

On the Ontology of African Philosophy

Francis E. Ekanem

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract: Philosophy, a discipline as old as the human faculty of reason has its thrust on the good life for man. It employs the instrumentality of contemplation, reflection, analysis and criticism to arrive at truth. African thinkers tailor their thoughts towards addressing the lacuna in the schemata of things as it affects the general existential lives of her people. African philosophy has its orientation in communalism as contra-distinguished from Western philosophy which is individualistic in outlook. This is also reflected in the African and Western ontology, respectively. The excursus in this research is to show the distinctive features of African thought process and its underlying influence as rooted in her culture and tradition. The work also attempts to highlight the effort put forward by African thinkers which has laid to rest the debate as to the existence of African philosophy.

Key words: Ontology, African, philosophy, communalism, belief and culture

INTRODUCTION

The debate or controversy on whether there is an African philosophy is dead and buried (Uduigwomen, 1995). This is a very strong assertion that requires great evidence not just of talking about African philosophy but doing African philosophy. It is on record that systematic philosophizing started in the Greek city of Miletus in Ionia. Though philosophy is a universal discipline with its methods and approach, the bulk of literature available to us are from the Western World and it is particularly individual's thoughts with a scrupulously critical analysis of the ideas under discussion of various issues (Hullen, 2006).

Africa has a wide array of philosophy richly embedded in her culture and tradition in oral form. Odera Oruka, calls this philosophical sagacity. African philosophers have been labouring to elaborate African abstract beliefs and practices with travails for a long period now. But today that effort has paid off as literatures in vast area of African philosophy abounds.

Western philosophy seem to be the paradigm for doing academic philosophy however comparative philosophy can establish similarities in terms of thought processes of people in different climes. Hence, philosophy is a universal discipline whose quest is to understand life which is common to all humans though with different approach and method. This study is an attempt to harp on the ontology of African philosophy while establishing the fact of the actualization of African philosophy.

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL THINKERS

African philosophy can be said to originally begin with Placide Tempels, a Franciscan missionary from Belgium who lived in the colonial era among the Bantu population of the Congo. His work, *Bantu Philosophy*, constitutes the first intuitive attempt and approach to the reality of African thought (Nkemkia, 1999).

Africans found a new awareness of her personality and worth, once the identity crisis due to colonial rule was over. As free persons a new era and a new horizon opened up in front of them; an age of speculation began. From this moment onwards, philosophy is no longer a means of affirming oneself in front of someone else. It became the art of wisdom, the effort to penetrate the truth on life and a means of giving an important contribution to the universal human thought.

The first African thinkers were formed in Western schools and they specialized within Western thinking. We shall analyze the thoughts of some intellectuals who promoted African culture and in the process did philosophize in the social and political field.

KWAME NKRUMAH'S CONSCIENTISM

Kwame Nkrumah was among the early African heads of state that claimed independence and like everyone else, fought against colonial rule. He was a revolutionary who affirmed that a revolution was necessary to bring a new awareness in an oppressed people of their tradition. This includes cultural values and a new consciousness of their proper identity and personality. Nkrumah (1964) opine that:

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

The philosophy which has to give support to this revolution and which originates from it is what he designate, conscientism which incorporates the humanism of traditional society in this commitment. Nkrumah's conscientism is based on deductions derived from African human conscience traceable to the style of humanism and the communitarian conception of traditional Africa.

LEOPOLD SENGHOR'S NEGRITUDE

The negritude movement gave birth to an ideology elaborated among African intellectuals in Paris around (1933 to 1935). They foster a complex of values found in the authentic African culture and called for a new awareness. Negritude is the whole of the values of civilization, cultural, economic, social and political which characterize the black people, more especially the Negro Africa World. It is essentially instinctive reason which pervades all these values because it is reason of the impressions, reason that is seized. It is expressed in the emotions through an abandonment of self in identification with the object through the myth by images and archetypes of the collective soul, especially by the primordial myth accorded to those of the cosmos. In other terms, the sense of communion, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm are the traits of negritude that researchers find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the Blackman (Ruch and Anyanwu, 1984).

JULIUS NYERERE'S UJAMAA

In Ujamaa, a treatise on African socialism published in April 1962, in English, by Julius Nyerere in TANU Newspaper (the Voice of Tanganyika African National Union Party), one can find the formulation and basis of a typical African socialism. The researchers had in mind the conception of Western socialism and he considered it as being inadequate to cover the needs of an African lifestyle.

