

A Review of the Question of African Philosophy

(Bodunrin, P.O.)

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Introduction

The past three or more decades have witnessed a deluge of works on the twin quest to know whether African Philosophy exists and what its nature consists of. The authors of most of these works who are erudite scholars in their own rights have been somehow engaged in what Nwala (1992:34) refers to as “Great Debate.” The earlier enquiry dwelt on whether African Philosophy really exists or whether it is non-existent. But a much later era went further to investigate more into what the nature of African Philosophy is. To a very large extent, the former quest into its existence seems to have been reasonably settled. However, as to what the nature of African Philosophy is, the debate has remained yet inconclusive.

Ikenuobe (1997:190), in his work on *The Parochial Universalist Conception of ‘Philosophy’ and ‘African Philosophy’*, attempts classifying philosophers into two camps, namely, the Universalists and the Particularists. The former refers to those who view Philosophy mainly from the Western analytic point of view and who at one and same time believe that every philosophy, even if it were African in orientation, must be subjected to the Western yardstick. On the other hand, the latter refers to philosophers who hold that even the worldviews of any group of people sieved through their folklores, legends, myths or proverbs form their philosophy.

Our author, Bodunrin, however, falls into the first category. In his treatment of “The Question of African Philosophy”, he deals with the twin question of the existence and nature of African Philosophy. And he dwells particularly on the nature of African philosophy, bringing Oruka’s framework into focus. Meanwhile, he owns up on his eventual shift in insight as he sees the different strands of African Philosophy as different perspectives of understanding (p.163).

He gives the four trends a deeper and harder look with a view to drawing out probable reasons for the emergence of African Philosophy. Ethno-philosophy is outrightly considered as pseudo or debased philosophy; Philosophic sagacity is merely tolerated; and Nationalist Philosophy is tagged as ordinary cultural worldview or romanticisation with the past. It is only Professional Philosophy that is considered an impeccable manner of doing philosophy.

The entire gamut of the work presents two classic approaches to the study of philosophy, namely, Wonderment and Conscious creativity. That notwithstanding, in our review of this monumental piece, the four trends identified by Oruka ought to be revisited, if only briskly, so as to offer us some necessary illumination.

The Four Trends

The four philosophical trends identified by Oruka are, thus:

- a) **Ethno-Philosophy** – which he says refers to communal thoughts or myths, folklores and folk-wisdom. This describes the world-outlook or thought-system of a particular African community or the whole of Africa. It is not a body of logically-agreed thoughts. He calls this philosophy in a debased sense. The works of Placide Tempels, Leopold Senghor, John Mbiti, Marciel Griaule, Isidore Okpewho, Asare Opoku and Alexis Kagame are classified under this trend.

- b) Philosophic Sagacity** – refers to the trend whereby wise men who are reputed for unadulterated traditional wisdom and/or who are independent-thinkers are sought after and identified from within the society. This depicts the fact that even without literacy or Western influence, philosophical reflection is possible. Such ones are usually traced from among those who have not been in any sense seriously affected by modernity. Within this context is classified the sage, Ogotomeli, in Marcel Griaule's work on *Dogan Religious Ideas*, etc.
- c) Nationalist Ideological Philosophy** – is an attempt at evolving a new or unique political theory on traditional African Socialism and familyhood. It is also aimed at authentic mental liberation and return to true and genuine traditional African humanism as a symbol of meaningful freedom and independence, as opposed to the Western conceptual systems. Such philosophers include Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Leopold Senghor, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Mobutu Seseseko, E.W. Blyden and W.E.B Dubois, etc.
- d) Professional Philosophy** – refers to trained philosophers. It is the view of Universalist philosophers as opposed to Particularist philosophers that philosophy must have same meaning in all cultures while the subjects and methods could be dictated by cultural differences or the existing operational environment of the philosopher. Here, it is submitted that African philosophy is done by African philosophers with African context. No mere descriptive accounts are considered philosophical. Rather, criticism and arguments are considered central characteristics. Oruka identifies Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, Oruka Odera himself and Bodunrin P.O. under this group.

