

“Ethnophilosophy” Redefined?

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Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.2 No.1, June 2010, pp.73-85

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Abstract

The meaning of the term “ethnophilosophy” has evolved in both a significant and controversial variety of ways since it was first introduced by Paulin Hountondji in 1970. It was first challenged by the Kenyan philosopher, H. Odera Oruka, as based upon Hountondji’s unfair appreciation of Africa’s indigenous cultural heritage. Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo, using a form of analytic philosophy as foundational, thereafter argued that Yoruba ordinary language discourse also served to undermine Hountondji’s critique. The later work of the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, and the Kenyan D. A. Masolo have further legitimized the epistemological status of elements of African

culture that once would have been labeled as of no genuine philosophical significance because they were ‘ethnophilosophical’ in character. The end result of this debate seems to be that both the form and content of philosophy in culture generally must be relativized. The most significant consequence of this would be that African and non-Western philosophy generally would finally be culturally liberated from the oppressive influence, indeed dominance, of what has conventionally come to be known as ‘mainstream’ (Western) philosophy.

Introduction

The term “ethnophilosophy” has had its most significant influence in the area of African philosophy. It is a curious word, in that its meaning over the past decades has varied from originally being a term of abuse, virtually an invective, to now a normative term that could in principle be applied to what is labeled “philosophy” in any culture. The present paper traces some of the key points in this transformation.

Origins

The term “ethnophilosophy” appeared in a most dramatic fashion in 1970 in an essay published by Paulin Hountondji, a philosopher from the Republic of Benin, entitled “Comments on Contemporary African Philosophy”. Hountondji used the term to both chastise and categorize the work of a number of Africanists who were some of the first to link the word “philosophy” to the cultures of Africa in their published works (Tempels 1959; Griaule 1965; Mbiti 1969). He objected to the way these scholars linked the word “philosophy” to the African intellectual heritage because they implicitly observed a double-standard regarding its meaning, a double-standard that was demeaning to the intellectual integrity of Africa generally:

This Belgian missionary’s *Bantu Philosophy* still passes today, in the eyes of some, for a classic of “African philosophy”. In fact, it is an ethnological work with philosophical pretensions, or more simply, if I may coin the word, a work of ‘ethnophilosophy’ . . .

Indeed, *Bantu Philosophy* did open the floodgates to a deluge of essays which aimed to reconstruct a particular *Weltanschauung*, a specific world-view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and, moreover, *philosophical*, through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs and institutions - in short, various data - concerning the cultural life of African peoples.

Africans are, as usual, excluded from the discussion, and Bantu philosophy is a mere pretext for learned disquisitions among Europeans. The black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse (Hountondji 1970, 122).

For Hountondji, some of the distinctive characteristics of this offensive African ethnophilosophy are as follows: (1) It presents itself as a philosophy of *peoples* rather than of *individuals*. In Africa one is therefore given the impression that there can be no equivalents to a Socrates or a Kant. Ethnophilosophy speaks only of Bantu philosophy, Dogon philosophy, Akan philosophy; as such its scope is collective (or ‘tribal’), of the world-view variety; (2) Its *sources* are in the past, in what is described as authentic, *traditional* African culture of the *pre-colonial* variety, of the Africa prior to ‘modernity’. These can be found in cultural byproducts that were primarily oral: parables, proverbs, poetry, songs, myths - oral literature generally. Obviously, since such sources do not present their ‘philosophies’ in any conventionally discursive or technical format, it is the academic scholars, rather than African peoples, who interpret or analyze them, and thus come up with what they present as the systematized ‘philosophy’ of an entire African culture; (3) From a *methodological* point of view, ethnophilosophy therefore tends to present the beliefs that constitute this ‘philosophy’ as things that do not change, that are somehow timeless. African *traditional* systems of thought are therefore portrayed as placing minimal emphasis upon rigorous argumentation and criticism in a search for truth

that provides for discarding the old and creating the new. Tradition somehow becomes antithetical to innovation. Disputes between academic ethnophilosophers thus arise primarily over how to arrive at a correct *interpretation* of a static body of oral literature and oral traditions.

If this material were to be presented as cultural anthropology or as straightforward ethnography, Hountondji would have no objection to it. But when it is introduced as philosophy, as *African* philosophy, a demeaning and subversive double-standard is introduced that excuses African philosophy from having critical, reflective, rational, scientific, and progressive content in any significantly cross-culturally comparative sense. Hountondji does not hold the perpetrators of this unauthentic African philosophy *personally* responsible for their crimes. In their day in their own intellectual circles they believed they were doing something revolutionary, something genuinely radical and progressive, by daring to link the word “philosophy” directly to African systems of thought.

Contours of the Debate

The responses to Hountondji’s clarion call to stop intellectually crucifying Africa in this manner have been profound. At first, virtually no one wanted to risk being labeled an “ethnophilosopher,” and there is no doubt that his critique led, in part, to the extensive period of soul-searching in the 70’s and early 80’s on the part of African philosophers over how philosophy in the African context should be construed. For the term “ethnophilosophy” had, for many, become a euphemism for false and anti-African African philosophy.

However, an African philosopher who disagreed almost immediately with what he perceived as certain unfounded claims and implications of Hountondji’s critique was H. Odera Oruka of Kenya. Oruka insisted and set out to prove, empirically, that Africa’s cultures had always had their own philosophers, sometimes designated as ‘wise men’ or, by Oruka, as *sages*. Their most distinctive attribute was not that they acted as passive

repositories of rote-memorized, communally orthodox oral literature and traditions, but that they critically analyzed and evaluated the beliefs and practices of their cultures, and frequently disagreed with them on a rational basis. This Orika succeeded in documenting via a series of fieldwork recordings, principally in the Luo-speaking areas of his native Kenya:

Some sages ... attain a philosophic capacity. As sages, they are versed in the beliefs and wisdoms of their people. However, as thinkers, they are rationally critical and they opt for or recommend only those aspects of the beliefs and wisdoms which satisfy their rational scrutiny. In this respect, they are potentially or contemporarily in clash with the die-hard adherents of the prevailing common beliefs. Such sages are also capable of conceiving and rationally recommending ideas offering alternatives to the commonly accepted opinions and practices (Oruka 1990, 44).

Oruka also objected to other elements of Hountondji's argument which suggested that something truly akin to serious philosophical thinking was more likely to develop when Africa's cultures became predominantly literate rather than oral in character. Hountondji had suggested that orality tended to reinforce the status of beliefs as communal, while literacy encouraged more diverse and independent trains of thought. In response, Orika asserted that he (Oruka) had succeeded in identifying individual, non-literate sages who undertook original thinking about such philosophical fundamentals as God, religion, body and mind, virtue, good and evil, truth and falsehood, happiness, life and death, justice, freedom, equality, law, human suffering, punishment, ethnicity and communalism. For Orika, the presence of such sages was more than sufficient ground to prove that this further claim of Hountondji's was also false.

Another response to Hountondji's critique was that formulated by J. Olubi Sodipo and Barry Hallen at the University of Ife, Nigeria. Hallen and Sodipo chose to experiment with the more conventionally academic *ordinary language* approach to analytic philosophy (Austin 1961) in the African context, which focuses upon how people in a particular society *use* certain words in their natural language in everyday life, in order to

precisely monitor their meanings and the criteria that govern their proper usage. But, rather than treating individual concepts in isolation, the point was to place them in their relevant “fields of discourse” - the network of other concepts with which they were interrelated since all were somehow concerned with the same subject-matter. For example, the network of concepts used to rate information as more or less reliable - a topic of obvious relevance to epistemology or the theory of knowledge. In their *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (1986), they set out to demonstrate that the Yoruba-language vocabulary and criteria used to classify information as more or less reliable differed fundamentally from those derived from English-language usage and treated as paradigmatic by (Western) academic philosophical epistemology:

African philosophy, insofar as it may come to deal with the analysis of African languages (or meanings) and evaluation of the beliefs of African cultures, will not even be in a position to begin until such things have been correctly understood and translated in a determinate manner.

For something has happened. A category of information that was supposed to be ‘knowledge’ no longer is. People who were supposed to be ‘witches’ no longer are. From a cross-cultural point-of-view we therefore believe that this book introduces a new dimension into philosophy (not just into *African* philosophy) by demonstrating that the criteria governing the application of certain concepts in radically different language systems may be of genuine philosophical significance (Hallen and Sodipo 1986, 124).

While Oruka consulted Luo ‘wise men’ or sages for their diverse and critical opinions, Hallen and Sodipo chose to target Yoruba (southwestern Nigeria) traditional healers or masters of medicine as reliable sources for the correct usage of a selection of terms that would correspond to, and hopefully make for meaningful comparisons with, the results of similar exercises carried out by orthodox academic philosophers who targeted English-language ordinary, everyday usage.

What is noteworthy about both of these responses to Hountondji’s critique is that neither succeeded, at least initially, in escaping being typed by their peers (as well as Hountondji himself) as further manifestations of ethnophilosophy. Oruka’s research was criticized for being philosophically simplistic and superficial: “For it is one thing to show that there are men capable of philosophical dialogue in Africa and another to show that there are African *philosophers* [my italics] in the sense of those who have engaged in organized systematic reflections on the thoughts, beliefs, and practices of their people” (Bodunrin 1981, 170).