When Nyerere was the president of TANU, the party made what was called The Arusha Declaration in February of 1967. Through this declaration, the party expressed the

urgency of defining African socialism in Tanzanian terms and also affirmed the existence of a big difference between Western socialist philosophy and other social doctrines. Ujamaa served as the foundations for an African socialism: socialism made in Tanzania (Nyerere, 1968). These words aptly capture the full import of Ujamaa:

This is exactly what traditional African society succeeded in doing; both the rich and the poor individuals were completely secured in African society. Natural catastrophe brought famine but it brought famine to everybody poor or rich. Nobody starved, either of food or of human dignity, because he lacked personal wealth; he could depend on the wealth possessed by the community of which he was a member. This is socialism (Nyerere, 1968)

NNAMADI AZIKIWE'S NEO-WELFARISM

Azikiwe's Neo-Welfarism is an economic system which blends the essential elements of capitalism, socialism and welfarism in a socio-economic matrix (Igwe, 1992). Furthermore, eclectic pragmatism, a coinage of the idea of azikiwe by Igwe (1992) suggests the most suitable method for dealing with multi-faceted reality, especially in economic and political matters. This method attempts to harmonize apparently opposing views not by resolving the contradictions but by selecting and blending what is useful and practicable in each for the purpose of attaining the desired goals.

Hence, eclectic pragmatism accommodates the fact that man is selfish and altruistic, rational and irrational, individualistic and communalistic all of which can be adequately balanced to achieve a harmonious social life. This method is also the best method of dealing with certain persistent problems which includes tribalism, frequent coup d' etat, religious strivings and the recurrent question of an effective developmental ideology which is common place in Africa (Igwe, 1992).

THE FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Is there any philosophy that can originally be attributed to Africans? Are there contributions in terms of knowledge advancement whose origin can be traced to Africa? This is what African philosophers have been grappling with of late since emphasis have shifted from mere apologetics to the nature, scope, substance, content and methodology of African philosophy (Azenabor, 2010).

By African philosophy, we mean the critical reflection and the asking of fundamental questions, the seeking of meaning and understanding within the bias and context of African cultural setting and experience. In other words, African philosophy is the reflection of an African or non-African on how Africans make sense of their existence and the world in which they live, based on the African cultural experience and reality. The nature of African philosophy therefore, refers to the features in philosophy that give it its peculiar African character. This is found in the African philosophical tradition; for philosophy is rooted in a tradition (Azenabor, 2010).

The philosophy of a people is always a tradition and a tradition must pre-suppose a certain minimum of organic relationships among (at least some of) its elements (Masalo, 1994). Any philosophy or thought system that is not part of its tradition does not constitute experience (Masalo, 1994). The nature of a philosophy is the tradition of that philosophy and the tradition of a philosophy is the spirit and style of that philosophy, the persistent and dominant orientation of a people's philosophy which can be seen as primary.

Philosophical tradition must be determined in line with a predominant theme such as British philosophy which is seen as empiricism, American philosophy which is seen as pragmatism, French as rationalism, German as idealism, Russian as materialism, Indian as spiritualism and Chinese as humanism (Momoh, 1989). A tradition of philosophy is identifiable in terms of innermost essence of the intellectual pulse within which it is produced (Stace, 1957).

The development of knowledge anywhere is cultural and historical. It is determined to a great extent, by the social context (Hullen, 2006). And understanding comes by from interaction with the environment. Even though philosophers propound their philosophies in their individual capacities they do not diverge from the prevailing experience, the philosophical spirit of their age, the challenges of their time and the influences of their culture. For example, Dewey's philosophy is in conformity with the spirit of American-philosophy of the time which was pragmatism. Hume's philosophy was in line with the prevailing philosophy in Britain which was empiricism. Descartes' was in conformity with French philosophy which was rationalism. Hegel's philosophy was within the spirit of German philosophy which is idealism. So, the nature of African philosophical tradition is in its innermost essence which is rooted in and nourished within the context of African culture, history and experience and this is more metaphysical and spiritual.

It is at this juncture that African philosophy is parallel to Western philosophy. Recourse to Hume's

stands on metaphysics and the logical positivists who see metaphysical speculation as useless and an exercise in futility. The spirit of science forbade metaphysical speculation as its objects cannot be proven empirically. Reality is here reduced to only what is given to us in sense experience. Thus, from this Western paradigm, African philosophy may not be said to be philosophy. This is one area we would have a problem if we shold on to Western philosophy as a strict rule for ascertaining truth because Western ontology is different from that of Africans; this must be borne in mind.

