



**HERMENEUTICS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v5i2.1>**Ademola Kazeem FAYEMI, Ph.D****Department of Philosophy, University of Lagos, Nigeria****Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to re-examine the hermeneutic in the ongoing discourse on methodology in African philosophy. The diverse understanding of hermeneutics is not only limited to Western philosophy; in the few decades of its history in African philosophy, hermeneutics has also assumed different meanings. This paper discusses not only the historical evolution and development of hermeneutists in the West, but also the African hermeneutists: Tsenay Serequeberhan, Okonda Okolo, Sophie Oluwole, Raphael Madu, and Bruce Janz. Through a comparative critical inquisition on the strengths and the problems involved in the conceptions of hermeneutics by these African philosophers, this paper argues that basic to hermeneutics is dialogue and its proclivity towards intercultural understanding.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics, African philosophy, intercultural understanding, Oral tradition.

**Introduction**

Reflections on the question of the most appropriate method of investigating African philosophy have culminated in some methodological options: the free stylist approach, the ethno-philosophical approach, the universalist approach, philosophical sagacity approach, the conceptual-analytic approach, the method of ordinary language, canons of discourse, the method of relevance, the method of cultural reconstructionism, conversational method, the method of complementary reflection, and the method of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is one of the several approaches being advocated by scholars in doing authentic African philosophy. The hermeneutic method, which is initiated by Theophilus Okere is vast developing into a tradition in contemporary African philosophy with such later proponents as: Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994), Okonda Okolo (1994), Sophie Oluwole (1996), Raphael Madu (1992), Bruce Janz (2015) among others. Before discussing the basics of this method in contemporary African philosophy, it is important to embark on a brief excursion into the origin, meaning and thought of a few hermeneutic thinkers in Western discourse. It is important as well to consider the nexus between hermeneutics in occidental and African philosophies. As a follow up to such discussions, a critical evaluation of hermeneutics in African philosophy shall be attempted with some concluding remarks.

### **Hermeneutics in Western Philosophy**

Hermeneutics has a long history. Etymologically, the word 'hermeneutics' is derived from Greek verb *hermeneuein*. Its noun is *hermeneus*, which means the name of a legend, *Hermes*. *Hermes* is the divine messenger. He brings the message of destiny; *hermeneuein* is that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message. *Hermes* is the interpreter and carrier of god's messages to man. It is on the basis of this root connotation of hermeneutics that Heidegger said that "hermeneutics means not just the interpretation but, even before it, the bearing of message" (HEIDEGGER 1982, 29). Adding some slants to the etymology of the term, Inwood said *hermeneutics* means "expression," "explanation," "translation," or "interpretation" (INWOOD, 1998, 385).

There are different conceptions of hermeneutics. Though, the most common definition of hermeneutics is that it is the art of interpretation, scholars have defined it differently, especially in line with the different kinds of hermeneutics. Six different definitions of hermeneutics which correspond to six historical stages can be given: The theory of biblical exegesis; general philological methodology; the science of linguistic understanding; the methodological foundation of *Geisteswissenschaften* (human science); phenomenology of existence and of existential understanding; and as the system of interpretation. Each of these definitions is an indication of the emphasis shift in the history of hermeneutics.

Originally, hermeneutics is used as a method of interpreting texts; an exegesis. *Exegesis* refers to the interpretation of Holy Scripture, such as the *Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran*, etc. *Exegesis* as a technical term means "to draw the meaning out of" a given text. It is an effort in bringing an inner meaning into the open; making explicit what is implicit. The opposite of exegesis is *eisegesis*, which means to read one's own interpretation into a given text. *Exegesis* can thus be said to mean the research technique we use to find the inherent meaning of a text we read, i.e. what the writer or person speaking actually said. In the context of Christianity, *exegesis* thus refers to what God really said in the Bible. Hermeneutics started as biblical *exegesis* (PALMER 1969, 32-34).

Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) and Friedrich Ast (1778-1841) are the two important philologists who expanded the conception of hermeneutics from strictly biblical exegesis to the study of the meaning of other texts as well. I can identify some of the basic conceptions of hermeneutics in Ast's thought. For example, the hermeneutic circle and the relation of the part to the whole. Wolf emphasizes the meaning of historical knowledge and the idea that the interpreter should possess as much historical knowledge as possible. He also saw hermeneutics as inevitably having two sides: it always includes the components of understanding (*verstehen*) and explaining (*erklären*) (PALMER 1969, 78-82).

Following a philological methodological composition of hermeneutics is Schleiermacher's conception of hermeneutics as linguistic understanding. For Schleiermacher (1768-1834), hermeneutics as the science of linguistic understanding refers to "general hermeneutics", whose principles can serve as the foundation for all kinds of textual interpretation (Ricoeur, 2008: 51-52). Defining hermeneutics as the "doctrine of the act of understanding," Schleiermacher extends its application to all texts, not just the biblical. He draws a clear distinction between speaking and understanding, which thus propels hermeneutics in a new direction as it becomes the art of understanding.

Schleiermacher emphasized two elements of hermeneutics, the grammatical and the psychological, and highlighted the circularity of the hermeneutical process: we cannot understand a word or a sentence except in the context of the whole text, but we cannot understand the text unless we understand the component words or sentences. In the same way, to understand a text we must first be privy to the author's intention, which we cannot access except by the instrumentality of the text. This is the reality of the hermeneutical circle (INWOOD 1998, 386). The goal of this circle is to understand the mental process or true meaning of the speaker/writer. According to Schleiermacher, we must leap into the center of this hermeneutical circle in order to grasp the whole before we can understand the parts and vice versa. The significance of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is that hermeneutics is no longer seen exclusively as a special disciplinary matter belonging, for example, to theology or literature, but as the art of understanding any utterance of language (PALMER 1967, 90-92).

With Wilhelm Dilthey, hermeneutics becomes not just a method of understanding but a discipline. Dilthey's goal was to formulate a truly humanistic methodology for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and he saw hermeneutics as being the core discipline for all the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The *Geisteswissenschaften* encompasses all those sciences which concern the understanding of man's activity. Dilthey uses hermeneutics as adequate method for understanding the human being while the natural sciences explain nature. Dilthey's idea that understanding is circular and historical is of central importance to hermeneutics. For Dilthey, man is basically made in history. There is first and foremost self-understanding, which belongs to the psychological realm, but understanding of things occurs through history. There is no true starting point for understanding, since every part of the process of understanding presupposes the next and the one before.

Hermeneutics can also be seen in the sense of phenomenology of existence and of existential understanding. The two proponents of hermeneutics as the phenomenology of Dasein and existential understanding are Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Heidegger presents the hermeneutics of Dasein in his major work, *Being and Time*. This

hermeneutics refers neither to science or the rules of textual interpretation nor to the methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, but to the phenomenological analysis of Dasein. Dasein is according to him, a “being in the world”, and Dasein’s being is determined by the world in which he is thrown into. To arrive at the real nature of understanding, Heidegger said that we will require an appreciation of that being whose nature it is to understand, the only being (Dasein) who is capable of understanding (OGUIEJIOFOR 2009, 81). Unlike hermeneutists before him, Heidegger’s main goal is not to prove that there is a hermeneutic circle, but to show the significance of this circular understanding to ontology. Heideggerian hermeneutic is therefore a fundamental ontology that is primarily an understanding and interpretation of Dasein.

Against Dilthey and Husserl, Hans-Georg Gadamer follows the lead provided by Heidegger. Gadamer, who is a student of Heidegger, is another hermeneutist. He developed his own philosophical hermeneutics, which owes quite a bit to earlier hermeneutics in general and to Heidegger in particular. Gadamer, however, takes his hermeneutics one step further with his controversial assertion that: “Being that can be understood is language” (1976, 31). Language imposes a limit, as well as marking the promise of creative possibility. Given that thinking is tied to the boundaries of language, our understanding, in Gadamer’s thinking, is language bound. Hermeneutics has thus encountered the positively philosophical question of the relationship of language to being, understanding, existence, and reality.

