

TRENDS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: A CASE FOR ECLECTISM

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1. Introduction

In the contention of Oladipo (2006), the debate on the idea of African philosophy which has been divided into trends or schools, dates back to the 1960's and 70's, which constitute the modern epoch of African philosophy, when some African thinkers began to question the perspective that traditional African beliefs and worldviews, as embedded in pre-colonial African cultures, constituted African philosophy. This question bordering on the parameters of African philosophy sprang from and was weaved around the idea, promoted by both western and African thinkers that Africans do not have a philosophy. And if they do have, who are they? And if there are, what ideas from within their community of thought constitute African philosophy? As significant as this enquiry might have been in the historical evolution of African philosophy, with the work of Makinde (2010) on *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*, African Philosophy has moved beyond the question of whether there is an African philosophy or not. When Onyewuenyi (1994) wrote on *The African origin of Greek Philosophy: An Exercise in Afrocentricism* he gives African philosophy an age, such that to question the existence of African philosophy is to negate the being of western philosophy. This piece goes beyond the question of whether there is an African philosophy or not, to study the development of the different trends that have emerged from the study of the history of African philosophy. It moves beyond the conventional limits of the study of the trends or

schools of African philosophy tied to the 1960's and 70s to the contemporary developments in the study of African philosophy.

2. The Schools of African Philosophy

In this study, the concepts: trends and schools are used interchangeably. As such, when trends is used, it signifies schools and vice versa. The schools or trends to be discussed in this piece have been grouped into the Universalist, Particularist, Eclectic, National-Ideological, Sage philosophy, Literal/Artistic philosophy and the Hermeneutic school.

a. Universalist/Professional Trend of African Philosophy

The universalist or professional school of African philosophy was promoted by scholars such as Peter O. Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu, Odera Oruka and Paulin Hountondji. Their thought is grouped into a school because they share fundamental positions and assumptions. As a school, what is their argument? They argue that philosophy is the same everywhere and uses the same methodology, and thus African philosophy should be critical and not a descriptive record of Africa beliefs. Bodunrin (cited by Uduigwomen, 1995), a leading figure in the universalist trend brought out the basic features of this school. These include:

- i. They agree with Jenny (1999), that philosophy deals with problems which are ultimate, abstract and very general. These problems cut across geographical and cultural divides. Bodunrin (cited by Uduigwomen, 1995) wrote, "Philosophical systems are built up by systematic examination of specific features of the world out of the relationships that are perceived to obtain between them" (p. 3). It is therefore not surprising that when Sodipo (cited by Uduigwomen, 1995) describes the idea of cause and chance in Yoruba ontology, Bodunrin (cited by Uduigwomen, 1995) would reject it as philosophy on the

grounds that it only allows scholars to see how the Yoruba concept of cause and chance fits into the Yoruba traditional system of thought and not in the general or universal corpus of literature called philosophy.

- ii. If any literature must be categorized as philosophical, it must contain within itself the energies of criticism and argument. In this case, to put out traditional ideas that have not been criticised or cannot be argued, or ideas that are not logical in its presentation and scientific in nature, cannot be regarded as philosophy. Thus, when logic, science, criticism and argumentation are not the hallmark of a body of thought, they cannot be regarded as philosophical.
- iii. For a body of thought to be philosophy, this school also argues that it must follow the analytic or dialectical pedagogy of enquiry. In this process of presentation, one's ideas must be well and clearly articulated, so that your audience would know what they are invited to believe. In this process, the thinker must show how his theory addresses the problem at stake more than other theories. Like the dialectics of Hegel, ideas to constitute philosophy become an antithesis to an already existing thesis, to give birth to a new thesis.

While it is true that philosophy needs to have universal relevance as the professional approach insists, Uduigwomen, (1995) criticizes it on the grounds that philosophical problems will remain plain and in the abstract except it is made to have local and concrete relevance. For instance, the problem of reincarnation will not have any relevance to the African until it is discussed with a focus on the categories that underlie his worldview. From the perspective of Uduigwomen, one can argue that contextualization is what makes African philosophy to have a cultural dimension, arising from the special problem and unique experience of the African people. Any

attempt to detach philosophy from particular contexts would make philosophy a rarefied thing.

b. Ethno-philosophy or Particularist Trend of African Philosophy

The proponents of this trend include Tempels (1959), Mbiti (1970) and Senghor (1964; 1973). They argue that the different African worldviews properly constitute what could be regarded as African philosophy. They would define African Philosophy as the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas. It places little or no emphasis on scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation and makes more emphases on local relevance or context. This does not in any way mean that this trend undermines the significance of scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation.