The key point in Bodunrin’s criticism seems to be that being critical of certain beliefs and practices in one’s culture is not enough to qualify anyone in any society as a professional philosopher. In Hallen and Sodipo’s case, the fact that they turned to traditional healers as their preferred sources of information about ordinary language usage has been interpreted as assigning them a status comparable to Oruka’s sages. To a limited extent this analogy is justified, in that the local population did regard them as those members of their community most knowledgeable of the culture generally. But the fact that Hallen and Sodipo - guided by the tenets of *ordinary language philosophy* - were using these men as arbiters for the correct usage of ordinary, everyday, spoken language rather than as sources of rational but idiosyncratic beliefs indicates a very different methodological approach to philosophy in the African context from what Oruka was concerned to develop with the school of thought he eventually designated as *philosophic sagacity*.

Cultural Elements in Contemporary African Philosophy

Many other African philosophers have contributed to what remained a vigorous debate over the proper role of oral traditions in African philosophy (Appiah 1992; Imbo 2002; Masolo 1994; Mudimbe 1988; Serequeberhan 1991; Wiredu 1980). But, beginning roughly from the early 1990’s, a kind of consensus was emerging that, although basing African philosophy *exclusively* on such material might not be the best way to proceed, it most certainly was entitled to a place in the writings of African philosophers who regarded it as in some sense formative or even foundational. In part this was a response to

an increasingly global Western cultural imperialism; and in part it was either an implicit or sometimes explicit acknowledgement that philosophers in the African context felt free to chart their own methodological pathways if necessary so as to accommodate the distinctive nature of Africa's intellectual heritage.

One example of such a refined approach may be found in the work of the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Gyekye. In his *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (1997), Gyekye makes a clear distinction between the methodology he embraces and the results of that methodology when applied to elements of his native Akan culture. The forthright phrasing of the opening statement of this book, meant to summarize its aims, is characteristic:

[1] to stress the fact of the universal character of the intellectual activity called philosophy - of the propensity of some individuals in all human cultures to reflect deeply and critically about fundamental questions of human experience; [2] to point out that philosophy is essentially a cultural phenomenon; [3] to argue the legitimacy or appropriateness of the idea of African philosophy and attempt a definition of (modern) African philosophy; [4] and to demonstrate that there were sages or thinkers in Africa's cultural past who gave reflective attention to matters of human existence at the fundamental level, and, as part of the demonstration, to critically explore the philosophical ideas of the Akan traditional thinkers (of Ghana) (Gyekye 1997, 9).

In his *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (1995), Gyekye's approach to Akan philosophy is significantly conceptual. He identifies terminology in Akan (Twi) discourse that is of philosophical significance. But he also emphasizes the intellectual importance of proverbs in that culture, as analogous to philosophical 'nuggets' that contain highly condensed, judicious insights and wisdom, characteristic of an oral culture that could not have recourse to extensive written tracts. At the same time he rejects, categorically, a purely, technically philosophical, linguistic or conceptualist approach to these materials (Gyekye 1995, 64-65). He does this because

their function, most importantly, is not merely to express or to record wisdom - it is to also serve as *practical* guides to life and human experience.

To research their practical consequences in Akan culture, Gyekye has undertaken what he unabashedly refers to as “fieldwork” - seeking out “sages” in traditional Ghanaian society who can explain this dimension to the concepts and proverbs he finds of interest (in effect, they illuminate the relationship between theory and practice). But rather than remain with sets of random concepts and proverbs and the isolated, individuated meanings or insights they express, Gyekye sets out to weave them together (Gyekye 1995, 16) so that they can then be seen to express more systematic philosophical viewpoints on such topics as God, causality, free-will, and ethics or morality: “By ‘connection to the traditional’, I ... [am] only calling for some analytic attention to be paid *also* to the traditional thought categories, values, outlooks, and so on, as a way of affirming an existing African philosophical tradition, some features or elements of which may be considered worthy of further philosophical pursuit” (Gyekye 1995, p.xi-xii).

Gyekye further maintains that this philosophical substratum of Akan proverbs will turn out in many cases to replicate the proverbial wisdom of other African cultures. This is a thesis he explores in greater detail in a later book, *African Cultural Values* (1996). For example, in a chapter on “Moral Values”, he favorably compares specific humanistic values expressed by the Akan with similar virtues affirmed by the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria in West Africa and the Swahili language and culture of East Africa. Yet at the same time he wants to maintain that it would be a serious error to infer from this that there is such a thing as a *unique* - in the sense that it contains *ideas not found anywhere else* in the world - African (traditional) philosophy shared by all the subcontinent’s peoples (Gyekye 1995, p.xvi). He is equally reluctant to argue that there is a *unique* Akan cultural philosophy. According to him, what one does find in every culture in the world are certain common philosophical concerns and questions to which different answers (destiny versus free-will, for example) in different formats (proverbs versus deductive arguments, for example) have been proposed. The particular combination or interrelation of formats and answers to these concerns or questions found in a particular culture may

somehow be distinctive, but this is of a very different order from their being literally unique to that culture.