In what looks like a shift in position, Bodunrin alludes to a new conviction that the different understandings of the meanings of philosophy by various contemporary philosophers represent different strands of African philosophy (p.163). On a general note, the thrust or focus of this paper is an attempt at identifying the nature of African Philosophy. Thus, it raises questions on what it entails for a given idea to be termed African Philosophy; what the main characteristics of an African philosophical discourse are; what the challenges of African philosophers are; and what needs to be met and what problems to be solved.

In a bid to find solution to these quests, our author offers two basic approaches, thus: the Wonderment approach and the Creation Consciousness approach.

The Two Basic Approaches

1. Wonderment

African Philosophy begins with wondering at the nature of the universe, like any other form of philosophy, for instance, the stars, oceans, birds, life, death, growth and decay, etc. It is also understood that contact with Western Europeans has impacted so much on the people's traditional worldview and belief systems, especially via colonization, evangelization and introduction of writing. African Philosophy, therefore, has emerged as a means of meeting the challenges posed by the new situation. As Sogolo (1990:42) expressed it, utility should play a role in the society. Philosophy as a search for truth is not mutually exclusive of philosophy conceived in purely utilitarian terms. In this sense, philosophy is seen as a necessity. Some of the challenges posed by the new situation were clearly enumerated by our author in four primary ways in relation to the four trends earlier mentioned.

First, that the Europeans took special interest in studying the Africans in a bid to govern or convert them and discovered some radical difference between Africans and themselves in the colour of their skin, style of life and thinking capability and laid too much emphasis on how irrational and non-logical an African could be. With their missionary backgrounds, the anthropologists and ethnographers had vested interest in the people's spirituality or Religion, which led them invariably into concluding that the people were primitive, irrational and illogical. However, later developments, especially, in the area of education, naturally called for a redress in this misinformation and misinterpretation. These attempts were made by those Oruka terms ethno-philosophers.

Second, that with the rise of Black Nationalism emerged a generation which struggled for political independence and who at one and same time felt that all the vestiges of Western mode of life, whether in language, dress, culinary habits or government had to be curbed or expunged from the mentality of the people. The traditional social order with its pristine values of ancestral link were radically sought after. This came in the form of Nationalist ideological philosophy.

Third, that in a bid to produce a corollary to the intellectual categories of what the African intellectuals meet elsewhere in the course of academic quest in either history of philosophy or so, there exists that natural quest to evolve an autochthonous African species of these disciplines. Since it had become especially a vogue and a thing of pride and great value to talk of British Philosophy, American Philosophy, European Philosophy, Indian Philosophy, etc it became necessary to produce an African version of it, if the Africans were not to be considered inferior. The nationalists, therefore, felt it was patriotic enough to have African Philosophy. An instance of how Bodunrin's colleagues in the Philosophy Department of University of Ibadan criticized and derided a syllabus which he drew up in 1974 as being too Western and not sufficiently African is cited as one of those challenges that spurred him into action (p.165). In this case, philosophers take up the challenge in introducing ethno-philosophy, political ideologies of African politicians or adopting socio-anthropological methods of philosophy.

Fourth, that consequent upon the fact that philosophy and the education sector in general has to compete with other social needs in the allocation of scarce resources, especially in the provision of infrastructures and basic human needs, such as hospital, portable water, good roads and agricultural development, the philosopher is also required to show the relevance of his discipline. This is what Sogolo (1990) refers to as 'philosophical orientation' being tied to the African sense. The need therefore for prefixing 'Africa' as in African Literature or African history obviously became very pertinent.