This perspective was expressed in Placid Tempels' work, *La Philosophie Bantou* and John Mbiti's piece, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Segun (1991), criticised this perspective when he argued that Tempels' primary motivation was not to define African philosophy, but to help European missionaries understand the thought pattern or worldview of the Bantu people. This he believed would make the work of evangelization easier for the European missionaries. Segun's criticism does not suffice here, because that a man has not set out to do something but still does, does not mean that what he has done is not worth it. If we move beyond Tempels to Mbiti, his purpose is clear. Mbiti (1970) wrote that the primary motivation for documenting his work was to put down the:

Philosophical understanding of African peoples concerning different issues of life. Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life

where, through word and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind. (p. 1).

On these grounds, Hounntondji (cited by Segun, 1995) would insist that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy because it is a communal and collective thought and it is not written down. Even here, the criticism of Hountondji that is based on the idea of oral tradition cannot be sustained. Philosophy is not philosophy because it has been written down; it is philosophy because it is first an idea. This would question the *philosophiness* of the ideas of Socrates who never wrote down his thought, but were later put down by his disciple Plato. Writing is not the only way of transmitting information, oral tradition is another. As has already been done by Tempels and Mbiti, professionals can collect the African wealth of ideas and critically analyse them, especially for the enlightenment of many traditional Africans who are yet to be persuaded on the distinction between philosophy, religion, mysticism and telepathy.

Segun (1995) had also criticized this view on the basis of its definition of African philosophy in terms that are traditional. He argues that it would follow that contemporary African philosophy is not philosophy. African philosophy evolves and cannot be traditional all the time. If philosophy addresses issues at all times, it then should be creative, dynamic and not static. He further criticises this view on the grounds that it takes a position that assumes that once we have identified these authentic traditional ideas, we need only report them without criticism. Even here again Segun's arguments cannot be sustained. There is no piece in which the particularist school have said that philosophy is traditional thoughts reported without criticism. Segun takes on the emphasis of the particularist school as though it were all they have said. Worthy of note is that the idea of traditional often used by the particularist school is not limited to myths, proverbs, legend, lore, folklores, etc., of the African people; it also implies a philosophical style passed from one generation to another. In this case, Segun's argument that modern African philosophy cannot be regarded as African philosophy because of the

new context it address, is not true; for even though they were not reflecting on African myths, proverbs, legend, folklores, they carried with them the *Igwebuike* underlining principle of African philosophy, which emphasizes the significance of the one among the many.

c. National-Ideological Trend of African Philosophy

During the 20th century, a fulsome energy swept across the African continent bringing about the political emancipation of many African states. And so in 1957, Ghana became independent, in 1960 Nigeria became independent, in 1989 Namibia became independent and in the early 1990's South Africa got her independence from the apartheid regime. This energy was ignited by some Africans through their manifestos, pamphlets, political works, etc. These nationalists include, Azikiwe, Awolowo, Nkrumah, Nyerere and Senghor. Azikiwe (1937; 1965; 1964; 1978; 1981) developed his ideology later described as Zikism by some commentators, which was a philosophy for the political regeneration of Africa, economically, politically, culturally and otherwise. Leopold (1964; 1973) developed the African philosophy of negritude which affirmed the beauty of the black race. Nkrumah (1962; 1963; 1964) developed a philosophical Consciencism so as to help sustain the African identity. Nyerere (1968; 1985) developed the Ujamaa Socialism. The discourse of these African political thinkers was the theoretical offshoot of the African anti-colonial struggle, and the grounding point of departure of African philosophical engagement.

d. Sage Philosophy

Sage Philosophy was Henry Odera Oruka (1944–1995), the Kenyan philosopher's contribution to the development of African Philosophy. Through interviews with sages from traditional groups, he identified philosophical sages in different cultures who were more of the repositories of cultural wisdom. He divided them into two groups; the first he called Folk Sages, who embodied community

wisdom; the second he called Philosophical Sages, who held a critical stand towards that wisdom. From his findings, especially as to philosophical sages, he concluded that the West and Hountondji were wrong in saying that Africa has no philosophy, for his research showed that philosophy existed in traditional Africa. Oruka (1991) engaged in this investigation so as to counter three claims that undermined the *philosophiness* of African philosophy. These claims include:

- i. that while the Greek sages use reason, African sages do not engage in philosophic thought.
- ii. African sages are part of an oral tradition, whereas philosophic thought requires literacy. This was also targeted at undermining African thought as unphilosophical.
- iii. African traditions encourage unanimity regarding beliefs and values and discourage individual critical thought.

