

## THE IDEA OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY IN AFRICAN LANGUAGE

GODWIN AZENABOR

It was Gene Blocker who once said that we cannot resolve any problem, question or idea in African Philosophy, until we first of all settle the meaning of 'African', 'philosophy' and then 'African philosophy'.<sup>1</sup> We therefore begin by settling the words 'African' 'philosophy' and then 'African philosophy'.

The term 'African' is racial geographical entity. 'Africa' is a continent inhabited by people of a particular race, which could be black, white, Arab, Negro, etc., but definitely with similar culture, custom, common history of colonial experience and tutelage. So in spite of the diversity of forms in African cultures, there are common traits and similarities.

The conception of philosophy is decisive in determining what we take African philosophy to be. By philosophy we mean a rational, critical and systematic reflection or study of the nature of the world, of man and his position and goal in the world. Philosophy can also be seen as the study of the principles underlying conduct, thought and knowledge. Furthermore, Africans have a particular constellation of problems; a recent colonial history, a multiplicity of diverse sub-national indigenous traditions, a foreign language, a literary culture are still very much in the making.

And by 'African philosophy', we simply mean the philosophy that is nourished within an African cultural experience, tradition and history. There is always the spirit of African philosophy. The spirit is that of a metaphysical and spiritual orientation which is more of co-existence with nature rather than conquest, more of collectivism rather than individualism, more of holism rather than

atmoism, more of synthesis rather than analysis, more of relations rather than separation, unity rather than dualism or monism.

The idea of African philosophy has given rise to the problem of language. The argument here is that for a philosophy to be truly African, the language and form in which it is expressed must be African. For example, "Bantu Philosophy" was not written in African Language but in Dutch, and so it is said not to qualify as African philosophy.

The question of Language, as it relates to the idea of African philosophy is that, there can be no African philosophy, (so it is argued), until there is a philosophy in African language(s), not just a translation or interpretation. This is because English philosophy, for example, is written in English, Chinese philosophy is in Chinese language, French philosophy is in French language, German philosophy is in German language, etc., but African philosophy (e.g. Yoruba, Igbo, Uchi, Hausa's philosophy) is still being written and communicated in foreign languages. These foreign languages, it is argued, may not depict the true picture of African philosophy. It is the indigenous languages that really take care of issues of identity, feelings, empathy and meaning. Hence, a genuine African philosophy should be written in African language, since language is societal and experiential. Frontline advocates of this view are F. Ogunmodede, S.B. Oluwole, Gene Blocker, Chris Uroh, etc.

It is precisely this question of language, "that has led to skepticism about African philosophy by some contemporary African philosophers".<sup>2</sup> And it is precisely because of the need to reverse this trend that made some scholars to request that we write and teach African philosophy in African Language in order to make it authentic. The question of Language is, perhaps, inspired by Miguel Unamino's assertion that "a philosophy is a philology".<sup>3</sup> The question of language has become important because language is the tool and primary medium of philosophical expression, it is the vehicle of the philosopher's thought and it plays an important role in the way people know and understand. The language of a people is said to be the principal feature that marks them off from other people - it is their essence and authenticity.<sup>4</sup> So linguistic forms have been said to have powerful control over the minds of people. Language has been said to be a good

store of people's ideas about their own environment and that "one is able to arrive at the structure of reality of a particular people beginning from their language..."<sup>5</sup>

Arguing the case for African philosophy in African Language, Chris Uroh writes:

The problem becomes more complex when foreign languages with markedly different world views are imposed on a people in place of their own language. In that case, they are forced to perceive themselves through an alien cultural screen, which is bound to distort their own image. Such a people will suffer an identity crisis, for they will neither really be like "themselves" nor exactly like the culture they are imitating.<sup>6</sup>

It is along this line that Francis Ogunmodede also argues in his paper, "African philosophy in African Language." According to Ogunmodede, we cannot critically explain human experience well enough to an African by using a foreign language, like English or French. To use foreign language to explain African experience and culture, according to Ogunmodede, is to be culturally alienated, live unauthentic life and become irrelevant to our society.<sup>7</sup> Citing Cheikh Anta Diop's *Civilization and Barbarism*, Ogunmodede buttresses his argument further, when he writes "Flight from one's own language is the quickest short-cut to cultural alienation."<sup>8</sup> The point that is made here is that if we do not utilize African Language in education, especially in philosophic thought and discourse, our emancipation from colonial domination remains incomplete. And in lending weight to this position, Wiredu had written that the nature of a given philosophical position, may be influenced by the structure and other characteristics of the language in which it is formulated and may derive plausibility from the form of its expression.<sup>9</sup> But then, Wiredu quickly adds that any language is flexible and can be adopted to any conceivable needs of communication.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Problem of African Philosophy in African Language(s)***

For historical reasons, which we believe we all know, the African scholar writes in foreign languages. Whereas, in his or her philosophical meditations and

during conversations with the elders and or sages in the traditional settings, the African scholar communicates in an African language, but does not finally write in this language. There is, of course, reason for this development. This is because most indigenous languages are not taught in schools, especially in Nigerian schools, and where taught, they are taught in colonial languages. So, right from the onset, the scholar cannot really grasp the understanding and mastery of local languages enough to enable him to put it to writing for education purposes. The point is that indigenous languages are confined to lower status in African countries. After all, there is no higher institution in Nigeria, for example, where a Nigerian language is used as the official medium of instruction, other than for courses in African languages and literature. This failure in encouraging the use of Nigerian languages as the official means of instruction in our higher institutions is the root of the language problem in African philosophy.

The problem of language is further complicated because most African languages are local, whereas philosophy is an international study. So, talking of international realism, most African languages cannot pass the mark. If we use a language that does make meaning to the international scholars, that work or philosophy shall perish for its lack of being understood, and understanding is a factor of development. So the question of writing African philosophy in African languages poses of linguistic trap. If for example, we decide to write this article or paper in my own language (that is Esan language), ninety-nine percent of my audience and readers would not understand - in fact I would not be communicating. We can therefore see that the indigenous language approach in African philosophy if adopted will narrow the scope of discourse in African philosophy. Exchanging English or French which are international languages for a national African Language, would be building a barrier to philosophical communication and make thought difficult. This is why Wiredu on this issue of language rightly advises caution until unity is achieved in Africa to make it possible to realize the idea of a continental *lingua Franca*.<sup>11</sup>

Thirdly, there is nor unity of language nor do we have a *lingua franca* in Nigeria, talk less of Africa. This is precisely why we translate into English or French, in order to reach out to a wider range of people and remove unnecessary barriers to communication and understanding. But even with translation, there is

still the problem and even failure in translating some categories, expressions or abstractions in the native languages into foreign languages, without falling into ontological fallacies or even fantasies. Wiredu already gives another note of caution in this area, when he writes in "Philosophy, Mysticism and Rationality", that: "unless different languages share basically the same logic, it would be impossible to translate one into another,"<sup>12</sup> and even when translated, there is still the problem of correctness in the translation. Quine in his "Principle of Indeterminacy of Translation", is said to have emphasized certain areas of discourse in which it is impossible to convey the exact meaning of an original assertion into a translated one. The difficulty here, according to Quine, is more evident when dealing with systems involving beliefs, world views and other social values, all of which are culture dependent.<sup>13</sup> The point is that in translation, the original meaning may not be conveyed. Consequently, it is argued that in the absence of a language in our own tongue, through which we could analyze the true nature of African philosophy, we cannot get a tolerable translation or interpretation. All we have now is mere reductionism, which conceals.

### ***Resolution of Problem***

On our part, we point out that the problem of language is mainly that of linguistic contrast in words, especially when it comes to the question of translation. There might not even be one or single word in an African language for English or French words and vice versa (for example, in most African languages there is no gender pronoun like "she" in English language). But there is always a concept for a word or a thing in any language. And philosophy is essentially the articulation of concepts not words. Furthermore, philosophy deals with ideas and thought and these precede language. "Experience shows that there are many ideas for which we have no words, as well as words that do not correspond exactly with our perceptions of reality in their general grammatical structure and classification."<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, one might argue that the problem of language is really not philosophical but linguistic and its emergence is as a result of semantics and vocabulary. "In their account of language, the two leading British philosophers... Locke and Berkely - consider language as an artificial creation, chiefly to keep

records and for communicating ideas."<sup>15</sup> What matters therefore, is that one succeeds in communicating to the target audience, the language notwithstanding. So beyond linguistic variances and expression one does not see how the issue of language is a determinant factor of a philosophy.

African philosophy is not alone in the use of foreign languages to communicate in African Studies. There are other disciplines such as African history, African literature, etc., which are still being written and communicated in English and French. Why then should that of philosophy be different? We need not write in African languages, in order to write authentic African philosophy. What we need is to express our thoughts in a language that is universally understandable and intelligible and to avoid foreign categories and models. Furthermore, learning, understanding and writing in African language is not what really matters; rather, what matters is sharing the experience of African people. This is not to say, however, that an African philosophy in African language is wrong. No. Rather, all we are saying is that the language does not determine the authenticity of African philosophy. This may explain why we have not had any African philosopher writing in an African language. Another reason, is that most African languages are really under-developed in syntax, localized and lack the needed vocabulary to meet up with modern challenges and sophistication.

Finally, it is instructive to note that philosophy is not African on racial or linguistic lines but what makes a philosophy African is the tradition of the philosophy : African cultural experience, history and tradition, with a grounding in an holistic ontology, which is more of co-existence with nature, rather than conquest, more of collectivism, rather than individualism, more of holism rather than atomism or monism, more of synthesis rather than analysis. Authentic African philosophy is that philosophy that is applied to the conceptual problems of 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 drawing from the traditional source of African philosophy is a second difference between African philosophy and any other philosophy. This is precisely why Prof. Kwesi Wiredu remarks that it is necessary to develop a sympathetic

reflective understanding of traditional modes of thought, and to a large extent our modes of thought remain much closer to traditional ideas than many are willing to acknowledge.<sup>16</sup>

### NOTES

1. Gene Blocker: "African Philosophy" in *African Philosophical Inquiry*, Vol. I, No.1, 1987, p.2
2. M.A. Makinde : 'Philosophy in Africa' in *Substance of African Philosophy* (Auchi: African Philosophy Projects, Publications, 1989), p.106.
3. Cited by Olabiyi Tai: "Theory and Prattice in African Philosophy" in *Second Order*, (Vol. VI No.2, July 1977), p.13
4. Charles Uroh: "Colonialism and the Language Question - A Reply of Godfrey Tangwa" in *Quest Philosophical Discussions*, (Vol. VIII, No.2, December, 1994), p.138.
5. D.A. Masolo: *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), P.101.
6. *Ibid.*, p.139
7. Francis Ogunmodede. "Of History and Historiogrphy in African Philosophy", A paper presented at the International Conference on African Philosophy held at the Seminary of SS Peter and Paul, Bodija, Ibadan, 27th-31st March, 1995.
8. *Ibid.*
9. K. Wiredu: *Philosophy and An African Culture*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.34
10. *Ibid.*, p.35
11. *Ibid.*
12. Quoted by H. Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy* (Nairobi, Kenya: African Centre for Technology Studies, 1991), p.27.

13. Cited by Godwin Sogolo: *Foundations of African Philosophy*. (Ibadan: Modecular Publishers, 1992), p.27 and 28.
14. D.A. Masolo: *op. cit.*, p.96
15. Adebayo Adesanya: "Yoruba Metaphysical Thinking" in *Odu: Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies*, (no.5, 1958), p.36
16. Cited by K.A. Appiah : *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London : Methuen, 1992), p.145