THE PRACTICE OF PHILOSOPHY IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Introduction

In this paper, I address myself to the problems plaguing the practice of philosophy in Africa, at least at the academic or professional level. Since its inception as a fully fledged discipline, African Philosophy is steeped in controversies. Controversies concern its nature, method as well as contents. But more important is the question as to who are the practitioners and audience. I have identified three problems which confront African Philosophy today with regard to the above.

The first challenge is the challenge of imperialism in African Philosophy where the west not only invented the discipline but also philosophized on behalf of Africans. This has been aptly put by Masolo when he claims that Western discourse on Africa and the African response has largely determined the course of African Philosophy.

The second challenge is that of audience of African Philosophy. My analysis and observation seem to lead me to the conclusion that western missionaries and anthropologists’s invention of Africa and the subsequent discourse on the same was never meant for Africans but Europeans. This leaves Africans as mere objects of knowledge, never participants in the process of producing the same. Little wonder then that it was very simple for a European centered epistemology to be used in analysing African reality.

The third challenge is that of culture. That African philosophers and commentators on African worldview concentrated on addressing an audience that was foreign (European) as a way of correcting the situation without establishing a critical culture of debate in Africa, one that could question the truths in African Philosophy. This has made African Philosophy seem to be irrelevant to African culture.

The paper concludes by proposing a solution, the prospects available in African Philosophy. African Philosophers should concentrate on the critical and analytical skills that seek to logically evaluate the elements of African culture. This will propel African Philosophical literature to a level where it will be discursive about man, nature and God, a kind of constant debate that evaluates old truth while allowing new truth to evolve.

Philosophy in Africa

By African Philosophy is meant second order discourse that critically analyses the elements of African culture within the framework of the method, style and language generally accepted as philosophical.¹ This would imply that philosophy is related to culture. However, this relating of philosophy to culture becomes problematic in the case of African philosophy. Whereas one would easily argue that Philosophy is the love of wisdom, it is not easy to hold indisputably that African Philosophy is African wisdom. Debate abounds on exactly how African Philosophy should be defined.²
D. A. Masolo has observed that the “birth of the debate on African philosophy is historically associated with two related happenings: Western discourse on Africa, and the African response to it.” This may be an indirect way of saying that the West has all along directed the nature and course of philosophical discourse in Africa. It would follow that in a most profound sense, from its inception, the question of African Philosophy has been tied to the existence and nature of Western philosophy.

A casual look at the history of African philosophy reveals two important phenomena. One, that early missionaries and anthropologists who pioneered debate in this field addressed a foreign audience, Western, trying to explain the strange nature of African modes of thought. Their aim was to describe the differences in thought patterns between Africa and the West. The second phenomenon was that the first generation of African philosophers either followed suit trying to identify and describe these differences, or simply reacted by asserting one thing or the other about African thought, thus, reacting to and/or addressing the same foreign Western audience in a bid to persuade them to change their views of the African.

In a way, then, Western Philosophical discourse has charted the way for African philosophical discourse. Hountondji points out:

The history of our philosophy since then has been largely the history of our succeeding interpretations of this collective ‘philosophy’, this world view which was assumed to be pre-determined and to underpin all our traditions and behavior, and which both western and African analysts must now seek to unravel (emphasis mine).

Of course, Hountondji was specifically referring to ethno-philosophy, one of the western created ways of interpreting African philosophy. But, he also has something to say about the general misconception in African philosophy. He says:

Most African philosophers have misunderstood themselves. While they were actually creating new philosophies, they thought they were merely reproducing those which already existed. While they were reproducing, they thought they were simply recounting. Commendable modesty, no doubt, but also betrayal since the philosopher's self denial in the face of his own discourse was the inevitable consequence of a projection which made him arbitrarily ascribe to his people his own theoretical choices and ideological options.

Western imperialism in Africa in which Africa was colonized did not only mean physical occupation of Africa by Europeans, but, that Europe was exporting to Africa some superior culture which was to replace African culture. This gave rise to the most serious challenge that African philosophy has had to grapple with, that while remaining philosophically relevant to African culture that was presumed not there, African philosophy had to struggle to get its place in the world philosophical market. Remember in the minds of early European missionaries and anthropologists, there was no African culture worth talking about. The West had not only invented the idea of a primitive Africa, but also the techniques for her rehabilitation. Thus, the first obstacle that confronted African philosophy was that of philosophical imperialism. Here, the West did not just invent African philosophy but also philosophized on behalf of Africa.
Tempels and the Mission to Civilize

