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Exploring the Philosophy of Godfrey B. Tangwa

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we critically examine Godfrey Banyuy Tangwa's philosophy. We argue that Tangwa's thought, like most thinkers, is largely influenced by his historical and cultural experiences. His philosophy can be studied under three principal and closely related axes: The first is *philosophy as an instrument of social and cultural transformation*. The second axe is concerned with *giving voice to indigenous African values and knowledge systems*. In a global academic arena dominated by Euro-American epistemological systems, Tangwa's work seeks to decolonize indigenous African epistemologies from Western misrepresentation and to challenge the purported universal validity of Western systems of thought. The third angle is concerned with *criticism as a tool for social enhancement through democracy and meritocracy*. According to Tangwa, there is no such thing as a superior or inferior culture, since no culture is perfect given that human beings, the inventors of culture, are imperfect. However, all human cultures are perfectible. Genuine cultural progress will be possible only when all cultures are



given voice, self-criticize their beliefs and values, and beg and borrow from each other. Tangwa's epistemic pluralism resonates in almost all areas of his thought. This paper is merely an introduction to Tangwa's philosophy; we do not claim to exhaust his vast and eclectic thought in a single paper.

Keywords: *Godfrey B. Tangwa, epistemic decolonisation, African philosophy, African bioethics, epistemic injustice*

1. INTRODUCTION

The thoughts and writings of a scholar are often profoundly influenced by his/her life experiences, historical context, and cultural background. As shown below, the life, work and thought of Godfrey B. Tangwa is not an exception from these influences. Tangwa is a second generation post-independent African academic philosopher. The first generation include prominent African thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu, Macien Towa, Henry O. Oruka, Paulin Houtondji, Peter Bodunrin, John Olubi Sodipo and Ebénézer Njoh Mouelle, among others. The first generation of African philosophers can be distinguished between academic or professional (some of whom we have just listed) and philosopher-leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Leopold S. Senghor, Kenneth Kaunda, Jomo Kenyatta, Sekou Toure, etc., who had the arduous task to produce "their ideas under the pressure of direct problems of governance" (Taiwo, 2004:243). One of the patent differences between the first and second generation of African professional philosophers is that while the first were largely occupied with the debate as to whether or not there exists an African philosophy, albeit some attempts at original philosophical reflection, the second generation has, arguably, departed from that debate and focused on imaginative philosophical issues, considering the debate about the existence of African philosophy as either sterile or settled.

Tangwa's thought and academic work can be examined under three principal closely related axes: The first is philosophy as an instrument of social and cultural transformation. According to Tangwa, philosophy must be relevant to its immediate setting by proffering



solutions to local problems. This real-world goal persuaded Tangwa towards the propensity for applied philosophy. The second angle is concerned with giving voice to indigenous African values and systems of knowledge. In a global academic arena dominated by Euro-American values and epistemological systems, Tangwa's work seeks to deconstruct and decolonize indigenous African norms and epistemologies from Western misrepresentation and domination. In doing so, his work challenges the inherent epistemological ethnocentrism and purported universal validity and applicability of Western thought. According to Tangwa, African knowledge systems are valid forms of knowledge which can proffer solutions to local as well as global problems. For this reason, he advocates for cultural and epistemological pluralism.

The third dimension which is central to Tangwa's philosophy is criticism as a tool to achieving a better society through democracy and meritocracy. It is in this field that we see Tangwa's use of philosophy as a tool for social and cultural transformation (applied philosophy) at its best. He considers liberal democracy as an indispensable precondition for holistic development. For him, one of the principal reasons "for the developmental failures of African countries must be looked for in their democratic failures" (Tangwa, 2011:178). Inspired by the critical rationalism of Karl Popper, Tangwa contends that criticism is the guarantor of security, one of humankind's fundamental pursuits. However, because criticism seems to undermine this sense of security, it is usually eschewed by those who hanker for security (Tangwa, 1996:78). For him, what the opponents of criticism fail to grasp is that "uncritical complacency is the greatest danger to security and eventually to survival" (1996:78).

It is on these three plinths that Tangwa's philosophy is grounded. Be it in his academic writings, lectures, political and social criticisms, these three themes reverberate. Tangwa is also a prolific writer and his publications in academic journals, magazines and newspapers cover a wide array of issues. He is a practical philosopher who thinks that philosophy/philosophers must come down from their ivory tower of academia, detached from the daily reality and experiences of the people, to engage with issues that are relevant to their communities/societies.



This paper is divided into five sections. In section one we examine Tangwa's life, philosophical influences, and work. In section two, we discuss epistemic decolonization, one major theme that runs through his philosophical work. Section three focuses on Tangwa's applied philosophy. In section four, we discuss his political philosophy; and section five focuses on the problem of knowledge production and access in Africa.

