

In search for a foundation for African philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This article is a response to the various proposals for the Africanization of the philosophy curriculum in African schools. I am of the belief that Africa is not yet ready for the project of Africanizing the philosophy curriculum. This is, due to the dearth in African philosophers and scanty educational materials that could truly be termed African philosophy. A solid foundation for African philosophy must first be built, before any attempt at Africanizing the curriculum will succeed. What should occupy the minds now is the search for a veritable foundation to situate African philosophy. The research employs the philosophical methods of critical analysis, reflective argumentation and textual analysis to drive home its point.

Keywords: African philosophy, foundation, Africanizing the curriculum, worldviews, contemporary culture.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the existence of African philosophy or more properly philosophy in Africa could arguably be considered to be a dead one now. This is very true, considering the rich proverbs, stories, myths, beliefs, religion, songs and worldview of Africans, which are evidently products of philosophy. The philosophy that produced them may be lost but the various proverbs, beliefs etc are pointers to the existence of philosophy in Africa. Unfortunately, most philosophers in their zeal to prove that African philosophy exist, elevate these worldviews as philosophies. And it is these worldviews, religion, myths etc that most scholars like Thaddeaus Metz recommend to form the bulk of African philosophy curriculum (2016:492). These would have had a proper place in the curriculum, if the philosophy driving them were not lost due to lack of a written culture in Africa. The lack of written culture made it difficult to assess the philosophical leanings of traditional African worldviews, leading to different and conflicting readings of the worldviews and beliefs.

Due to the inability to appropriately sieve out the philosophies that produced these worldviews and beliefs, I think they should be consigned to the realms of myth and folklores and not as African philosophy. The West has its myths and philosophy and the

boundary is clearly drawn. The Africans on the other hand finds it hard to let go of their myths and legends, but tend to Christianize them as philosophies. Peter Bodurin puts it in better words: “the pity is that ethno-philosophers usually fall in love so much with the thought system they seek to expound that they become dogmatic in the veneration of the culture to which the thought system belongs. They hardly see why others may refuse totally to share their esteem for the system they describe” (1991:13). To categorize them as philosophies that need inclusion in the curriculum, is to deliberately make African philosophy a spiritual enterprise devoid of rationality that ought to be the hallmark of philosophy.

It is understood that philosophy in Africa needs a foundation to build on, just like the Western philosophy is built on a long and glorious tradition. It is my opinion that this philosophy be erected on a firm foundation that could stand the test of time. To build philosophy on what I consider as traditional myths and unfounded beliefs is to make philosophy in Africa to suffer from stunted growth. It is only when philosophy is built on a right foundation that philosophies will develop in Africa that would, truly merit the name African, for it will cut across both traditional and contemporary Africans. It is at this moment that we can confidently Africanize the curriculum.

THE FUTILITY OF BASING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY ON TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEWS AND BELIEFS

Many and diverse conditions to be fulfilled for a philosophy to be qualified as an African philosophy, have been given over the years. One of the dominant views is that the philosophy must have an African colouring. This view has three discernible subsets. The first set, consists of scholars who hold and presents African traditional worldviews and beliefs as African philosophy. They generalize a particular conception of reality of a segment of Africans and call it African philosophy. This is mistaken, for philosophy is not identical with worldviews. According to Bodurin, a worldview is “the works of those anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists and philosophers who present the collective worldviews of African peoples, their myths and folk-lore and folk-wisdom as philosophy (Bodurin, 1991, 63). Beliefs and worldviews could at most be products of philosophy. This does not mean that all beliefs and worldviews are product of philosophy, some are products of religion, myth, superstition etc. Thus, to present worldviews and beliefs as philosophies of African is to commit a grave mistake. This is more so, if the philosophy of those beliefs is unknown. To present worldviews and beliefs of traditional African as their philosophy, is to run the risk of presenting products of religion, myth and folklores as philosophy. A combination of many factors add to form the worldviews of a people and not merely philosophy. To present the entire worldview as philosophy is to obliterate the line that separates African religion, philosophy, myth and folklores. This is perhaps the reason most scholars, tend to see African philosophy as inherently transcendental. Most scholars see Africans as religious in everything. These scholars found it hard to separate philosophy, myth and religion as intertwined in the worldviews of Africans and end up passing an unbalance judgment that African conception of reality is spiritualistic. Metz capture this sentiment when he outlined the distinct character of African philosophy thus:

Sub-Saharan thinkers tend towards relationality, characterizing reality and value in terms of dynamic, interactive properties between beings or forces, and not so much static properties intrinsic to individuals. For another, they often prize vitality, life or strength, traditionally understood in terms of an invisible energy that has come from God and permeates everything that exists in varying degrees. For a third, they routinely appeal to 'spirituality', or what is more carefully called 'invisible' or the 'insensible' world, taken to include at least God and ancestors, wise founders of a clan who have survived the deaths of their bodies and who continue to guide the clan (2016, p. 491).

Spiritualism is common to all parts of the world. The difference is that the West and other parts of the world have successfully demarcated the realm of religion from philosophy and spiritualism is properly situated under religion. Africans parading a worldview that is an admixture of philosophy, religion, and myth have failed to separate the contributions of philosophy to the composition of these worldviews. As a consequence Africans are at a loss as to which part of their beliefs and worldviews is a product of philosophy and which part is from religion and myth. This makes many to present the entirety of the worldview as African philosophy. The worldviews of traditional Africa could serve as entirely products of philosophy, if we could separate the philosophical, religious and mythic from it. But as far as I am concerned and as it has clearly been shown, (in controversies African philosophy is presently in) we cannot decipher the philosophical contents of our worldviews and as such we cannot convincingly show them as African philosophy. Attempts to present them as philosophy, is what led to the misinterpretation and misconstruing of African philosophy to be spiritualistic and thus debased and inferior to the Western kind of philosophy. This kind of philosophy that is forged on Africans first by Tempels, then by Kagame and others tend to portray African philosophy in a negative light as a philosophy that, "divides, discriminates, conceals unduly, creates cognitive barriers and most importantly creates special types of laws and conditions needed to penetrate its claims. Thus, only those in possession of these conditions and laws could obtain knowledge" (Bisong 2014, p. 40). I am African, I do not conceive reality this way. My students from interactions with them do not seem to see reality in this mode. I do not understand the basis on which scholars like Hamminga will characterize vitality and spirituality as authentically African. Hamminga writes concerning African mode of justification of knowledge thus: "from the African point of view, arguments are a sign of weakness, of lack of power and vitality. A good, forceful truth does not need arguments" (2005, p. 61). Africans are not different in mentality from other human beings and thus cannot possibly think differently. Influences on them may be different but their mental faculties are the same like that of every other human being. Since their mental faculties are the same, one cannot think transcendently and the other empirically only. There is a moment of oscillation, in thinking transcendently and empirically in all human beings, Africans are no exceptions. Thinking differently is an appellation that is due to the wrong interpretation of our worldviews – the failure to separate the philosophical, religious and mythical contents in the worldviews.

The second set of scholars consists of those who hold the opinion that, for a philosophy to be authentically African, it must be built on the worldviews and beliefs of traditional Africans. These set does not present African worldviews as African

philosophy. They argue that a philosophy must derive from the traditional African worldviews for it to merit the title, African philosophy. One of such philosophers is Okere. He believes that African philosophy could only be given birth to through a hermeneutic of African culture. This implies that any philosophy that is not so built is not African. It further implies that if I reflect on a concept that is not culturally antecedent in Africa, my philosophy is not African and I am invariably not an African philosopher. Okere writes:

One should go back to one's own roots and sources. The sources, the headwater region of creative and original thought, are one's own culture. No familiarity with the foreign and borrowed element can suffice for the articulation of something so deep-felt as one's understanding of one's own world. It is not a question of fruitlessness when one undertakes to think foreign to oneself. It is also a moral question of being honest and true to one's self (1983, p. 114-115)