It may become necessary to mention Fr. Placide Franz Tempels' pioneering work, Bantu Philosophy, which aimed “to seek, discover a logical system of human thought as the ultimate foundation of any logical and universal system of human behaviour.” Who were charged with this task? “All those who were called upon to live among the native people. The colonials …those who hold administrative or judiciary office among the African people.” But more importantly, it concerned all those whose mission was to civilize, educate, and raise the Africans, it concerned all colonizers with good will” (emphasis mine). These Europeans of good will were to understand African culture and thought system and “trace out the elements of this thought, to classify them according to the ordered systems and intellectual disciplines of the Western world.” In the face of this, African systems of thought were to be ordered and patterned along known Western disciplines. This classification was to be done by sympathetic Europeans with good will who had answered the call of coming to Africa to civilize the primitive race.

In reality, early discourse on African philosophy was an exchange between missionaries and anthropologists in Africa and their counterparts in Metropolitan European cities. Africans needed sympathy! Therefore, an African philosophy or thought system had to be presented by Europeans emotionally sympathetic to the African cause. African thought system was typified as statically traditional, ready to be compared with Western Science. The former was a closed system resistant to criticism and change, while the latter allowed criticism and is dynamic. The latter presents alternatives, the former is a fixed way of thinking. The task facing African philosophers was to lend credence to this faulty description.

A Primitive Africa

At this point in the history of African philosophy, two distinct systems of thought were mapped out, a civilized West and a primitive Africa. The civilized West was supposed to philosophize on behalf of the primitive Africa. African philosophy was an unconscious philosophy and someone else had to extract it for them (Africans). This body of knowledge became known as ethno-philosophy, well known among readers in African philosophy today.

This brings us to the second challenge. That of audience. Ethno-philosophy sparked off a great debate. Daggers were drawn between defenders and opponents of ethno-philosophy. We now realize that the decades of the 60s, 70s, and 80s can be seen as a wasted period in the history of African philosophy. African philosophers concentrated all their effort on criticizing ethno-philosophy. A critique of ethno-philosophy was the “in-thing.” It was fashionable! Yet, while this was going on, Africans were losing ground and opportunities to critically look at the elements of African culture in a bid to create or cultivate a critical and vigorous philosophical culture that could sustain a philosophical discourse. Hence, African philosophers just like the ethno-philosophers continued to address a foreign, European audience.

Instead of Africans addressing the critical question of how and why African culture has failed to undergo revolutions that would usher in a renaissance, they were busy responding to the claims of ethno-philosophy. Perhaps the very nature of African culture is a challenge to the growth of an African philosophy, perhaps not. How, for example, did the Greeks initiate a system of thought that spread and influenced the whole world? Was this dependent on culture in any significant way? The question, which Kwasi Wiredu
Problem of Missionary and Colonialist Thinking

has confronted, requires serious scrutiny and consideration. Wiredu charged that African culture is inherently anachronistic, authoritarian and prone to seeking supernatural explanations to natural events. This shows that even respected African thinkers still feel that something isn’t right with African culture. To the casual observer then, Africans are not drawing upon African standards to explain reality. Even to the respected Wiredu, the lack of the spirit of science in Africa is unfortunate. Summing up this disdain of African cultures, Okot p’ Bitek has exclaimed that in Africa, “it is the tourists’ tastes that matters.” It is easier to use standards foreign to Africa than those that are African, hence, Africans for him have fallen in the trap of a false dichotomy where philosophy and culture are completely different and unrelated to one another. The question that becomes relevant is how to harness African culture to serve African philosophy.

This brings me to the third challenge in African philosophy. That African philosophy has moved to a second level discourse, where philosophical investigations have taken root without the establishment of critical culture that will provide content for this investigation. For example, philosophical discourse is so strong in formal institutions of higher learning, yet the general public cannot immediately relate to its discourse. One reason for this is that there are more Western trained philosophers who merely comment on African philosophy just because they are Africans, but not because they believe in the African cause of philosophy.

The challenge here is to let flourish a well coordinated first level discourse on which philosophy will then critique, seeking to improve and modify these cultural elements to form a history of philosophical thought which will create great and important paradigms within African culture. The presence of these paradigms is what philosophy is all about; critical landmarks in a people’s history of thought.