Building on the gains of earlier thinkers, Ricoeur’s thought on hermeneutics is that it is a system of interpretation. For Ricoeur, hermeneutics is the theory of the rules that govern an exegesis, an interpretation of a particular text. A text can be group of signs, symbols of dreams, symbols or myths of literature etc. For Ricoeur, hermeneutics is the system by which the deeper significance of a given text is revealed. It is “a reflection upon existence and upon all those means by which that existence can be understood” (Hackett, quoted in MADU 1992, 26) It is a recovery of the self, an overcoming of the separation between the self and one’s true being.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is dialectical in the sense that no single perspective can attain the depth of interpretative insight needed, especially with respect to self-understanding, which to him is central to the hermeneutical process since understanding involves self-understanding. This awareness leads Ricoeur to the strengthening of the pivotal role of the “other” in self-understanding. He stresses, however, that there can be no universal canons for exegesis, but only separate end opposing theories concerning the rules of interpretation (RICOEUR 2008).

It is evident from the above historical excursus into hermeneutics that hermeneutics is concerned with the understanding and interpretation of

our being in the world and how our different ways of being in the world are connected to our understanding of things (KAKKORI 2009, 19). In the words of Oguejiofor, hermeneutics is a quest for meaning, one's own meaning in one's life, society, and milieu—in short, in the totality of one's universe, which could be said to be constituted by one's cultural symbols (2009, 80). Despite the different emphases in the historical evolution of hermeneutics, certain elements can be identified as basic in the hermeneutical process: psychology, history, and context, as well as understanding, prejudice, tradition, intention, and language. Hermeneutics as a method of philosophical research in the West developed as a reaction to what its advocates considered to be the inability of the traditional tools of philosophy to understand the real essence of philosophy as an existential project (OWOLABI 2001, 154). The method of hermeneutics now developed in restoration of the ideal of philosophy, which was lost to the extremism of positivist rationality and pure analysis.

### **Hermeneutics in African philosophy**

Having discussed the origin, meaning and thought of a few hermeneutic thinkers in Western discourse, let us now return to the method of hermeneutics in African philosophy. Though not with a distinctive meaning in African context, the advocates of the method in African philosophy felt persuaded by the approach of hermeneutics in continental European philosophy, where it developed as a rescue from the extremism and absolutism of philosophy in the hands of positivism and modernity, to the real essence of philosophy as an existential project. "They maintained that all that modernist extremism had done against the traditional culture in the name of the modernist idols of pure analysis, strict rationalism, and stringent methodism should be renounced" (OWOLABI 2001, 154). It is on this account, that the yearning for a recovery of African philosophy from the agents of eurocentrism and underestimation of African intellectual heritage that the hermeneutic method began to emerge.

Though, in the domain of African philosophy, it is difficult to identify thinkers who align themselves in a straightforward manner with orthodox, mainstream phenomenology and hermeneutics as practiced by Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Dilthey among others. One reason for this, as Hallen (2003) rightly noted, is probably that philosophers in the African context were wary of another European-generated approach to human understanding that focused in such an emphatic manner on elements that were said to be universal to human understanding because of concerns that such an overview could underrate or ignore elements to African cognition that were distinctive or perhaps even somehow unique (HALLEN 2003, par. 8).

In African philosophy, the concept of hermeneutics refers to the methodology of achieving a deeper understanding of materials such as symbols, culture, language and history through detailed interpretation. It is the method of understanding some most probably, lost ideas through careful interpretation of the socio-historical background that produced them. After extensive study of Heidegger, Ricoeur and Gadamer, Okere, a prominent African philosopher, attempted a hermeneutical engagement with Igbo culture. He advocates a specifically African form of hermeneutics.