2. LIFE AND PROFESSIONAL WORK

Godfrey B. Tangwa was born in Ndzenswhai-Shisong, Nso (1947), in the North West Region of Cameroon. Raised in a deeply Catholic background, Tangwa nurtured the desire to become a priest at a very tender age (2010:2). Upon graduating from St Joseph's College Sasse, Buea, he immediately embarked on his dream to become a Catholic priest and after several years of seminary preparation, Tangwa decided to discontinue his long-cherished pursuit for priesthood in order to follow his academic ambitions. He explains the reason for this change of choice: *"at the seminary, I suffered a crisis of conscience which convinced me that I was more of a pagan than a Christian in the depths of my heart, and (doctrinally) a potential heretic, as a future priest"* (2010:2). Tangwa studied at Nsukka (1974-1977), Ile-Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University (1978–1979), and Ibadan (three of Nigeria's foremost universities). He lectured at the University of Ife, from 1978-1986, and joined the University of Yaoundé in 1987 as a Senior Lecturer.

Tangwa is a philosopher, bioethicist, columnist, actor, political and social critic, and consultant. He served at the University of Yaoundé I for over three decades before retiring in 2012. He has lectured across Africa, Europe, and America. He is one of the few contemporary scholars from sub-Saharan Africa who has gained international recognition. Tangwa has authored over 11 books, 25 book chapters and more than 80 scholarly papers in peer-reviewed journals. He was chair of the Philosophy Department in the University of Yaoundé I from 2004 to 2008. He has been member of several academic and professional associations and scientific and ethics review committees around the world. He is a member of the International Association of Bioethics (IAB), where he

served on its Board of Directors from 1997 to 2003, and was Vice-President of the Association from 1999-2001. He is also member of the *Cameroon Academy of Sciences (CAS)*, fellow of the *African Academy of Sciences (AAS)*, member of the Academic Board Advisors and Head of Case Working Group, *Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment (GET) Consortium*. He is the founder, pioneer chair and current vice-president of the *Cameroon Bioethics Initiative (CAMBIN)*. He is also a member of the editorial board of *Developing World Bioethics*.

Tangwa has held fellowship positions in Germany and USA, and has served as expert and consultant for many professional and scientific organizations. He was visiting scholar at the Hastings Center, in the US, visiting Scholar at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, for an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship. He is advisor for the journal *BioMed Central*. Tangwa participated in the writing of the WHO Ethical and Safety Guidance Notes for Research with Adolescents (2011) and the *Council for International Organisation of Medical Sciences CIOMS/WHO International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects (2002)*. He has equally been invited and contributed expertise to the *European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP)*, *Grand Challenges in Global Health (GCGH)*, *Glaxo Smith Klein (GSK) Bioethics Advisory Group*, *South African Research Training Initiative (SARETI)*, *International Research Ethics Network for Southern Africa (IRENSA)* and *Hoffmann- La Roche's Science and Ethics Advisory Group (SEAG)*. Tangwa also participated in the review of the *International Code of Ethics for Occupational Health Professionals of the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH)* in 2009 as co-chair of the African regional review group and as the commissioned writer of the basic theoretical text for the code review entitled "The Fundamental Principles of Ethics" (2016:92).

3. ACADEMIC TRAINING

After renouncing his childhood ambition to become a Catholic priest, Tangwa dedicated his full oomph to purely academic and secular pursuits. His academic training in Nigeria brought him in contact with some of the best philosophical minds in Africa, at the time, and beyond.



For his Bachelor's Degree (B.A.) in philosophy, he studied at the University of Nsukka (1974-1977) and for his final year long essay, Tangwa worked on "The Problem of Akrasia or Weakness of Will and Prescriptivism", under the supervision of Hilary Staniland (1941–1976). For this work, Tangwa had as his external examiner, Professor Henry Odera Oruka from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, the initiator and proponent of sage philosophy. For his M.A., Tangwa moved to the University of Ile-Ife where he worked under the supervision of John Olubi Sodipo³⁷ for his dissertation on the subject: "Nkrumah and Nyerere on Socialism: A Comparative Study" (1979). This dissertation was examined by Professor Kwasi Wiredu from the University of Ghana, Legon. Tangwa undertook his PhD studies at the University of Ibadan and for his thesis on the topic: "Karl Popper's Theory of Indeterminism" (1984), he was jointly supervised by Peter Bodunrin and Lansana Keita. Vernon Pratt from the University of Lancaster in the UK was external examiner of this thesis.

4. THE NEED FOR EPISTEMIC DECOLONIZATION

Following from some leading advocates of epistemic decolonisation like Franz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Kwasi Wiredu, and Valentine Mundimbe, Tangwa believes that European colonization of Africa did not only involve the political and economic exploitation of the continent, it also involved epistemic domination of the people through the proselytization and denigration of indigenous African systems of knowledge and ways of being. Fanon emphasizes this idea when he states: "Colonialism is not only satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, distorts it, disfigures and destroys it" (1967:169). From the same perspective, Wiredu opines that "because the colonialists and related

³⁷ Sodipo was a firm advocate of the important role Philosophy plays in traditional and transitional societies and worked toward promoting public interest in the discipline. Sodipo is one of the first advocates for the promotion of African epistemologies. With Barry Hallen, he wrote *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (1986). He was the founding editor of *Second Order: An African Philosophy and Culture* (1972).



