

African phenomenology and ontological absolutism in politics: The complex postcolonial situation of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT: In an attempt to formulate an African phenomenological method, this article engages with existing African philosophical schools, namely particularism, universalism and eclecticism. I will explore how the positions advanced in these schools, valid in their own rights, are at the same time potentially absolutist and thus in need of reformulation. I will also test my theoretical findings by addressing the ontological implications of ontological absolutism in politics, with special reference to the situation in Cameroon and how they translate to an identity crisis. I argue that an absolutist understanding of human existence has become an integral justification for the use of violence. I then proceed to propose ways of addressing the situation by arguing that this absolutist foundation is foreign to Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, and it will only further the chaos that is already ravishing the social reality in Cameroon. While addressing the problem, the aim here is to attempt a formulation of an African phenomenological approach and to bring attention to the often-neglected phenomenological and ontological dimensions in African politics.

Keywords: Africa, identity, relationality, violence

Introduction

The sociopolitical reality of many postcolonial African countries leaves very little to be desired. This is partly due to the challenges of colonial structures and the lack of adequate political mechanisms during the fight for independence from colonial regimes to address the potential challenges of postcolonial Africa. The question of identity is not only an issue of ontological legitimacy, it is and has remained an issue of relationality. Postcolonial African societies have struggled with relationality owing to the colonial and arbitrary merging of various people in the making of states. The impacts of these mergers have had enormous negative effects on African countries. The crux of the matter hinges on the challenges that many African countries have experienced in their attempt to engage the social, political and economic realities that they face. In light of these challenges, the primary task of this article is to formulate an African phenomenological approach by engaging the three dominant African philosophical schools, namely particularism, universalism and eclecticism.

The secondary task is to contextualise the proposed African phenomenological approach in the prospect of a lasting sociopolitical cohesion in Cameroon. This prospect already raises a number of complex questions that pertain not only to the present, but also the disposition towards the past. Situated in Central Africa, Cameroon has a population of 25.31 million people (Central Intelligence Agency, 2021). It had its share of colonial conquest and pillage. In the Central African region, Cameroon, unlike other parts of the region, experienced a triple colonialism; Cameroon was a colony of Germany, the United Kingdom and

France. A situation that eventually resulted in a bilingual division of the nation after independence in 1960. English and French are the official colonial languages in Cameroon. However, the French speakers are the 'majority'. In recent years, there have been social, economic and political rivalries between French-speaking and English-speaking Cameroonians. These rivalries have resulted in the loss of lives and the physical displacement of many Cameroonians.

In this article, I formulate an African phenomenology by considering three major schools in African philosophy, namely particularism, universalism and eclecticism. I argue that these schools provide important African phenomenological implications that might aid an effective formulation of an African phenomenological framework or method. However, I maintain that the schools falter, especially when we critically consider the complex case of Cameroon's colonial history. In fact, these schools fail to provide a suitable phenomenological framework because of the ideologically absolutist positions they advance.

The structure of this article is in three parts: firstly, I present a theoretical framework in which I engage phenomenology in the three major schools in African philosophy. In my theoretical explanation, I draw on both primary and secondary sources of Western philosophical understanding of phenomenology. Secondly, using the example of Cameroon, I engage the positions of the various schools, how they assume extreme theoretical frameworks and present absolute positions that are not suitable for the African phenomenological position that I advance in this article. Thirdly, keeping in mind the various schools and the weaknesses that I identify, I propose a reformulation of the schools and proceed to propose what I refer to as a particularist conversationalist school. I conclude that this formulation

provides a plausible African phenomenological approach for Africa in general and the sociopolitical reality that this article focuses on.

Conceptual framework

Without presenting an exhaustive account of Western phenomenology, this article understands phenomenology as the way things appear to us or the way we experience things in the world. Dermot Moran notes that Edmund Husserl, in 1900/1901, announced phenomenology as a bold and radical way of doing philosophy (Moran, 2000). Phenomenology was later developed by scholars like Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Emmanuel Levinas and Simone de Beauvoir, among others. In general, the main task of phenomenology is to address things as they are experienced. It does this by avoiding '...misconstruction and impositions placed on experience in advance...Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within' (Moran, 2000, p. 4). Referring to Heidegger and Georg Gadamer, Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994) notes that the axiomatic point of departure for phenomenologists is the existentiality of human lived existence. As such, phenomenology is the revival of the living contract with human reality and the interpretation of how things present themselves through these realities (Moran, 2000; Sokolowski, 2000). Founding figures of phenomenology understood connecting with human realities as the elimination of dogmas and various early accounts of knowledge. The task of phenomenology is to reinvestigate philosophy in order to return it to the life of human experiences (Moran, 2000). It is a critique of traditional ways of investigating knowledge through rationalist and idealist accounts of reality (Moran, 2000).

Scholars like Miguel Beistegui (2002, p. 21) observe that '[t]he primary task of the analysis of...[human beings] is thus to bring the human back to its concrete soil, back to existence, far away from the metaphysical constructions that have been grafted onto it'. The argument here is that there is a human tendency to undermine that which we experience by focusing on idealist or rationalist takes on how reality presents and/or should present itself. This framework is challenged by phenomenologists who propose a return to the concrete reality of human experiences.

It is important to note at this point the irony that Lee Braver (2015, p. 23) observes in the phenomenological method, he writes that '...phenomenology – the study of what appears – seeks out that which does not appear, at least not explicitly, prominently, plainly'. Much more than that which appears, phenomenology also seeks to understand that which is not apparent, although close to us but hidden in such a way that it eludes our sight. Heidegger (1962), among other Western philosophers, was strong on bringing to light that which is hidden. Even though Heidegger's work was largely influenced by thinkers who preceded him, his bold claims on the need to engage being in its everydayness succeeded in nuancing and posing anew the question about the meaning of being.

From this brief analysis, a fair knowledge of what phenomenology entails should be clear to the reader. While acknowledging the significance of the Western phenomenological approach, this article seeks to formulate an African phenomenological method by addressing the missing link in an existing African phenomenological approach. This African phenomenological method will then be used to

address the ontological problem that has been attributed to the sociopolitical challenges in Cameroon. I will also show that this African phenomenological method is arguably applicable to challenges that are faced in African in general.

From the above, ontology is connected to phenomenology, and as such, ontology is an important concept that needs to be briefly discussed. According to Hay (2006), there are two ways of understanding ontology. The first, and more abstract, is concerned with the nature of 'being' itself – what is it to exist, whether (and, if so, why) there exists something rather than nothing, and whether (and, if so, why) there exists one logically contingent actual world. The second sense of the term is concerned with '...the (specific) set of assumptions made about the nature, essence, and characteristics (in short, the reality) of an object or set of objects of analytical inquiry' (Hay, 2006, p. 80). In this article, I am going to concern myself with the latter definition that Hay presents. This is because of the substantive and less abstract political philosophical argument that will be advanced in this article. In this article, ontology will be understood narrowly as a science or philosophy of being. Norman Blaikie's (1993, p. 6) definition sums up a political outlook to ontology:

[It] refers to the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social [or political] enquiry makes about the nature of social [or political] reality – claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with one another.

Political ontology is different from ontology in the metaphysical sense because political ontology pertains to an analysis of political being and the political realities that determine its existence. In sum, this article seeks to explore the nature of being (ontology) from a phenomenological viewpoint. In other words, phenomenology will be used in the service of ontological enquiry.

African phenomenology

This section will focus on how phenomenology is already a philosophical method in African philosophy. By African phenomenology, I mean the discursive philosophical dispositions that emerge from Africa and how they describe and reflect the lived realities of Africans. It is important to note here that I use phenomenology as a feature or description that multiple other methods and schools of African philosophical thought may have. Kwame Gyekye (1995, pp. 15, 23, 24, 27), among others, understands the fundamental tasks of philosophy to be to: (1) provide people with 'a fundamental system of beliefs to live by'; (2) determine 'the nature of human values and how these values can be realized concretely in human societies'; (3) speculate about 'the whole range of human experience' by providing 'conceptual interpretations and analysis of that experience, necessarily doing so not only by responding to the basic issues and problems generated by that experience but also by suggesting new or alternative ways of thought and action'; and (4) offer 'conceptual responses to the problems posed in any given epoch for a given society or culture'. To speak of an African phenomenology in contemporary African society is to theorise about human dispositions toward their realities and how the understanding of their lived experiences can promote a better awareness of their challenges and aid a meaningful response to these challenges.

African philosophical responses to everyday realities can be divided into three main schools or traditions, which owe their existence to historical contingences: (1) universalism (Hountondji, 1973); (2) particularism (Gyekye, 1995; Wiredu, 1997); (3) eclecticism (Kanu, 2013). Considering the space constraints, I will only present a brief account of these three schools. Beginning with universalism in African philosophy, scholars like Paulin Hountondji recommend and argue for a position towards philosophy as a universal topic. In an article titled 'Pluralism, true and false', Hountondji (1973, p. 115, 117) argues that African philosophy needs to engage in a 'debate on a universal, worldwide scale' and leave behind its 'furious particularism'. Hountondji's African philosophical position is a response to African particularism which for him is a reaction to the false universalism of the colonisers. Contrary to this position, he maintains that 'world civilisation' needs to be understood as an interactive process between different cultures concerning the universal. Refraining from such a communicative endeavour may lead to a form of 'theoretical imprisonment' (Hountondji, 1973, p. 117) in an African obsession with the formulation of an authentic identity. Hountondji ushered African philosophy and philosophers past identity reconstruction into an African awareness that is open to universalist episteme. He claims that Western philosophy has dominated the debates on universal norms and it is time for Africa to move beyond identity validation.

Different from the universalists' position advanced by Hountondji, particularists like Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye argue that

[p]hilosophers belonging to a given culture or era or tradition select those concepts or clusters of concepts that, for one reason or another, matter most and that therefore are brought to the fore in their analysis (Gyekye, 1995, p. 7).

Kwasi Wiredu (1997, p. 92) notes that '[i]f a tradition of modern philosophy is to develop and flourish in Africa, there will have to be philosophical interaction and cross-fertilization among contemporary African workers in philosophy'. Wiredu (1997, p. 98) charged that

this is the time when there is the maximum need to study African traditional philosophy. Because of the historical accident of colonialism, the main part of the philosophical training of contemporary African scholars has come to derive from foreign sources. Why should the African uncritically assimilate the conceptual schemes embedded in foreign languages and cultures?

This perhaps informs the suggestions by Gyekye (1995, p. 33)

...that the starting points, the organizing concepts and categories of modern African philosophy be extracted from the cultural, linguistic, and historical background of African peoples, if that philosophy is to have relevance and meaning for the people, if it is to enrich their lives.

There are other African philosophy scholars like Mangena (2014), Etieyibo (2015) and Matolino (2015) who argue that for African philosophy to succeed in engaging the world, it must do so by developing its own line of thought alone. The point here is that the foundation of philosophies in Africa should have its sources and resources in African lived traditions and historical backdrops.

Eclecticism presents a different stance from universalism and particularism. Scholars like Andrew Uduigwomen (1995), Kwame Nkrumah (1964), and Kanu (2013) belong to the Afro-eclecticism school. The eclectic school presents an argument that challenges the position of particularism and universalism. They stage their argument in the middle ground between particularism and universalism. Eclecticism is therefore the blend of both particularism (traditional African philosophical positions and preoccupations) and the universalism (Western philosophical positions and universalist preoccupations) in African philosophical endeavours. They base their philosophical frameworks on the desire to provide philosophical responses using African and Western philosophical epistemes in engaging the particularists' and universalists' philosophical themes.

From the above traditions, it is safe to say that African philosophical arguments are not solely based on the precolonial, colonial or postcolonial concerns. They address their immediate realities and the necessary responses these realities compel in light of their interpretation of their history, their present and their desired future. This is why Emmanuel Eze argues that colonial ontology was built on a false premise that promoted the marginalisation of Africans. By colonial ontology, I refer to the colonialists' epistemological and ideological conceptions of African human existence (being). Eze's 'The colour of reason: The idea of "race" in Kant's anthropology' (1997) is central to the point I present in this section. Eze's position is characterised by a philosophical account of Immanuel Kant's 'anthropology' and its resultant effect on epistemological, ontological absolutism and epistemicide in Africa. This epistemological and ontological absolutism is established based on a specific conception of 'human nature' (Eze, 1997, p. 105). Apart from Eze, there are other African philosophers who expose these problematic elements of the Western philosophical disposition towards Africans (see Serequeberhan, 1994).

The above account reveals the philosophical complexities that are apparent in Africa philosophical enquiries. These complexities can be summed up, in question form, as follows: amid Western historical misrepresentations, how do we philosophise in the context of the particular and the universal? While thinking about this question, it is important to note the human context that constitutes the foundation of African philosophy and the grounding that is phenomenological in nature. The question, what is our context?, is essential to any philosophical theorising in an African society. This theorisation is not done in a vacuum as it is always within a community of enquiry. The context is necessary for the formulation of the problem and the search for meaning. More importantly, the hermeneutical engagement with the search for meaning is done communally. In other words, African societies' search for meaning is premised on a communitarian framework. The position of this communitarian outlook is contested among the various schools already presented in this section. The next section will test the positions of the various schools on the complex case of Cameroon.

Political crisis and the ontology of difference in Cameroon

Cameroon presents a complex case in which to apply African phenomenology. Using the approaches advanced by any of the schools presented above remains difficult to resolve. Looking at Cameroon's history, there are social, political and

economic realities that need to be critically engaged with and a conscious effort put into addressing the effects of their ontological implications. As already indicated in the introduction, Cameroon's complex triple colonialism has had a devastating effect on a sense of solidarity and unity. Willard (1970, p. viii) elaborates further:

The only previous experience these peoples had had with common political rule was that provided by the Germans, which began in 1884 and lasted until French and British military began to drive the Germans out in 1914. The old German colony of Kamerun was later divided between the invaders along a line running roughly from the outskirts of Douala northeast to the Lake Chad basin.

Willard identifies a very important point in the historical narrative of Cameroon. The multiple colonial encounters reveal a complex history that makes it difficult to effectively impose a historical past on Cameroon. However, one could argue that this complexity is shared and can serve as a point of convergence for Cameroon. In this attempt, Willard (1970, p. vii) observes that '[t]he interpenetration of so many different foreign cultures with so many varying indigenous ones makes culture clash a problem for every new African state'. Cameroon's bilingual, multicultural federation, different from the unitary states with single colonial legacies in some other African countries, is partly one of the major problems in Cameroon (Willard, 1970). Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 8), in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, observes that

[t]he black man has two dimensions: one with his fellows, the other with the white man. [The black person] behaves differently with a white man and with another [black person]. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question.

Fanon presents a general effect of colonialism on Africa and Africans, one that I believe speaks in a profound way to the various schools of philosophy.

The universalist school's response to the complexity that is evident in Cameroon is that we should focus more on engaging universal moral action in our attempt to resolve the general problems. This would entail a receptive disposition to Western views. Fanon (1967) would perhaps critique a universalist commitment to universal morality that does not consider the relevance of a particularistic consciousness as the initial and important starting point. The particularist school would argue that Cameroon must focus on establishing moral action based on the immediate and local moral frameworks. Fanon's critical disposition to the effects of colonialism and its resulting challenge to postcolonial consciousness is important for African phenomenology. This is because Fanon's two-dimensional postcolonial person requires a critical engagement with the particularist school, especially as it pertains to what is now considered an immediate and local morality. However, it is plausible to argue that the particularist approach is too brutish to be able to engage with the complex intricacies that is unique to Cameroon. The same can be said of the universalist school because of the universalist's assumption that there exists a homogenous universal consciousness from which Cameroon can draw. The eclectic school, which sits between the universalist and particularist schools, does not consider the complexities and multiple realities in the various schools. They do not provide a

compatible framework from which complex problems in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular can benefit.

Returning to the case of Cameroon, the multiple realities in which Cameroon finds itself are as a result of the triple colonial encounters that continue to have a devastating effect on the grounds on which to build relationality and collective goals. By relationality, I mean the mutual understanding necessary for the effective functioning of a society. Through colonialism, Africans in general and Cameroonians in particular assumed a culture through language (Fanon, 1967) and sociopolitical experiences (Willard, 1970). Elsewhere, I observe that the complex historical experiences in Cameroon are illustrated by,

one might argue, the case with the French-speaking Cameroon and English-speaking Cameroon where social and political problems emerge because of conflicting world views. With colonialism, a black person is forced to assume a double culture (local and colonial) and this informs belonging or alienation (Sanni, 2020, p. 4).

From this account, one sees that there are phenomenological and ontological implications that can be deduced from the case of Cameroon. The various languages (local and colonial) represent various worlds, for to speak a particular language is to assume a particular worldview (Fanon, 1967). Conflicts emerge in a situation where finding common ground for compromise in the middle of these conflicting ontological backgrounds is not promoted because of the belief that one's worldview is superior to other people's views and languages.

These diverse ontological backgrounds have been a major source of dispute in Cameroon. The fundamental question has been, what binds us as a nation? This question has an existential and historical underlining that makes it complex. However, attempts at responding to the question have been driven by a negative ontology of difference aimed at exclusionist and absolutist positions, rather than a rigorous desire to understand the diverse national experiences. By ontology of difference, I refer to the social realities that make an individual or group different from others. This difference could be marked by cultural, historical and linguistic factors. The phenomenology and ontology of difference promote an understanding of human experience and existence in ways that are necessary for co-existence. In other words, the way people perceive their sense of belonging in society influences the quality of their experience as part of that community.

In this section, I have hinted that in the middle of the recognition of differences, the main goal of a society is to identify a point of confluence that binds people to a collective goal, and the various schools do not provide plausible grounds on which to foster this recognition and appreciation of differences. This point of confluence has to be continuously engaged with by society in order to identify various needs for change and creative ways of integration. Willard (1970, p. 4) adds a different layer to the motives of the government in promoting a collective goal in a community when he writes that '[t]he basic motives remained the same...improved material well-being, and greater individual and collective efficacy...'. What Willard observes here is that a fragmented sense of belonging always has a negative effect on promoting a just social and economic distribution of resources. A major challenge for Cameroon, as is the case for many Africa countries, is the identification of a collective standpoint that pulls everyone to collective and individual goals.

This challenge emerges because of conflicting conceptions of history and the role that cultural, ethnic or tribal and religious groups have played in either promoting disparity or promoting cohesion. Willard (1970, p. 5) also notes that '[t]he lines of tribal, ethnic, regional, and even religious disparities tend to coincide with those of wealth, patterns of social evolution, welfare benefits and political power'. Ethnicity, regionalism and religious differences (Willard, 1970) have been justifications for economical exploitation, social isolation and political manipulation. As it is the case in many African states, '... the unprivileged also emerge into power, however, or become aware of the possibilities of doing so, they put the universalist and equalitarian tenets of the nationalist...credo to their most severe test' (Willard, 1970, p. 5). It is important to note that "[i]n Cameroon and many other new states of Africa, the fact that there are rich tribes and poor tribes is certainly...important..." (Willard, 1970, p. 6) when analysing the conflicting worlds that are the reality in Cameroon.

From the above discussions, it is safe to argue that there is an inherited culture of ontological marginalisation and alienation in Cameroon. In other words, to belong to a group and the purpose upheld in it, one needs to embody a particular historical narrative. This position resonates with the argument advanced by Willard (1970, p. 6) when he argues that

[i]dentity is a matter of the significance of a thing, a question of purpose and perspective. The achievement of a sense of identity is most significant when it involves acquiring a sense of oneness from many separate distinct events or objects, when it is a question of parts and wholes.

By this, Willard means that the sense of oneness depends on various parts and the obligation that mandates an individual to share the ideals in the various parts that promote oneness. The challenge here is not solely on the idea of oneness. Conversely, it is more about the absolutisation of this ideal sense of oneness and the marginalisation of others who are perceived not to share in the idealised vision that constitutes the foundational conception of this shared oneness.

Postcolonial Cameroon has struggled with the idea of oneness or cohesion because of the various historical paths that now constitute the make-up of its people. These historical paths are characterised by various cultures, traditions, tribes, languages, religions and political leanings. It is important to note that the nature of the various historical paths that I have alluded to are based on ontological presuppositions that are characterised by ideological absolutism. This absolutism has divided the social and political landscape in Cameroon. The crux of the matter is that there is no real engagement with the ontological questions that are at stake in the political climate in Cameroon. At the heart of these questions is the ability to engage past, present and future ontologies in a way that seeks common ground on which everyone can stand and co-exist.

In my view, existing African philosophical schools and their phenomenological implications when weighed against the situation in Cameroon do not provide a phenomenological solution to the complex case that I have attributed to Cameroon. I argue that the various African philosophical schools discussed are potentially absolutist in nature, and therefore in need of reformulation or revision. I will show in the next section that the conversational school which straddles particularism and universalism comes close to providing a significant contribution

to an African phenomenology. However, I consider the ideas that the conversational school presents as necessary but insufficient. Therefore, the reformulation I propose is necessary. The next section will focus on reformulating the positions of three African philosophical schools with the aim to rectify the potentially absolutist phenomenological position it engenders.

Reformulating African phenomenology

A major concern that emerges from the various schools, especially in connection with the complexity that arises from the account of Cameroon, is the stringent desire to impose a method on particular situations in Africa. The more challenging task of phenomenology, to my mind, goes beyond the imposition of methods. On the contrary, the focus should be on the method that is implicit in the context – the foundation of a particular perspective. Within problems lie solutions, and methods can neither obscure the solution or reveal it. The outcome depends mainly on how well the problem has been understood and interpreted. The task of African phenomenology therefore is to let the situation speak through an effective investigation and engagement with the context. The real burden of African philosophy is the noise that distracts and blocks the ability to listen to our context without presuppositions, an agenda or an audience that risk an accurate engagement with our context. Like Jonathan Chimakonam (2015, p. 1) rightly argues, the African philosophical response was borne out of the frustration that emerged from colonial classification of Africans as 'culturally naïve, intellectually docile, and rationally inept'. This intellectual agitation must give way to a more context-based engagement with the realities on the ground, a return to the soil.

Chimakonam proposes a phenomenological approach when he deploys the method of conversational thinking or 'conversationalism', which he defines as the 'philosophical engagement between individual thinkers with one another, on phenomenological issues of concern, or on one another's thoughts where thoughts are unfolded from concepts or from concepts of concepts' (Chimakonam, 2015, pp. 19–20). Chimakonam identifies a number of principles that should guide conversational thinking. Considering the limited space here, I briefly discuss the principles relevant to the objectives in this article. The principles are 'transformative indigenisation', 'noetic re-Africanisation', and 'moderate decolonisation' (Chimakonam, 2015, pp. 27–28). Transformative indigenisation reorients the African philosopher using non-African philosophical categories and imposes an obligation to give the foreign categories an African flavour. This is the same as domesticating or particularising what is foreign (Chimakonam, 2015). Noetic re-Africanisation guards against the danger of losing a commitment to African forms of thought due to an erosion of the African framework through a deep preoccupation with non-African modes of thought (Chimakonam, 2015). This principle demands that an African philosopher who fears that engagement with non-African theoretical schemes has placed her outside the African theoretical framework must re-acquaint herself with what has been forgotten. In this way, a balance is found between stringent commitment to African and non-African theoretical frameworks through intercultural conversations. Moderate decolonisation proposes a radical rejection of non-African theoretical schemes, whether for political or philosophical reasons, because it jeopardises the

universalisation aspiration of African philosophy (Chimakonam, 2015).

As Ada Agada (2019) rightly observes, the conversational method promotes the eclecticism that African philosophical particularists downplay. This is the case with Chimakonam's position because it seeks a middle position that reconciles the universalist and particularist schools. To my mind, this is the problem with conversationalism as a phenomenological method of enquiry. On the one hand, conversationalism promotes an intellectual negotiation between conflicting worldviews. On the other hand, it basis its position on the middle ground that exists between the arguably two extremes. A position that reflects a kind of continuum between schools and that the discourse between them can place us anywhere on that continuum, depending on the context. However, conversationalist thinking is essentially eclectic. While the middle ground appears to be a safe space, I argue that the foundation of African communities should be based on the principle of conversational particularism. By conversational particularism, I mean the engagement with African particular phenomenological realities with an open position to be challenged by other worldviews. Different from the position advanced by the conversationalist school, conversational particularism begins with the rigorous attempt to exhaustively understand the context, as revealed and hidden, in a discursive way. The point here is that the context or the immediate particular reality must be considered as a primary point of departure before any discursive positions are considered.

The task of conversational particularism as a phenomenological method is not reconciliatory as is arguable the case in the conversationalist school. Conversational particularism asks the question, what is the issue? The reasoning behind this question presupposes a worldview that is unique to a particular group of people (culture, tradition, episteme, etc). The particular must be established in a discussive and undistorted way, and it is at the same time open to external challenges and, where necessary, re-evaluation. The task of phenomenology in African societies is to engage not only with that which is hidden, but also to evaluate the apparent or seemingly explicit realities. According to Wiredu (1997), in society, it might appear to people that interests are different, but ultimately they share similarities in the various notions of interests and needs. For instance, when one thinks of food and has various cravings, the shared goal is satisfaction. The point that I draw from Wiredu's position is that the need for common ground is very important for African societies and this is mostly attained through dialogue, with consensus as an ultimate goal. Implicit in this goal is the negation of absolute positions or claims that prevent the accommodation of other worldviews. Conversationalism falls short because it does not provided a clear foundation that establishes the context or its significance. Like eclecticism, it only assumes a reconciliatory position, which I believe is necessary but not sufficient.

In the case of Cameroon in particular, and the way phenomenology should be engaged in Africa in general, conversational particularism presents us with a new disposition towards conflicting worldviews and ontologies. As already highlighted, the colonial histories brought about an ideological agitation of ontologies that has flowed into postcolonial Cameroon. The nature of the social and political disintegration in Cameroon is largely based on absolutised viewpoints that now obscure adequate engagement with the immediate. These

absolutist tendencies, as already highlighted, are based on the multiple colonial encounters that distort a true sense of a contextual phenomenological grounding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the task of this article has been to critically engage how the three schools of African philosophy (particularism, universalism and eclecticism) have phenomenological implications. While I recognise the significant of these schools, I argue that particularist school and the universalist school present absolutist positions that distort the task of African phenomenology. In my attempt to reformulate an African phenomenology, I argue that the Chimakonam's 'conversationalism' comes close to providing a suitable framework for formulating an African phenomenological method, but it falters because it simply provides a reconciliatory middle ground without establish a foundational ground, therefore, conversationalism is a position similar to eclecticism. I then propose conversational particularism as an alternative reformulation to correct the position advanced by conversationalists.

I proceeded to contextualise what I refer to as a conversational particularism in the sociopolitical challenges of Cameroon. I argue that the Cameroon's current situation is driven by ideologies that reveal two extreme positions, namely the particularist (traditional) and the universalist (colonial). The complex historical realities of Cameroon in particular and Africa in general make it difficult to engage with, the immediate context. I also argue that ontological absolutism is a major problem in Cameroon and this is partly due to its multiple colonial histories. Amid this fragmentation, I believe that a new disposition towards the multiple colonial histories is needed. Cameroon's identities, multiple as they may be, must engage anew the various parts that constitute the whole. Past historical positions must be engaged in the challenges that invoked them in the present. African phenomenology, understood within the proposed framework of conversational particularism, demands that we become wary of the implications of certainty as we are of uncertainty.

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