Given the pivotal role of hermeneutics in philosophy, Okere sees hermeneutics as an important approach that can rescue African philosophy from itself. With respect to philosophy, hermeneutics enables philosophy to act as a bridge among cultures and peoples. It did this by reminding philosophy of its own cultural origins and clearing the ground about its prejudgments, originating biases, initial and abiding interests and unconscious presuppositions. In Okere's submission:

Once philosophy becomes fully aware of its own cultural background and its limits, its strengths and perhaps also of its weaknesses, it will be in a position to appreciate statements, ideas and philosophies from other cultures and ultimately generate a dialogue among ontologies and philosophies. (OKERE 2004, par. 14)

For Okere (1983), hermeneutics is therefore an interpretative tool of mediating, rationalizing and dialoguing between what he called 'philosophy' and 'non-philosophy' in human experiences. It is a means of accessing the non-philosophical components of a people's culture.

In so doing, hermeneutics, if employed as a methodological paradigm in African philosophy, in Okere's understanding, will help create a forum for understanding cultures and for seeing the rich pluralism as well as the basic compatibility of cultures. Besides, the approach will help in rediscovering African cultural values that have been adulterated as a result of external influences. Conceiving of every philosophy as culture bound, Okere's position is that the process of hermeneutics consists therefore in the interpretations of the symbols of the culture in question (OKERE 1983, ix). African philosophy, being a hermeneutics of African culture, must therefore involve interpretation, which should be mediated by the individual, his/her culture, tradition, environment, personal experience and history. The appeal of hermeneutics to Okere is that it will allow African philosophy a unique starting point such that African philosophy is not reducible to other philosophical systems, even when it uses all the rational tools that any other philosophical traditions take as essential (JANZ 2015, 481).

Though, a pioneer of this approach in African philosophy, Okere's hermeneutic approach has received some severe criticisms. Agbakoba (2005, 236) avers that his approach is nothing other than "patriotic romanticism that has nothing in mind other than extolling African culture and most especially his Igbo culture". In the same vein, Njoku (2005, 101) notes that "philosophy seems to lose its enduring universal structure in Okere – the greatest master of the African hermeneutic school of philosophy." According to Bruce Janz, in Okere's adoption of hermeneutics, "there are limits to the extent the method can deal with meanings that are not simply there to be uncovered, but are the result of some violence that does not want itself to be named" (2015: 481).

Serequeberhan, another advocate of the method in African philosophy, describes hermeneutics as "the means of returning to the ancient truths of mythologies that philosophy for so long avoided because of the aversion that Plato, the patriarch of Western philosophy, had for literary materials" (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994, 1). Within the context of African philosophy, Serequeberhan situates the hermeneutic method as that approach "standing between the particularism of the traditionalists and the universalism of the modernists" (SEREQUEBERHAN, 1994, 5). Hermeneutical philosophy is explicitly context-oriented, by which is meant that it stresses the fact that human cognition always takes place in a particular historical, cultural and intellectual era, and is informed by the paradigms and priorities distinctive of that era (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994, 6).

Serequeberhan's recognition of history as important to the development of hermeneutics differentiates his hermeneutics from Okere's. He notes that the hermeneutics of African philosophy involves on the one hand horizon, which is the context of its historical location and, on the other hand, discourse, that is the outcome of the interpretive process working on a particular situation (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994, 17-18). In African history, hermeneutics is necessitated by the encounter with the foreign and aggressive colonial experiences. Serequeberhan construes the African horizon as one of violence and counter-violence, tracing the distinction of the "other" in the Western tradition. This "other" turns out to be distinctive not by mere difference but by his or her inferiority, sub-humanity, and statements of uncivilization expresses by Western eurocentrists.

Employing the hermeneutic approach for the reinterpretation of the deep reflection underlying symbols, mythological narratives and oral traditions in Africa, Madu (1996: xxxiii) affirms that it is the only way to achieve a deep interpretation of the cultural artifacts and a proper understanding of the indigenous culture while also advancing philosophy in its universal essence. Madu's concern is to establish "that symbols are philosophically relevant, not simply culturally relevant, and that hermeneutics is the best method for extracting the philosophical content"

(JANZ 2015, 483). He uses hermeneutics to excavate symbolic resources and metaphors, meaning and significance of destiny in Igbo culture.