personnel perceived African culture as inferior ... colonialism included a systematic program of de-Africanization" (Wiredu, 2004:1). For Mundimbe, colonialism involved the complete "domination of physical space, the reformation of *natives'* minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective" (1988:2). Because of this, since the colonial era, "Africans have had almost an infinity of spokespersons. These claimed unilaterally the right to speak on behalf of the Africans and to define the meaning of experience and truth for them. Thus Africans were reduced to silence even about themselves" (Ramose, 2003:1). This attitude has resulted in a situation where academic discussion today "is still rooted in a system that has yet to adhere to ... fundamental principles of justice as the recognition of and respect for the opinions, concepts, and systems of norms and values of different cultures and regions" (Graness, 2015: 127). For Tangwa, in addition to colonialism, the techno-scientific progress of the Western world "has made it to consider itself and to be generally accepted as an infallible oracle in all other spheres and in all other matters" (1996:185). He opines that:

The dominant philosophies and ideologies of the western world, especially as practiced though not always as propagated, accept and promote the doctrine that 'might is right'. This, taken together with the belief that 'knowledge is power' leads to a pervasive desire to know everything, to coordinate everything, unify, harmonise, control, commercialise and monopolise everything. Western culture has a big mouth and very small ears. Even when it condescends to listen to other cultures, it does so within the framework of 'searching for spices' and specifies both what it wants to hear and how it should be said. So it often ends up hearing only an echo of its own voice. It cannot stand unfamiliar talk or familiar but random talking. It worships order, format and precision. (1996:185)

The oppressive structures instituted by the colonialists and perpetuated by the forces of neo-colonialism, under the guise of economic globalization, have helped to amplify the silencing of indigenous African systems of knowledge and ways of being. "Because of this, Western culture has developed a high degree of immunity and imperviousness



against influences from other cultures except in areas where these are inevitable corollaries of its exploitative activities” (1996:185). It is for this reason that there has been a conspicuous paucity of African philosophical perspectives in the global intellectual arena. This Eurocentric approach which imposes an ethic of knowing, that is, what should be taught and learned as philosophy or valid knowledge (Chimakonam, 2017: 125), has resulted in epistemic injustice where African philosophical traditions, perspectives, and ideas are marginalised within mainstream philosophical discourse (Chimakonam, 2017: 123).

According to Tangwa, more objective research on African values and systems of knowledge will help correct many of the distortions made by colonialists about Africa (ns). The colonialists operated on a Eurocentric paradigm in which non-Western cultures were perceived as inferior. For Tangwa, *“no human culture or community is perfect, although some may be more advanced or better-off in some respects than others. There may be activities/skills at which any one culture is ‘better’ than all the others, but a culture in general cannot be described as being ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ to another on that basis”* (2019:17). For this reason, Tangwa thinks that *“all human cultures are... perfectible, because none is perfect... given that human beings, the creators of culture, are imperfect beings”* (2019:17).

In the fields of bioethics, medicine, and medical research in Africa, Tangwa calls for the urgent need for epistemic decolonization by giving voice to indigenous African perspectives. Pratt and de Vries seem to share Tangwa’s disquiet and support his call for epistemic decolonisation when they contend that:

The silencing of the epistemologies, theories, principles, values, concepts and experiences of the global South, constitutes a particularly egregious epistemic injustice in bioethics. Our shared responsibility to rectify that injustice should be at the top of the ethics agenda. That it is not, or only is in part, is deeply problematic, and endangers the credibility of the entire field. (2023:325)



According to Pratt and de Vries, the marginalisation of the knowledge systems of the global south in bioethics rather impoverishes the bioethics landscape by not including the views, perspectives, and the voices of all those who are also affected by global health challenges (2023:327). He provides the following justification for giving voice to African thought in medical research ethics:

The idea of giving voice to African thought in medical research ethics is compelling not only on the idea that reality and human experience are vast and diverse and cannot be adequately captured by one paradigm or from one perspective but also on the consideration that the continent of Africa has, historically, been: colonized, exploited, indoctrinated, proselytized, mentored, marginalized and excluded. Cumulatively, these historical experiences had turned many Africans into more or less mute and mimetic beings, or disciples and catechists of received foreign systems on the world stage. And yet, the continent, because of its high burden of diseases and epidemics, is the scene of numerous medical researches by all and sundry researchers from all over the globe for all and sundry motives and motivating factors (2019:44).

Tangwa thinks that epistemic decolonization is necessary for both Africans and non-Africans (2019:44). Because the rapacious tendencies that prompted the colonialists to Africa have not receded, and does not seem to end any time soon, more than 60 years after granting African countries political autonomy, it is necessary to take the project of conceptual decolonization seriously: He writes:

The exploitative agendas and greediness of erstwhile colonizers of Africa and of the so-called developed world and its determination to maintain global hegemonic dominance is complimented by inducement and proselytization of elite Africans, especially experts, to subvert the emergence of Africa as an equal partner on the global stage. An African scientist or other expert who decides to stay and work in Africa on local problems faces a huge dilemma. African governments or non-governmental agencies do not yet seem aware of the importance of funding research for development. The scientist or expert is left with only the option of applying for funding to Western governmental or



non-governmental agencies. But these are not philanthropists. Funding comes usually with strong strings attached, including the compulsion to work within a rigid procedural framework, including even the ethics rules to be followed. African scientists and experts working with Western funding are very comfortable and can rapidly achieve high professional standards and status but they are at the service of Western global dominance and hegemony. That is why there has been little change in Africa and the lives of Africans in spite of the high level African scientists and experts working for Western institutions and agencies both in and out of Africa." (2019:44-45)

The global epistemic dominance of Euro-American philosophies and perspectives does no justice to the huge repository of knowledge that exists in the diverse cultures of the world, especially non-Western cultures. Tangwa thinks that just as "one hand cannot tie a bundle; one culture cannot fix the world" (2019:45), since no culture is epistemologically and axiologically perfect.