Bodunrin re-prioritizes them placing nationalist-ideological and philosophic sagacity first and ethno-philosophy, which is the so-called debased philosophy as the last. Here, he considers the latter as almost a non-philosophy which stands in "sharp opposition to the position he wishes to urge in his conception of philosophy" (p.166). Bodunrin never failed to commend the efforts being made by African political thinkers as a worthwhile aspiration. However, he was reserved on certain presuppositions of attempts so far made. And he categorically accuses them of romanticisation with the past. Thus, he posits that "the past the political philosophers seek to recapture cannot be recaptured" (p.166). He wonders why Nkrumah, after having alluded to this reality in his "Consciencism" by advocating a new African socialism which would take adequate care of the existential situation of Africa, would still subscribe to the belief that a full reconstruction of our social order is still possible without taking into cognizance our contact with the West through colonization and Christianity which has had far-reaching effects on African traditional life (p.166). Both Nkrumah and Nyerere are of the view that the traditional way of life must be the point of departure. As Sogolo (1990:42) would assert, "no discipline can ever sever ties with the past, since it is the past that gives inspiration to the present, while the present is expected to serve as a stimulant for the future." In a bid to reconstruct, obsolete ideas are dropped, while new ones are picked up. The bone of contention, however, is that,

The traditional African society was not as complex as the Modern African societies... The crisis of conscience which we have in the modern African society was not there. In the sphere of morality, there was a fairly general agreement as to what was right and what was expected of one. In a predominantly, non-money economy where people lived and worked all their lives in the same locale and among the same close relatives, African communalism was workable. Africa is becoming rapidly urbanized.

As he further argues,

The population of a typical big city neighborhood today is heterogeneous. People come from different places, have different backgrounds, do not necessarily have blood ties and are less concerned with the affairs of one another than people used to be. The security of the traditional setting is disappearing. African traditional communalism worked because of the feelings of familyhood that sustained it. This was not a feeling of the human race, but a feeling of closeness among those who could claim a common ancestry (p.167).

However, he agrees with Wiredu in advocating the need for organizing our cities into manageable units so as to foster the sense of belonging among people of diverse origins based on totally new premises. He harps on his condemnation of political thinkers for romanticizing the African past, arguing that "certainly, not everything about our past was glorious." Our author cites the prevalence of land disputes between communities and villages and the subjugation of our ancestors by a handful of Europeans as some inglorious samples which should keep us from romanticizing our past.

He stresses, rather, on the need for reconstruction of our past, to examine features of our thought system and our society that made this possible, echoing that “African humanism must not be a backward-looking humanism.” He calls for a more vigorous, rigorous and systematized way of doing African philosophy, since no genuine manner of philosophizing can be completely devoid of the influence of modernity. Bodunrin also acknowledges that there are two ways of approaching the investigations of philosophic sagacity, namely, the Dr. Barry Hallen Model – which identifies reputed individuals, records their submissions in a course of dialogue and eventually sifts out the wheat from the chaff. Then, the Dr. Oruka Odera style of recording thoughts of individuals uninfluenced by modern education, thereby helping native Africans to give birth to innate philosophical ideas. This is doing African philosophy, because participants are Africans or are working in Africa and are interested in a philosophical problem from an African point of view. In a nutshell, a criticism of traditional, cultural beliefs, akin to what emanated from the Greek Athenian Agora is in the offing.

2. Conscious Creation

Philosophy is also seen as a Conscious Creation. In this case, there is strictly no conscious philosophy without conscious reflection on one’s beliefs. So also, in this respect, Bodunrin holds that the philosopher and the sage are helping to evolve this. The need for a tradition of organized or systematic, critical reflections on the thoughts, beliefs and practices of the people, cannot be underrated here. In this case, the role of writing in the creation of a philosophical tradition is brought into sharp focus, even though writing may not be a precondition. However, our author notes with utmost concern that there exists complex, rational, coherent and logical conceptual systems in Africa worthy of the philosopher’s attention. Yet, he faults certain ethno-philosophers who are of the view that all rational, logical and complicated conceptual systems are philosophical. While not applying the term ethno-philosophers with any pejorative intent, he notes with much concern that:

First, some of the things they say about African culture are false. Mbiti’s claim that Africans have no conception of the future beyond the immediate future and Senghor’s claim that Negro African reasoning is intuitive by participation, are cited to show that a philosophical work does not cease to be so simply because of false claims. Second, that the argument that collective thought of people upon which they concentrate is not genuine philosophy is quite unacceptable to him. As it were, “disciplines are not in water-tight compartments, and areas of interest overlap.” Wright succinctly has it that there is no particular method which is the only method of philosophy today (p.171). Nevertheless, certain assumptions are still necessary as to clarity of thought-pattern, justification of issues at stake and not mere description of the empirical world.

