

## IN DEFENSE OF ETHNO-PHILOSOPHY: A BRIEF RESPONSE TO KANU'S ECLECTICISM

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### Abstract

After reading an Article by Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu entitled: Trends in African Philosophy: A Case for Eclectism (2013, 275-287), I felt that as Africans of Black extraction, we were doing a disservice to our very own philosophy called Ethno-philosophy in ridicule. For many years African philosophy has not been taken seriously by both African Philosophers and Western Philosophers alike. To my knowledge, African philosophy has been disparaged and downgraded for failing to have, among other things, a coherent system of thought and a method that can be applied across all the cultures of this world. In this essay, I argue that philosophy needs not to have a method that is absolutely applicable across all cultures in order to be a philosophy that is worth celebrating. My position is that the current generation of African philosophers must develop a logic on which African philosophy should sit instead of “running away from their burning house only to seek refuge next door.”

**KEYWORDS:** Ethno-philosophy, Universalism, Particularism, Eclecticism, African Logic

### Introduction

In this essay, I defend the thesis that ethno-philosophy is the only philosophy that an African of black extraction can be proud of as it is rooted in African traditions and cultures. This is notwithstanding the amount of criticism that it has received over the years from the West and from fellow Africans who subscribe to the Universalist approach to the study of African philosophy. I begin this essay by briefly re-visiting the debate on whether or not African philosophy exists and I outline and critique the arguments by selected Western philosophers against the possibility of the existence of African philosophy. To me, this exercise is very important since all the criticisms that ethno-philosophy has received over the years have been done in the context of this debate. Coming to this debate, I discuss arguments by Hume, Hegel and Bruhl before turning to Universalist and Particularist positions on African philosophy.

Turning to the Western arguments against African philosophy, Hume, for instance argued that the African was incapable of logical thinking and was therefore intellectually unproductive, among other inadequacies. Hegel, on the other hand, divided Africa into three parts; the one that lied south of the Sahara which he called Africa proper; the one that lied to the north of the Sahara desert

which he called European Africa and finally, the one along the river Nile close to Asia. For Hegel, Africa proper was still incapable of being rational since it was still at the childhood stage. Bruhl also completely rejected the rationality of Africans as he claimed “that Africans were largely pre-logical” (OYESHILE 2008, 57). Bruhl described a “pre-logical thought” as one that was unscientific, uncritical and one that contained evident contradictions (2008, 57).

After sampling and discussing these arguments, I discuss the Universalist and Particularist positions on this debate. While Universalists like Kwasi Wiredu, Peter O. Bodunrin, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Paulin Hountondji among others reasoned that philosophy was the same everywhere and so was the method of doing it, Particularists like Placide Tempels, Leopold Sedar Senghor, John S. Mbiti and J. Olubi Sodipo argued that philosophy was culture-bound, that is, it was a function of the traditions and cultures of a given people. I then outline and discuss Kanu’s eclecticism project which, to me, is not any different from the Universalist and Eurocentric project which is seeking to disparage and downgrade African philosophy, in general and ethno-philosophy, in particular. Finally, I make a case for ethno-philosophy by arguing that the current generation of African philosophers has a role to play in the project of taking ethno-philosophy beyond the foundational level where it is at the moment. One way to doing this is by establishing the logic and science on which this philosophy will be anchored. To this end, I give credit to Jonathan O. Chimakonam and others who have already set the tone for the development of this logic.

### **Re-visiting the African Philosophy Debate**

The African Philosophy debate is a long standing debate that has spanned many generations. The debate is centered on whether or not there is something called African philosophy with a clearly distinct method and system of thought, the same way as there is British philosophy, American philosophy and Asian philosophy or that Africa has no philosophy that is worth studying study. To this debate, we have had critical voices from both the West and from Africa. From the West it has been argued that Africans are not rational and since philosophy is a rational enterprise, it follows that Africans cannot philosophize.

Since these arguments have been presented for more than three decades now and have found an audience, I will only select and present three of these arguments by Western philosophers namely; David Hume, G. W. F. Hegel and Lucien Levy Bruhl. To begin with, Hume, a Scottish philosopher, held that the African (the black-man) was incapable of logical thinking and was therefore intellectually unproductive, among other inadequacies (MADUKA 2005, 5). Hume also believed very strongly in the idea that Europe was the model of humanity, culture and history (2005, 5).

Much later, this view found support from former Apartheid South African president, Mr. Pieter Willem Botha who remarked, thus, “intellectually, we are superior to the Blacks; that has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt over the years” (MAILU 2012, Web. N.P). Although Botha himself was not a philosopher, it is easier to discern from his tone that the generality of white people both in South Africa and the West—during his time, and to some extent even now—never accepted and may never accept the notion that Blacks are rational people capable of having a clearly defined philosophy.