Moreover, Gyekye argues that philosophy is a historical as well as cultural enterprise. By this he means that the issues which concerned African philosophers in precolonial or 'traditional' times may not be the same as those that concern African philosophers in modern or contemporary times (Gyekye 1995, p.xi-xii). But this does not imply that there should be no connection between the two. He is prepared to be flexible about what exactly that connection should be. From the standpoint of the history of philosophy in Africa, all viewpoints relevant to 'traditional' philosophy would become important. But since the philosophical priorities and concerns of every society change over time, this would mean that, from the standpoint of modern or contemporary African philosophy, some 'traditional' themes may prove of less interest or relevance than others.

Hountondji has also recently (2002) clarified his position on what he now prefers to term "African traditions of thought". When explicitly assessed from a critical philosophical standpoint, they have every right to constitute an important dimension of African philosophy. But this would constitute a very different approach to their significance than when previously used to promote 'fairy-tale', tribal African philosophies manufactured in an ad hoc manner from random proverbs and myths.

Philosophy as an Aspect of Culture

For a long time in academic philosophy in sub-Saharan Africa, much controversy over the embattled concept of ethnophilosophy appeared to pit indigenous African knowledge systems against philosophy as a specialized category of knowledge. The assumption in much of that literature, and in the work of some diehard critics of the idea of African philosophy to date, is that an idea cannot be both indigenous and philosophical at the same time (Masolo 2003, 26).

The most recent and comparatively ‘radical’ metamorphosis of the meaning of the term “ethnophilosophy” could be seen as a logical consequence of the history already recounted. “Ethnophilosophy” began its conceptual life as an appellation used to stigmatize what was said to be a distinctively dysfunctional form of African philosophy. It was then ‘liberated’, insofar as it was then used to legitimize the inclusion of distinctively African cultural elements in a scholarly discipline that could be considered African-oriented yet philosophically scrupulous as far as professional or academic standards were concerned (Gyekye 1997, 235-241). Most recently it has been elevated to a kind of transcendent status in that, if this kind of approach is acceptable for African philosophy then, in effect, it might also all along have been true of whatever was and is termed “philosophy” in any culture - Western or non-Western.

This would mean that the priorities (the ‘problems’ of philosophy) that distinguish it as a discipline in Western cultures are themselves culturally generated, as are the priorities that distinguish it in Asian cultures, and so forth. If indigenous content is legitimized, the whole of philosophy becomes effectively, respectably ‘tribalized’. In effect, then, every manifestation of even academic philosophy, wherever it occurs, might be said to represent a form of ethnophilosophy. But what the West almost succeeded in doing was persuading the rest of the world that its culturally-generated ‘views’ of philosophy - its ethnophilosophy - should be regarded as culturally universal, as forms of thought and knowledge that all other cultures were compelled to imitate if they wished to be admitted as members of that exclusive club known as ‘academic’ philosophy:

The African ethnophilosophy controversy rekindles and contextualizes the opposition between local and universal perceptions of knowledge. Thus, the emergence of the social-construction-of-knowledge movement (“ethno-knowledge”) clearly erodes its [‘science’ when presented as an exclusively *Western* paradigm of universality, for example] force by questioning its foundational status. In opposition to that which is alien, foreign, or extraneous, the postulation of the adjective indigenous before the characterization or name of any knowledge is to claim for the adjective

the desirability of autochthony (autochthony), self-representation, and self-preservation (Masolo 2003, 25)

Conclusion

The overriding, critical issue for orthodox or establishment (Western) philosophy, of course, will be to what extent the indigenization of knowledge and of philosophy opens the door to relativism. For if knowledge and thereby truth were to become culturally or linguistically defined and thereby potentially relativized, Western orthodoxy would view the discipline of philosophy as entering into the mode of self-destruct. But, as the intellectual fashions associated with multiculturalism and postcolonialism have demonstrated (Mudimbe 1988), and as a Western-generated postmodernism has highlighted, epistemological standards and priorities are also cultural byproducts (Harding 1997). This would make the door referred to above disappear entirely, because now non-Western, indigenous systems of knowledge should have prima facie integrity and thereby equal representation and status in the global intellectual marketplace.

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