

THE DEBATE ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL SURVEY

This is a work in the history of philosophy - precisely the history of African Philosophy. It seeks, in a historical, nonetheless critical manner, to provide a survey of the set of arguments which have come to delineate a distinctive phase in the development of African philosophy - i.e. that phase in which professional African philosophers in a self-conscious manner sought to consider two separate, nonetheless related, questions:

- (1) the question of the meaning of the phrase 'African philosophy'; and
- (2) the question of what should be the attitude of African scholars to the cultural heritage of their people.

These questions which are aspects of a complex question - of African philosophy - have produced a formidable body of literature which now define the nature of that phase in the development of African philosophy, the exploration of which is the concern of this paper.¹ The point of this paper, then, is to serve as a prolegomenon to contemporary African philosophy. It is an attempt to delimit, in a critical manner, the set of questions and theoretical positions that can provide the gateway through which contemporary 'trends and perspectives' in African philosophy can be understood.

Now, the question of African philosophy is, essentially, the question of what we may mean when we talk of 'African philosophy'. Its primary focus is on 'the world-views and value systems of traditional African societies'²: Are they philosophical? The issue here, as Prof. Blocker rightly points out, is that of 'the meaning of cross-cultural statements'³. It has to do with the question of the extent to which African world-views, beliefs and so on can be said to satisfy the criteria for inclusion in *Philosophy*.⁴ It is a philosophical question which, in recent times, has dominated discussion among professional philosophers in the

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academic departments of African universities⁵.

Originally, before the emergence, particularly since independence, of a group of professional African philosophers, it had been taken for granted that there was an African philosophy. This was associated with the traditional world-views of Africans. Thus, works like Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* (Presence Africaine 1959), Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969), Iddowu's *Olodumare; God in Yoruba Belief* (Longman 1962) and other works of their type were seen as embodiments of African philosophy. Fr. Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy*, in particular, was for many African scholars the paradigm of African philosophy. Small wonder then, that earlier attempts at attacking the colonial myth of the mental inferiority of Africans saw in this work the 'African Metaphysics' and epistemology which could serve as the theoretical basis of the nationalist ideologies (Negritude, for example) which served as rallying points for the anti-colonial struggle. Leopold Sedar Senghor's writings on 'The African Apprehension of Reality' and 'African Metaphysics', can be seen as a celebration of this work.⁶

With the emergence of professional African philosophers- most of them trained in Western universities, however, this conception of African philosophy was challenged. Many of these new-bred philosophers reject the original conception of African philosophy on the following grounds. First, they argue that those who equate African philosophy with the traditional world-views of Africans fail to make a clear-cut and necessary distinction between philosophy in the popular or 'unique' sense and philosophy in the strict, that is academic sense.⁷ They maintain that whereas, in the first sense, 'everyone is naturally a philosopher, and so is every society'⁸, philosophy, in the second sense, is a theoretical discipline like physics, algebra, linguistics and so on. The argument for the rejection of traditional African world-views as philosophy, in the words of one of the leading members of this group of philosophers, is that :

... If we pose that it is absurd to speak of unconscious algebra, geometry, linguistics, etc. and if we accept that no science can exist historically without an explicit discourse, then by the same token we must regard the very idea of unconscious philosophy as absurd. Conversely, if we believe that it is the essence of any science to be constituted by free discussion, by the confrontation of hypotheses and theories created by the thought of individual ... and reaching total convergence through reciprocal amendment, then we must also find absurd the idea of a collective, immutable and definitive 'philosophy' abstracted from history and progress.⁹ Thus, on the basis of a definition of philosophy as a rational and

critical activity, an activity of which argument and clarification are essential elements, these philosophers - modernists we may for the sake of convenience call them - reject the 'folk-philosophies' (this is Hountondji's) which were originally presented as African philosophy and contend that the title 'African philosophy' should be reserved for 'the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary philosophers'¹⁰. It is, therefore, 'still in the making'.

