

**ORIENTATIONS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY :
A CRITICAL SURVEY**

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Philosophy in the general sense of the concept refers to the critical reflection of human beings on the problem of their existence and essence. African Philosophy therefore is the activities of African people in this respect. It connotes the process of critical thinking embarked upon by the African people in the bid to solve certain problems that confront them. We need to mention that the idea of philosophy as an academic enterprise is a recent one in Africa. It is precisely an offshoot of Africa's contact with European culture. But that does not imply that Africans prior to this time never gave attention to philosophical issues, at least in an informal manner. African Philosophy as we have it today is therefore an amalgam of the various ideas and problems of traditional African thought and modern philosophical culture; employing the methodology of the Western philosophical tradition. This paper is an attempt to survey although in a critical manner the various arguments of the dominant orientations in African philosophy. In this regard our effort is historical, in the sense that we feel the urge to begin to document the movement of ideas that culminated into African philosophy as tension on the debate about the existence of African Philosophy is gradually cooling down today.

An African student of philosophy who takes a course in African philosophy for the first time may be shocked by the fact that an extensive amount of literature on African philosophy is devoted to the polemic surrounding the issue of the existence and essence of African philosophy. But the shock ought to abate if he recalls that Western philosophy throughout its history is constantly questioning its own existence and essence. The fact that African philosophy is essentially meta-philosophical confirms its status as genuinely philosophical. Any form of philosophy is and ought to be a meta-philosophical enterprise. The

self-critical aspect of philosophy is the appropriate starting point of the philosophical programme. This self-criticism is always fruitful by generating many fundamental questions. In the same vein, the polemic concerning the essence and the existence of African philosophy generated many issues, the discussion of which forms the content of African philosophy today.

Do we have an African philosophy? This apparently simple question dominated the discourse of African Philosophy for many years. This question is first raised in reaction to Father Tempels book : *Bantu Philosophy*.¹ The publication of this book brought into the consciousness of people the fact that there can be a body of literature than can be categorised as African Philosophy simply because of the cultural context that generated it. With this innovative project of Tempels, certain nagging questions in relation to African thought begun to surface such as these: What is the philosophical status of African Worldviews? "Do those worldviews demonstrate a systematic coherence and a fundamental unity from which we can deduce a distinctive African mode of thought, even a form of rationality?"² Can African Philosophy be produced by mere description of the folk beliefs of the African people? What is the ideal method of extracting African philosophical materials from the body of ideas of traditional African culture? Can the methodology employed for the production of African philosophy be different from the conventional ones in Western Philosophy?

Precisely, the discussion of Tempels *Bantu Philosophy* stimulated a vigorous debate on what is and should constitute African Philosophy. Although superficial analysis of the discourse may lead to the conclusion that the issue is simply whether African philosophy exists or not, but a deeper study of the polemics will reveal that the bone of contention is whether and how it is possible for the traditional African thought to be retrieved and presented as African philosophy. In essence, the debate is not essentially about the existence of African philosophy but about the approach for repackaging it for the consumption of the contemporary integrated and interrelated global society. In this respect, there have been four approaches which have been tagged as the four trends in African Philosophy. The four trends are : (1) Ethno-Philosophy; (2) Philosophic Sagacity; (3) Nationalist Ideological; and (4) Professional Philosophy.

(a) Ethno-Philosophy Trend

The name ethno-philosophy has been given to the orientation in African philosophy that subscribes to the approach employed by Father Tempels in presenting the communal beliefs of the Bantu people as an example of what and how African philosophy should be. Majority of the scholars categorised as members of this orientation are theologians such as J.S. Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, anthropologists like Mercel Griaule, Alexis Kagame and Robin Horton. It has been said that these scholars are interested in African thought for two major reasons: (i) to debunk the ethnocentric assertion made by first generation of European Africanists; that African people are incapable of rational and rigorous reflection and analysis; (ii) to make the African mentality or cultural matrix comprehensible to the Western mind especially for the purpose of the "civilizing" or colonization.