It means to be counted as an African philosopher, one must give up the temptation of generating ideas that are totally alien to traditional Africans. This is the conception of African philosophy that I seek to deconstruct. Hountondji succinctly highlights on the danger of this conception thus:

To require one to be content with reaffirming the beliefs of their people or social group is exactly the same as prohibiting them from thinking freely and condemning them in the long term to intellectual asphyxia. Deep down such a demand, lies radical skepticism and stubborn relativism, and perhaps worse still, behind the apparently anti-racial and anti-Eurocentric stance lurks a secret contempt for non-western thinkers, who are thus subtly excluded from any claim to universality – that is to say to truth – and denied the right to any authentic research, simply being expected to display the peculiarities of their culture in philosophical form (Hountondji, 1983, pp. 128-129).

In a similar rebuking manner, Osuagwu writes:

We cannot be doing African philosophy only when we are focused on and using our pure indigenous African cultural and natural matters. An African can, legitimately, use philosophically interesting cultural and natural issues of other peoples to do his African philosophy. Just as much as it is legitimate for an African to philosophize on the cultural and natural issue of other peoples and places, so too is it equally legitimate for European or Asian philosopher to make African culture and nature issue of his philosophical endeavor. (Osuagwu 2005, p. 63).

African philosophy need not be built on the traditional worldviews and cultures of Africa. To do so will be to plunge African philosophy into relativism. Okere clearly assent to the inevitability of this in his assertion that

The possibility of an African philosophy raises the question of the validity and universality of truth and the communicability of cultures and their respective philosophies. Is truth relative? It seems this conclusion is inevitable. The historicity and relativity of truth – and this always means truth as we can and do attain it – is one of the main insights of the hermeneutical

revolution in philosophy and it is in it that this thesis hangs (Okere, 1983, p. 124).

It is in attempt to build African philosophy basically on the worldviews of Africans that most works in Africa have tended to carry the ‘we-them’ mentality. “They paint an idyllic image of an African and contrast it with that of the Westerner. This is the spirit that drives the projecting of communalism as something uniquely African in contrast to the individualism of the West” (Bisong&Shenge, 2019, p. 5). Doing so, will recoil African philosophy into ethnocentrism. Asouzu condemns this vigorously and advises that African philosophy should take the form of “a transcendent complementary ontological inquiry which seeks to grasp reality from the preceding conditions of its comprehensive determinations ... it [should] seeks to transcend our limited horizons as these present themselves to us in our diverse cultural milieus (Ibuanyidanda 2007:10 emphasis mine). An authentic philosophy should seek to transcend artificial boundaries of cultures and worldviews. Failure to do this is to relapse into ethnocentrism, whereby African worldviews and beliefs no matter how defective would be raised as absolutes in total negation of the better views from others. It will present African philosophy as closed and static devoid of dynamism and universality which ought to be the marks of philosophy. To construe philosophy as tied to a particular culture is to make philosophy backward looking, when it should be more forward looking. A more forward looking philosophy can only crop up, if we build on the present. And this present is obviously a mixture or complementarity of views from different regions of the world. An authentic African philosophy ought to devise ways to warped up these divergent and competing views in search of a philosophy for Africa. The past is far away and very obscure. It is with the present that the spirit of African philosophy should be discerned and sieved out. Even if it were possible to retrieve the past, I see no good reason why we should crave for the reenactment of the past. There is invariably no past in Africa that was not shared by some other regions of the world. If other regions are not seeking to retrieve their past, I do not see good reasons why Africans should deliberately want this. There is no past that is uniquely African, such that when we build our philosophy on them, they will constitute a unique African philosophy.