In doing philosophy, therefore, the African philosopher, according to Bodunrin cannot deliberately ignore the study of the traditional belief system of his people. In fact, he sees the study of traditional societies as the most probable answer to the current state of philosophy whereby it is said to be impoverished. The need for criticism is brought to the fore, a criticism that is rational, impartial and an articulate appraisal from either negative or positive dimension. The nature of criticism is expected to be reforming, modifying or conserving and in applying one’s intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer (p.173). It is a task to be undertaken piecemeal on issues with universal systematic examination of specific features of the world and the relationship perceivably obtainable between them.

Historical and literacy criticism, which is a product of the modern age, is seen as a corollary to philosophy and not any naïve comparison with ordinary history or literature. Herein, it is understood that writing helps one to pin down certain ideas which ought to be crystallized or etched on our minds, making the ideas of one day available for future use. “It is by this means that the thoughts of one age, are made available to succeeding generations, with the least distortion” (p.177). In this light, we do not have to begin all over again. It is indeed, doubtful whether philosophy can make any serious progress without writing.

Part of the nuances to this whole discourse is how Bodunrin argues that, of course, the philosophy of a country or region of the world is neither definable in terms of the thought-content of the tradition nor in terms of the national origins of the thinkers. He cites the Universalist conception of Wiredu that for a set of ideas to be a genuine possession of a people, they need not have originated them, they need only appropriate them, make use of them, develop them, if the spirit so moves them, and thrive on them.

The intellectual history of mankind is strewn in a series of mutual borrowings and adaptations among races, nations, tribes, even smaller sub-groups.

It is also true that the work of a philosopher is part of a given tradition if and only if it is either produced within the context of that tradition or taken up and used in it. One is at liberty to move into a culture guided by his philosophical interest.

Evaluation and Conclusion

In his quest into African Philosophy, P.O. Bodunrin argues that there exists African Philosophy but posits that what the nature is of African Philosophy is yet to be properly defined. Bodunrin, as seen earlier in the work ranks among astute philosophers of the Universalist mode (as against the Particularists) who hold that the concept of philosophy in terms of its methodology and subject matter should be the same in both the Western and African sense. In his conception of African Philosophy, he advocates that it should be placed under the same analytical parameters with Western Philosophy. However, the striking characteristic which distinguishes our author, is his self-criticism or shift from his earlier stance, when he asserted that what he attacked earlier was nothing other than “the lack of criticism and rigour of argumentation.” Therefore, he expressed his conviction over the different positions as to their nature of being African Philosophy.

Nevertheless, one notices some glaring inconsistencies in his arguments. He rejected other strands of Philosophy which were not of the Western analytic mode in a sort of *apriori* style. It is quite obvious that he dismissed it on the grounds of not only methodology but also content or object of the study. As good and appropriate as analytic philosophy is, however, it must be understood also that there exists other philosophical viewpoints other than the Western mode which is being used as the standard for dismissing African traditional philosophy as being non-philosophical. This is because if the condemnation is resulting from the oral nature of traditional African Philosophy, it must be understood too that even what we call Western analytic philosophy evolved in like manner. As it were, Socrates did not write anything. That which is known of him today came out of the writings of Plato who was his student. It is evident therefore that though writing is important, it is not a precondition for authentic philosophical reflections. Without writing, idioms, myths, poetry, legends, proverbs, parables, folktales, folksongs or folk-wisdom, festivals and various forms of institutions convey traditional thoughts.