Anthropological Fogs

In the above discussion the greatest victim in the debate on African philosophy is African culture. Missionaries came to Africa on a civilizing mission, to pacify the ‘tribal’ primitive peoples and prepare them to receive the God of Christianity. They had to understand African culture. Colonial administrators came to Africa to introduce civilized institutions of governance (His or Her Majesty’s territory in Africa) and African land suddenly became Crown land. Africa had been turned into Crown land without crowns. These missionaries and colonial administrators needed to understand African tribal chiefs, replace spears and shields with guns and the helmet. But they failed to replace African thinking with European thinking. The former requires understanding African culture. The latter demands replacing African culture. When missionaries got tired of the tropical sun, and Africa became independent a new discipline continued the former work under a different guise: Anthropology, to study the primitive communities. The work that missionaries (many of whom had no formal training) did in an earlier time was now taken over by those who had formal studies in scholarship. Africa had again fallen victim of anthropological studies.

In his book, Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy, Odera Oruka identifies four trends which to date characterise discussions in African philosophy. These he named as: Ethno-philosophy. Professional African philosophy, Sage philosophy and Nationalistic-Ideological
philosophy. Odera's emphasis was actually on Sage Philosophy which he defines as a way of thinking that fluctuates between common wisdom and didactic wisdom. The project may have been noble. A number of people have contributed too to its growth, notably, Antony Oseghare, F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo, Oriare Nyarwath and Patrick Dikirr, to mention but a few.

In the development of Sage Philosophy methodology over the course of the last ten years, some have suggested that there should be a move, away from “Sage philosophy,” as such, to “philosophic sagacity.” The previous method was accused of resurrecting the skeletons of ethno-philosophy which had anthropological undertones. It has been observed that Sage Philosophy relies heavily on the community to philosophise. Some have questioned this and likened it to the reliance on community by ethnosophilosophers. Perhaps, the parallel is clearer in the product. I agree with several critics who claim that the product of the Sage Philosophy interview is a synthesis of the trained philosopher and not the systematic and rational ideas of the sage. Likewise, Tempels', “vital force” and Mbiti’s “African concept of time” are their ideas as trained thinkers and analysts capable of categorizing reality, and not the views of some amorphous group of Africans.

The new emphasis on “philosophic sagacity” concentrates on didactic thinking. This is as it should be. Revising existing and possible theories in African philosophy will make the corpus of African philosophy grow. The point we are trying to make here is that, as scholars and students of philosophy in Africa, we have a duty to participate in scholarly sophistication. The duty of the philosopher in Africa is to create new horizons for the development of African philosophical thought. The legitimate point is that through this sophistication, new knowledge is being created.

F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo has discerned three trends in African philosophy, a reduction of H. Odera Oruka’s four trends in African philosophy. He identifies these as:

1) Epistemic;  
2) Sage Philosophy proper; and  
3) Nationalistic ideological.

The first is concerned with the generation of knowledge, the nature of knowledge creation and validation. The trend seeks to locate its axis in Africa’s cultural dynamics, both for traditional and contemporary Africa. The second is rooted in traditional African thinking, therefore seeks to portray African wisdom. The third represents the thoughts of African political theorists. The thoughts of Nyerere, Kenyatta, Oginga Odinga, Nelson Mandela among others all fit here. This trend seeks to serve a political purpose, the formulation and articulation of social and political theories that are relevant to Africa.

In Ochieng'-Odhiambo's views it is the second strand that has more affinity with ethno-philosophy, especially in its methodological set up. For one, it is community or ethnic based and as in the case of ethno-philosophy individual ideas can easily be touted as representing a community's thought yet communities do not think and therefore cannot philosophize. It is the individual who philosophizes.

It is at this point that new controversies seem to set in. Today, there is a view gaining prominence that through Sage Philosophy, the unfinished work of collecting material on 'tribal' cultures in Africa by Western scholars will this time...
be accomplished. This is an observation that arises from the interest Sage Philosophy has created among some Western researchers who happily present it as authentic African philosophy. I am aware of how much heat this claim can and has generated. My position is that some works by Western and even African scholars on Africa could easily qualify as very good data for philosophical discussion. Clearly the task of philosophy is not to collect tribal data (cultural) and present the same, but to deal in and analyse concepts and ideas that relate to particular data and reality from a community. This has to be done with a lot of objective considerations. Today, many works on African philosophy are littered with questions such as burial rites, transition rites, what is and/or is not taboo in what community, what does or/and does not constitute wisdom among what community etc. My humble observation is that matters of death, rites etc and community’s values such as wisdom are concepts that transcend cultural barriers and can be addressed as such at a level universal without necessarily tying them down to a particular community. Though I want to believe strongly that culture plays an important role in the cognition process, the emphasis on culture/community in this case is being overstated. The picture that one remains with is that of a unique way of looking at the world that is specific to not just Africans but the particular tribe/ethnic group in question.