In addition to not being unique to Africans and being murky and obscure, African past is not a past that we should moan so much for. If the past was so glorious, then traditional Africans would have been more developed or at best equal their Western counterparts in terms of development. Based on their level of development before the intrusion of the Whites, it could be inferred that African traditional values, beliefs and cultures do not have the essential ingredients for all round development of the individuals (Bisong 2018, p. 3). I know many people like EvaristusEkweke have argued that African traditions had the potential to lead to development; I do not want to engage in argument with them. Even if, it has the potentials for bringing up a unique kind of development for Africa, it is not possible to retrieve and relive it. The experience of JuliusNyerere is a great lesson to learn from. Attempts to relive traditional beliefs and culture may not fare well in the contemporary societies. To reintegrate these traditions and way of life into contemporary life, could lead to negative effects as Ujamaa did. There is therefore, no need to build a philosophy on the past, the present would provide a firmer ground for the erection of African philosophy.

The third set holds that a philosophy must reflect African unique conception of reality. That is, for a philosophy to be African, it must reflect or employ African logic/method or ontology. This group takes a less radical position. They do not argue that African philosophy must be built on African cultures, traditions and worldviews, rather it should carry the methods or let's say the spirit of traditional African views. Momoh perfectly exemplifies this set of reasoning, when he avers, "any work that claims to be an African philosophy, is not an African philosophy, if it is actually not in harmony and congruence with the spirit of Africa, which reality is primarily spiritual" (1993, p. 66).

Chimakonam also exemplifies this view, when he alleges that a work is only African if it employs African logic. Ogbonnaya believes that for a work to be African it must reflect the ontology of traditional Africans. Nnoruka affirms this position by asserting that the procedures African philosophers adopt, remain the greatest challenge. He writes: "The procedure he employs must be such that will make African philosophy truly African. This is possible only when African philosophy is thought through a conceptual framework properly African and adapted to African realities (Nnoruka, 2005, p. 114). This position held by some African philosophers as x-rayed, above overcomes most of the weaknesses of the other two positions, but relapses into the same ethnocentric bias that plague others. In addition to ethnocentrism, it also tends to drag African philosophy into relativism, which is not a character of an authentic philosophy. Maurier commenting on this asserts: "for were we to impose upon these realities a foreign framework, we would be placing on them an iron collar, we would torture them in a Procrustean bed, we would not be able to readily connect reality with the particular savor it has" (Maurier 1984, p. 26)

More so, to assume a different logic for Africa, is to create room for superiority-inferiority divide. It creates room for the question, which of the logics is superior? To insist that an African philosophy must use either the ontology or logic of traditional African is invariably to think this is the best/superior logic or ontology. If it is not the best logic or ontology, what then will be the justification for sticking to it? Do we need to stick to a defective ontology or logic because it is African in order for us to be counted as African philosophers? What if the African logic does not fit well with the subject of my examination, should I twist it to forcefully ensure that it fits in? Would this produce an accurate picture of the reality I am investigating? Would it lead to truth? For truth is arrived at when the right logic is employed. Authentic philosophy to my opinion, should be free of ethnic sentiments. No logical tool is superior to the other, and any one that fits well in a given situation should be employed to achieve ultimate results devoid of ethnic bias. This is possibly what Aristotle mean when he asserts: "it is a mark of an educated man and a proof of his culture that in every subject, he looks for only so much precision as its nature permits. For example, it is absurd to demand logical demonstration from a professional speaker; we might as well accept mere probabilities from a mathematician" (De Interpretatione 2013, p. Ch. IX).

Aristotle seems to be saying that every reality should be investigated differently, which implies that if a different logical tool is needed in a certain investigation, it should be employed. To stick to one logical tool for all investigations is absurd. A philosophy devoid of ethnic bias should see a complementarity of logics as the only sufficient and adequate tool for the investigation of reality. Even if it is agreed that African philosophers

should employ African logic, the question will be, which logic is authentically African and which is Western, Eastern, and Southern. Three-valued logic is believed by many to be African brand of logic. This is the thinking of Winch (1972); Evans-Pritchard (1980); Bello (1993); Sogolo (1993); Ijiomah (1995), Irele (1997); Isaac, (2001), Etuk (2002), Chimakonam (2011 and others. Udo Etuk shows how this work, thus:

If anyone cut another person's palm fruits, then he will pay a fine.