There is, however, a more significant argument (more significant from the point of view of praxis) for the rejection of African traditional world-views as philosophy by the modernists. This has to do with the question of the adequacy or otherwise of these world-views for contemporary African societies which are confronted, not only with the urgent task of developing industrially and technologically, but also that of how to ensure that this is accomplished without damage to what is best in our traditions. The argument here is this: since development is the goal of modern African societies and since this cannot be achieved in the contemporary world without science and technology, then

The habits of exactness and rigour in thinking, the pursuit of systematic coherence and the experimental approach characteristic of science are attributes of mind which we in Africa urgently need to cultivate not just because they are themselves intellectual virtues but also because they are necessary conditions for rapid modernization.¹¹

The urgent task for African philosophers, therefore, is to create in their societies those conditions necessary for scientific and technological development - a task they can accomplish, not by glorifying an 'ossified past', but by subjecting to critical analysis, in the light of the demands of contemporary times, their traditional world-views. For the modernists, then, 'it is the present and not researches into archives which determines our understanding of the past'¹².

This, in outline, is the position of those professional African philosophers - Profs. Wiredu, Bodunrin, Hountondji, Oruka, to mention but a few of them - who reject the position that African traditional world-views constitute an authentic African philosophy.

There are, however, other African philosophers - Drs. K.C. Anyanwu and C.S. Momoh for example, who strongly feel that the works rejected by the modernists constitute an authentic African philosophy. This group of scholars, the traditionalists - not only insist on a definition of philosophy that is broad enough to accommodate African traditional world-views. They also, on the basis of this definition and their interpretation of the

contemporary life in Africa, see the task of contemporary African philosophy in a different light. For them, philosophy 'is essentially a reflective activity'¹³. It is the reflection of man either on the experience of themselves or the experience of the world-process of which they are an integral part. And since, the argument goes, there 'is no part of the world where man never reflected on such basic questions about the physical universe'¹⁴, we cannot deny, without absurdity, that there was philosophical activity in traditional African society. This explains the reason why some of them, Dr.K.C. Anyanwu for example, still see Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* and his doctrine that for the African being is force or life-force as providing a paradigm of 'African Metaphysics'¹⁵.

The position just outlined in the preceding paragraph should, of course, be seen against the background of the colonial myth which portrayed Africans as an inferior, backward and barbarous people who never made any significant contribution to human civilization. It is a position born out of the nationalistic urge to defend African culture and civilization 'against external contempt and underestimation'. No wonder, then, that the traditionalists see, in opposition to the modernists, the role of African philosophers, indeed any African scholar, in contemporary African societies as consisting in a combination of two tasks. 'First, to expose and destroy all false ideas about African peoples and cultures that have been perpetrated by Western scholarships'¹⁶; and second to 'endeavour to present the institutions of African peoples as they really are'¹⁷ - in short, to promote an understanding of 'What existence or reality as experienced in African Culture ... means to African thought'¹⁸ through an exposition of its underlying assumptions.

This is where the question of African philosophy goes beyond the issue of what philosophy is and whether certain materials in Africa fulfil the criteria of that definition to the normative issue of what should be the attitude of the African philosopher to the cultural heritage of his people. The question, seen in this perspective, is a manifestation in philosophy of the problematic which has, since independence, come to define the African condition - that of fashioning modes of development both intellectual and socio-political, which will enable Africans to confront the challenges of today while, at the same time, preserving that which is best in our traditions.

We may now, at this juncture, consider the strength and weaknesses of the two schools of thought whose positions on the question of African philosophy we have tried to clarify. This in an attempt to bring

to put in sharper focus the assumptions or presuppositions underlining them and to underscore the significance of this debate for a clear understanding of contemporary African reality.

The modernists, we have seen, base their rejection of African traditional world-views as African philosophy on two grounds. First, a conception of philosophy as a self-conscious, critical activity and second, a critical interpretation of the 'African condition', which is given expression in the African search for self-identity. Now, some critics have argued that the definition of philosophy on which this rejection is based is rather narrow and partisan. We have a view of this line of criticism in J.Paratt, when he remarks:

.... that to reject tradition altogether as a valid basis for constructing a philosophy may be a prejudice formed from the European model of "Written" philosophy". Because the history of philosophy in Western civilizations is largely a history of individual literate philosophers, this need not imply that African philosophy must be the same kind of thing.¹⁹

G. Salemohamed expresses the same line of thought when he comments on P.O. Bodunrin's "The Question of African Philosophy" thus:

....when Bodunrin speaks of philosophy, he has in mind only the British-American philosophical tradition. Although he is quite happy that this could co-exist in African universities with continental philosophy, he does not investigate from the latter point of view what might be the merits of including in the philosophy curricula of African universities everything that he at present rejects.²⁰

The point of these criticisms is to emphasize the need for African philosophers to relate to the collective world-views of their people, for this may well provide the basis for 'an African orientation in philosophy'. Yet, it does not appear that they sufficiently come to grips with the spirit that informs the agenda for African philosophy the modernists present. The modernists do not deny that African traditional world-views are worthy of philosophical study. (Indeed some of them, Prof. Wiredu, for instance, are actively engaged in this study.²¹ What they emphasize is that this study, rather than consisting in a mere narration or description of what these world-views were, should involve a critical engagement with them. The point of this critical engagement being the determination of the extent to which the insights offered by traditional world-views are adequate for dealing with 'contemporary African experience with its many sidedness'²². The argument for this advocacy for a critical approach to the study of traditional world-views, simply put, is

this: that since the cardinal goal of contemporary African societies is development, and since the key to this (development) in the contemporary world is science and technology²³, then African philosophy, to be relevant to contemporary African experience, should, as a matter of urgency, promote the scientific attitude. But if the scientific attitude is defined by such features as 'freedom of inquiry, openness to criticism, a general type of scepticism and fallibilism and non-veneration of authorities'²⁴ then it cannot be said to be compatible with the traditional world-outlook which, among other things, stresses conformity to social norms at the expense of individual initiatives. If, therefore, the modernists argue 'for a conception of philosophy that is pluralistic, self-critical and open-minded, i.e., one which is the very opposite of dogmatism and authoritarianism or unjustified belief and opinion'²⁵, it is not because this happens to be the conception of philosophy that now defines the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition, or because they do not see the relevance of oral tradition to the development of African philosophy. Rather it is because they believe that it is only this kind of philosophy that can promote the scientific spirit, without which the goal of development in Africa may become unrealisable.

To defend the modernists in this manner, however, is not to suggest that their position is flawless. For, in emphasizing science and technology and the role of philosophy in promoting the intellectual attitudes necessary for their development, we (Africans) may unwittingly make a fetish of the scientific spirit, thereby laying a solid foundation for imperialism in the guise of science. That this fear is not completely out of place can be seen in the fact that an uncritical acceptance of the Western notion of development by many African societies has led to the acquisition of sophisticated technology which, rather than alleviating the sufferings of the people, have added to their misery, by endangering even those aspects of their culture that can provide the foundation on which their contribution to world civilization in contemporary times can be built. (Witness, for instance, the negative effects of the infiltration into these societies of the consumerist ethos of Western, capitalist, civilization- an occurrence that has made corruption and violence facts of life the people have to contend with, in addition to the formidable problems of poverty, ignorance, disease and so on). The crucial challenge to the modernists then, is the issue of how to achieve significant sciento-technical development, without losing in the process all that is good in the African tradition.

This is where the position of the traditionists has some relevance. For, in advocating that African philosophers set themselves the task of

justifying African traditional world-views and their underlying reason, what they stress is that any attempt by Africans to develop and contribute to world civilization can only be meaningful from the stand-point of African culture itself. But, in stressing this point, the traditionalists do not display a sufficient awareness of the evolutionary nature of culture. They tend to believe that culture is something static, a commodity, as it were, which could be preserved, bought and sold by a people. Yet, nothing can be further from the truth. Culture is not such a finished product; it is something that is 'constantly in making', in consonance with the dynamics of the continuous socio-economic development of a society. African culture, therefore, is not anything we may preserve at all times. Rather, it is something, parts of which we may want to remake or change in accordance with the dictates of our socio-economic reality and the ends (both theoretical and practical) the achievement of which we have set for ourselves, as a goal. Thus, although the traditionalists may be right in insisting that our contribution to the world should be from the stand-point of our culture, they may not be far from being wrong in insisting that the visions and insight offered by our traditional world-views are adequate for the understanding of our present socio-economic reality. For while we may confidently assert, with Earl Lovelace, that

Nobody is born into the world. Everyone of us is born into a place in the world, in a culture and it is from the stand-point of that culture that we contribute to the world,²⁵

we also cannot but hold, with Bodunrin, that,

The forward march of science and technology will ensure not only that no nation lives in isolation from others but also that purity of culture is not maintained.²⁷

The question confronting Africans, then, is not that of whether they need science and technology or not, but that of the kind and manner of acquisition of these important agents of development. But if this is the case, then the role of philosophy in breaking down 'the cultural constraints to scientific patterns of thought' in African societies can never be overemphasized.