Hegel, a German Philosopher, also did not believe that Africans could philosophize and that there was something called African philosophy that was worth celebrating. Thus, in [The Philosophy of History] Hegel divided Africa into three parts:

One that lies south of the desert of Sahara... Africa proper...the Upland almost entirely unknown to us, with narrow coast-tracks along the sea; the second is that to the north of the desert...European Africa (if we may so call it)...a coastland; the third is the river region of the Nile, the only valley-land of Africa, and which is in connection with Asia. Africa proper, as far back as history goes, has remained –for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world—shut up; it is the gold land compressed within itself—the land of childhood, which is lying beyond the day of self conscious history and is enveloped in the dark mantle of the night... (HEGEL cited in ONYEWUENYI 1994, 94-95)

Bruhl, a French sociologist, also denied Africans the idea of having a philosophy that was worth of study. According to Offia (2009, Web. N.P), Bruhl and other sociologists like Evan Pritchard, Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes felt the inclination to insist that for any form of thought or action to be adjudged intelligible or rational, it had to conform to the rules of formal logic as defined by the West. That therefore meant to them that any thought system that seemed contrary to this formulation was irrational (OFFIA 2009, Web. N.P).

Against this background, Bruhl completely rejected the rationality of Africans as he claimed “that they (Africans) were largely pre-logical” (OYESHILE 2008, 57). Bruhl described a “pre-logical thought” as one that was unscientific, uncritical and one that contained evident contradictions (2008, 57). For Bruhl, people with such thoughts differed not in degree but in quality from those with a logical mind (OFFIA 2009, Web. N.P). Thus, Bruhl bifurcated of the human society into two categories: those of a “primitive mentality” and those with a “civilized mentality” (OFFIA 2009, Web. N.P). Africa by this classification fell under the former category (OFFIA 2009, Web. N.P).

While I will generally not be surprised to hear Western philosophers such as Hume, Hegel and Bruhl denying the fact that Africans have a clearly distinct philosophy, because of their (Western philosophers') misplaced belief that "Reason is Greek" and "Emotion is African," what is rather worrisome is the disturbing reality that even among Africans themselves (especially Africans of Black extraction), there is no agreement as to whether African philosophy exists. For instance, fellow African philosophers especially those trained in the Western tradition such as Wiredu, Bodunrin, Hountondji, Appiah and others have followed Western philosophers in asserting that philosophy is the same everywhere since it uses one method, and must necessarily be critical instead of being descriptive.<sup>1</sup>

This category of African philosophers has come to be called the Universalists and they subscribe to a school of philosophy called professional philosophy. At the opposite end of this debate, African philosophers like Tempels, Mbiti, Sodipo and Senghor among others have argued that philosophy is culture-bound. This category of African philosophers has come to be called Particularists and they are widely spread into three schools, namely; ethno-philosophy, nationalist ideological philosophy and sage philosophy. In this essay, although I will outline and explain each of these schools of philosophy that belong to the Particularist strand of thinking, I will dwell much on ethno-philosophy since it is the one that has received much criticism over the years.

To begin with, according to African philosophers that subscribe to ethno-philosophy, philosophy is not the same everywhere and the methodology of doing philosophy depends entirely on the context in which the philosophy is situated. *Ethno-philosophers* are all agreed that African philosophy exists and is that kind of philosophy that is uniquely African in terms of its brand logic, its values, its knowledge forms and its metaphysics. In the words of Kanu, African philosophy is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas (KANU 2013, 278).<sup>2</sup>

*Nationalist Ideological Philosophy* is another of the Particularist's approach to the search for African philosophy and it defines African philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that I am not suggesting that there is something wrong in philosophy being done through analysis instead of being descriptive, my point is that the idea of analysis must not be universalized. Why should we be forced, as Africans, to buy in to the Western model of critical analysis as if we cannot define critical thinking ourselves?

<sup>2</sup> This is notwithstanding the fact that later in this essay, Kanu argues in support of eclecticism which calls for a combination of Western methods with African thought systems in order to have a philosophy with a world wide appeal.

as a system of thought, based on traditional African socialism and familyhood (EMAGALIT 2013, Web. N.P). It is represented by the works of politicians like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Senghor. This trend of philosophy aims at seeking a true and a meaningful freedom for African people that can be attained by mental liberation and a return to genuine traditional African humanism wherever it is possible (EMAGALIT 2013, Web. N.P). This trend of philosophy gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century.