Evident from the foregoing is that in establishing a rational connection between the past and the present, the hermeneutic approach exposes hidden meanings of supposedly lost thoughts and provides deeper interpretation of indigenous ideas. Hermeneutics uses mythological narratives and oral traditions as its objects for rigorous interpretation. As an approach in contemporary African philosophy, the method has the goal of retrieving the authentic philosophical heritage of Africa using the tools of analysis and criticism.

The hermeneutic method recognizes the indigenous sages, but unlike the advocates of philosophical sagacity method, who consider the thoughts of the sages as indigenously philosophical, advocates of hermeneutic approach regard the traditional oral narratives as good raw materials for philosophical explication. Owolabi (2001) in defending his hermeneutic-narrative approach as the most appropriate methodology of locating an authentic African philosophy writes:

... the real initiative in the project of indigenous philosophical production rests with the trained philosopher rather than the local sages. It is the responsibility of the former to reveal the hidden meanings embedded in the materials provided by the sages. (OWOLABI 2001, 153)

He notes further that:

The real desideratum in the quest for an authentic African philosophy, according to the advocates of the hermeneutic method, is not to prove that there are philosophers in traditional society, as the defenders of sage-ethnological approach would like us to believe, rather, the goal is to be able to retrieve the philosophical heritage in a form that will be useful to the contemporary effort of liberating and transforming African society (OWOLABI 2001, 153).

The above task of retrieving and unfolding the hidden meanings of oral narratives is based on a problematic assumption. And that is, that the indigenous African intellectual heritage as embellished in the people's oral narratives such as symbols, proverbs, tales, songs, mythologies, etc. exist and is easily retrievable. Ideally, retrieval, and consequent deeper interpretative analysis of ancient texts are enormous intellectual tasks. However, the fact that the oral narratives are not lost; but out there only waiting for discovery of latent philosophical ideas makes the task feasible. In such a pursuit, the

fundamental thing is to identify the intellectual scheme and paradigms of thought, which ancient African thinkers initiated, developed and used in transmitting their oral literary heritage from generation to generation.

It is on the basis of the above that Oluwole's hermeneutical orientation in African philosophy is markedly different from the likes of Owolabi, Serequerberhan, Okere and Madu. It is worthy to note that Oluwole neither used the label "hermeneutic" to characterize her methodological approach to African philosophy in any of her numerous prominent works, nor did she mention any method for that matter. However, her serious engagement with oral tradition strongly suggests her subtle romance with hermeneutic orientation.

In many of her later works and essays, Oluwole (1996, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2010 and 2016) attempts a deeper analysis and hermeneutic interpretation of oral tradition using as a case study, the Yoruba oral literary example. Her intention is not to defend the hermeneutic interpretation of oral tradition as materials for philosophical ends; rather her hermeneutic engagement is to discover actual oral texts in which critical African philosophical views were expressed. Her conviction is that it is not the analysis and interpretation *per se* that make the oral texts philosophy, rather what qualifies them, as philosophy must already be inherent in the oral narratives.

In choosing the hermeneutical method, Oluwole (1999) writes that her goal is to:

... document, study and understand the deep meaning of different oral texts expressed in various African languages for the purpose of identifying the in-built literary genres and conceptual paradigms in which African sages formulated their thought within specific conceptual structures. It is within such a structure that their philosophical and intellectual worth can be determined. (p. 29)

The fundamental objective of engaging in extensive and rigorous studies of several actual oral texts and materials in different African languages is to discover the indigenous philosophical thoughts embedded in them and not to invent theories or formulate theoretical postulates for the present. In this approach, "the researcher needs to identify and formulate adequate tool(s) for accessing and knowing the nature of the assumed elements of reality, whose knowledge and understanding would help human being in coping with life and experience" (OLUWOLE 2016, 181). This is the humanistic basis of the hermeneutic method.