It should be clear from our survey thus far that the question of African philosophy is not, as a critic contends, a question raised by some African philosophers who deliberately 'reduce socio-historical considerations to obstructions, as if philosophy were an entity that floats above the societies which have produced our philosophers'²⁸. For, as we have seen, it is not simply a concern with meaning, but more significantly

and closely connected with this, an attempt by African philosophers to reflect on the African problem of self-identification which, as Wiredu argues, 'at its most fundamental level ... is a philosophical problem'²⁹. Thus, apart from producing a formidable body of literature which has come to form the inner core of contemporary African philosophy and making some African philosophers, Wiredu for instance, to begin to turn their critical searchlights on the traditional world-views of their peoples, the debate on this question has brought into sharper focus the magnitude, at least in intellectual terms, of the crisis of identity which (thanks to colonialism) has now come to define the African condition. It is, therefore, in addition to being a significant building-block in the unfolding architecture of African intellectual history, also a reflective and worthwhile contribution by African philosophers to the understanding of contemporary African socio-economic reality.

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Notes and Reference

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2. Abiola Irele, Introduction to Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, p.8

3. Gene Blocker, "African Philosophy", *African Philosophical Inquiry*, Vol.1 Number 1 January 1987,p3.
4. Gene Blocker, 1987, *Ibid.*
5. Abiola Irele, *op. cit.*, p.8
6. See Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, edited and translated by John Reed and Clive Wake, London, Nairobi, Ibadan and Lusaka : Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1976, pp. 29-37.
7. Cf. Paulin Hountondji 1983, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2 and Odera Oruka, 1975.
8. Paulin Hountondji, *Ibid.* p. 47
9. Paulin Hountondji, *Ibid.*
10. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.36
11. Kwasi Wiredu, *Ibid.*, p.32
12. G.L.R. Jame, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, London: Allison and Bursby, 1977, p. 107.
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15. Cf. K.C.Anyanwu, *The African Experience in the American Market Place*, Smithtown, New York, Exposition Press, 1983, pp. 61-64.
16. Okot p'Bitek, quoted in C. Anyanwu, *Ibid.*, p.3
17. Okot p' Bitek, *Ibid*
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 21. See, for instance, Kwasi Wiredu, "The Concept of Truth in Akan Language" in P.O. Bodunrin (ed), *op.cit.*pp. 43-54; and Wiredu, "The Akan Concept of Mind", *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, Number 3, October 1983.
 22. Kwasi Wiredu, *op cit.*, p. 36
 23. P.O. Bodunrin; Introduction to P.O. Bodunrin (ed.) *op. cit.* p. XII
 24. P. O. Bodunrin, *Ibid.*
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**INDIVIDUAL, INSTITUTION, NATION BUILDING
AND OBLIGATION : A REVIEW ESSAY**

Chasing a philosopher and his work is not a matter of joke and one must attempt only if one has the inbuilt innovative competence to adjust to the idiosyncrasies of the philosopher which rests more in the intangible dimensions rather than the tangible ones. As a philosopher R Sundara Rajan (RSR) can be classified as what Adam Smith would label as a 'public spirited man' who displays respect for legitimate power and the 'priviledges of individuals and groups'. The present work¹, thus, does attempt to provide a technical treatment to the role of the individual, its interrelationship to institutions within which he exists, the tangible results in the form of nation-building and issues of obligations of each section to the other in an inter-dependent mode. However, this review article is not going to confine itself merely to the ideas of the *Primacy of the Political* (POP) but link up with RSR's other two works i.e. *Towards a Cirtique of Cultural Reason*² (TCCR) and *Innovative Competence and Social Change*³ (ICSC). While the completion of the trilogy for the author represents a decade of work to examine the role of the political from within the context of social to the theory of culture and culminating by pitting political competence against political culture, the present article will contextually and thematically examine by centralizing the role of the individual, institution and nation-building process in the context of obligations.

The question, thus, arises whether RSR has been able to cement the trilogy into a unified whole or has he left at a point in front of which is a gaping unbridgable chasm or has he landed us within the proximity of a philosophical black-hole from which neither the individual nor the institution nor a nation-building process can escape total oblivion. The density of ideas and spirits encapsulated from the works of individuals incorporated ranging from Aristotle, Kant, Kautilya, Locke, Hobbes, Marx, Adam Smith, Hausser, Dilthey, Riceour etc. of the past and Almond, Sidney Verba, Coleman, Rajni Kothari, Myron Weiner etc. of the living present has led to a situation where individual identities of ethics and rhetorics, or the issues of classical and contemporary theories or the

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