Moreover, the importance of decolonising medicine and medical research in Africa is because of differences in cultural context and understanding of disease and health. For example, "within African culture it may not be enough to identify the physical cause of an ailment or illness, as there is a tendency to search for the cause of the cause in a regressive chain that can terminate only in God or else become interminable" (2019:46). In the African worldview, supernatural entities "including dead-living ancestors, sundry spirits, divinities, gods and God" (2019:46) are recognized as involved in disease, health and healing. Cultural background "is important in healthcare and treatment of illness needs to be culture congruent to be effective and satisfactory" ((2019:46). It is for this reason that externally imagined approaches to resolving health crisis in Africa "should be subjected to critical scrutiny in the light of African social contexts and the specific understanding of the health care problems from an African outlook" (Ujewe et al., 2019:7).

However, Tangwa does not think that all Western values and perspectives need to be decolonized; there are values which have cross-cultural relevance. For example, the four principles of ethics, which include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. According

to him, although “these principles are couched in the language and idioms of the industrialized Western world ... they have cross-cultural relevance and applicability, even if they are not everywhere conceived or expressed in the same terms. The principles are also relevant to, and applicable in, all fields of human endeavour and activity, irrespective of context, situation or perspective” (2019:11). The four principles are adaptable and can be contextualised to fit into different cultural places and values. Tangwa’s worry is with the way in which these principles are being transported into and imposed on non-Western cultures without consideration for their ontological and cultural differences. For example, the principle of autonomy cannot be applied in a relational and communitarian cultural setting like sub-Saharan Africa without removing its heavily Western individualistic packaging or contextualising and adapting it to the values and worldviews of the local peoples and communities.

5. TANGWA’S ADVOCACY FOR APPLIED PHILOSOPHY

Tangwa’s PhD research had a profound influence on his thought. Throughout his work, the desire to make his thought clear and lucid, in the manner of Popper’s writing, can be seen. Not only was Tangwa influenced by Popper’s style, he was also influenced by his philosophical method (criticism). In his book, *Karl Popper: A Thematic Critical Introduction*, Tangwa writes:

Karl Popper is one philosopher whose style of philosophizing is simple and clear, straight-forward and completely void of any tendency to mystify. He has also contributed decisively to a remarkable range of the more central and perennial philosophical problems. [...] Popper’s philosophy is also practical in the sense that most of the philosophical problems he grapples with arise from or are related to practical human problems (1990:1).

It can be seen clearly why although his doctoral specialization was in the field of epistemology and metaphysics; Tangwa’s interest has always gravitated towards applied philosophy. Hence, in whatever area of philosophy he has worked on, this practical approach “which aims at making a difference in the real world” (2016a:94) is evident. Tangwa

found in ethics and, by extension, political philosophy, the sub-discipline par excellence for this concrete goal of philosophy. He says: “ethics, in my view, is a branch of philosophy completely and immediately concerned with making a difference in human acts, actions, decisions, choices and behavior” (2016a:94). Also, ethics is a prescriptive science, and the role of the ethicist “is persuasive and exhortatory, aimed at achieving results by convincing through rational arguments. The ethicist may not achieve results as fast as those who use other methods, such as force or lobbying, but the results of the ethicist, when achieved, are more influential, firmer and longer lasting” (2010:8).

Tangwa’s immense works on issues in African bioethics, African philosophy of medicine, health research ethics, African philosophy, intercultural philosophy, and political and social philosophy, have contributed in the deconstruction and decolonisation of African indigenous values and systems of thought, and have opened new vistas for research. His work, in many ways, also challenges Euro-American moral and epistemological hegemony. Tangwa’s work is based on the firm conviction that constructive philosophical contemplation should arise from “*empirical data while good practice and policy should be based on justifiable coherent theory*” (2016a:92). Underscoring this practical role of philosophy and what he would like to pass on to the next generation, Tangwa says:

What I would want to pass on to my students and non-students alike is the thought that philosophy is nothing more and nothing less than critically reflecting on issues, using all the devices and techniques philosophers have employed through the ages and, that being the case, it is indefensible philosophizing on issues that concern other peoples and their cultures, let alone philosophizing on their thoughts and pronouncements, to the neglect of those which concern our own peoples and culture. In other words, I am recommending a very practical impulse and purpose for philosophy, which uses all available philosophical tools in addressing and tackling problems, beginning with those nearest to heart and home. Philosophical ideas, concepts and theories that have no applicability in context should not be the mainstay concern of African philosophers. To the extent that an African is mainly



concerned with philosophical ideas and issues that have no relevance or applicability in the African context, to that very extent can it be said that s/he may be an African philosopher but his/her philosophy is not qualifiable as African philosophy. (2016b:104)

The role of philosophy, according to Tangwa, therefore, no matter which area of specialisation one is working in (metaphysics, epistemology, logic, political philosophy, aesthetics, etc), should be to offer solutions to existential problems. For philosophy to be relevant, it must be used in addressing problems.

