

POSTWHAT! Towards An Afro-Centric Postmodernism

by David Paul Mavia

This is a brief perspective on how the African worldview interprets what we call *postmodern*. It is a deliberate attempt to give a subjective analysis in my attempt to understand some foundational schools of thought in the Western world namely Pre-modern Modern and Post-Modern.

It is only recently that I got to understand the 'philosophical dispensations' that led to or in a way contributed to the mind frame of the Western world and way of thinking. The triune dispensations in question are Pre-modern, Modern and Post-Modern. I am told each had some dominant philosophers and thinkers, the likes of Nietzsche, Lyotard, Kierkegaard, Kant, Satre and Camus just to name but a few and without considering their order of arrival. In my attempt to understand, what they contributed to western thought my concern crops up in figuring out where exactly my afro-centric philosophical worldview connects to these schools of thought. There lies in this picture the major task of reconciling times and ages in an attempt to create unity of thought that is not just postmodern but also added to the fact that I am Christian with views that are primarily biblical.

PICTURES

Whether we are modern or postmodern or whatever we attribute our philosophical spine, there is a sense in which we in Africa are perceived. The picture of the rest of the world carries with it independent biases that are detached from their persuasive schools or backgrounds of thinking.

I remember a song in the Christian world that caused a bit of bad ripples a song by Scott Wesley Brown. This song was misunderstood because many did not go through the entire lyrical content. The song was titled something like '*Lord please don't send me to Africa*' it carried the paradox of being a missionary at the same time denying the possibility of God sending him to a place of His choice (in this case Africa). The missionary's reasons of not being dispatched are that in Africa there are Gorillas Baboons and Snakes. He goes on to tell God that he is not a Tarzan. Obviously towards the end of the song, he is heard shouting 'Ok I will go I will go'. The point is even with the balanced lyrical content there is already a painted picture of Africa that emerges. I will be quick to add that the most prominent phrase 'dark' has been tagged to Dark Ages -a period of history without God and secondly to the continent of Africa as a place with no civilization as we know it. The picture here is not only referent to the jungle nature of the continent but also the entire human landscape in culture history and language. We were the proverbial Nazareth where nothing would come from and history bound itself to this Nathaniel Philosophy because there was no guile in it.

HISTORICAL PARALLELS

Without much ado, I think it would be important to look at the parallel of the two worlds in question. Since I am no historian, my mere awareness of the times will also offer a triune perspective of our history too. Along side pre-modern, modern and postmodern, I would put pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. These are important for they establish some sort of idiosyncratic pointers, which are foundational in how an African's worldview would relate to the postmodern. It goes without much argument that the scramble and partition for Africa had great consequences in the way we expressed our concepts and philosophies. In fact most of the conflicts even with the introduction of Christianity were based on cultural differences or cultural philosophy. It did not take long therefore for such analogies such as 'Christianity is a white man's gospel' to be formed. In fact at some point as a form of ridicule there was a line that went something like 'the flag followed the cross' which insinuated the coy infiltration of superior western governance and colonization of the African continent. They used to say that 'the white man came and told us to close our eyes and pray and when we opened our eyes to say amen our land was gone'. I am not on a mission to rub it in but to clarify and show the clouded door and entry of the gospel to Africa. The gospel didn't just come in, it came along with secular governments and colonies and thus it was compromised and received with some misgivings.

DEMONSTRATIVE PHILOSOPHY

One can already see at a time when the west was grappling with the age of reason and science and the strong 'God is dead movement' we were being introduced to the gospel. For Africa, it was not a matter of the existence of a supreme being but the abilities and demonstrative parameters of God (remember Moses and the Egyptian magicians). I therefore suggest that much as our philosophy was not in the dimension of expending intellectual muscles we had what I call a 'demonstrative philosophy'. Apologetics would not work. We were more interested in visible power one would easily say we walked by sight more than we walked by faith – yet to say so would deny our addiction to beliefs. If an African believed something was going to happen then it did, and if that is anything to go by then we too were a faith people. In fact, at the very core, the African man centers his beliefs in a lot of spiritual activity. What would have worked for us would have been a demonstrative gospel that had miracles, power and wonders. A miracle working Jesus is the key. So when a seminary-educated missionary landed in Africa and could not entrust himself, to demonstrate the gospel as Christ had authorized the disciples, then it became difficult to impact the people. The substitute of gospel power became secular forceful government and this collaboration carried a form of godliness but denied the power thereof.

The consequence of course was that a semblance of Christianity was spread, education solidified it and if it is anything to go by, the advent of the post colonial era would enable a thorough westernization that entertained some apologetics and philosophical approach to the gospel. In fact most philosophy lecturers who had managed to study abroad after independence had embraced heavily atheistic thinking lines and thrived on intellectually bashing any students who believed in a God and a Christ gospel.

THE QUANTUM LEAP

I have cut down a lot of details to be able to come to a place where I can enumerate the diversities in our philosophies. I also wish to see a reconciliation between our different philosophical platforms though this is difficult. Perhaps a beginning is the common denominator of Western Christian postmodern thought and post colonial African Christian thought which is the centrality of Christ.

Africa has since come a long way there has been a lot of intellectual exchange. This has bridged the gap a bit and again I say a bit largely because even in the pursuit of a postmodern philosophy it appears that I still have to plunge myself into the midst of 20th Century philosophers so as to have a basis of developing an argument. There is little to show, in books and works, of an African postmodern thinker let alone Christian thinker or philosopher. It is easy for me to buy books and materials on Satre, Lyotard, Nietzsche or even Schaeffer or Ravi Zacharias but where do you buy the African Philosophers and more so Christian?

Without this basis it is difficult for someone with an African worldview to have a meeting of the minds with postmodernism. Here the Internet is a genuinely helpful bridge for true exchange, though still inadequate to create a common historical foundation. Most of the websites I visit have very thorough and edifying materials yet they would deny their authors our audience since our worldview is different. We might be geared towards *cyber missionaries* who might not necessarily have to be scared of coming to Africa because of Gorillas and Snakes. Even with these kind of missionaries, for us to connect and exchange ideas will take a bit of plunging into the sober understanding of our world.

The Internet has played a role however in promoting these schools of thought in the sense that we in Africa are at least able to locate such websites. We can at least pronounce postmodernism.

A SHIFT

Coming from a society that thrives on mimicking, the media has channeled a lot of cultural transactions and a current generation of 'mosaics' whether they know they are called so or not, be they in India, China or Australia are now beginning to think 'alike' and behave as if their orientation is from a common pool.

This generation regardless of geography has been subjected to similar pressures of drugs, dysfunctional families, economic hardships and the like. This creates a common entry point for this generation into the world of ideas where we will present Christ. On the surface this shift seems to eliminate the problem of diversities in philosophical lineage. Yet the question we must raise is, outside of the West is their thinking truly postmodern in the western sense or is it post-something-else? The 'mosaics' or 'millennials' from non-Western backgrounds and cultures far outnumber the ones from the West, and this makes them the majority of the potential harvest we call 'every creature'. This requires our strict attention to whatever they perceive postmodernism to be, how they process truth and how they will understand our gospel. There is a whole world outside the borders of America and Europe, and though they look and sound like Westerners they operate on different historicities and paradigms that may distort our messages and pervert the good we aim for. We must look deeper into the labyrinths of these mental perceptions, and answer the question 'Post-what?'



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