murder, arson, riot, robbery, assassination and war. These are physical actions by means of which human beings inflict pain and physical injury on one another. This is why most people would readily agree that such actions come closest to what can be described as violence

However, when 'violence is viewed from a broad perspective, one begins to see the inadequacies of the narrow definition of the term. The first flaw in the narrow definition of violence is that it does not recognize the distinction between the words 'violent and 'violence', between a violent act and an act of violence. To describe a state of affairs as violent is to point out the effect which an exertion of force has on a given object. Such an object may either be living or non- living, human or non-human. A violent act is an act that is qualified by an attribute of violence. From this understanding, almost any action which a human being performs can be performed violently. A dancer can dance violently, a boxer may punch his opponent violently, a driver may drive violently and a footballer may charge violently. The impression one has of these actions is that they are accompanied by force, fury and outrage. It would appear then that a violent act only describes how some actions are performed and the physical effects which such actions have on their targets. On the other hand, the word 'violence' is a noun which refers to a phenomenon which is not limited to a particular description. An act of violence then will be an act of a particular kind which is not co-extensive with violent acts. Thus, when we talk of violence, especially in human affairs, we are not simply interested in the means whereby particular harm is inflicted but rather in some characteristic activity or phenomenon. It follows then that we are not interested in the violent acts of the boxer, the dancer, the driver and the footballer which the narrow definition does not exclude. According to John Harris (1974) violence in human affairs is the end product of the subtraction of a violent act from an act of violence.

Although this appears to be a metaphorical way of making the distinction between violent act and an act of violence, the point being made is instructive. The distinction suggests that a violent act can be performed against any object, whether human or non-human with or without the intention of causing harm to such an object. On the other hand, an act of violence often has as its target a human being usually with the intention to cause harm. This intention can be overt or covert. Such an act does not necessarily take the form of a physical action. Thus, an action might be violent without necessarily being an act of violence. The man who forcefully pulled back a child in order to prevent him from being knocked down by a speeding car is doing a violent act but not an act of violence. Thus we can apply the term 'violent' correctly to any act done with the appropriate degree of wildness or vigor, thus wild and vigorous dancing may be violent! But the correct employment of this criterion of application of the term 'violent' does not make dancehall into an act of violence. Again, an action may be an act of violence without being physically forceful. For instance, a man may quietly insult another, thereby degrading him.

One important point that ensues from the foregoing distinctions is that violence does not necessarily take the form of visible action. There are also forms of violence which are not visible which nevertheless causes pain to its victim. In this regard, we may note what some philosophers have called 'negative actions' (Hobbes 1947) According to this view, a negative action represents failure of an agent to act within our normal expectation. Thus if a government fails to prevent conditions which contribute to the suffering of its citizens, such government can be said to do violence even when it is not overtly doing so. By the same token, if a government is expected to provide some basic necessities of life for its citizens and it is not doing so without any justifiable reason, its inactions can be regarded as an act of violence especially when citizens suffer as a consequence.

One philosophical issue raised by our conception of violence is that of causation. This is also the central issue in the debate on the place of violence in dancehall culture. Is dancehall the cause of violence in Jamaica? Ian Boyne seems to be ambivalent on this question; sometimes he says that dancehall can be held responsible for the violence, especially in the inner city communities because dancehall artists usually sing songs that glorify violence. "The gun lyrics in the dancehall are setting up these youths to kill each other, to pursue values which are literally destructive and which shorten their lives" (Boyne 2002: G1). But at other times he says that it is difficult to empirically establish the fact that dancehall is associated with the violence in Jamaica. However, the position of Cooper is clear on the issue of whether dancehall promotes violence. Rather than holding dancehall responsible for the violence in the inner city communities, Cooper (2004) identifies the origin (cause) of violence with (i) the imitation by youths of various violent movies imported from abroad and (ii) the rebellious energy of enslaved African people who refused to submit to the whip of bondage.

Thus, with relation to the issue of violence in Jamaica, dancehall cannot be singly isolated as a cause. If this is the case we might support the Cooperean perspective on this issue by appealing to the philosophies of William of Ockham and John Locke. In his rejection of the theory of innate ideas, Locke has argued that the argument that supports innatism can be rejected on the basis that other (more plausible) reasons can be adduced for how we come to know. If this is the case, Locke advised, that we should invoke the principle of Ockham's razor which states that we should not multiply entities unnecessarily.

Ian Boyne might be said to have recognized this position in one of his articles in the *Sunday Gleaner*, when he observed "it is hard to empirically establish a causal link between murders committed in the inner cities and negative dancehall lyrics" (Boyne 2002: G1). What is this, if not a skepticism about holding dancehall responsible for the violence of the youths in the inner cities? In the same article, Boyne also accuses dancehall artists of glorifying material wealth: "... the elevation of material things as the ultimate arbiter of value and meaning" (G5). But it is also necessary to read Boyne's position on this issue along with his general position of what is wrong with Jamaican society. In a different article also in the *Sunday Gleaner* entitled, "The Centrality of Morality" Boyne has this to say about the Jamaican society: "In Jamaica, the greatest value is money. There is no strong sense of nationalism, cultural identity or morality to

make people resist material inducements” (Boyne: 2002: G4). The inference we can make here is that dancehall is only a subset of Jamaican society. Thus if dancehall artists are singing lyrics that glorify material wealth, we can safely say that it is only reflecting what is happening in the wider society. It will then be difficult even as Boyne himself recognizes to hold dancehall culture responsible for any violence that results from the glorification of material wealth.

One conclusion that we may draw from the debate between Cooper and Boyne is that the cause of violence in Jamaica should be examined from some other sources apart from the dancehall. Our analysis of violence, though not exhaustive (for lack of space), suggests that there is a structural dimension to the issue of violence in Jamaica. According to Barak (2003) structural violence refers to violence that is a product of political and economic arrangements working in tandem or symbiotically (130). It is interesting to note that Cooper and Boyne correctly identified the root cause of violence as colonialism and neo-colonialism influences, and the materialistic nature of the society respectively. The structural dimension of violence in Jamaica has also been articulated by Stolzoff (2000). According to him “the social relations of dancehall productions are to a great extent structured by the same social variables found in Jamaica’s national economy: massive exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence” (8).

The belief which is prevalent among most commentators on dancehall is predicated on the fact that there is an underlying structural dimension to violence in dancehall in particular and violence in Jamaica in general. Rather than wasting time and energy on *ad hominem* arguments, there is the need to focus attention on the issue of violence in politics, for the violence that has been identified with dancehall takes its clue from the violence in the wider society. In order to appreciate this point, it is necessary to pay attention to the nature of violence as a phenomenon.

Charner Perry (1970) has observed two features about violence. The first is that the culture that shapes men is filled with ideas and symbols of violence. According to him, history, fiction, political oratory, sports, even religion is built upon a framework of conflict and violence. The second feature is that aggression and violence have been, still are, and perhaps long will be advantageous to some individuals and groups. For Perry, it is a notorious fact which has been used frequently as one explanation of social change, “that individuals, groups, or societies which have acquired a distaste for violence become tempting prey- the vulnerable, contented, well-fed civilized dwellers in a fertile valley invite raids from the hungry, lean, hard savages in the hills” (2).

One important inference that could be made from Perry’s observations is that violence in society is endemic and it cannot be totally extirpated because it is rooted in the very structure of societies. Thus Perry advised that “preaching love and brotherhood will not do the job. Peace and civilization depend rather on institutions which shape our actions and ideals, which discipline our emotions. (2) Perry’s observation is in harmony with our earlier observation about the role of the philosopher in practical affairs; that philosophers are not moralizers, rather they are suppose to reason about matters that are important to their immediate environment. In doing this, critical analyses of issues are indispensable.

One issue that is brought to the fore in the determination of the relationship between dancehall and violence is that of the place of violence in politics. As we noted earlier on violence in dancehall is a reflection of the violence in the wider society. However, this does not say that human beings cannot reason about the violence in dancehall but they have to do that within the general framework of the type of culture of which dancehall happens to be only a sub-division. In other words, what we are suggesting is that society should not make a single phenomenon a scape-goat with regards to a general ill of the society. What is required in the present situation in Jamaica, where violence has taken the form of unjustified killings is the need for all stakeholders in the state- government and civil society- to come together and discuss and dialogue on all issues relating to the prevalence of specific forms of violence in the society. In this, philosophy becomes extremely important. This is in virtue of the emphasis it places on argumentation. It is required that persons participating in the discussion approach the issue of violence in politics with an open mind. Issues should be discussed disinterestedly and impartially. The ultimate goal of such a discussion is that of reaching a consensus about the nature and causes of violence that is of concern to the society and what can be done to control it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barak Gregg. *Violence and nonviolence: Pathways to Understanding*. London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003.
- Boyne, Ian “The Centrality of Morality” *Sunday Gleaner*, November 17, 2002.
- _____”How Dancehall Holds us Back” *Sunday Gleaner*, December 29, 2002.
- Cooper, Carolyn. *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003
- Copi, Irving P. *Introduction to Logic*. New York and London: Macmillan Company, 1968.
- Etuk, Udo. “Philosophy in a Developing Country” *Philosophy*, Vol. 62, No. 239, 1987. pp 59-66.
- Hare, R.M. *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1963.
- _____ “On Terrorism” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* Vol. xiii, No. 4, 1979. pp.241-249.
- _____ *Objective Prescriptions and Other Essays*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999
- Harris, John. “The Marxist Conception of Violence” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 3, No. 2, 1974. pp. 192-220.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (ed.) Harrison, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1967.
- Kiros, Teodros “African Philosophy: A critical/ Moral Practice” in Teodros Kiros (ed.) *Explorations in African Thought*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.
- Perry, Charner. “ Violence- Visible and Invisible” *Ethics* , Vol. 81, October, 1970. pp. 1-21.
- Raphael, D.D. *The Problems of Political Philosophy*. Great Britain:

- Macmillan, 1976.
- Sogolo, Godwin. "Options in African Philosophy" *Philosophy*, Vol. 65, 1990. pp. 39-52.
- Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town and Tell the People*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980.