However, the question we should pose here is that does this metaphysical and spiritual posture of African philosophy have any substance which can be practical and useful to us in solving the existential challenges? This metaphysical and spiritual under-pinning of African philosophy is more of co-existence with nature rather than conquest, more of collectivism, rather than individualism, more of holism, rather than atomism, more of synthesis, rather than analysis (Momoh, 1989).

The nature of African philosophy can be found in its basic assumptions about reality and the theoretical schemes or explanatory models which are epistemological and metaphysical and religious in nature. Within this framework, spirit, life force or vital forces are the primary axioms. Here, the material has meaning and purpose only through the lenses of the spiritual. The nature of reality is charged with life forces that is everything is alive. Even nothing becomes something, especially when we utilize the right spiritual apparatus (Azenabor, 2010). This is the crust of the nature of African philosophy. Every other philosophizing is either borrowing from the Western philosophy or the philosophy of other climes. What force is to the Africans is what being is to the West. Tempels (1969) tells us about the nature of life forces in his Bantu Philosophy. Life forces are in hierarchical order. The highest of the force is God, followed by divinities, ancestors, spirits, man, animals, plants and minerals. Superior or higher forces can directly influence the lower while the lower can only indirectly influence the higher or superior. Nothing moves without affecting another, there is a constant interaction; no isolation in the universe of life forces. This lay credence to holism rather than atomism and it is with this holistic mode of thought that researchers are able to establish a synthesis of human knowledge.

Every philosophy also has an existential base. The ideal of life in Asian philosophy is to flee from illusions of life process in this world. That of Western philosophy is to conquer the world and nature but that of African philosophy is to co-exist with nature and the world. A deep-seated need exists in the mind of the African; the

need to feel at home in the universe. Consequently, existence in relation, being for self and others, sum up the African conception of reality.

Another crucial factor which defines the nature of African philosophy is when the philosophy is applied to the conceptual problem (s) of the African life. The other characteristic of African philosophy which marks it off from Western philosophy is the drawing from a common pool; the African traditional past. This gives us understanding about God, mind-body, causality and so forth within an African cultural setting.

ORAL TRADITION AS SOURCES OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

African has not been as privilege as the West whose written tradition dates back to centuries. At best what we have are oral tradition in the form of language and proverbs. And this is one major source of rudimentary materials of African philosophy. Beginning from the sixties, the literatures busted forth with enough rich and authentic materials for doing African philosophy. Some of such literatures are *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *The Concubine* and *Weep not Child* amongst others.

In these works, the cultures and belief systems comes alive and these are the materials for African philosophy because every philosophy in the strict sense must develop from a culture. According to Wiredu (1980), traditional philosophy is simply a stock of originally unwritten proverbs maxims and usages. For him, African philosophy should be based on current African experiences.

Language as an aspect of culture incorporates proverbs. Proverbs are seen as the oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs are the most important aspect of language and it is proverbs that researchers find the remains of the oldest forms of African religions and philosophical wisdom thus proverbs are the defining features of African languages. Even Greek philosophy can be said to have developed from its cultural background. Proverbs for example were used extensively in building philosophical theory and sustaining philosophical claims. Proverbs were used as litmus test for many philosophical assertions especially in politics and the authenticity of philosophical claims.

There is no better source to find a vast array of proverbs like in African literature. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe for example, showcases >300 proverbs extracted from the Igbo cosmogony. Same thing is applicable in *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, *Weep not Child* by Ngugi Wa Thiongo to mention a few.

When an African writes, he does that from the perspective of his culture, chronicling the socio-economic religious or political reality of his time. African literature is so rich in that it articulates the culture, tradition and belief system of her people giving the needed materials and basis for questioning the fundamental beliefs and assumptions. Embedded in the literatures is a vast wealth of proverbs that has far reaching philosophical implications. Thus, language and literature forms an impetus from where African philosophy can be sourced from.

OF THEORIES AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

The problem of methodology in African philosophy has resorted into various theories and approaches. Man as a rational being exercises his rationality by erecting structures and forming concepts to explain, understand and unravel reality and the nature of the world. The process of accomplishing these tasks in philosophical parlance is a body of organized and systematized knowledge known as theories. The formation of a theory for solving problems and resolving questions is very much a task, common-place in philosophy. Philosophical theories therefore, could have epistemological, metaphysical, ethical or even logical undertones. A theory is therefore, a formal set of ideas that are intended to explain why something happens or exists.