In the bid to assess textual evidence that some oral texts contain critical philosophy, the hermeneutic approach is inevitable. Oluwole urges

that “what should directly interest the philosophers is not the cultural behaviours of the people, but the intellectual style established by oral texts in different African languages” (OLUWOLE 1999, 100). With such goal in view, Oluwole believes that the hermeneutic study of oral literature will not only promote comparative inter-cultural understanding, but it will also provide a veritable foundation upon which a modern African tradition of philosophy can be cogently based.

In Oluwole’s hermeneutic approach, there is not so much credence to indigenous sages; the bulk of focus is on traditional oral narratives as good raw materials for philosophical explication. The approach has the task of retrieving and unfolding the hidden meanings of oral narratives. But there is a problematic assumption here. And that is, that the indigenous African intellectual heritage as embellished in the people’s oral narratives such as symbols, proverbs, tales, songs, mythologies, etc., exist and they are easily retrievable. Ideally, retrieval, and consequent deeper interpretative analysis of ancient texts are enormous intellectual tasks. However, the fact that the oral narratives are not lost; but out there only waiting for discovery of latent philosophical ideas makes the task feasible. In such a pursuit, the fundamental thing is to identify the intellectual scheme and paradigms of thought, which ancient African thinkers initiated, developed and used in transmitting their oral literary heritage from generation to generation.

Oluwole (1997, 140) warns against the temptation of subjecting or attempt to submit the thoughts to the tests of the paradigms of Western thought, since that will by implication, defeat the very possibility of establishing the existence of an authentic African intellectual tradition in them. Instead, the research should allow the oral literature to account for its own existence as a philosophy. In exposing how the fundamentals of philosophical themes a researcher is working on explicitly occur in the oral texts, Oluwole charges against the tendency of creating new philosophies from the texts. Given the fact that professional philosophers conventionally engage themselves in the analysis, explanation, criticism and/or justification of the works of different philosophers without necessarily creating new philosophies out of them, the primary task of the researcher is to explicate the implicit; bring to light the implications of the issues so analyzed and interpreted.

In other words, the philosopher’s engagement with the oral literature is to show that the concise prose and poetry that are structurally revealed in the narratives are more detailed, more reflectively rigorous, and more focused on precise social and existential problems than the way they are originally presented in the narratives. She admits that neither the choice of texts by the researcher nor the analysis or interpretations that follow can in any way be regarded as either exhaustive or conclusive because no honest interpretation is ever monogamous (OLUWOLE 1997, 140).

The above point on the non-uniformity in interpretation is not to be seen as an albatross on the hermeneutic method. This is because, for Oluwole, it aids the intellectual culture of dialogue, which is most needed in developing fruitful contemporary traditions of African philosophy. A dialogue, according to her, takes off on the assumption that each of the two deferring views or topics needs to be discussed so as to expose the merits and demerits of each. The process is to listen to and try to understand what each discussant has to offer. The goal is to note points of differences and similarities. Discussants in a dialogue are not out to completely destroy and/or annul each other. The goal is to promote mutual understanding.

The element of dialogue is basic to the method of hermeneutics. Dialogue is more of an attempt to analyze, explain and identify different ideas, beliefs, principles and conceptual schemes so as to discover reasons that account for noticed differences among philosophies. It is an aid to comparative philosophy. The fundamental goal is to make room for deeper understanding and full appreciation of the basic elements and features that account for the undeniable diversity in human intellectual traditions and cultures. The envisaged result is to explore conditions for greater mutual understanding that breeds reciprocal respect rather than one that creates competing regimes of episteme that widens the artificial vacuum established by scholars in “our common humanity” (OLUWOLE 2010, 7).

If the long discussion of the existence of African philosophy had taken the form of hermeneutic dialogue rather than the dominant scientific and positivistic approach of Western philosophy, Oluwole believes, it would be most probable that more several fruitful discoveries would have been made about Western and African traditions of philosophy.