6. BIOETHICS

It is in the field of bioethics and philosophy of medicine that Tangwa's contribution as a philosopher and African scholar has received the greatest national and international recognition. He has expounded indigenous African moral perspectives on diverse issues in bioethics and philosophy of medicine including abortion, personhood, euthanasia, assisted reproduction, environmental ethics, stem cell research, the moral status of the human embryo, African traditional medicine as a valid form of medical practice, poverty, research with vulnerable human beings, international ethical guidelines on health research, etc. One major theme that cuts across his works on bioethics is that all human beings have immeasurable value and are all equal (2019:1). He opines that "from most other points of view, human beings are rather demonstrably unequal but, in spite of their un-equality in those respects, they are all equally human, for which reason they should always be treated with fairness and equity" (2019:17). In many ways, the outlook of his research in bioethics can be referred to as intercultural. For Tangwa, global bioethics has a lot to learn from the indigenous "African eco-bio-communitarianism" (1996:192), a relational ethical approach which encompasses all compartments of the universe in a sort of inter-human and inter-species solidarity.

According to Tangwa, indigenous African cultures are imbued with values, norms, and epistemological perspectives which may provide solutions to some of the ethical problems posed by Western biotechnology. In line with his belief that philosophy needs to be relevant

to the society in which the philosophical contemplations is done, he demonstrates that this can only be possible when such reflection takes into account local values, worldviews and contexts in such reflections. Hence, we need to take seriously African perspectives and understanding of the problem, and adopt approaches originating from this specific context to address the problem (2010:3). It is from this standpoint that Tangwa's work on bioethics and philosophy of medicine draws inspiration from traditional African culture and outlook.

Tangwa considers himself as a cultural pluralist and a moral universalist (2010:5), and builds a middle ground between these two seemingly conflicting approaches to morality. From the point of view of cultural pluralism, he argues that all human cultures deserve respect and equal voice, since no culture is perfect. From a moral universalist outlook, he considers morality as universal. Although morality is concerned with right and wrong, good and evil, which also include cultural practices and actions, morality "in the moral sense could not differ from place to place or from time to time. Morality not only is necessarily prescriptive, it is necessarily universal in its ambitions, although, like all other things human, it is subject to human epistemological and other limitations" (2010:5). Tangwa points out the enduring epistemological and reductionist danger of the Westernisation of bioethics in a world where Western biotechnology has global ramifications and which raises questions beyond the scope and capacity of Western philosophy to address (2004).

In this regard, Tangwa sees globalization as an opportunity for the Western world to learn from less dominant cultures and philosophical traditions and to renounce the pretence of Euro-American epistemological and axiological superiority so that the resulting global culture can be culturally all-encompassing and inclusive of the best values from the four corners of the globe. This is because, he insists, "no human culture is perfect and none so poor that it has not discovered human values that have eluded the others" (2010:4-5). Also, Africa is home to a multitude of clinical trials. It is for these reasons that Tangwa thinks "globalization should not just mean Westernization, let alone

Americanization, where world policy is set with strident declarations from the White House.” (2010:4-5)

Tangwa proposes an indigenous African moral approach to medicine where neither social nor economic status should be an obstacle to health care. The traditional African approach in addressing global pandemics, epidemics, and health crisis like HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Corona virus requires that we recognize these health challenges first as posing a common threat to the continued existence of the entire community and/or world and, therefore, requiring the urgent mobilization of all of the community’s or world’s resources in combating the threat (2010:3). Unfortunately, this has not been the case, rather, the best resources of the affluent nations of the world, “who are less at risk and less affected, are lavished on enhancement medical care and other luxury medical researches, while medicines which can mitigate the effects of HIV and delay its lethal *terminus ad quem*, widely available in the developed world, are mostly inaccessible or unaffordable in the developing world” (2010:3).

7. HEALTH RESEARCH IN AFRICA WITHIN MULTIPLE VULNERABILITIES OF AFRICAN POPULATION

All human being are by nature vulnerable. By virtue of their embodiment, all human beings are predisposed to harm (Rogers et al., 2012:12). Humans are liable to bodily illness, harm, infirmity, and death, and depend on the care of others for long periods during their lives (Mackenzie et al. 2014:1). They are exposed to political manipulations and abuse, and are also predisposed to environmental hazards. African populations face “multiple vulnerabilities” (Tangwa, 2021) related to their economic, political, scientific and health conditions. In today’s world, Africans are the most “marginalized, stigmatized, or face social exclusion or prejudice that increases the likelihood that others place their interests at risk, whether intentionally or unintentionally” (CIOMS, 2016:57).