In as much as Bodunrin’s view on need for analysis relates to the essence of enhancing or improving on what is already on ground, it is *ad rem*. So long as it pertains to attaining some particular level of habit of rigour in thinking and exactness or coherence, it is in order. Granted, there are intellectual virtues or necessary conditions which need to be readily cultivated for any reasonable sense of philosophizing, it must however be noted that it is not necessarily by wholesale importation of the Western manner of doing philosophy. It is most probably therefore, a glib reference to the need to develop further the African technical philosophical thought which is still in process that is meant. African Philosophy as seen by Bodunrin is quintessentially symbolic, emotive, non-reasoned, non-individualized, non-critical and pre-scientific, and is thereby rejected as pseudo-philosophy. In as much as every philosophy depends on a worldview, conjectural reconstruction of African wisdom is seen as a legitimate means of undertaking philosophy.

Understandably, Bodunrin’s bias is consequent upon his background which is specifically Western in orientation. He was therefore trained to place high premium on certain aspects of empirical testing and verification while missing his very footing in his African ambience by using Western standards in judging African thoughts. It should be noted too that African communities are communalistic in nature, as such, any attempt at using individualistic paradigms just as our erudite author is doing to explain that which is communal, would result into a flaw or confusion. Our author never minced words in criticizing three of the four trends in African Philosophy. Ethno-philosophy, for instance is considered as debased, demeaning and at best pre-reflective or pre-scientific philosophy. The entire African Philosophy or worldview even from the sage or nationalistic perspective is seen as being too culturally specific and descriptive. Come to think of it, does this not amount to throwing the baby with the bath-water? In the same token as the original ideas of the ancient and medieval eras have been precursors of Western contemporary analytic Philosophy, so also African ethno-philosophy and philosophic sagacity or nationalistic ideologies act as not only precursors of African contemporary analytic Philosophy but are more so sources of boosting or enhancing it.

In other words, genuine philosophy can also emanate from oral tradition. It is not possible therefore to totally divorce philosophy from culture. This would be contradiction in terms, because in all climes, philosophy is culture-relative in diverse ways.

That apart, for Bodunrin to think that it is only in the Western categories that there exists proper definition of Philosophy is quite untenable. This is because in arguing that way, he has settled the case in advance in respect of what philosophy is. Therefore, his own view too remains practically inconsistent in this light, since he had Western analytical methodology in mind as the ideal.

The interesting dimension in the new trend as to the application of languages in philosophy and natural sense also has its unique creative potentialities which is rich in natural conceptual networkings. It is rudimentary psychology to note that some good knowledge of one's mother-tongue from the early stages of life, enhances intellectual ability in an unimaginable degree. The gap between the eating of food with the left fingers and the belief that interprets it is as bad, for instance, is staggering to an ordinary rational mind. Or rather, the interpretation of "ekwu ojo meta" (it's quite an age – for a Yoruba person) and "you will die in three days time" for an Igala; or the gap between the Ibo "onukwu" (which means fool) and translates to "friend" in the Igala mind, beats the imagination.

In sum, what Bodunrin espouses here, is to a reasonable extent understandable. The author presents an admirably highly condensed work, piecing many relevant thoughts together, while he grapples with the crucial question of the nature of African Philosophy. Nevertheless, a *caveat* needs to be sounded. The views expressed in the course of expounding his idea on this question of African Philosophy, is a very broad one, but he holds tenaciously to the singular view that if it is to be done properly, it does and must have autonomy. That, it is not just anything that can pass for philosophy. Though we may not in any sense be advocating for "anyhow" or "anything" goes type of Philosophy, in the manner of a higgledy-piggledy sort of style, our avowed stand is that such a view would only succeed in stultifying the growth of Philosophy and African Philosophy in particular. Room must be created not only for the professionals, therefore, but also for what mankind calls "unconscious philosophizing" or what we may term "anonymous philosophizing".

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