In Ghana, this trend of philosophy was pioneered by Nkrumah who developed what became known as philosophical consciencism meant to help sustain African identity (KANU 2013, 280). Nkrumah's Philosophical consciencism incorporated the humanism of traditional society in this commitment and was based on deductions derived from African human conscience traceable to the style of humanism and the communitarian conception of traditional Africa (EKANEM 2012, 55).

The following paragraph best summarizes Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism:

Social revolution must therefore have, standing firmly behind it, an intellectual revolution, a revolution in which our thinking and philosophy are directed towards the redemption of our society. Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from these conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. (NKRUMAH 1964, 78)

In Zimbabwe, this trend of philosophy was popularized by Robert Gabriel Mugabe's socialism that was blended by a local ideology called *gutsaruzhinji* (promoting the interests of the majority) which resulted in the introduction of free primary education and food rationing that was meant to avert hunger in drought prone areas. The system also ensured that all children were immunized for free against the six killer diseases, namely; Polio, Measles, BCG, Tetanus, Whooping cough and Tuberculosis.

During those early years of Zimbabwe's independence, Mugabe believed that only a well-fed, healthy and educated nation would lead to socio-political and economic development and that self-seeking attitudes would be retrogressive to this development. So, *gutsaruzhinji*, a philosophy premised on the idea of communal belonging was going to be the panacea to the problems affecting this new Zimbabwe which was smarting from a protracted war of liberation. It is however critical to note that many years later, these gains were reversed when advanced stayism led to poor governance which in turn led to the collapse of the economy as well as the social and political institutions.

In Tanzania, Nyerere developed *ujamaa* socialism which was an attempt to integrate traditional African values with the demands of the post-colonial setting. As a philosophy, the central objective of *ujamaa* was the attainment of a self-reliant socialist nation (IBHAWOH and DIBUA 2003, 60). *Ujamaa* was founded on a philosophy of development that was based on three essentials—freedom, equality and unity. For Nyerere (1967, 16), the ideal society must be based on these three essentials. Thus:

There must be equality, because only on that basis will men work cooperatively. There must be freedom, because the individual is not served by society unless it is his. And there must be unity, because only when society is unified can its members live and work in peace, security and well being. These three essentials, Nyerere further contended are not new to Africa; they have always been part of the tradition social order. (1967, 16)

What united all these ideologies was the need to develop a homegrown kind of philosophy that would lead to African renaissance (re-birth) which would see the African man and woman being able to chart his or her own destiny. Nationalist ideological philosophy led to the development of communitarian concepts such as *hunhu/ubuntu* (in Zimbabwe and South Africa), *omundu* (in Tanzania and the rest of east Africa), *umunna* and *ibuanidanda* (among the Igbo of Nigeria), *Okra* (among the Akan of Ghana) and *Botho* (in Lesotho) among other African countries. In all these concepts, individual existence is tied to group, family and/or community existence (MANGENA 2014, 12). Thus, Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism, Mugabe's *gutsaruzhinji* concept and Nyerere's *ujamaa* socialism all fit into the philosophy of African humanism which is premised on the idea of community.

*Sage Philosophy* was another of the Particularist's approach to the search for African philosophy and it was developed by Kenyan philosopher Oruka. With regard to this school of philosophy, Kanu (2013, 280) notes, thus:

Through interviews with sages from traditional groups, Oruka 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 communal wisdom; the second he called philosophical sages who held a critical stand towards that wisdom

Oruka used his findings to counter Hountondji and those Western philosophers who had argued that Africa had no philosophy (KANU 2013, 280). His central

claim was that the Eurocentric philosophical discourse was biased in favour of Western traditions and cultures. He lamented that:

While the sayings of numerous Greek sages such as Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and other pre-Socratics, were regarded as “philosophical,” those of traditional African sages were not. This bias arises out of the implicit belief that philosophy is the privileged activity of certain races. He believed that this unjustified belief had further led to the image of philosophy as the restricted property of Greeks, or Europeans, and, even more exclusively, the property of white males. Partly concerned with exposing the falsehood of this Eurocentric attitude, he recognized that what had raised the apparently simple sayings of the pre-Socratics to the status of philosophy were the subsequent sustained commentaries by later philosophers. He maintained that the ideas expressed by indigenous African sages were no different from those by the earlier Greeks. (ORUKA 1990, 47)

By way of criticism, it is clear that the Universalist’s emphasis on critical thinking as a key part of the philosophical enterprise was something they got from the West since most of these had been trained in Western schools of philosophy. To my knowledge, critical thinking is a product of rationality, an attribute denied of Africans by Hume, Hegel, Bruhl and others. It therefore makes it very difficult for me to believe that the ideas of these Universalists were not “tainted by foreign influences.” If indeed, their ideas were tainted by foreign influences, then ethno-philosophers, nationalist ideological philosophers and those who subscribe to sage philosophy are justified in calling for the crafting or development of a philosophy that is grounded on African traditions, cultures and experiences.

Assuming that the Universalist approach to the study of African philosophy is also motivated by the need to come up with a philosophy that is grounded on African experiences, the problem which remains unresolved is that this kind of philosophy does not have deep roots in African traditions and cultures. While cultural encounters cannot be avoided and may have played a part on the thinking of most Universalists, I argue that indigeneity remains an integral part of a people’s philosophy. As I look at the importance of cultural encounters, I reflect on the questions: When one goes to a faraway country to secure education, do they also have to take back home their cultural baggage and systems of thought? Does a discipline always have to use Western logic in order to be deemed philosophical? What justifies using Western logic and science as standards for all philosophies in this world?

It seems to me that these are hard questions which even the fiercest critics of African philosophy; the likes of Hume, Hegel and Bruhl cannot answer. Against this background, I argue that ethno-philosophy is an African philosophy which we, as Africans, should try to defend with pride and that professional philosophy remains professional philosophy at least, in the minds of its conceptualizers. In the minds of African philosophers who subscribe to Particularism, professional philosophy only seeks to uproot the African from his informal traditions and cultures and give him or her new identity and this is highly unacceptable since it is tantamount to proselytisation of African cultures and value systems. So, will Kanu's defense eclecticism take us anywhere?

A proper response to this question would probably require that I give an outline of Kanu's defense of eclecticism with a view to showing how this defense seeks to deal with ethno-philosophy's alleged failure to place more emphasis on scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation methods which I consider to be the hallmarks of Western philosophy as defended by the likes of Hume, Hegel, Bruhl and others.

### **Kanu's defense of Eclecticism**

In this section, I give an account of Kanu's defense of eclecticism showing how he sees it as the best alternative to the African philosophy debate, in general and the alleged shortcomings of ethno-philosophy, in particular. The argument by the defenders of the eclectic school to which Kanu belongs proceeds thus: because African philosophy has been criticized by Hountondji and Western philosophers like Hume, Hegel, Bruhl and others for being illogical, incoherent and unsystematic, there is need to combine the Universalist and Particularist approaches to African philosophy and this would involve sifting the philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc., and ask professionally trained philosophers to reflect on them (KANU 2013, 283).

Defenders of the eclectic school believe that at the point of this romance between the professional and unprofessional, authentic African philosophy is realized (KANU 2013, 283). Kanu cites Uduigwomen (1995) who describes the 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 materials or data needed by the Universalist approach. Thus, it will deliver the Universalist approach from mere logic chopping and abstractness. These will be a fruitful exchange of categories and concepts. (UDUIGWOMEN cited in KANU 2013, 284)

With this outline of the main thrust of the arguments of the eclectic school, I now turn to the critique of Kanu's defense of eclecticism in order to buttress the foregoing.

### **A Critique of Kanu's defense of Eclecticism**

In this essay, I argue that Kanu's claim that eclecticism is the panacea to the African philosophy debate in general and to the shortcomings of ethno-philosophy in particular is a claim that needs to be supported by very strong and unshakeable premises but it seems to me that at the moment; he does not have such premises. Eclecticism, in my view, complicates the African philosophy debate as it sounds like another Universalist position and/or another Western rebuttal of African philosophy. I say so because, the mere admission that African philosophy cannot stand alone without being anchored on the logic of the West, shows that Kanu has no confidence in having African philosophy that is anchored on its own logic and yet according to C.B Nze (2013, 418),<sup>3</sup> logic lies at the foundation of everything, once it is established, every other form of theorizing takes shape.

He maintains that Aristotle was the man to do it in the Western tradition, creating the foundation upon which theorists of different inclination built their thoughts. For Nze, we cannot correctly do African philosophy, mathematics, science, etc., without first laying a logical foundation for such (2013, 18). By inference, Nze is emphasizing on the importance of seeking local remedies to local problems. On this score, he agrees with most Particularist philosophers in the African domain who have argued that African philosophy must be anchored on African tools of analysis, especially African logic. He avers, thus:

The practice which has grown uncontrolled since the colonial times in which African intellectuals seek to construct native African theories upon the logical foundation of the West is simply misguided. Western intellectuals read such works and toss it aside because they see nothing different in what they have since accomplished. (2013, 18)