### **Evaluating Hermeneutic Approach to African Philosophy**

The hermeneutical approach takes a fairly radically relativistic view of ‘knowledge’. The responsibility of philosophers is to come to terms with their historicity by acknowledging it, and by achieving a degree of reflective/reflexive understanding of the characteristics that distinguish their era while at the same time being situated in it. This would seem to indicate that the hermeneutical philosopher would be rather wary of philosophical ‘talk’ that presumes the existence of cognitive, etc. universals that are said to underlie or to be formative of understanding in all historical eras. Claims about the existence of such ‘universals’ would likely be treated as intellectually ethnocentric and false reifications of the paradigms of one particular era as somehow essential to all (HALLEN 2003, 13).

“A major problem of the hermeneutical approach is that texts, an action, or culture could become subject of various or several interpretations” (AKPAN 2009, 81). Thus, the result of the hermeneutical process must of necessity be different. In the context of African philosophy, therefore, we

cannot say in advance what the result of the interpretation will be. Nor is there any canon against which wrongness and rightness is to be determined.

The veracity of the above criticism has been vitiated by Owolabi (2001) in his defense of the hermeneutic method. He sees the above objection as a product of our entrenched scientific presumption that interpretation ought to be tested by something outside it. According to him, hermeneutics takes it for granted that interpretations will be relative, multiple, and subjective. This is not to be seen as a problem, rather, it is the very position hermeneutists are trying to defend. “What hermeneutics strives for is the blossoming of the many flowers of interpretation, if this will generate dialogue within and across cultures” (OWOLABI 2001, 159-160).

In addition, given that the method of hermeneutics uses African cultural categories and intellectual heritage (in isolation) as the basis of defending authentic African philosophy, distinct from Western philosophy, one may inadvertently fall victim of ethnocentric commitment, with which some Western scholars (such as Levy-Bruhl, Hegel, Horton, Hume, etc.) had hitherto been alleged.

It is on the basis of the above that Innocent Asouzu’s critique of the hermeneutic approach to African philosophy is premised. One of the greatest difficulties, which hermeneutics of culture as a philosophical methodology has to contend with, according to Asouzu (2007: 62), is that “it seeks to dogmatize on fixed meanings attached to words, names, symbols, wise sayings; more often than not, by reference to some distant ages past.” As long as the hermeneutic approach does not free itself from the attractions of its cultural background in view of universal applicability of all modes of meaning; “as long as philosophy does not fully free itself from ethnocentric excesses of this kind, it would continue to solve fake puzzles, battle with self-imposed restrictions and even with contradictions” (ASOUZU 2007, 62). Asouzu is of the view that the self-immolation arising from the unintended ethnocentric commitment in the hermeneutic approach can be avoided. Such avoidance is possible only if the hermeneutic method absorbs itself of the principles of complementary reflection, which is Asouzu’s kind of favoured method of doing African philosophy. In his words, advocates of the hermeneutic approach should:

...seek to capture culture within a comprehensive, universal complementary future oriented perspective and not necessarily relative to one’s own circumscribed location only. It is for this reason that hermeneutics of culture must be complementary in orientation to be complete, and should it attain the noble objective it has set for itself. In this sense, culture within the ambit of complementary reflection can be grasped adequately within the context of all the actors and factors that determine the ideas of a thinker and those

individuals and communities under consideration.  
(ASOUZU 2007, 43)

The above demand for comprehensiveness, universality, and future looking orientation of Asouzu's complementary reflection in repositioning hermeneutics raises some questions: Should it be taken that philosophical hermeneutics be applicable to all areas of knowledge? Does philosophical hermeneutics in its comprehensive dimension introduced by Asouzu concern the conditions of understanding limited to the humanities alone, or does it apply also to knowledge of the natural sciences? What is the scope of future oriented research – ten years, hundred years, millennia, or what? If the universality of hermeneutics is accepted based on the principles of complementary reflection as Asouzu urges us, it must be proven to be applicable to all fields of knowledge, and covering all knowledge there is for it to be comprehensive. But how realistic is this? Answers to these questions are not provided by Asouzu, and it is doubtful if Asouzu's attempt to rehabilitate the hermeneutic method is successful.

In appraising Oluwole's hermeneutic approach to African philosophy, we may ask: If the goal of Western philosophical tradition, to paraphrase Hallen (2002: 70), is to achieve a level of "rational" truth that transcends (and thereby applies to) all of humanity's diverse cultures through the use of analysis, criticism, experimental and demonstrative procedures, then does it mean that these approaches play no role in the literary thought of the Africans, whose goal, as Oluwole noted, is humanism with its attendant hermeneutic constitution? Oluwole's answer to this important question is that emotion, intuition, interpretation, debate, synthesis, which are requirements of the hermeneutic method are not aberrations of a rational procedure amenable to scientific understanding. Oluwole writes:

Interpretations, by their very nature, consist of relating different events to each other so as to work out a synthesis. Nature may be all logic and mathematics, which is of course doubtful, but man, definitely is not. Demonstrations of the effects of events on human life and interests are impossible through a system of logic that pays no heed to human relations and feelings. Mathematics does not postulate the effects of human sensations and emotions as determinants of human existence. Scientific analysis does not feed emotions into its computer. (1991, 117)

On the above premise, Oluwole concludes that:

[She does] not see the scientific alternative as superior or inferior to it [hermeneutic alternative]. As in many other spheres of human thoughts, these two alternatives stress two options, two distinctive concerns that separate two literary cultural endeavors, each valid and probably inevitable for human development. To adequately interpret nature and relate human these to human interest and existence, a vast and thorough knowledge of the nature of man and our experience are imperative. While the terms in which factual knowledge and their understanding are expressed are not determined in any *a priori* fashion, no interpreter should feel safe treading on undefined, unanalyzed, or unknown grounds. But no matter how detailed our analysis of facts, it never replaces interpretation. The tools and methodology available within each endeavour are different and distinct even both can in the end, be related to human interests. (1991, 121)

Notwithstanding the eloquence and logical defense of Oluwole above on the reconcilability of the hermeneutic approach and the analytic method, Oluwole's hermeneutical approach still opens us to some fundamental questions: Given the European origin of the hermeneutic method itself, how can African hermeneutics avoid being certified as just one more example of a European mentality that therefore cannot authentically apply to the African cultural context? (HALLEN 2002, 65) How do we ascertain and confirm the authenticity of the sources of oral texts which Oluwole aims to engage hermeneutically? To what extent are the oral texts so presented by Oluwole truly representative of the people's intellectual views, and not just the mere reflections and/or impositions of the investigator's opinions? What are the recipes for discovering the philosophy in oral texts – intuition or certain given paradigms? Are all forms of oral narratives expressions of strict philosophy? What exact conception of philosophy do we have in mind? What are the prospects and implications of a hermeneutical study of oral traditions in the process of coming up with a comprehensive history of African philosophy that stretches from the ancient to contemporary periods? Are there sufficient and meaningful in-built strategies of overcoming the challenges of linguistic translation and objective interpretation in Oluwole's hermeneutical method?

### **Conclusion**

Neither Oluwole, nor any of the advocates of the hermeneutic approach to African philosophy, provides answers to foregoing fundamental questions. Two important implications can be drawn, thereof from the queries. One is to infer that the search for an appropriate method of doing African philosophy continues as the hermeneutic approach is not fully convincing. However, in

spite of the queries, the hermeneutic approach invites dialogues and conversational narratives. The second implication, which is related to the first, is that hermeneutics in African philosophy is about raising questions and providing interpretative answers for self and intra-cultural understanding of the African experiences. Perhaps, it is in this sense that this paper in consonance with Janz (2009), construes hermeneutics as a “way to create new philosophical questions that come from and resonate with a geographic and cultural place.” The salience of the questions raised offers hermeneutics the potentials not only for intra-cultural understanding but also for intercultural exchange and understanding, “especially in the light of the [diverse and] problematic versions of encounter that exist in the past and present” (JANZ 2015, 484).

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