The theories in modern African philosophy emanate because questions have been raised as to the form, content and methodology of African philosophy. Consequently, scholars who are more interested in not just talking about African philosophy but in actually doing it, decided to address themselves to specific philosophical issues while formulating theories to show the existence and the Africanness of African philosophy.

Scholars of course, propound their theories against the backdrop of their schools of thought and perspective in philosophy and the metaphysical principle which sets the mood of their philosophical reflection. The results of these have left us with a wide array of philosophies that can be truly called African. Some of such bold theorising are: Innocent Onyewuenyi's Theory of the African Origin of Greek Philosophy; Placide Tempels Theory of Life-Forces, John Mbiti's Theory of African Concept of Time, K.C. Anyanwu's Theory of Cultural and Epistemological Relativism, J.O. Sodipo's Theory of Mystical Causality, Kwasi Wiredu's African Concept of Truth, S.B. Oluwole's African Humanism, Udo Etuk's Status Factor of an African Logic, C.S. Momoh's Moralism, Kwasi Wiredu's Ethical Consensus and G.E. Azenabor's Holistic Ontology.

Different theories of doing African philosophies will deepened the spirit of philosophy thereby giving us alternatives to tackling our myriads of problems. If this principle is applied to those knotty, gray areas of the challenges as a people, it will bring us out of the woods while fast tracking development. Hountondji in Masalo (1994) avers that:

If the development of philosophy is in some way a function of the development of the sciences then African philosophy cannot be separated from African science and we shall never have in Africa a philosophy in the strict sense, a philosophy articulated as an endless search until we have produced, in Africa a history of science, a history of the sciences. Philosophical practice that peculiar form of theoretical practice that is called philosophy, is inseparable from that other form of theoretical practice called science

This means that both philosophy and science are developmental categories. The major point of emphasis here is that if we go back to the culture and tradition we would discover a method, a way of doing things that have helped us as a people in relating with the environment even before the advent of scholarship. It is expedient we begin to study this contents and forms and see if we can extract something that can be beneficial to us and to humanity at large.

CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to establish the point that philosophy is a rational, critical and logical discipline that is universally common to man. It is a reflective and contemplative activity from whence we arrive at truth that helps us to master the environment and triumph over the challenges. It further shows that African philosophy has move from the stage of potentiality to the stage of actuality with several workable approaches by Africans and non-African scholars alike doing African philosophy proper and making bold conjectures and theorizing. The approach the great leaders of blessed memories like Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Azikiwe used in order to

overcome the challenges faced in their days are worthwhile. There is no better time to start doing African philosophy than now because the challenges we face as a people in every strata of the individual and collective lives has reached an alarming level. We must thus, fashion out ways of survival and coming out of this conundrum, through making bold conjectures and theorizing from the background of the ontology.

REFERENCES

- Azenabor, G., 2010. Modern Theories in African Philosophy. Byolah Publishers, Lagos, Nigeria.
- Hullen, B., 2006. African Philosophy: The Analytic Approach. Africa World Press, New Jersey, ISBN-13: 9781592213702, Pages: 361.
- Igwe, A., 1992. Zik: The Philosopher of our Time. Fourth Dimension Publishers, Enugu, Nigeria.
- Masalo, D.A., 1994. African Philosophy in Search of Identity. Indiana University Press, Bloomington ndiana, USA., ISBN-13: 9780253207753, Pages: 301.
- Momoh, C.S., 1989. The Substance of African Philosophy. 2nd Edn., African Philosophy Projects Publications, Auch, Nigeria, ISBN-13: 9789782877000, Pages: 390.
- Nkemkia, M.N., 1999. African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking. Paulines Publication, Nairobi, ISBN-13: 9789966214515, Pages: 239.
- Nkrumah, K., 1964. Conscientism. Panaf Books, London, UK.
- Nyerere, J.K., 1968. Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism. Oxford University Press, London, UK.
- Ruch, E. and K.C. Anyanwu, 1984. African Philosophy. Catholic Book Agency, Rome, Italy.
- Stace, W.T., 1957. The place of philosophy in human culture. *Philosophy*, 12: 302-316.
- Tempels, P., 1969. Bantu Philosophy. Presence Africaine, Paris, Pages: 190.
- Uduigwomen, A.F., 1995. Philosophy and the Place of African Philosophy. In: Footmarks on African Philosophy, Uduigwomen, A.F. (Ed.). Obaroh and Ogbinaka, Lagos, Nigeria.
- Wiredu, K., 1980. Philosophy and An African Culture. Cambridge University Press, London, ISBN-13: 9780521296472, Pages: 256.