

THE QUESTION OF THE “AFRICAN” IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: IN SEARCH OF A CRITERION FOR THE AFRICANNESS OF A PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The African question in African philosophy is enigmatic because of the intentional attempt to rationalize Africans out of humanity. Eurocentric scholars and missionaries mutilated history and concocted a false image of Africans which they presented as the substantive African identity (MUDIMBE 1988); an identity that presents the African as pre-logical, barbaric and as such incapable of philosophic thoughts. This identity was foisted and consolidated on humanity including Africans, and intellectually accepted as the true African identity for over four centuries. Consequently, while the racist Eurocentric description of the African makes it impossible for one to suggest that there can be anything like African philosophy, the enslavement, balkanization, colonization and the introduction of a Western-oriented formal education into Africa further dehumanized, traumatized and alienated Africans from their culture. This experiment is what precipitated the identity problem in Africa. Hence, the issue of a criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy is a contentious one because Africans were by their intellectual orientation trained to believe that there is nothing as such. This training and orientation also makes it difficult for those who think that there is a distinct African mode of thinking to be able to present it in a clear and unambiguous manner. This is because such a criterion will restrict the scope of African philosophy to a given epoch. In this sense, African philosophy will be concerned with only a part of the African historical experience. Given the comprehensive nature of philosophy, we are inclined to the persuasion that a criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy ought to be derived from the totality of the African experience.

KEYWORDS: African philosophy, African, Africanness, criterion

127 Introduction

Page 127 Although in spite of the intellectual disquiet of racist Eurocentric scholars, it is “unarguable that today, it is generally accepted that there is a distinctive formal study called African philosophy” (UDUMA 2004, 173), yet the unwillingness to admit of African Philosophy persists. The general reaction is: yes, we agree there is African philosophy, but what makes that philosophy Africa? This explains why

the question of the African in African Philosophy was in fact raised in the first place.

In essence, as a corollary to the question (more aptly, denial) of African philosophy is: what is it that makes a philosophy "African"? In this context, is a literary piece classified as "African Philosophy" because it is written by an African? or because it was written within the geographical location of Africa? Besides, who is an African? Is it someone who is born of African parents?; those blacks in Diaspora? Or, someone who is an African in his "heart"? On the other hand, can all these people produce authentic African philosophy?

In trying to deal with these and cognate questions two senses of "African" has been identified. Sometimes the word "African" means in the style of but they can also mean "within the geographical area of" (BLOCKER 1989, 198). There also appears to be a third sense which is "a person of". In the context of this third sense, one can still act or write in "the style of" or be "within the geographical area of" Africa, and still not be concerned with African philosophy. There is no doubt that this is the contention of Hountondji when he rejects Father Tempels' Bantu Philosophy "because ... we cannot exclude a geographical variable" (HOUNTONDJI 1983, 70). The geographical variable here has to do with "a person of" not in the context of "within the geographical area of." The point, for him, is that that Tempels wrote his work within the geographical location of Africa makes no much sense. This is because his (Tempels') not "being a person of" African origin rules out the possibility of anything from him becoming African philosophy. This contrasts with the works of Alexis Kagame, which just because Alexis Kagame is an African, to paraphrase Hountondji, makes his work "an integral part of African philosophical literature" (HOUNTONDJI 1983, 70).

Regrettably, the question of the African in African Philosophy goes beyond these innocuous distinctions. In this essay, therefore, I am concerned with examining Richard Wright's disguised denial of African Philosophy under the question "what is it that makes a philosophy African"? In this regard, it is pertinent to underscore that African philosophy is an answer to some racist philosophical questions (is the African a human being? Can the African think, reason, plan or act morally?). The vibrancy of African philosophy in the contemporary world was attained and can only be sustained through the attempt to answer as well as question the answer to such disguised denials.

The "African" Question

Page 128 To be able to understand the context that gave rise to the African question adequately, a succinct prelude is necessary. One needs to understand that the "humanity" of Africans, unlike that of any other race, is "a contested humanity" (ASIEGBU and AGBAKOBA 2008, 9-10). There was a deliberate attempt to

rationalize Africans out of humanity. Perhaps, this deliberate attempt reached its apogee in the 19th century when most European philosophers, scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists, and even theologians and ministers of the “Good News” got their tools ready to rationalize the blacks out of humanity (ODEY 2005, 34). Prominent scholars such as David Hume, G. W. F Hegel, Charles de Montesquieu, Levy Bruhl, Buckner H. Paine gave credence directly or indirectly, to the view that Africans are sub-human and inferior when compared with the Caucasian race (OGUEJIOFOR 2005, 86-93). Hiding under the pseudonym Ariel, Buckner H. Payne (2010) in 1867 argued that the Negro is neither a descendant of Adam nor have a soul .The import of this is that Africans are not among the class of human beings created by the Judeo-Christian God, and perhaps, the God of Islam.