Ethno-philosophy as an orientation in African philosophy can be identified with the following features :

- (1) An acceptance of the descriptive methodology as the appropriate method of extracting African philosophical materials from the body of folk beliefs of the African people.
- (2) A salient belief in the uniformity of the diverse cultures of the African peoples.
- (3) An acceptance of the need to differentiate between African beliefs on the one hand and western assumptions on the other and the presumption that each is unique and completely distinct and parallel to the other.
- (4) The belief in a very liberal conception of philosophy that manifold ideas can be categorised as philosophical by this orientation..
- (5) A sentimental and romantic attachment to the African past, so much so that criticism of the cultural facts are completely avoided.
- (6) A conception of philosophy as the enterprise of the community rather than that of the individual. An open denial as Odera Oruka puts it of "Plato's maxim that the multitude cannot be philosophic".³

Ethno-philosophy has been severely criticised by many people since the establishment of this orientation. So many are the pitfalls of this trend identified

that one may not discuss it all in this essay. But we shall endeavour to examine the very fundamental ones. The most popular critic of ethno-philosophy, Paulin Hountondji who indeed gave it the name criticised the trend for confusing the two senses of the word "philosophy".⁴ According to him the concept refers to a strict academic enterprise and also connotes a loose act of reflection in the ordinary sense. The ethno-philosophers according to Hountondji present the loose and debase form of "philosophy" as African philosophy. In doing this, ethno-philosophy seems to be implying that Africans are only capable of practising the weak form of philosophy and not the rigorous one.

Ethno-philosophy has also been criticised for its descriptive approach. The mere documentation of the folk beliefs of the African people, without proper critical analysis of it has been seen as unphilosophical. Even if there is a need for a recording of these beliefs, this can only be philosophical if it is critically and analytically reconstructed.

A mere description of the empirical world cannot satisfy these conditions. The pity is that ethno-philosophers usually fall in love so much with the thought system they seek to expound that they become dogmatic in the veneration of the culture to which the thought system belongs... They do not raise philosophical issues about the system (because for them no problems arise once we 'understand' the system); therefore, they do not attempt to give a philosophical justification of the belief system or of issues that arise in it.⁵

Finally and related to other criticisms against ethno-philosophy is the claim that ethno-philosophy rather than working dogmatically in favour of African culture and people is saliently operating for the imperialists. The ethno-philosophy project has therefore been denounced as an attempt to disarm and demobilise the process of critical reflection in Africa.⁶ Mere presentation of folk and uncritical beliefs according to the critics is a ploy to distract the focus of African people away from the more worthwhile enterprise of critical thinking that can contribute to the project of liberation that is expedient for a dependent and subservient group of people that presently occupy the African space.

(b) Philosophic Sagacity

The second trend in the debate concerning the existence of African philosophy is the Philosophic-Sagacity trend. This trend emerged as an attempt to challenge the claim that African philosophy is a myth because the individual thinkers that generate philosophical issues are absent in traditional Africa. Having accused ethno-philosophy as presenting folk ideas as African philosophy, there was the challenge of revealing the individuals capable of systematic and rigorous reflection in Africa, the way individual philosophers abound in the Western society. Philosophic-Sagacity trend is a response to this challenge. The argument of the subscribers to this approach can be summarised thus : (i) There exists in pre-colonial African societies, Sagacious people who possess the capacity to engage in rigorous and systematic thinking about problems that are genuinely philosophical. To prove this, the members of this orientation identified such Sagacious people who still exist within contemporary African society and still operate like their predecessors with genuinely African cultural materials; (ii) All societies possess extra-ordinary people who give attention to philosophical problems. These sages are the minds behind the so called folk beliefs of the society. These individuals are anonymous within African traditional society because the absence of literacy and writing culture will prevent their recognition. Therefore, the task for the contemporary African society, particularly for the trained philosophers is to prevent the remaining living sages from being denied the necessary recognition.

Philosophic-Sagacity trend has been identified with scholars such as Marcel Griaule; the French anthropologist who documented the ideas of the Dogon Sage Ogotomeli⁷; C.S. Momoh, the Nigerian Philosopher, who engaged some Uchi Sages in serious discussion about philosophical issues and problems⁸; Barry Hallen and Sodipo, the American and Nigerian Philosopher respectively, who analysed the philosophical assertions of some Yoruba medicine men⁹ and Odera Oruka, the Late Kenyan Philosopher who popularised this orientation¹⁰.

The argument of the members of this orientation that there were and are still African individuals whose thoughts are sufficiently rigorous to be described as philosophical has been demonstrated further by personal engagement with some of these sages. Employing the ethno-graphic method, the believers in this approach recorded and analysed the ideas of the sages and attempted a

systematisation of them into a logical, consistent and coherent form. In doing this, the members of this philosophic sagacity trend demonstrate (1) That Africans are capable of rigorous reflection; (2) That African folk beliefs are not uncritical, that in fact African thinkers are as critical as their European counterparts; (3) That the African sages are independent in choosing their theme and in approaching them, they are even capable of disagreeing with the communal and conventional positions. The sages in fact "recommend only those aspects of beliefs and wisdoms which satisfy their rational scrutiny".¹¹

But the approach of the philosophic-sagacity trend has been criticised. Objections to this trend are basically subsumable under three categories. The first series of objections concerns the problem of identifying the real owner of the ideas produced by the engagement of the academic philosopher with the indigenous thinker. As Pater Bodunrin puts it "whose philosophy does the philosopher produce as a result of such research".¹² The second group of objections relates to the influence the professionally trained philosopher will have on the indigenous thinker, given the status of the former as an elite and the other as an illiterate. How are we sure that the trained philosopher will not be prompting or even putting words in the mouth of the sages. The last set of objections is directed at the desire of the believers in the philosophic-sagacity trend to establish the uniqueness of the ideas produced by the African sages in contradistinction to Western ideas. Can such a desire be realised given cross-cultural interactions of the world community today? Do we still have Africans who are truly insulated from Western cultural influence? We believe that such a goal is unattainable and even unwarranted. Manifestations of foreign ideas in indigenous philosophical enterprise is a reality and part of the dynamism of the contemporary age which cannot be ignored in Africa.

(c) Nationalist Ideological Orientation

The third trend in the discourse on the existence of African philosophy is the Nationalist-Ideological trend. The people who have been categorised as members of this orientation are the first generation of statesmen and politicians who were in the vanguard of independence movement. Prominent politicians who have been identified with this trend are Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Amilcar Cabral and others.

We need to mention that these people did not argue for the existence of an African Philosophy in a direct manner. Indeed, their purpose in philosophy is secondary. It is not their fundamental objective to partake in the discourse concerning the existence or otherwise of African philosophy. Rather, they stray into philosophy because of their belief that the genuine liberation and development of Africa cannot be realised unless it is based on a well developed system of ideas which is authentic and unique to the African society. The members of the Nationalist-ideological trend feel that this authentic and unique system of ideas was the foundation of the pre-colonial African society. But they also realise that this body of ideas had been disturbed by colonialism and its revival will be a tedious task.

Simply put, Nationalist-Ideological orientation argues that the project of liberation of the African people demand that the traditional African thought system should be revived as the foundation of the new society. Certain basic positions are accepted by virtually all the members of this orientation. Those positions can be summarised thus:

- (1) The belief in an authentic African thought in traditional African society and the assumption that the traditional ideas sustained the pre-colonial African society.
- (2) The sentimental belief that this traditional system of ideas ensured social order and peaceful co-existence in the traditional African society and the yearning for the return of the old order.
- (3) The belief that the traditional African society was egalitarian and communalistic, so much so that there was peace and order.
- (4) The claim that post-colonial African society can only realise full liberation and genuine development if it is based on the traditional African social and political philosophy.

But these arguments of the Nationalist-Ideological trend have been criticised. The first argument against this orientation is that the body of traditional ideas which they seek to employ are completely lost to history. The second argument against the trend is that the beautiful and romantic picture of the African past painted by the African nationalists is a figment of their imagination. According to the critics of the trend, abundant evidence are in place to debunk

the belief that traditional African past was glorious. As Bodunrin puts it: "A way of life which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious".¹³ The last fundamental argument against the position of the nationalists is to the effect that the ideas of the ancient past cannot be adequate to meet the challenges of the contemporary world. How can the ancient ideas be adequate for the demands of the modern society of today?

(d) Professional Philosophy

The last trend in the discourse of African philosophy is the Professional Philosophy trend. The trend has as its members the professionally trained philosophers who have imbibed the Western orientation of practising philosophy. At the centre of this trend are the first generation of academic philosophers in Africa, namely: Kwasi Wiredu of Ghana; Peter Bodunrin of Nigeria; Paulin Hountondji of Benin Republic and Henry Odera Oruka of Kenya.

This category of philosophers has been accused of denying the existence of African Philosophy simply because they disagreed with the presentation of folk beliefs as African Philosophy by the ethno-philosophers. The fundamental contribution of this orientation to the enterprise of African Philosophy is that they purified the discipline by ensuring that the debase form of philosophy is not adopted as African philosophy.

The arguments of the professional philosophers are these:

- (1) African Philosophy like Western Philosophy must be a strict, rigorous and critical discipline. It must not be seen in the popular sense of the idea as the totality of worldview of the African people. The professional philosophers who belong to this trend are mindful of the need to demarcate the philosophical from the non-philosophical.
- (2) They have a universal conception of philosophy. In this sense, they feel that if African philosophy should be different from its Western counterpart, the variation should not be fundamental. African philosophy to some of them, is the work of professionally trained Africans in all areas of philosophy. It is desirable that the works be set in some African context, but it is not necessary that they be so.¹⁴

- (3) African traditional thought cannot be categorised as a philosophical piece because it lacks the written culture which is a necessity for the formulation of philosophical tradition.
- (4) The only way that Ethno-philosophy can attain the status of philosophy is through the process of critical analysis of its products. Ethno-philosophy can only produce the raw materials which will be further refined using the traditional philosophical tools. "It is not enough simply to collect information about what our ancestors said or thought, we must try to interpret, clarify, analyse and where appropriate after a critical evaluation, assimilate and develop the resulting body of thought".¹⁵
- (5) African philosophy instead of venerating the African culture the way the Ethno-philosophers do, ought to critically engage with the culture. It ought to criticise certain items in our culture that do not favour our development as a society. It can also reconstruct the culture in order to make it respond appropriately to societal challenges.
- (6) African philosophy to them is more of a potentiality than an actuality. Unlike the ethno-philosophers who maintain that the enterprise is established, the professional philosophers contend that it is still in the making and needs the effort of those properly trained philosophers. "African philosophy as distinct from African traditional worldviews, the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary African philosophers, is still in the making."¹⁶

The polemics surrounding the discourse of African philosophy since the commencement of academic philosophy have been dominated by members of professional philosophy trend and their opponents. The critical attitude of the professional philosophers particularly for the materials of ethno-philosophy has been seriously challenged. In this respect, professional philosophy trend has been accused of elitism, universalism, imperialism and of so many other things.

The major criticism levelled against the members of this orientation is directed at their goal of establishing African philosophy as an aspect of Universal enterprise of philosophy. This Universalism according to critics, does not take into consideration the fact that all philosophies are produced from different cultural contexts. The conception of philosophy as a universal enterprise fails to take into consideration the cultural diversities of the world and the fact that every

culture reflects on those problems that are pressing to them. The cultural origin of philosophical problems and the cultural dimension of their solutions put question mark on the desire of the professional philosophers to integrate African philosophy into the so called universal philosophical culture.

Related to the above criticism is the argument that the professional philosophers having been schooled in the Western tradition seek to entrench this Western Orientation in Africa. The intellectual imperialism that the professional philosophers are accused of, is said to be behind their ambition of trying to force all the techniques of Western philosophy on the African enterprise. Since Western paradigms and tools cannot effectively meet the challenges and aspirations of Africa, the professional philosophers have encouraged its adoption in order to further consolidate Africa's dependency on Western culture. To avoid this, it is argued that African philosophy ought to be established as a unique and distinct enterprise that will reflect on the problems that are peculiar to Africa. The establishment of an African philosophy, the critics of Professional philosophy maintain, is to forge and consolidate the identity of African people which has been seriously undermined by Western Scholarship.

Our attempt so far, is to revisit the identified four orientations in philosophy. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now say that virtually all the four tendencies benefited the discourse of African philosophy. Ethno-philosophy can be credited with providing the raw materials needed for analysis and also for insisting that our indigenous culture can only be neglected at our own peril. The nationalist-Ideological trend should also be commended for raising the fundamental themes of indentity and development. Their discourse has put in focus the imperative of reflecting on the issues of our freedom and development, without which any form of reflection will be hair-splitting. The Sagacious trend cannot also be ignored. The transition between the traditional and the modern is encaptured by the African Sages. For the transition to be smooth and fruitful their didactic and philosophical Knowledge should be documented. The importance of the professional philosophers cannot be over emphasised because they are the heirs of this emerging tradition. The tools that they have supplied are indispensable for the African philosophical project. In all, the controversy over the essence and existence of African philosophy, long as it may be, has

provided us with the appropriate starting point. We can then begin to say that African philosophy has come of age.

NOTES

1. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris : Presence Africaine), 1959.
2. Abiola Irele. Introduction to Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983), p.8.
3. H. Odera Oruka, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (Nairobi : Shirikon Publishers, 1995), p. 17.
4. Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality, Op. Cit.* p.55.
5. Peter Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy", Tsenay Serequeberhan, *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings* (New York: Paragon Publishers, 1991), p. 77.
6. An example of this kind of criticism can be found in Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality, Op. Cit.*
7. Marcel Griaule, *Conversation with Ogotomeli* (Honsby, London: Oxford University Press, 1948).
8. See for example his article: C. S. Momoh, "Pansophism and Ontological Placements in African Philosophy", in C. S. Momoh, (ed.) *The Substance of African Philosophy* (Auchi: African Philosophy Projects Publication, 1989), pp. 372-390.
9. Barry Hallen and O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcrafts: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (London: Ethnographica, 1986).
10. H.Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Leiden, The Netherlands, Brill Publishers, 1990).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 25
12. Peter Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy", *Op. Cit.*, p. 72.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
15. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1980). p. ix-x.
16. *Ibid.*, p.30.