Oruka's responses to these views shaped what is today called Sage Philosophy. What then is Sage Philosophy? Oruka (1991), defines Sage Philosophy thus:

...the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom (well known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community. (p. 28)

According to Masolo (2006), Oruka had very definite ideas about who qualifies as a philosophic sage and how such persons are to be distinguished from other sages. These qualifications are as follows:

- i. The tendency to express dissatisfaction with the status quo belief system of their communities is an important critical component and a criterion Oruka used to identify sages as philosophical. Dissatisfaction sometimes motivates the philosophic sage to advance the knowledge that everyone has by subjecting it to scrutiny in order to determine its validity and worth.
- ii. While philosophic sages may still share with others some customary practices and beliefs, or aspects of them, unlike other members of their community, they emphasize rational explanations and justifications of courses of action. They owe greater loyalty to reason than to custom for its own sake. As a result, not only are sages often a source of new knowledge, but they are also a catalyst to change within their communities.

e. **Literary/Artistic Philosophy**

The literary or artistic school of African philosophy focuses on African thinkers who through their literary or artistic works made reflections that are philosophical. These artists include: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Okot p'Bitek, Taban lo Liyong, etc. For instance, in the *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, he reflected on the Igbo-African philosophy of life, kinship, death, the afterlife, ancestors, etc. For instance, in Achebe's work on the *Things Fall Apart*, the essence of the Igbo-African philosophy of belongingness comes to light:

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him. (p. 132)

After the feast, when one of the eldest men of the *umunna* rose to thank Okonkwo, the foundation of the Igbo-African philosophy of belongingness is unveiled:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. (p. 133)

Excerpts like these contain germs of Igbo thoughts on ethics, epistemology and metaphysics.

f. **Hermeneutic Philosophy**

From the name, this school understands African philosophy as interpretation. And here, the works of philosophers like Okere, Barry Hallen, J. O. Sodipo find their relevance. In this school, African philosophy is understood within the context of analysing African languages, texts, proverbs, sayings, etc., with the hope of extracting from them the philosophy of the African people through interpretation. For instance, the interpretation of the Igbo proverb *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the tree, it would be caught by man), helps you to understand the Igbo-African social philosophy.

3. **A Case for Eclectic Trend in African Philosophy**

The Eclectic school of African philosophy would define African Philosophy as the combination of the universalist and particularist approaches to African philosophy. This would involve sifting the philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc., and reflecting on them by professionally trained African philosophers. They believe that at the point of this romance between the professional and

unprofessional, authentic African philosophy is realized. It argues that schools are already doing African philosophy, but that they will do better if they join heads together. Uduigwomen, (1995) describes the eclectic interplay between the two schools as follows:

The universalist approach will provide the necessary analytic and conceptual framework for the particularist school. Since this framework cannot thrive in a vacuum, the particularist approach will supply the raw material or data needed by the universalist approach. Thus, it will deliver the universalist approach from mere logic-chopping and abstractness. There will be a fruitful exchange of categories and concepts. (p. 6).

The eclectic school prefers to take a central position. It holds the promise of transforming the conception and practise of contemporary African philosophy. In the African world view every position has a stake. A thousand flowers are allowed to bloom. Obele azu kpata obele nku, nnukwu azu kpata nnukwu nku which translates to let the small fish fetch small bunch of fire wood and let the big fish fetch a big bunch. Two emerging and prominent eclectic theories in African philosophy include: Ibuanyidanda and Njikoka ontologies credited to I. I. Asouzu and G. O. Ozumba respectively. Theories of this kind are able to capture the originality and viability of African thought system.

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing, this piece has studied the schools of African philosophy in such a way that it goes beyond the conventional limits of the study of these trends traditionally tied to the 1960's and 70s, to the contemporary developments in the study of African philosophy. This study moves further to include the literary and hermeneutic schools as trends in the historical development of African philosophy. The researcher adopts the eclectic school of African philosophy as the most credible and productive school of African philosophy and considers any form of particularization as

a philosophical pride, which must be avoided in every sincere philosophical enquiry. The eclectic trend spoken of here by the researcher moves beyond the conventional eclectic trend which harbours only the universalist and particularist schools, to include all the schools of African philosophy as relevant ends in every African philosophical reflection.

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