The validity of the above inference from Payne’s position can be seen in Charles de Montesquieu’s position that to regard the African as a human being implied that “we (the Caucasians) are not Christians (1952, 259). This perception of Africans flourished as: “some great universities in Europe and America competed among themselves in propounding theories that would prove that they (Africans) were not human” (ODEY 2005, 34). The explicit consolidation of this perception of Africans into Western education infested most recipients of Western education with an erroneous conception of Africa/ns. In this regard, E. W. Blyden brazenly asserts:

The Negro of the ordinary traveler or missionary—and perhaps, of two thirds of the Christian world—is a purely fictitious being, constructed out of the traditions of slave – traders and slave-holders, who have circulated all sorts of absurd stories and also prejudice inherited from ancestors, who were taught to regard them as a legitimate object of traffic. (1967, 58)

The point on prominent relief here is that the African question in African philosophy is an offspring of the Eurocentric derogative description and vilification of Africans. The problem of identifying an acceptable and plausible criterion or criteria that make a philosophical theory, idea, system or work African appears to be a perennial one because the heinous Eurocentric perception and presentation of Africans as sub-humans was woven and almost unabatedly reinforced and consolidated by centuries of perverse Western supremacist philosophy, anthropology and education (OGBUNWEZEH 2005, 163). The fundamental reason why Eurocentric scholars were able to peddle their racist views about Africans for over four centuries without any form of serious intellectual challenge from Africans is the phenomenon of the Trans Atlantic slave trade and the colonization of African. In Addition, I. C. Onyewuenyi

includes the colonization of the means of information dissemination and formal education by the West (1993).

Against this back drop, it is important to note that the colonization of Africa by the West led to the introduction of Western education as the official formal education in Africa. In this direction, the incorporation of the Eurocentric vilification of Africa/ns into the Western education introduced into Africa made most Africans to “automatically uphold and habitually employ the colonizers’ viewpoint in all matters in the strange belief that their racist, imperialist, anti-African interest is the universal humanist interest, and in the strange belief that the view defined by their ruthless greed is the rational, civilized view” (CHINWEIZU 1978, xiv).

Walter Rodney buttresses the veracity of this point when he among other things describes Western education as education for “the creation of mental confusion” (2009:2 93). Western education alienated Africans from their culture, incarcerated our best minds and made most of them to accept the distorted Eurocentric view about Africa/ns as sacrosanct. As J. O. Oguejifor asserts:

The level of education the African acquired was a seal of his cultural alienation. Left in a state of uncertainty, with horrendous contempt of his own traditional heritage, and hamstrung in his patent undersized coat of modern education, he became a sorry sight both to himself and his observers. (2001, 43)

Though, there were some voices of dissent in the 19th century against the Eurocentric perception of Africans, it was however in mid 20th century when most African countries have regained their political freedom that the view was vigorously challenged by African scholars. The reason for this is not far-fetched; one needs political power to be able to assert his/her dignity and identity properly. It was, therefore, at the dawn of political independence that African intelligentsias “joined issues with one another with vigour and determination to salvage the tarnished image and dignity of the African” (ASIEGBU 2009, 59). The immediate goal of African intelligentsias at the dawn of political independence was to achieve on an intellectual plane what African militants, political activists and revolutionaries have accomplished—the deconstruction of the battered image of Africa/ns, and *ipso-facto* demonstrate the humanity, rationality and nobility of the African (ASIEGBU and AGBAKOBA 2008, 9; ACHEBE 2012, 52-3). Kwasi Wiredu concurs with this view when he opines that: “The principal driving force in post colonial African philosophy has been a quest for self- definition” (2004, 1).

From the foregoing, one will understand that the African question is a question of an authentic definition of the African. An authentic definition of the

African will not only substantiate their humanity but will also restore their dignity. This is because the Eurocentric definition of the African buttresses the position that Africans were originally “sub-human” and as such were incapable of logical thoughts and moral acts before their contact with the Caucasians (HEGEL 2001, 109-112). The corollary of this is that traditionally, Africans lack the ability to philosophize; hence to talk of African philosophy is abnormal.

This is because any being that cannot think can neither philosophize nor have a philosophy. The off-shot of this is that for one to talk of African philosophy, he must first of all define what he/she meant by “African” and as well pin-point what makes a philosophy “African”. It is in view of this that Gene Blocker asserts that “we cannot resolve the problem of African philosophy until we first of all settle the meaning of African”... (1991).

However, owing to the fact that all first generation African intelligentsias were formally trained by Western oriented scholars, in Western institutions or Western founded institutions they were wont to habitually use and approach reality using the Western conceptual scheme as a telescope. It is this orientation that makes the adjective “African” very problematic when it is used to predicate philosophy. Accordingly, C. S. Momoh (2000:1) poignantly observes: “for many years some scholars, intellectuals and philosophers dissipated a lot of precious energy on denying the existence of African philosophy.”

It is thus not surprising that the adjective “African” is both significant and problematic in African philosophy (OKOLO 1987, 42) even in the contemporary world. While the humanity of Africans and their ability to philosophize is no longer in doubt, there is still skepticism over the plausibility of attaching the adjective “African” to philosophy in the same sense the adjectives “Western” and “Oriental” are attached to it. Sequel to this is the disagreement over the peculiar criterion/criteria which a given philosophical work must meet in order to qualify as African philosophy. We shall attempt to see how these two unresolved issues in the history of African philosophy can be properly addressed.

Between African Philosophy and African Philosophies

One of the essential facts about philosophers is that they hardly agree with one another on any given issue. It is difficult to find different philosophers that totally agree with each other on any particular issue without a point of divergence. For instance, both Jeremy Bentham and J. S Mill are utilitarians but their exposition of utilitarianism is strictly speaking not the same. In the same vein, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey all agree that pragmatism is the best philosophical system yet their exposition of pragmatism have different points of divergence. Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger are both existentialists and phenomenologists yet their exposition of the nature of existentialism as well as phenomenology is not identical. What accounts for this

situation is the fact that every philosopher approaches reality from a given perspective; “a particular pigeon-hole, or what is generally referred to as a conceptual scheme” (AGBO 2003, 193). The disposition of any philosopher toward any given phenomenon is a product of his intellectual, cultural as well as social experience. And since habit die hard, a philosopher does not abandon his/her disposition/position on any phenomenon once and for all. He/she only shifts his/her position gradually by emending and repudiating his/her original position in order to insulate them against valid criticism without necessarily abandoning them. What philosophers do is that they often look for better arguments that will validate their punctured convictions, theories or positions.

Accordingly, when it became obvious that the denial of the humanity of the African is a rationally unfounded thesis, that Africa was the cradle of human civilization, the denigrators of Africa/ns grudgingly accepted that though the African can speak, speculate and reason but due to the diversity of African cultures, we cannot talk of African philosophy in the sense we talk of Western philosophy, rather what we at best can have is African philosophies. The point on relief here is that the opponents of African philosophy in the light of overwhelming evidence abandoned the porous argument that there is no African philosophy because Africa is originally sub-human, nay incapable of philosophic thoughts and replaced it with what appears to be a more plausible position—there is no African philosophy because Africa as a continent is made up of people with diverse cultures. One of the major proponents of this position is Richard Wright. The major point Wright buttresses is that given fact that there are over 40 different countries in Africa, each with a number of different language groups, it is impossible to have such a thing as African philosophy (1984, 43-44).

A good grasp of the position of Wright shows that it is a disguised denial of African philosophy. This is because the import of Wright is that the predicate “African” cannot be attached to philosophy. In other words African philosophy does not exist because we have many African cultures and not just one African culture. The plausibility of Wright’s argument can be deduced from the fact that the African continent is a conglomeration of many ethnic nationalities with diverse cultures, languages, religions, and world-view. Nigeria for instance has over 250 ethnic nationalities. Thus, given the strong affinity between philosophy and culture, a continent that has different distinct cultures will definitely house different philosophies, and since Africa is necessarily housing people with distinct cultures, to talk of African philosophy is a misnomer because the term African philosophy suggests that Africa has a univocal philosophy and this is not factually true. Indeed, the multiplicity of diverse cultures in Africa is an indisputable fact. In this regard, anyone who subscribes to the truism that every philosopher is a child of circumstance will immediately discover that the phrase African philosophy is in fact misleading. According to C. B. Okolo:

The materials of culture are objects or materials for philosophical reflections. The philosopher cannot think, interpret and find meaning in a vacuum. This he does through his particular culture. African philosophy emerges out of [the African] culture. The African philosopher critically reflects on the language, religion, history, works of art, folklore, idioms, collective beliefs, etc., of the African people. (1987, 47)

The implication of the foregoing is that every philosophy flows from a culture and since the culture of a people comprises of their language, religion, beliefs, arts, idioms, etc., authentic African philosophy must be a product of, and from the works of arts, religions, idioms and beliefs of the African people. The strict import of this stance is that African philosophy must be a product of a homogenous African culture, language, arts, beliefs, idioms. Unfortunately, a homogenous African culture does not exist. What we have is African cultures. The strong affinity between philosophy and culture makes it impossible for a homogenous philosophy to emerge from the multiple cultures in Africa. It is more proper to expect that different philosophies will be excavated from the multiple cultures in Africa. Therefore, the phrase African philosophy is at best misleading. The proper designation should be African philosophies.

Although scholars such as Jacques Maquet (1972) and C. B. Okolo (1987) have successfully unveiled and buttressed the cultural affinity between black African people, their arguments are not strong enough to repudiate the fact that Africa has no homogenous culture or world-view. The fact that Maquet (1972), talks of the cultural unity of 'black' Africa and not Africa substantiates the non-existence of a homogenous culture in Africa. Moreover, a hermeneutic engagement and analysis of the culture—world-view, language, idioms, religion, symbol, and arts of the ethnic groups within an African country would lead to the emergence of different philosophies. For instance, in Nigeria, due to the cultural diversity between the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa people, we have works on Igbo philosophy, Yoruba philosophy and Hausa philosophy. As Agbo rightly observes, "to the extent that every philosophy is a product from (not just of), a culture, there are differences in philosophies from various cultures" (2003, 192).

The point is that the position of Wright against the existence of a homogenous African philosophy is factually indisputable but this fact can only render the phrase "African philosophy" non existence, if and only if there is a homogenous Western philosophy. This is because, the term West refers to anywhere from Europe to America and Europe is a very large conglomerate of nations, peoples and languages (ETUK 2002, 110). Yet we talk of not just European philosophy but Western philosophy. Even a cursory glance at the history of Western philosophy from its very beginning in the Milesian school to

its contemporary trends of individual thoughts reveals that Western philosophy is not in any way a homogenous system. Of course, it is also an offspring of cultural diversities in the West. The whole of Europe is not a cultural homogenous continent with the same language, works of arts, traditional beliefs, idioms and proverbs. Hence, to assume that Western philosophy, which refers to the whole of Europe and America, is a product of a homogenous Western culture is untenable. In effect, a Western philosophy that specifically refers to a homogenous philosophy produced from a homogenous culture is non-existent. In this regard, the term African Philosophy is as erroneous and misleading as the term Western philosophy.

However, if cultural homogeneity or strict logical consistency/compatibility is the major criterion for the classification of philosophy into trends, strands, schools, movements or systems, phrases such as Western philosophy, American pragmatism, German Idealism, British Empiricism, Existentialism, Feminism would not have emerged. This is because all the aforementioned philosophical trends have a great deal of internal diversities that are logically incompatible. For instance, both John Locke and David Hume are classified as British empiricists, yet their versions of empiricism are logically incompatible. If Hume's British empiricism is valid, Locke's British empiricism is invalid. Therefore, the fact that different philosophies that are logically incompatible are often grouped together evinces the fact that cultural homogeneity and/or logical compatibility are not the major criteria for the classification of philosophical trends.

In view of this, we understand that the adjectives "African", "Western", "Oriental", "European", or "American" are not employed to designate a homogenous philosophical trend that emerged from a homogenous African, Western, Oriental, European or American culture. They are rather employed to predicate a group of philosophies that emerged from, and are products of the multiple cultures of any given continent, region or country. Richard Wright and all those who argue that the multiplicity of cultures in Africa render African philosophy non-existent should also know that if the same principle is applied to Western philosophy, the logical conclusion will be that Western philosophy does not exist. What this entails is that one can neither validate the plausibility of the phrase "Western" philosophy without simultaneously validating the plausibility of the phrase "African" philosophy; nor can one invalidate the plausibility of the phrase "African" philosophy without at the same time invalidating the plausibility of the phrase "Western" philosophy. The import of this is that the word "African" stands on equal footing with the word "Western" when it is used to qualify the term "philosophy". In other words, the traditional method of classifying different groupings of philosophies into different trends justifies the plausibility of the phrase "African" philosophy. Just as the phrase "Western"

philosophy refers to the various philosophies that are excavated from the existential experience of diverse cultures, and historical experience of Western people, the phrase "African" philosophy also refers to the various philosophies that have been/can be excavated from the cultures, and diverse experience of the African people. Viewed from this perspective, one will immediately discover that to accept the phrase "Western" philosophy and reject the phrase "African" philosophy is philosophically unfounded. The question then is: what is it that makes a philosophical work African?

The Africanness Question

While the African question deals with whether African philosophy exists or not, the Africanness question deals with the issue of the major characteristics/criteria that make a philosophical work African. The significance of this question lies in the fact that unless one is able to specify the traits or principles or features that make a philosophical work African, it will be difficult to separate African philosophy from other philosophies such as Western philosophy and Oriental philosophy. The point on relief here is that the failure to specify the basic traits, principles or features of African philosophy will negate the existence of African philosophy as a regional philosophy that is distinct and independent of Western philosophy. As a result of this, different scholars have responded to the challenges posed by the Africanness question by proposing different criteria that make a philosophical work African.

According to Paulin Hountondji, African philosophy refers to a set of texts, specifically, the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by the authors themselves (1996, viii). The basic import here is that what makes a philosophical work African is the author of the work. And that a work is said to be philosophical if the author described it as such. What this comes to is that for Hountondji, if an African biologist writes a biology textbook and described it as philosophical, the textbook will invariably qualify to be a text in African philosophy. By implication, African philosophy can only be done by Africans and all works done by Africans can be said to be African philosophy if their authors declare them philosophical. In this sense, any philosophical work done by an African philosopher is African philosophy; and any philosophical work done by a non-African is not African philosophy. This characterization of African philosophy is purely geographical. J. I. Unah (1988, 49) rightly pinpoints the proponents of this characterization of African philosophy and its logical imports. According to him:

Professor Peter Bodunrin has classified himself and a few others—Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and Odera Oruka—as professional philosophers. Dr Campbell Shittu Momoh has identified the four among

others as "African logical neo-positivists" which they seem to have accepted stoically. The key position of this group of philosophers—the African logical neo-positivists—is that there is no uniquely African philosophy any more than we can talk of a uniquely African mathematics or African physics, that whenever any African philosopher engages in a debate on Plato's epistemology or German idealism he would be doing African philosophy.

The point buttressed here is that the major proponents of the geographical origin of a philosopher as the sole criterion that makes a philosophy African is the school of thought known as African logical neo-positivists. The African logical neo-positivists are professional African philosophers that adhere to the position of the logical positivists that the sole end of philosophy is the critical analysis, clarification of thoughts through argumentation. Hence, wherever there is no critical analysis and argumentation, there is no philosophy. In this regard, the African logical neo-positivists argue that African philosophy lacks any identity apart from when it is viewed as the works of African professional philosophers. This is because what is paraded as African philosophy is at best the communal thoughts/beliefs of African people and since these thoughts/beliefs lack the critical rigour and argumentation that make a work to be called philosophy, a peculiar African philosophy as a distinct philosophical trend does not exist. Hountondji (1989, 122) seems to buttress this point on behalf of the African logical neo-positivists when he asserts:

The essential point here is that we have produced a radically new definition of African philosophy, the criterion now being the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content. The effects of this is to broaden the narrow horizon which has hitherto been imposed on African philosophy and to treat it, as now conceived as a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world. In short, it destroys the dominant mythological conception of Africanness and restores the simple, obvious truth that Africa is above all a continent and the concept of African an empirical geographical concept and not a merely metaphysical one.

What the foregoing comes to is that a philosophy is African by virtue of its authors and not its content. The corollary of this is that every engagement of an African professional philosopher in a debate, analysis, critique or discussion on any topic in Western philosophy is African philosophy. But the engagement of any professional African philosopher or non African philosopher in the unwritten or documented traditional beliefs, myths, artifacts, worldview, idioms, proverbs

and thoughts of African people is neither doing Western nor African philosophy. This is because the African logical neo-positivists are of the opinion that for anything to acquire the status of philosophy, it must be written, critical, personal and reflective (HOUNTONDI 1982, 122; BODUNRIN 1989, 157-160). One cannot accept the geographical origin of a philosopher as the criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy without simultaneously implying that African philosophy lacks a substantive identity that differentiates it from Western philosophy, thus, its acceptance by the African logical neo-positivists underscores their commitment to their original explicit denial of the existence of African philosophy in a disguised manner. This buttresses my initial proposition that philosophers hardly abandon their original position, even in the light of overwhelming evidence, without a serious intellectual battle

Be that as it may, the thesis of the African logical neo-positivist concerning the criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy (specifically as expressed by Hountondji) is absurd, porous and unacceptable. This is the case because their criterion of the geographical origin of a philosopher makes the scope of African philosophy too big and too thin at the same time. The position that every work done by a professional African philosopher is African philosophy makes African philosophy scopeless in the sense that it accepts every work by a professional African philosopher, be it in Western or Oriental philosophy, as African philosophy. Another import of this argument is that African philosophy has no distinct identity that separates it from Western philosophy and Oriental philosophy. It is totally empty of any unique geographical spice, nay ingredients. It is purely nothing but a philosophical work by African Western-trained and Western-oriented professional philosophers.

Furthermore, the criterion of geographical origin of a philosopher is unacceptable because it also makes African philosophy very thin and restrictive. It makes African philosophy an exclusive academic discipline that can be done only by Africans. What this implies is that the criterion opines that only Africans have the mental ability to do African philosophy. The absurdity of the position of the African logical neo-positivists is that their criterion accepts that the works of professional African philosophers on Western philosophy/philosophers can be properly called African philosophy but rejects that the works of any professional Western philosopher, no matter how African the content is, can be properly called African philosophy. This is because they tend to portray the view that philosophy cannot be African in content, for philosophy is a product of written literature in a literate society and the illiteracy of traditional African society implies the non-existence of neither philosophy nor African philosophy or philosophers in traditional African societies (HOUNTONDI 1989, 122; BODUNRIN 1989, 159-160). Thus, the African logical neo-positivists label

anyone and every work on a substantive African philosophy excavated from the traditional African oral literature and worldview as *ethno-philosophy*.

However, the attempt to salvage the inherent absurdity in the geographical origin criterion by Bodunrin created more confusion instead of a resolution. Bodunrin emended the geographical criterion by arguing that the works of professional philosophers on African traditional beliefs, religions, idioms or proverbs are not African philosophy because of either the geographical origin or geographical location of the philosopher. In the words of Bodunrin, any group of philosophers discussing traditional African worldview “are doing African philosophy only because the participants are Africans or are working in Africa and are interested in a philosophical problem (howbeit universally) from an African point of view” (1989, 159). The introduction of the issue of geographical location here by Bodunrin as another criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy is an attempt to include non-African philosophers working in Africa among those that can do African philosophy. The major merit of Bodunrin's position lies in his recognition that non-African philosophers can do African philosophy but his insistence that such non-African philosophers must be working in Africa is illegitimate and not persuasive. We have African professional philosophers that were educated in Africa and are working in Africa, yet they neither write nor teach African philosophy.

Admittedly, the plausible idea in Bodunrin's assertion is that those doing African philosophy are those that are interested in a philosophical problem (howbeit universally) from an African perspective. The implication of this is that the geographical origin or location of a philosopher does not necessarily make his/her works African. This point necessarily contradicts and falsifies the geographical origin or location criterion of the African logical neo-positivists.

Contrary to the geographical origin /or location criterion proposed by the African logical neo-positivist is the identity criterion. The major thesis of the identity criterion is that every regional philosophy has certain unique features in common. Hence, a philosophy can only be African if we can identify a unique theme, goal or structure or mode of thinking that is peculiarly or predominantly characteristic of African cultures. S. B. Oluwole is perhaps the most explicit exponent of this criterion. According to her, for a philosophy to be authentically and culturally African, it must not be a product of an indigenous African professional philosopher rather it must contain a literary tradition that is peculiarly or predominantly African. Be this as it may, Oluwole explains that though the task of identifying the peculiar or predominant African literary tradition appears simple in theory, it is a herculean task. Hence she elucidates:

This task appears at first sight simple and straightforward. A literary piece from Africa is naturally African by the very token that it originated

from Africa. But even if this were so, there is still the need to identify, characterize and if possible, rationally justify such works as constituting a literary tradition with specific features which make the group a distinctive cultural phenomenon probably different from some other well known cultural types. (1991, 2009)

The point Oluwole is buttressing here is that for a philosophy to be African, it must possess an African identity that distinguishes it from other regional philosophies such as European, Asian or American philosophy. The offshoot of this is that the Africanness question is fundamentally an identity question. Little wonder M. F Asiegbu (2008, 39) avers that: “The debate about the possible existence of African philosophy is in a more nuanced sense, a dispute about African identity”. We noted somewhere else (see UDUMA 2010, 1) that the preoccupation of African philosophy with the search for an authentic African identity is natural, legitimate and necessary. It is natural and legitimate because it is a response to the natural instinct for self preservation. It is also necessary because it will help to reconstruct the tarnished image of Africans constructed and foisted upon us by Eurocentric scholars. Yet the quest for a common feature, theme, structure or disposition of the African traditional thoughts that will serve as the criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy is also a controversial one.

Accordingly, Oluwole (1991, 219-221) identifies three reasons why this is the case. The first is that most scholars mistake the part for whole; the identification of African thoughts as a whole with a particular metaphysical or epistemological disposition or tradition of a given African people for instance Nigeria, Igbo, Yourba, Bantu, Akan—is guilty of over generalization and as such inadequate. Buttressing this point further, Oluwole analogously explicates:

It may be argued that Africa, unlike Britain, is not a country but a whole continent. Thus nobody identifies European philosophy as empiricism, rationalism or idealism even though each of these brands occurs at different times and in different countries of Europe. This shows that the demand cannot be for the identification for a characterizing of the Africanness of one particular philosophy that is predominant over all others produced here in Africa. Rather the search is for some features that unite several local/national philosophies into the “international group” classifiable as African. (1991, 214)

The basic import here is that one of the controversies surrounding the identity criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy is the attempt to impose a certain metaphysics and epistemology of a certain African peoples on the whole of Africans. The second reason is the restriction of the scope of a unique and distinct African philosophy to the contemporary period. This restriction presents

the universal features of Western philosophy—analysis, logical consistency and argumentation—as the standard for a work to be philosophical and African; and of course, the acceptance of this position will deny African Philosophy of any substantial identity.

Closely connected with this is the equivocation of the geographical connotation of the word “African” with its racial connotation. Unfortunately, even though the geographical and racial connotations of the adjective African have the same *referent*, they do not have the same *sense/meaning*. As an adjective, “African” geographically connotes someone that is strictly speaking, a citizen of a given country within a given continent known as Africa. Racially, the adjective “African” connotes a group of individuals that are indigenes of any country in a continent known as Africa and are believed to have certain characters and qualities. The geographical sense of African cannot be used to analogically describe a non-African citizen, but the racial sense can be used to describe whoever behaves, thinks, or looks like what has been portrayed as the general racial traits of Africans. Thus Oluwole further elaborates the challenges of identifying a unique criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy. She writes:

The fourth and perhaps most important observation is that several discussions of African philosophy show a misidentification of elements of particular traditions within philosophy as the only features that can identify a work as properly classifiable as African. Of course, we use the word “tradition” to refer to various schools of philosophic thoughts in the work of authors which constitute a particular stance in Western philosophy. But here our search is for a literary heritage, our concern is to map out a general outlook whose distinctive form permeates and thus supersedes division into schools of thought or even disciplines. We are looking for the features of one particular Literary Tradition as it occurred within a specific geographical region of the world. An African or Western Literary tradition of thought in general is determined by the style, the approach, the goal and all else that go to characterized both the content, the features and style of expression as these commonly occurred within that tradition. To reveal this and should be the object of or analysis. (1991, 220-221)

It is clear from the above that what the identity criterion calls for is the identification of a unique African tradition of thought—the unique style, approach, content and features—that characterizes the thought of all Africans and not just a particular group of Africans. It demands for a peculiar or predominant African scheme of thought that underlines or colors the thought of all Africans. Given the cultural diversity in Africa, the question that erupts at this point is how

one can explicate, discover and identify a unique African scheme of thought. Appositely, Oluwole argues that such a peculiar African conceptual scheme exists in the traditional thoughts of Africans concerning human existence:

Like all attempts to locate existing traditions in their various forms, we must start with the collection, analysis interpretation, and synthesis of African literary piece because they come down to us mostly in fragments. This was what was done to early Greek thinkers. In other words, I am proposing that we go back to study African traditional thought which bear on problems of human existence. The purpose is not just an exercise in the documentation of different ideas and beliefs native to Africa. The aim is to unveil an existing literary tradition as an objective which is common to every rational endeavor of African thinkers. This is the only way in which we can come up with a cogent analysis of a tradition that genuinely constitutes African philosophy. (1991, 218)

What the foregoing comes to is that an authentic identity of African philosophy can only be excavated from any analysis of the unwritten/documented thoughts of traditional Africans encapsulated in the African oral literacy tradition of proverbs, idiom, myths, rituals, religious beliefs and folk-tales. This suggestion derives its plausibility from the fact that there is a strong affinity between philosophy and culture; for underlying every culture is a conception of philosophy. In this connection, the philosophical thoughts of a people are necessarily encoded in their proverbs, myths, folktales customs, laws and religious beliefs. These areas of culture though not philosophy but they are both the material for philosophizing and as well constitute the background to philosophy. Buttressing this point, M. F. Asiegbu (2008, 41) explicates:

Conceived in this way, philosophy is not culture neither does a popular conception serve as philosophy properly understood. Actually, if culture defines the way of life of a people, then it is not philosophy. A people's way of life embraces a long list of unending items, embracing their lore of knowledge, their philosophy, and proverbs, their artifacts, their feasts, their pride and prejudices, celebrations, songs, and funerals, patterns of doing things and poetry, language and medicine, commerce and craft, their cosmology, legends, myths, witticisms, wise-sayings, laws, and customs, religion and their conceptual framework and indeed, whatever makes their pattern of—together, all form their culture. Considered in this way, one cannot equate culture to philosophy. While culture is not philosophy, culture provides the raw material for philosophy. As a result, a philosopher, however intense his love for wisdom would be devoid of

any material for speculation should he do away with culture. In short, without culture philosophy is impossible. In relation to culture, philosophy is but the fruit of personal reflection, or in Okere's phrase an "individual mind" reflecting critically on culture.

The point here is though philosophy is neither identical nor synonymous with culture; it is necessarily a product of, and from a culture. This is because philosophy is the product of human wonder, reactions and reflection on their immediate environment. This is what is meant when we say that philosophy is a child of circumstance. Therefore, what makes a philosophy African, Western or Oriental is the cultural background it is excavated from, the cultural background it reacts to, the cultural background that provides the material object for philosophizing.

Conclusion

What the foregoing analysis comes to is that the African question in African philosophy is enigmatic because of the intentional attempt to rationalize Africans out of humanity. Eurocentric scholars and missionaries mutilated history and concocted a false image of Africans which they presented as the substantive African identity (MUDIMBE 1988); an identity that presents the African as pre-logical, barbaric and as such incapable of philosophic thoughts. This identity was foisted and consolidated on humanity including Africans, and intellectually accepted as the true African identity for over four centuries. It was in the mid twentieth century that African intellectuals were able to deconstruct the Eurocentric view and reconstruct the battered image of Africans. It is against this backdrop that K. A. Appiah following Achebe argues that a unique African identity is in the making (1992, 175).

Consequently, while the racist Eurocentric description of the African makes it impossible for one to suggest that there can be anything like African philosophy, the enslavement, balkanization, colonization and the introduction of a Western-oriented formal education into Africa further dehumanized, traumatized and alienated Africans from their culture. This experiment is what precipitated the identity problem in Africa. For the Africans that emerged from these experiments were tailored-made to see themselves and their cultures as inferior (OGUEJIOFOR 2001) to the Caucasian. Hence, the issue of a criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy is a contentious one because Africans were by their intellectual orientation trained to believe that there is nothing as such.

This training and orientation also makes it difficult for those who think that there is a distinct African mode of thinking to be able to present it in a clear and unambiguous manner. Senghor's position is a classic example.

Moreover, the fact that some scholars—Wiredu and Bodunrin—argue that the unique criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy can only be found in the works of professional African philosophers, while others—Momoh, Onyewuenyi, and Oluwole—argue that the criterion is to be found in traditional thoughts of Africans embedded in their oral tradition reveals the level of mental confusion nay, identity crisis Western education inflicted on Africans. It is, however, pertinent to note that it is erroneous to restrict the criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy to either the thoughts of anonymous preliterate traditional Africans or to the thoughts of literate modern Africans. This is because such a criterion will restrict the scope of African philosophy to a given epoch. In this sense, African philosophy will be concerned with only a part of the African historical experience. Given the comprehensive nature of philosophy, we are inclined to the persuasion that a criterion for the Africanness of a philosophy ought to be derived from the totality of the African experience.

The point here is that what makes a philosophy African is its identification with the cultural, historical or existential experience of Africa/ns (OKOLO 1993, 33-4). In this connection, African philosophy refers to a critical reflection either on a given universal phenomenon or a unique problem in Africa through the glasses of an African culture (OKERE 1976, 5). It also connotes a critical, comprehensive and systematic reaction to the traditional or modern thoughts/the historical or contemporary predicaments of Africans in the form of critical analysis and reconstruction. What this comes to is that what makes a philosophy Western, African or Oriental is neither the geographical origin nor location of the author; rather it is the cultural and geographical content. It is, therefore, the cultural/geographical background/content of a philosophy that makes it African. For any philosophical work, system, theory or idea to be African, whether it is written by an African or non-African, it must have an African flavor. It must be a product of wonder from or on the African experience and the African world.

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