S has cut another person's palm fruits.

But given the two premises, it does not follow that S must pay this fine;

Because the status of the person intervenes.

But S is a grandchild of this community.

Therefore, S will not pay this fine (Etuk, 2002, p. 112)

The African scholars named above, believe three-valued logic, that is “, a logical system in which there are three truth values indicating true, false and some indeterminate third value” (Bisong & Odok, 2013, p. 36) to be the logic that adequately fits into African ontological view of the world and thus is distinctively African. They continue to believe so, even when it is clear that the origin of three-valued logic like two-valued logic is Western. Aristotle is the first to point to the fact that the Western view also uses three-valued logic. In his comments as to the impossibility of determining the value of future contingent events, Aristotle writes:

One of the two propositions in such instances must be true and the other false, but we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must leave the alternative undecided. One may indeed be more likely to be true than the other, but it cannot be either actually true or actually false. It is therefore plain that it is not necessary that of an affirmation and a denial, one should be true and the other false. For in the case of that which exists potentially, but not actually, the rule which applies to that which exists actually does not hold good (De Interpretatione 2013, p. Ch. IX).

Other Western scholars we will not go into in this paper developed three-valued logic to its present form. Three-valued logic is not only developed in the West, it is also being employed there in explanation and exploration of reality. According to Bisong & Odok “three-valued logic is now being employed variously in the West. Quantum mechanics for instance only make sense if looked at from three-valued logic. The integrated circuit technology is built on many-valued logic” (2013, p. 37). I find it perplexing, why some people would think three-valued logic is distinctively African and two-valued logic is distinctively Western. In as much as Africans make judgments, they also employ two-valued logic. For judgment of good or bad etc necessarily follows a two-dimensional logic. Thus,

No logic is distinctively African and no logic is distinctively Western or Eastern. All hold a broad collection of beliefs, such that some could be justified by two-valued logic and some by three-valued and others by four-valued logic et cetera. For Africans to propose three-valued as distinctively African is a function of a divisive and polarising mindset. The Africans, the West and the East all have a moment of oscillation between two-valued and three-valued logic and other logics. The fact that some Africans beliefs could be explained through three-valued logic, does not mean the same logic does

not explain some beliefs of the West, the East and other regions of the world (Bisong & Odok 2013, p. 36).

It is erroneous and a mark of a defective mindset to construe African philosophy as one that follows a three-valued logic. This is why Francis Njoku asks a very pertinent question “does the fact that people are situated mean that they have a different mentality that will yield a different philosophy, other things being equal?” (Njoku, 2002, p. 10). This for him as well as for me is unlikely. All human beings are constituted with the same rational structure, and thus could employ many logics in their explanation of reality. A two-valued logic based philosophy could also be African, so also is a four-valued and one-valued logic. In the same vein, a philosophy must not necessarily reflect the ontology of Africa to qualify as African philosophy. To hold so is to make philosophy relative. If African have a unique ontology, which means the ontology of other regions is different, it implies that a philosophy built on an African ontology would not be generalizable. This is because what applies to a distinct ontology cannot reasonably apply to another ontology. If Africans have a distinct ontology, which Africans are urged to pursue, it invariably means Africans are urged to relativize their philosophy, for the product of such philosophy cannot be generalized to regions with different ontologies. Attempts to do so would lead to what Gilbert Ryle (1962, p. 16) describes as a category mistake. It will be a category mistake because we assume mistakenly that what works for one ontology would work for another. The implication of this, is that philosophy pursued based on one ontological framework will be relative to that framework. This relativism that African philosophy will be plunged into would need be avoided by holding a complementary attitude to the practice of philosophy.

ERECTING A VERITABLE FOUNDATION FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Compared to the West, traditional African philosophers did not leave us with a good ground to erect the foundation for African philosophy. This has made most African philosophers to tend to cling to the worldviews, traditions and cultures as a drowning man would hold on to a straw in attempt to save himself. Unfortunately, a straw would not save a man from being washed away by the tides of the sea, so also would building a philosophy on shaky ground of traditional African worldviews, put the philosophy in danger of crashing down. Our traditional fathers did not bequeath to us a philosophical legacy in the form that Plato and Aristotle gave to the West, but we can bequeath a better foundation for our children. The best ground to lay a solid foundation for African philosophy is not the historical African past. This could at best stand as the historical beginnings of African philosophy, where myth, religion, folklores and philosophy were intermingled. The philosophy done by the contemporary philosophers should serve as a period in the history of Africa where myth, religion and philosophy are separated. For this separation to be fruitful, attempts should be made to avoid erecting philosophy on the traditional worldviews that embody philosophy and nonphilosophy. Philosophy must be made to stand on its own. For this to be accomplished the contemporary realities need to serve as the grounds for building philosophy. The traditional past cannot serve so well because the philosophies behind them is lost, an attempt to sieve them out have always

ended in disagreement. It is safer and better to erect a philosophy on the culture we understand and can explain.

It is true that contemporary Africans cannot boast of a pure culture, making many to think that the philosophy erected on it will not be distinctly African. This fact is also true of traditional African traditions, beliefs and ideologies. There were not peculiar to Africa, most other regions also had eras of communalism. They also had eras where reality was interpreted in terms of the spirit (this is true of the Greeks before Thales). This is an era in Greek history, where myth, magic and religion were employed to explain reality. The early philosophers, earned the name philosophers by “steering away from the prevalent religio-mythological explanation of reality to a rational explanation” (Bisong2014, 21). If building a philosophy on the present view of the world, would make it not to be authentically African, it will also be true that building a philosophy on traditional views would not make it authentically African.

In addition to its charge of inauthenticity, building a philosophy on African traditional beliefs have many other weaknesses as has been argued already. According to Paul Olatubosun “retrieving the past to serve as a foundation for African thought is giving the past more than it can chew to bite. The past tells us only one possibilities, it spurs us to greater heights but never can they be sufficient foundation to contemporary African thought.” (Olatubosun, 2004, p. 70). It is better and safer to erect it on the present experiences of Africans, as this will be in tune with the way of life they are already used to and thus will cause less tension like the Ujamaa catastrophe. In addition to being in tune with the contemporary African culture, erecting African philosophy on the current realities and worldview, would help African philosophy to escape the move towards ethnocentrism and relativism. Its philosophy would have worldwide applicability, since the heterogeneous culture of contemporary Africa share much resemblance with that of other regions of the world. The philosophy that emerge from such a worldview would be universal and thus truly philosophy but at the same time it will be particular and relative. It will be particular because it will emanate from an identifiable human being. It will be relative because the experiences and influences that generate this philosophy would not exactly be the same with that of other regions. It will be universal because it will be applicable to other cultures.

Though, contemporary Africa share many features in common with most other nations, it is wrong to assume that the ingredients that make up these cultures are in the same quantity and quality. African culture though composed of bits of other cultures, is not exactly identical with that of the West or the East. The difference however, is merely that of degree and not of kind. Contemporary African culture is at once unique and similar to other cultures, because of the interplay in degrees of the bits of culture of other parts of the world. This interesting feature of African present reality is what I think philosophers of this age should savour and explore, to give its philosophy a unique touch that they could choose to call African philosophy, without making it lose universal relevance and appeal. Success at raising a philosophy on this more solid ground would provide a better foundation for future Africans to build on and possibly Africanize the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This paper supports the call for Africanizing the African curriculum but believes that African is premature for that. It believes that African must lay a solid foundation first for philosophy and watch it grow before it could successfully Africanize the curriculum. Lack of adequate resource materials that could be adequately termed African philosophy would be a big hindrance to the formation of an African based curriculum for philosophy. Enough materials need be made ready before the curriculum could be Africanized and this will speedily be made possible if the foundation for African philosophy is erected on firmer grounds, which is the contemporary culture. After a well laid out foundation, African philosophy will blossom, that is when we can talk of Africanizing the curriculum.

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