While many other ethno-philosophers like Nze, Chimakonam, Mbiti, Sopedipo and others believe that African philosophy need to be anchored on its own logic, eclectics believe that we need to rely on Western logic and it is my thinking that

this will take Africa hundred steps backwards. In my Shona culture we say: *muvhimi chaiye haavhimi nembwa dzemuvakidzani wake nokuti haazivi madzidzisirwo adzakaitwa kuvhima* (A real hunter does not hunt with his neighbour's dogs because he does not know how they were trained). In the same vein we cannot use Western logic as the seedbed of African philosophy. I believe we need to take ethno-philosophy further from where it was left by its founders instead of trying to run away from our shadow by developing its logic. As Ada Agada (2013, 240) admits:

It is true that ethno-philosophy (which encompasses communal and traditional African thought and the scholarly endeavour of their systematization in the light of Western philosophy) marked one tremendous leap for African philosophy, but it is only a stage, a foundational level of African philosophy.

Agada is probably challenging us as African philosophers of this present generation to expend all our energies in taking ethno-philosophy beyond the foundational stage in which it is at the moment. Agada is probably bemoaning the fact that as African philosophers, we are failing to develop what is ours—that is ethno-philosophy—preferring to take what is not ours—Western logic and Science—to inform what is ours—African philosophy/ethno-philosophy. According to Agada (2013, 240-241), “we are confronted with the naked fact that African philosophy has remained synonymous with ethno-philosophy long after its conception.” Agada (2013, 241) thus, asks the question: Can we really count the achievements of African philosophy outside the dominant school of ethno-philosophy?

There is no doubt that Western philosophers, Universalists and those who subscribe to the eclectic school of African philosophy such as Uduigwomen and Kanu would say NO to the above question. For example, Agada (2013, 243) quotes French philosopher, Jacques Derrida who postulates that:

Philosophy does not have one sole memory. Under its Greek name and in its European memory, it has always been bastard, hybrid, grafted, multi-linear and polyglot. We must adjust our practice of history and of philosophy to this reality which was also a chance and more than ever remains a chance.

Page 105 The picture that Derrida is painting here is that it is not possible to have for example British philosophy, American philosophy, Asian philosophy or even African philosophy that is stand alone. Thus, every philosophy borrows ideas from other cultures and it should not be seen as a form of embarrassment for

African philosophy to borrow ideas from Western philosophy (AGADA 2013, 243). By way of response to Derrida and others who subscribe to this school of thought, I argue that while there is nothing wrong in having cultures borrowing ideas from each other, the problem comes when it is always African philosophy that has to borrow from the West and not vice versa. This, to me, would mean that certain philosophical traditions are supposed to be more superior and dominant than others which argument I do not subscribe to. If it can be granted with certainty that there is British philosophy, American philosophy and Indian philosophy; why should there be a debate when it comes to African philosophy? It is against this background that I criticize Western philosophers, Universalists and defenders of eclecticism for thinking that without the input of foreign ideas, African philosophy cannot stand on its own. I particularly criticize Universalists and those who subscribe to the eclectic school of African philosophy for “running away from their burning house preferring to seek refuge next door instead of putting out the fire and refurbish their own house.”

My position is that, we need to put our heads together and take ethno-philosophy to the level where we will be proud of it. The likes of Tempels, Mbiti, Senghor and Sodipo and others have laid the foundation and we, the current generation of African philosophers, need to finish the job. In order to succeed in this endeavour, we need to establish a strong logical base on which this homegrown philosophy should sit; just as the Greeks, the British and the Americans managed to establish a strong logical base on which their philosophies have sat for so many generations. It is encouraging to note that the project of developing African logic has gained currency in the last few years because of this growing disenchantment with Western influences on African philosophy. African philosophers such as Chimakonam, Godfrey Ozumba and others have already started laying the groundwork especially as they have pioneered this project of establishing the logic on which African philosophy, particularly ethno-philosophy will rest. We all have a role to play in the development of this logic through teaching and research.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, I reflected on Kanu’s eclecticism project in which he is calling for a combination of Universalism and Particularism in a bid to solve once and for all the “shortcomings” currently besetting ethno-philosophy. These “shortcomings” I believe are part and parcel of the debate on whether or not African philosophy exists. I began this essay by giving an outline of this debate before following it up with the trends or schools of African philosophy. I then discussed some of the reasons why ethno-philosophy has not been given enough space to prove its worth in the academy. I also discussed and critiqued Kanu’s ambitious project on eclecticism by arguing that this project is nothing more than just a hybridization

of African thought systems with Western thought systems and thereby passing them as African philosophy. Finally, I demonstrated that ethno-philosophy remains a philosophy that is worth celebrating despite the fact that it does not have — in the minds of those who have criticized it — a coherent system of thought (no science, no logic and no argument).

### Relevant Literature

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