Tangwa has outlined five principal, and closely related, areas and forms of vulnerability of African populations. The first is that Africans are vulnerable as members of economically disadvantaged groups within

the global economy (Guillaumont. 2015:2). Economic vulnerability has made African states to be susceptible to exogenous factors including natural catastrophes, climate change, disease, among others, as well as external factors such as fall in terms of trade, which adversely affect economic growth and their ability to cope or adapt in times of economic downturn, and especially during public health emergencies like the COVID-19 and Ebola. Guillaumont argues that “structural economic vulnerability is higher in the continent than in other developing economies, reinforced by physical vulnerability to climate change...Africa has the highest proportion of fragile states among all continents” (Guillaumont. 2015:4). Unequal and lopsided terms of international trade which favours affluent nations in addition to the cumulative effects of slavery, colonialism, and genocide (Pogge, 2007:21) are contributing factors to Africa’s economic vulnerability.

The second claim is that Africans are vulnerable “as members of medically disadvantaged groups in the modern healthcare delivery system” (Tangwa, 2021). Sub-Saharan Africa is the region of the world with the highest disease burden. Global health inequalities, which are disparities in the distribution and access to health care and medicine between countries or between groups within a country, are most severe in African, especially in the sub-Saharan region. Global health disparities are inextricably connected to global economic inequalities. Economic disparity plays a central role in defining the health status of populations in the world because the countries with the highest maternal and infant mortality rate, low life expectancy, lack of access to medicines are also some of the poorest countries in the world (Tosam et al., 2018:243). This deplorable situation has been exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, malaria, tuberculosis and neglected tropical diseases, and, in recent years, the Ebola virus.

The third argument is that Africans are vulnerable “as minors, women, physically or mentally handicapped persons; as prisoners, orphans, patients, sex workers; all increasingly used as research subjects for the convenience of researchers” (Tangwa, 2021). Because of the lack of or the existence of weak regulatory systems in most African states, researchers and scientists easily find a regulatory and knowledge



vacuum to exploit. Moreover, backed by the longstanding and unsubstantiated racist logic that Africans and people of African descent are racially inferior, less human and, therefore, lack dignity, they are the most susceptible populations to exploitation in clinical research. Also, as we have stated above, African populations have suffered the most cumulative economic exploitation through slavery, colonialism, and globalisation. Because of this, they are also the most educationally, economically, and medically disadvantaged populations in the world and are, therefore, the most susceptible to exploitation, if not the most exploited, in medical research.

Fourthly, Tangwa argues that vulnerability equally applies to African researchers, scientists, and to governments and institutions. Because of deeply entrenched inferiority complex among these actors, they do not believe they have the qualified scientists and researchers who can carry out research on vaccines and new drugs and easily accept everything the West and WHO say or dictate on them. Also, since African governments do not fund research, most African researchers and scientists are induced to Western funded research and, therefore, carry out research that does not serve the needs of their populations. It is for this reason that Hountondji talks of the need for an autonomous science or research that is a “self-reliant process of knowledge production that enables us to answer our own questions and meet both the intellectual and the material needs of African societies” (Hountondji, 2009:9). According to Hountondji, African scholarship and research in general, is largely irrelevant to Africa because it only helps to advance the theoretical needs and questions of Western research and development; and not African needs. He writes: “most of our articles are published in journals located outside Africa and are meant therefore for a non-African readership.... In this sense, our scientific activity is extraverted, i.e. externally oriented, intended to meet the theoretical needs of our Western counterparts and answer the questions they pose” (Hountondji, 2009:8). In most cases, African researchers and scientists merely serve as data collectors for western-funded research.

Fifth, and lastly, African governments, on account of their natural resource endowment, cash poverty and tenacity to power, are also



vulnerable to Western exploitation (Tangwa, 2021). Western governments do business with African dictators and support them with military equipment in exchange for their natural resources. For this reason, most African leaders are concerned with pleasing their Western wealthy donors, and not serving their people. African leaders who desire to stay in power for long are susceptible to Western imperialistic manipulations. They easily submit to Western tutelage and are liable to give out the resources of their countries to Western powers in return for their protection. All this makes Africa vulnerable to political instability. According to Tangwa, slavery, colonialism, genocide and proselytization, and the heavy yoke of a foreign imperialist control have played significant causal roles in perpetuating severe poverty (Pogge, 2007:47) and the multiple vulnerabilities of African populations.

8. POLITICAL THOUGHT

Tangwa's political thought has been articulately expressed in his numerous critical essays relating to the democratisation process in Cameroon and Africa. These essays contain Tangwa's unapologetic and undiluted critique of the democratization process in Cameroon and Africa in the 1990s. Tangwa's political philosophy revolves around three interconnected themes: democracy, meritocracy, and criticism. According to him, a liberal democratic system, accompanied by meritocracy, is the indispensable road companion to genuine development in Africa. He writes: "democratisation is... the horse, as it were, that must be placed before the cart of African development, prosperity and wellbeing" (Tangwa, 2011:178). Although the immediate focus of these essays is Cameroon, the ideas and issues analysed therein resonate with the general governance challenges which have bedeviled African states since independence. The main ideas of his political thought are developed in the following works: *Democracy and Meritocracy: Philosophical Essays and Talks from an African Perspective* (1997); *Road Companion for Democracy and Meritocracy: Further Essays from an African Perspective* (2010); *No Trifling Matter: Contributions of an Uncompromising Critic to the Democratic Process in Cameroon* (2011). These books are collections of his weekly critical commentary, written under the pseudonym Rotcod Gobata, against the



unwillingness of the autocratic regime in Cameroon to give way to popular calls for democracy.