Even though Odera Oruka may have erred in conceiving the methodology of Sage Philosophy, at least he addressed ideas and principles. Centrally, I can mention “equality,” “God,” “rationality” conception of the “universe” among others. Some latter day Sage Philosophers may seem in a subtle way to be off the mark by their insistence on the concrete. Remember, wherever philosophy exists, it does not exist simply as culture, but as an offshoot of culture, which is a historical event, a milestone in peoples’ thoughts.

During the course of discussion at a conference in December 1999, on commemorating Odera Oruka’s death four years earlier, Dr. F. Ochieng’-Odhiambo raised some reservations as to whether or not philosophic sagacity should be open to western researchers. In his remarks, he was expressing the concern that perhaps such researchers should specialize in the anthropology of African philosophy, but not claim to be doing African philosophy per se. The views these Western researchers present, he observed, are more anthropological than philosophical. The reasoning on which Ochieng’-Odhiambo’s concerns hinge is the very real danger of Western researchers misrepresenting African culture once more, given the history which I have described earlier in this paper. Whether or not this was a true and valid observation, it is not quite clear whether African philosophy needs Western anthropology, since Western researchers, even if they live among Africans for many years, may still misrepresent African ideas. While I am convinced that African philosophy does not need Western theologians, it remains to be seen whether African philosophy can benefit from the resources of Western anthropologists.

Conclusion: Prospects in African Philosophy

One African philosopher, Paulin Hountondji has presented philosophy as history, not a system. Anthropology restricts itself to the study of the unchanging elements of a system. Philosophy devotes itself to understanding the dynamics of a system and unfolding new truths. Some traditional Africa has been presented as the archetype, prototype, - that which represents thinking
the African way! For L.S. Senghor reason is white while emotion is black. It was, it is, and forever it shall be! In Hountondji’s theory, the contents of African philosophy are to be provided by African culture, a dynamic culture that is constantly evolving. The method is to consider the essence of this culture, its conditions and possibilities of existence as well as its general articulation of philosophy as a theoretical activity that eschews mere empirical data devoid of any significance.

It is with this in mind that one can proudly proclaim that the future of African philosophy is taking shape today. With the realization of the demands for logic and criticism, many Africans scholars are abandoning the authority of the West, discarding Western anthropological fogs and looking straight in the eyes of African philosophy. This is a philosophy that relies on the dialectical process of development, in which any new truth is always better than the previous. By use of this method, African philosophy will become critical and analytical, constantly reflecting on reality, its conditions and possibilities of existence, be it in politics, economics, medicine or religion. African philosophy will have moved out of the ‘closed system’ structure, where it has truths that are general for all in the system. It will have created a history of a debate, one that is carried out within generations and which does not end with the end of the generation. It is continuous history. More important is the fact that the thinkers in each generation are totally responsible for whatever they say and do. They take part in the unfolding and discovery of truth and are called upon from time to time to attest to its validity as well as their truth claims.

This is the future of African philosophy, a philosophy that does not have absolute truth, and in which the search for truth is an endless exercise in which ideas are affirmed and refuted, where evidence is subjected to different validating categories in which a new truth is always arrived at and in which the present truth is always of higher validity than the preceding. The search for truth in African philosophy becomes an infinite exercise, an open-ended process.

In conclusion, it is important to observe that the development of ideas is not a process that is without challenges. The challenges facing African philosophy are indicators to its coming of age. Many practitioners in this field are happy to note the level that discourse has reached thus far. New frontiers are being sighted and giving rise to new challenges. In a way then, one can argue that indeed the old challenges have provided the framework for African philosophy today. Whatever else one thinks African philosophy is, irreducibly, it must operate at the second level discourse, transcend raw data, and seek to be rigorous. It must ask questions about questions and seek reasons behind reasons.
Notes and References

1. This work recognizes and appreciates the difficulty involved in defining philosophy. Whereas it is commonly agreed and accepted that philosophers talk about reality in a certain way unique to the discipline, many philosophers may openly disagree on the definition of the discipline. It becomes then easier to talk about things that are philosophical but fail to offer a comprehensive definition of the same. This paper is sympathetic to this position. However, due to the unending controversy over the meaning and nature of African philosophy, it becomes imperative that we begin somewhere. This definition seeks to look at African philosophy in relation to African culture, the former being a critical mirror to the latter.


15. This was the general assumption among ethno-philosophers, that there are two distinct systems of thought, a powerful and conquering Europe and inferior and subjective Africa.


17. The author is aware of the existence of literature that denies this fact, that, the Greeks are the authors of Western philosophy and civilization. The theory known as the stolen legacy is advanced among others: George James, (1954) *The Stolen Legacy* New York: Philosophical Library. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, Vol. 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient