

African Philosophers and the Quest for Development in Contemporary Africa¹

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Abstract

The tasks for African philosophers in crisis-ridden Africa is the focus of this work. It examines the effect of the three decades debate on the existence, 'who is', as well as 'who is not', an African Philosopher on how they define their roles in channeling a path for African growth and development. It argues that the debate, while vital to the philosophical enterprise, need not distract those that claimed to be 'philosophers' or with 'Philosophy degrees' from contributing their quota to the discourse on African development. It ends by outlining the role(s) that contemporary African philosophers should play, both for the sake of relevance and justification of devoting hours to contemplations and rigorous thinking.

Keywords: African Philosophy, development, crisis, Africa,

Introduction

This work is concerned with the question: what should be the concern of the philosopher in a crisis-ridden society like Africa? By putting the question this way, it is obvious that our project is prescriptive. But it is may also be seen as an indictment, a vote of no-confidence of a sort, on those whose professional calling places in the vantage position of setting in place "the intellectual foundations of the new Africa in-the-making" (Mason, 1982:7); those who Oladipo (2009:XII) placed the burden of "sustained application of critical and reflective thinking to various aspects of African life and experience" on; but who have taken refuge in "an attitude of positivity or mute indifference, contented with taking the platonic flight in the face of serious crisis, (and) squandered their times on idle contemplations (Uroh, 1995: 1).

For how long, we ask, shall the African philosophers continue to play the ostrich and take a flight in the face of the unpleasant realities that stare them at face? This is our worry in this paper. The paper is not a total condemnation of the African scholars but a call for a redirection of energy and a re-application of their intellect to the crisis of our time, the thirst for appreciable development that would make life worth living in Africa. The paper is divided into two parts. The first examines what the professional philosophers in Africa, or philosophers engaged in African related pontifications, have for

a long time concerned themselves with since the time of Anton Wilhelm Amo. The second part discusses what we believe should be their concerns, in charting a new developmental course for Africa in the comity of continents.

Is there or is there not?: African Philosophy and the Question of Existence

For close to four decades, if not more, the question, "Is there an African philosophy?" was core of philosophical engagement in Africa (Asiegbu and Agbakoba, 2008:IV, Asiegbu and Agbakoba, 2010:III). In fact, it is still doubtful if one could categorically affirm today that the question has ceased to be relevant or that an answer to which all philosophers subscribe to in this respect has emerged (Oyeshile, 2008:57-58). Perhaps, this does not really matter. "Philosophical" questions, such as this, are not always asked with the intention of getting a categorical 'Yes' or 'No' answer. Sometimes, it is enough if only by reflecting upon them, we are able to "enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination, and diminish the dogmatic assurances which close the mind against speculations" (Russell 1982; 28).

The only worrisome dimension to how this question has been handled is that the impression was almost created that "that question is itself what constitutes African Philosophy" (Sogolo, 1973:16). Thus, rather than do African philosophy what we have had is a debate about African philosophy (Sogolo, 1973:16), as to whether it exists or not. In the wake of this disputation two distinct groups emerged, one affirming the question and the other taking a reverse position (Bodunrin, 1985; Oladipo, 1992, 2000, 2006; Oke 2002)). Bodunrin describes these schools of thought as traditionalist and modernists. Oladipo prefers to call the second group the analytic school (Oladipo, 1992). As we shall see, more schools or orientations have long emerged.

In his own explanations, Bodunrin opines that the traditionalist school, is made up of those who are concerned with "the discovery of authentic African ideas and thought systems uninfluenced by alien accretion" (Bodunrin, 1985:XI). Accordingly, K.C. Anyanwu, who has vigorously defended this position, asserts that the African philosophy should be essentially a "reflection on the African cultural experience, or the exposition of the basic assumptions, concepts and theories which underline African cultural experience and activities" (Anyanwu, 1983: 42). Proponents of this view, according to Bodunrin, "think that the crisis of identity in which we are is because we have lost our roots", and that "by retracing our steps" to discover "where and why thing went wrong" it will be possible to "build a viable and secure Africa social, political and philosophical life" (Bodunrin, 1985; XII).

Furthermore, the traditionalist, believing in "the possibility of the development of a modern African philosophy firmly rooted in African culture" (Oladipo, 1992: 20 -21) sees the task of the African philosopher as that of defending "African culture against the false ideas" that have been perpetrated about it, by the Western scholarship (Oladipo, 1992: 20). For this school of thought, therefore, African folklores, proverbs, wise sayings, oral literature, social organizations and so on, should be studied with the intention of showing their logical structure and the assumptions on which they are based" (Oladipo, 1992: 20).

The crux of the arguments promoted by this group is further hinged on the essential role of culture in development as identified by William Abraham (1962) (See also Obotetukudo 2001, Bamikole 2007, etc). According to Abraham, culture functions as a catalyst of development in four distinct ways:

1. As a means of creating order
2. As an instrument for the achievement of social integration
3. To make events in human experience intelligible and significant
4. As regulator of change (Abraham 1962: 31)

Indeed, scholars such as Ogbogbo (1997) did suggest that the inability to come to terms with these intricate cultural and historical elements of African Philosophy is its bane in contributing meaningfully to mitigating the African crisis.

The second school of thought objects to the above view on many grounds. Essentially however, the core of their objection is that in content and methodology what the traditionalist present as constituting African philosophy does not meet the criteria that define the discipline of philosophy. In the first place, it is argued that the world-view of a people alone does not constitute philosophy in the strict sense of the word. At most, they could pass as what Odera Orika calls philosophy in the debase sense. According to Orika;

every work that claims to be philosophy is a philosophy only if the contents and the methodology of its inquiry conform to the conception that philosophy is a logical argument, a critical inquiry, a rational speculation or else a synthesis based on a rigorously reasoned-out investigation (Oruka 1975: 5).

Similarly, Bodunrin (1981:172) picks hole in the methodology of the traditionalists which according to him, is merely descriptive. For him, "in whatever tradition of philosophy one is working on and whatever method one is applying, some assumption seem to be generally agreed upon today" (Bodunrin 1981:172). These assumptions include the fact that a work in philosophy must be critical, that there must be a clear statement of the problem and that the author must be ready to justify his claims as well as readiness to change or modify one's position in the face of superior or recalcitrant argument or evidence respectively. For Bodunrin therefore, "Philosophy as a discipline does and must, have autonomy" (Bodunrin 1981:172). The view that anything can pass for philosophy", he says, "will hurt the development of philosophy in Africa" (Bodunrin 1981:178).

It is worth pointing out here that Bodunrin defines Africa philosophy in a sense which has remained not less controversial as the question which he had earlier intended to tackle. He defines the discipline in terms of the practitioner, and not strictly in terms of contents. In his words, Bodunrin opines that,

African philosophy is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, ethics or history of philosophy..... thus if African philosophers were to engage in debates on Plato's epistemology, or on theoretical entities their work would qualify as African philosophy. (Bodunrin 1981:216)

Expectedly, this view has been rebuffed by those who think that the: Issues" under discussion matter in the definition of the discipline of African philosophy. What makes Temple's *Bantu Philosophy*, a work in African philosophy is because the Bantu people are Africans. If an African philosopher decides to write on Plato without relating it to the African experience, his work would not qualify, as a

work on African philosophy. This is how Olubi Sodipo puts it: "while it is true that all these sons of Africa were pre-eminent in the second order activity called philosophy, yet, their philosophies had little or no basis in the folk philosophy of Africa and can therefore hardly be called African philosophy" (Sodipo, 1975:3). Thus, even when the discourse of the analyst school may be quite "intellectually entertaining", Sodipo thinks that, so long as they have "no roots in the (African) community they tend" to degenerate into irrelevant" (Sodipo, 1975:10).

But beyond the claim by the traditionalists that the analytic project is not relevant to the African environment, they have also argued that it is wrong to brand the traditional world views of Africa as a debase philosophy simply because they do not appear to fall in place with the western conception of philosophy. For instance, Joseph Omoregbe (1985:5), and corroborated by Oladipo (2009: 3), argues that the "essence of philosophy is not argument but reflection, he says: does not have to take the form of Western-type argument". Anyanwu argued in similar veins when he opines that philosophy as a cultural enterprise, "demands that each culture makes explicit its basic assumption about reality and the standards in terms of which it interprets experiences" (Anyanwu, 1985:279). He further insists that,

different people in different ages and cultures have offered different interpretations of the meaning of life. And since there is no absolute standard for interpreting the meaning of experience, it is possible that all the different interpretations offered by different people and cultures were correct and valid under the cultural stand points, experience or circumstances of the people. (Anyanwu, 1983: 22).

Anyanwu urges again that "we must admit plurality of cultural philosophical system" (Anyanwu, 1983:35). Concurring with Omoregbe, Anyanwu further suggests that, "it is experience not logical coherence or strict consistency (that) shall be the final judge in the study of cultural philosophy" (Anyanwu, 1983: 37). In all, Anyanwu thinks the need to understand man as a product of culture is more urgent today and therefore that the African philosophers cannot afford to dissipate their energy on the question of methodology. The debate on 'what' and 'what should not' constitute African Philosophy, says Sogolo, betrays the apparent crisis faced by the professional philosopher in Africa, namely, the crisis of justifying the fund expended to maintain him by his employer.

See the predicament of the African philosopher: he is employ by an institution entirely financed by a government, a government sponsored by a people and a people whose creed of relevance for any discipline has increasingly become one of quantifiable utility (Sogolo, 1988; 99-100).

In addition to this, the question of employability of their students or products in the face of frustrating high level of unemployment (Akintona 2007: 15) has constituted another burden that can be likened to a leech perching on the scrotum of a leper. This is the dilemma of the African philosopher. It is a problem of how to meet up with the requirement of his professional callings which is basically theoretical and at the same time retain their jobs in establishments funded by a government that has to ration its scarce resources and also justify the need for certain degrees, haunted by the call to focus on "practical and useful" courses of study.

Since the problem here appears reducible to that of discovering “anything meeting the criteria for being both African and philosophy” (Blocker, 1987: 1), it has been suggested that the African philosopher can eat his cake and still have it if only he could subject the African world-view “to systematic scrutiny by vigorous ratiocinative method” (Wiredu, 1981: 1; Oladipo 2006). In other words, instead of merely reporting the African world-views, the professional philosopher in Africa should raise questions about them (Uroh, 1994a; Oladipo 2009). Such questions, according to Sogolo, would “inject a great amount of philosophical character into the belief system in question (Sogolo, 1988: 112). At the same time, “the philosophy that evolves” as a result, “will be uniquely African” (Sogolo, 1988:112).

There is yet another orientation that has emerged from the debate so far. According to this school of thought the search for self-identity for Africa by professional philosophers in Africa may not really be what is needed by contemporary Africa. “There are times when Africa is not the banner we need” declares Anthony Appiah (1992:180). Before him, however Peter Abraham had cautioned against allowing what he says is “the touching love of some anthropologists for old ways (to) blind us to their inadequacy for modern needs (Abraham 1955: 393). Rather than search for the solution to Africa’s problem within the traditional African world-views, he suggested that Africa should adapt the western culture, a culture that he describes as “the distillation and integration of many cultural streams from many lands and places, sorted and added to until it can answer more completely than any other, man’s deepest needs in the technological present of the twentieth century” (Abraham 1955; 393). Abraham finds expression in Appiah’s book, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* where the author declares:

We would only solve our problems if we see them as human Problems arising out of a special situation... we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems generated by our being somehow unlike others (Appiah 1992; 136).

We particularly find it difficult to understand how for instance, Appiah would affirm, on one hand that, our problems arose out of a special situation, while at the same time, he maintains that we should not see them as having been generated out of our being somehow unlike others. One would think that if our problems arose out of a special situation, as Appiah himself admits, then either we are a people living (or who have lived) in a way special or that some special circumstances have made us somehow unlike others. Either way, we should expect some peculiarities in our problems and some uniqueness in their treatment.

What we have done so far is to present a sketchy narration of the major trends in the history of African Philosophy. The intention here is to prove a point: to show how for the large part, contemporary African philosophers have engaged with rather than working to cut ties with the realities of hunger, war, political instability, moral degeneration, general insecurity, crime, poverty, etc. It is equally important that we note the imperfections inherent in the orientations. Neither can succinctly claim to present a water-tight reason(s) for rejecting the other. Commendably, the orientations offered paths to critical engagements that could be taken by others, now or later in the future, for the sake of Africa. Even as some “thinks that philosophy is nothing but an area of hair-splitting distractions and controversies” (Asiegbu and Agbakoba 2006: Xi), based on the unending discussions on the existence of African Philosophy, we must take succor in the submission offered by Olusegun Oladipo (2009). Oladipo in his

words affirms strongly that the commitment of the African Philosopher will neither be to a culture, nor to a discipline, "but in terms of the conscious and sustained application of critical and reflective thinking to various aspects of African life and experiences" (Oladipo 2009:Xii).

Premised on our foregoing submission, it will not be out of place for us, at this juncture, to pop the question: what should be the concern of the contemporary African philosopher?

The Tasks for African Philosopher in the Quest for African Development

Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of African people. It is from these conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created (Nkrumah, 1975; 644).

Another way to interpret Nkrumah's position above is: what should the contemporary African philosophers concern themselves considering the present realities in today's Africa? What are these realities? This inexhaustible list would include political instability, primordial conflicts, technological backwardness, unfavourable international climate in all its ramifications, and so on.

In stating that the above should engage the attention of the African philosopher, we are not unaware of the contention that it is a mistake to think "that philosopher qua philosopher has certain competence which can make him solve our present social, moral, religious and economic problem" (Bodunrin, 1990: 11). Bodunrin may be right, but we find it difficult to reconcile his assertion with few notes that we have taken of the relationship between the emergence and subsequent growth of philosophical ideas in the western society, for instance, and their practical human problems of the same epoch. Few examples suffice here.

It is a fact of history that Socrates, Plato as well as Aristotle were "compelled by forces of change in the Periclean society to jettison many features of the traditional beliefs" (Mason; 1982:7); that Karl Marx's philosophy was inspired partly by the French revolution just the same way the many civil wars in England, led Thomas Hobbes to advocate a Leviathan that will keep erring men at bay. Indeed, philosophical ideas have contributed immensely to the constitutional development of nations in Africa, France and Britain (Asiegbu and Agbakoba 2006:16). In a sense therefore, Bernstein could not have been wrong in affirming that, "reflection does not occur in a vacuum. It arises when there is a discrepancy or conflict, a felt difficulty" (Bernstein, 1960:XXVII). Let us close this particular discussion by reaffirming the connection between the first and second order questions. John Dewey's view is instructive here. Dewey writes:

Those who assert in the abstract definition of philosophy that it deals with eternal truth or reality, untouched by local time and place are forced to admit that philosophy as a concrete existence is historical, having temporal passage and a diversity of local habitation... (And that) those who express contempt for the enterprise of philosophy as a sterile and monotonous preoccupation with unsolvable or unreal problems, cannot deny that, however, it may stand, with philosophy as a revelation of eternal truths, it is tremendously significant as a revelation of the predicaments, protests and aspirations of humanity

(John Dewey 1967:4).

The above observation however notwithstanding, we quite admit as Bodunrin has rightly argued, that "No one like Plato can propose a theory of the state today without a vast amount of knowledge of political science, political economy, political, social and economic history" (Bodunrin 1990:11). We, however, think that this situation goes to prove a point, namely, that the agenda for the philosopher in the present day Africa is heavy and also that, "his role in society not singular but multiplex" (Marson, 1982:13).

In the light of the above, we propose that the African philosopher should see his major preoccupation as that of synthesizing the work of scholars in other fields of human endeavour, "particularly those economists, political economists and scientists, who have tried to grapple with the African situation today" (Oladipo 1992; 98). The role of African philosophy in this sense is that of acting as a unifying science.

Let us illustrate the above view with an example. African countries were talked into accepting the Structural Adjustment Programme, SAP in the late 90s. One of the consequences of SAP is that the affected country has to devalue her currency. Now the classical economics arguments in these respects are: (1) Importation would be discouraged since imported goods and services would become more costly (this will create more market for locally produce goods and services); (2) There would be increase in Gross Domestic Product (this is because devaluation makes the products of the affected country cheaper and consequently increases the demands for them by outsiders). These will in turn boost export trade. In the end the devaluing country would be better off since, among others, foreign exchange would be conserved as a result of discouraged importation and second, more foreign exchange would be earned as a result of the boost in exportation. The argument here seems very convincing. Little wonder many African leaders bought the argument. The truth however is that the classical argument presented above does not take cognizance of the realities in many African countries. It is partly as a result that SAP has not worked, and indeed, crippled many African economies. There are two conditions that are essential for any country to make any substantial gain from devaluation of her currency. These conditions, which do not favour us, are first, the demand and supply of its export produce must be elastic. By this we mean that the export goods may be such that a reduction in price will necessarily increase the number of buyers. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the export goods must be such that quantity supplied or made available for sale could be increased at will. Coupled with the above is the fact that the economy must be such that could produce internally most of the domestic goods and service in the country.

Now take any country in Africa, for example Nigeria. Her export goods are of two categories – crude oil and agricultural produce. She does not export industrial goods. The truth is that, none of these goods can have its quantity increased at will. In the first place, crude-oil which forms the bulk of our exports has the quantity that we can lawfully put into the world market pegged by the organization of Petroleum Exporting countries, OPEC and so whatever the value of the naira we can exceed our quota. Similarly our agriculture sector still depends largely on the vagaries of weather. Worse still, cash crops like cocoa, Palm produce, cotton, and so on, have long gestation period which make a spontaneously reaction to an upsurge in demand difficult. Thus, what we have gained from devaluation is inflation. This is essentially because, among other things, our fledging industries have to source

capital abroad and in an inclement exchange rate, the consumers bear the burden of higher cost of production.

It is this type of analysis which we believe the philosopher in contemporary African society should concern himself or herself with. As Okafor (2004) suggests, this quest to "see philosophy in action is a challenge to philosophers so that they could match their theories with action" (Okafor 2004:32). Some contemporary philosophers, for example Ekanola (2007), are already bothered about the tasks before them and their colleagues by identifying critique of existing non-working ideologies as vital ingredient. Essentially, however, we must acknowledge that the core duty of contemporary philosophers is to expose "the contradiction" in which the man in African society is entangled with. By so doing, he or she would be able to "cancel and negate one sidedness in a more comprehensive system of thought" (Horkheimer, 1972:265). This, we believe is a major way by which the African philosopher as a professional in the second order discipline would rightly source his raw material, the way the early philosophers did, in the first order problematic of their milieu. We made this submission based on our avowed conviction that "Africa needs a new brand of science that needs not necessarily be western" (Ekwere, 2004:114) but that which is critical and rigorous in evaluating past and the present, for the sake of the future.

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