In the preface to *Democracy and Meritocracy: Philosophical Essays and Talks from an African Perspective* (2010), Robin Attfield says:

Tangwa is at once a courageous, an ingenious and a resilient philosopher, whose work strengthens the growing corpus of African philosophy. Many countries in the modern world could benefit from the kind of democratic system which he advocates, with governments answerable to the citizens, and removable by due, non-violent process. This work combines such advocacy with a Socratic gift for critic and with a disarming reasonableness sometimes reminiscent of Voltaire. (Tangwa, 1996:10)

Tangwa thinks that democracy in Africa must not necessarily follow Western models, some of which are not genuinely democratic. Africa needs to appropriate and indigenise democracy because “democracy in any actual context needs to adapt itself to the culture, world-view, values, customs and practices of the society in question, as long these do not contradict the fundamentals of democracy” (Tangwa, 2011:179). Every society has its social values, norms and worldviews, which at times may be utterly opposed to others. Western democracies are largely influenced by individualistic and rights-based values while African societies are influenced by communitarian and duty-based values. Hence, based on these ontological and moral differences, the Western model of democracy cannot be applied in Africa without taking these specificities into account. For example, the multiparty model of democracy may be appropriate in Western societies, but not amenable to African societies where people are usually easily inclined to political parties based on tribal, ethnic, regional, and/or linguistic affiliations. In Africa, democracy may require a non-party or even a one-party system (Tangwa, 2011:179).

According to Tangwa, criticism is crucial in the political arena, just like in any other area of human endeavour, because it can save the society from “irrevocable and uncontrollable mistakes” (1996:24). Mistakes result from our human imperfection, but criticism gives us the opportunity to identify and redress these errors for our common social improvement. Tangwa finds politically docile and uncritical followers of



authority as the most dangerous group of people for any society. He writes:

The tendency for people in authority to frown on criticism, complemented by the tendency of those under authority to flatter than criticise those in authority, is most dangerous. Uncritical praise-singers and apologists are the most dangerous enemies of any system or regime. By the same token, the honest and uncompromising critics of any system or regime are its best allies (1996:24).

Liberal democracy provides an excellent platform for citizens to be able to question and challenge constituted authority without any fear of repression or harm. For Tangwa, therefore, the greatest danger to human progress is resigned, docile, and uncritical population.

Another essential component of democracy is meritocracy. In a genuine democracy, people are voted to office not based on some subjective standard like race, social or economic status, religious, cultural or political leaning, but on merit. Tangwa writes:

Meritocracy is one of the indispensable road companions of democracy and development. In a meritocracy, subjective data, such as birth place, ethnicity, parentage, province of origin, gender, religious, political or ideological affiliation, etc. do not count in selection and reward procedures. However, a meritocratic system can indeed accommodate social gestures that attempt at righting or minimising past wrongs and discrimination inflicted on identifiable groups, through some form or other of affirmative action (2011:180).

For Tangwa, Cameroon, like most African countries, has been “impersonating a democracy” (1996:vii) since the introduction of multiparty politics in the country some thirty years ago. He points out six important points that have contributed to the failure of democracy in Africa: (1) “Absence of genuine democratic structures; (2) failure to modernise traditional structures, habits and patterns of thought; (3) failure to properly domesticate and indigenise borrowed structures and modes of thought; (4) absence of the genuine political will to democratize; (5) availability of an inexhaustible stock of immunising tactics and

subterfuges to incumbent dictators; (6) connivance of very influential external governments, agencies and persons” (2011:178-179).

If democracy must have meaning in the African environment, it must find its place within the indigenous African cultural context in which it is to be applied. To have a genuine democracy, African politicians must be ready to fully embrace democratic values and ideal and adapt it to their lived experiences. Also, there need to be a commitment for genuine democracy and not merely a gambit to lure western donors.

9. KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION BY AFRICAN SCHOLARS AND ACCESS TO RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

In line with indigenous African tradition of communal ownership of knowledge and natural resources, Tangwa thinks that scientific knowledge should be made available and accessible to all and sundry. He is very much concerned with the question of making his research publications available to *his “children and grandchildren and to all African scholars and researchers”* (Tangwa, 2019:5). Using his own experience in the domain of academic research and publication, he castigates the capitalist spirit that governs academic publishing in the world today, which makes it difficult for African researchers in particular not only to publish new ideas (ideas considered by these publication outlets as not aligned within Western scientific paradigm), but also to have access to, or afford, their own publications. In the introduction to one of his recent books, he regrets that “the Western academic enterprise has put a lot emphasis and value on peer reviewed publishing. While this has led to desirable quality control in publishing, it has also been linked with commercial and market forces with the consequence that these publications have not been easily accessible or affordable to many academics and knowledge seekers especially in the so-called developing world” (2019:9-10). Such difficulties in making research available and affordable, even for the authors of such research, have a negative impact on the diffusion of knowledge in Africa in general and knowledge about Africa in particular. According to Tangwa, “knowledge ought to be



considered a human good and ventilated to all and sundry as freely as possible or at minimal cost” (2019:9-10). He provides an account of his own experience as a researcher publishing scientific papers in Western journals:

In 1992 or thereabouts, I had published a paper in a Western journal on the problematic of African philosophy. I was sent two copies of the journal and a number of off-prints of my article which I had to pay for. The journal was neither available nor accessible nor affordable to academics in Africa, with the result that my thoughts and arguments on a relevant and important issue at the time were lost to those who would have critiqued them and possibly advanced knowledge on the question at issue. The question at issue was the existence of African Philosophy which, like African Bioethics today, was being denied existence, doubted or called into question. Twenty five years later, I wanted to have the said article republished in a book edited by some African colleagues. It needed a lot of efforts and the help of one of my former students abroad to access the article, which had already gone electronic and accessible by paying a respectable fee, and to obtain permission to have it reprinted. So, in real terms, my only reward as author of the article in question were the two free copies of the journal I got at first publication and perhaps the fact that I could present the article as an academic achievement towards promotion to a higher academic grade. I have no idea how much the publishers of my article reaped financially from selling it to knowledge seekers, but can the fact that I had no share at all in the harvest pass the test of ordinary fairness and justice? (2019:11)

The answer to the above question is obvious. Tangwa goes further to point out the difficulties he faced in his attempt to make one of his academic publications available and accessible free of charge for internet users. He writes:

More recently, a peer review journal invited me to an interview as one of the 'global leaders of ethics education'. [...] I was prompted electronically online to choose between open access and closed access publication. I quickly chose open access in line



with my strong belief that knowledge products should, as much as possible, be made as widely accessible as possible to all and sundry. I expected to be asked to pay some money for the open access option but, in the worst case scenario, I thought this would not exceed about 300 US Dollars; but it turned out that the fee for having the interview published open access was 2200 Euros! and it was already too late to reverse my open access option. I did not readily have that sort of money and, while I was still running around in an effort to raise it, the publisher started threatening me with legal action for non-payment of the open access fee. The industrialized Western world is the global role model for all other worlds, regions and countries of our planet, especially in domains such as profitable commerce, but it seems to have a fundamental impulse towards opportunistic exploitation, a moral ailment that ought not to be taken lightly. (2019:11-12)

Tangwa also points out the discrimination he suffered as an African scholar willing to get his academic papers published in Western journals. He opines that:

Apart from the problem of accessibility and affordability of intellectual and academic end products, it is not easy for someone of a different socio-cultural and economic background to get published in Western peer-review journals, and not only for reasons of quality control. Sometimes one cannot escape the impression that the peer-review system is used as a sort of intimidation or discouragement and even censorship against ideas that attempt fundamentally to challenge Western paradigms and generally accepted ideas and practices. (2019:12)

Islam, slavery, Christianity, colonialism, and capitalism are historical events that have seriously distorted and, in most cases, completely destroyed indigenous African modes of knowledge production (Taiwo, 1993). This, unfortunately, is being perpetuated today through neo-liberalism and economic globalisation. Although Tangwa does not go as far as making the declaration, the point is acutely clear, which is that African nations need to invest in the promotion of knowledge production which is relevant to Africa without undermining quality; knowledge that decolonizes, deconstructs and presents the true image of Africa from the



distortions African values and systems of knowledge have undergone. In a context where many scholars publish in order to gain promotion and upward social mobility, Tangwa believes that the aim of publishing should be to propose solutions to existential problems. Although he retired from public service in 2012, he is still actively involved in academic research and publications. In the last eight years or so, he has published three books and more than a dozen peer-reviewed articles.

10. CONCLUSION

Tangwa's work and thought can rightly be considered as a contribution to the field of applied philosophy with a particular aim not only to decolonize and deconstruct African thought, but also to indigenize and adapt Western values and ideas to African contexts. Be it in the domain of epistemology, ethics or political philosophy, Tangwa brings in his eclectic analytic approach with the aim of proposing context-friendly solutions to local problems. For Tangwa, philosophy needs to come down from its ivory tower of abstract or purely theoretical contemplation to resonate with the average citizen. He considers the tools of philosophy, rational criticism and critical analysis, as the catalyst of positive change in society. Although we have examined Tangwa's thought under three main themes: *philosophy as an instrument of social transformation, giving voice to indigenous African values and knowledge systems*, and criticism as a tool for social enhancement through democracy and meritocracy, it may be unfair to limit his work exclusively to these three fields. There are several philosophical angles his work can be analysed from. However, in the domain of ethics and applied philosophy in general, Tangwa's contribution has been most outstanding. His publications in the area of applied and theoretical ethics has given voice to indigenous African perspectives and ideals in global bioethics, opened new vistas and provoked debates and contributions from scholars from different parts of the world. It is from this viewpoint that Tangwa has been described as "one of the leaders in global bioethics" (Tangwa: 2016a:92). However, this paper is by no means an exhaustive treatment of Tangwa's philosophy, but simply an attempt to outline the principal axes of his thought, which can serve as a point of

departure for anyone who is interested in developing any aspects or areas of his philosophy.

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