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ON THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

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Abstract

This paper offers an attempt at a working conception of African philosophy, one that draws from more than twenty-five years of teaching courses in both African philosophy and American philosophy at several American universities. Indeed, sixty years ago, the battle for and against definitional precision and clarity dominated the debate in African philosophy academic circles. On the one hand, the proponents of the definitional thesis seemed convinced of the superiority of universalism over particularism to the point of subscribing to the need for a transcendent definition of philosophy. From calls for a so-called scientific or technical definition of African philosophy emerged several somewhat absurd and parochial discourses from thinkers who subscribed, perhaps in good faith, to what they deemed to be the scientific and/or analytic nature of philosophy. To these well-meaning scholars, mostly trained at Western universities, philosophy appeared to be synonymous with its modes of production and/or, in some cases, even its modes of transmission. Indeed, for example, while some of them valued the so-called "argumentation and clarification" methods of some Western schools of thought over the universal human need for reflection on the fundamental questions of existence and the worldviews they entailed, others subscribed, instead, to a Kantian conception of philosophy, which they held as containing the necessary and sufficient conditions for distinguishing between philosophical and non-philosophical discourses. On the other hand, those thinkers, who rejected all attempts at definitional precision and clarity, appeared also to succumb to the temptation to count all Africanist projects as philosophical. In this paper, we emphasize the need for a progressive definition, which may be able to avoid the excesses of precision and clarity and, at the same time, recognize the complexity and diversity of the African philosophies without indulging in the need for inclusion at all costs.

Keywords

African Philosophy; American philosophy; progressive conception; future; academic discipline

Introduction

It has now been more than sixty years since the explosion of definitional and anti-definitional theses held as the most fundamental issue in African philosophy. Amongst the proponents of the definitional thesis, one may still remember such thinkers as Paulin Hountondji and Peter O. Bondurin who, convinced of the superiority of universalism over particularism, were quick to subscribe to the need for African philosophers to embrace some sort of transcendent definition of philosophy. Considering Hountondji's and Bondurin's insistence on the need for a so-called scientific definition of philosophy, for instance, one may still have vivid memories of the emergence of such absurd and parochial discourses as those of Henri Maurier and Kwasi Wiredu, who appeared to believe perhaps in good faith that philosophy is always scientific or analytic in nature. Unfortunately, as Joseph Omoregbe correctly points out, to these scholars, philosophy appeared to be synonymous to its modes of production or/and even its modes of transmission.[1] Indeed, for instance, while Kwasi Wiredu valued the argumentation and clarification methods of the British analytic schools of thought over the universal need for reflection on the fundamental questions of human existence with the worldviews they entailed, Henri Maurier subscribed, instead, to a preference for Kant's conception of philosophy, which he then set up as containing the "necessary and sufficient conditions" for any discourses to be properly labeled "African philosophy."[2] Here, Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani, for instance, has demonstrated that even the argumentation method that is deemed to be uniquely Western by Joseph Omoregbe, as a concession to Kwasi Wiredu's ardent desire for universalism, can be shown to be universal, that is, simply human.[3]

Fortunately, these universalistic and parochial discourses appear to have been given the appropriate scrutiny over the past sixty years and, thus, now appear to have been given either a proper burial or their well-

deserved place in the museum of the academic discipline referred to as African philosophy. Of course, parochial universalism still counts some able defendants within the Africanist academe,[4] but not only has their status regressed from majority to minority, it also appears that most of them seem to have learned to put the proper perspective on the relationship between universalism and particularism. One can only hope that all those who have subscribed over the years to the alleged superiority of the universalist paradigm will soon come to understand the tremendous damage caused by their parochial discourses, which, ironically, have had the unfortunate consequence of helping to perpetuate the denial of the African rationalities invoked by some notable Europeans such as Hegel, Kant, Levi-Bruhl, and others.[5]

On the other hand, one might have noticed the growing number of proponents of an anti-definitional thesis operating in many Africanistic academic circles. While these men and women of good faith seem to understand the hazard of a quest for definitional precision and clarity, they appeared to have also succumbed to the temptation for necessary and sufficient conditions. For instance, the late Henri Odera Oruka saw no contradiction in his call for all of us to "let one hundred flowers bloom"[6] while at the same time he undertook, under the disguise of what he referred to as "philosophic sagacity," to set himself up as the "Plato" of African philosophy.[7] Thus, in fact, he relied upon the same so-called Western paradigm he had claimed to refute.

Indeed, it appears that the search for a clear definition of African philosophy has tended to lead to all sorts of discourses of exclusion, which try to suppress the richness and diversity of the African modes of thought and their subsequent worldviews. No wonder why some philosophy departments even within the African universities have been quite reluctant to offer courses in African philosophy. To the contrary, the present discussion aims at emphasizing the need for a definition, which may be able to avoid the excesses of precision and clarity while, at the same time, recognizing the complexity and diversity of the African philosophies. It is, therefore, our firm belief that African philosophy needs, at this stage of its long, and sometimes unrecognized rich history, what we shall call a working definition that is committed to, as Leonard Harris points out, a "progressive tradition."[8]

The working definition of African philosophy offered in the ensuing discussion is the result of two things relevant to our academic life: (1) a firm commitment to a pragmatist approach to philosophy, and (2) a body of observations accumulated over more than twenty-five years of teaching courses in American philosophy and African philosophy at a number of American universities as well as during our participation at numerous professional gatherings. Firstly, over the years, our approach to philosophy has been founded on the firm belief that, as John Stuhr is correct to point out, philosophy is always history and culture-bound.[9] In other words, in Tsenay Serequeberhan's parlance, philosophy is always the result of the interplay between horizon and discourse.[10] Indeed, even staunch defenders of the Afrocentric approach to both African philosophy, in particular, and philosophy, in general, appear to have come to terms with this reality. As Henry Olela notes:

> The question which we must perhaps settle before proceeding with our investigation is: Are basic assumptions in essence distinguishable from philosophical assumptions? It seems that if one were to insist on distinguishing between the two, such a distinction would not be that one is metaphysical and the other empirical. The distinction would, furthermore, not lie in the fact that one is held by philosophers and the other held by laymen. The only distinction which may be rationally made would be the tradition in which the assumptions are made. Thus, we are here forced to recognize the impact of culture on philosophy: philosophy was not and is not immune to the universal human process of sharing and assimilating of culture traits; philosophy was not, is not, culture free.[11]

Secondly, our years of teaching both African and American philosophy courses have illuminated the various sources of the numerous misunderstandings inherent in some of our colleagues' understanding of such phrases as "American philosophy," "African philosophy," "Native American philosophy," or else.

Africa, as a continent, appears to be perpetually in crisis. Among many other upheavals, the Ebola outbreak, which paralyzed West Africa between 2013 and 2016, and the migration of thousands of Africans towards Europe via Northern Africa during the past decades appear to have shaken the foundations of some of the ideals allegedly held dear by most Africans. For instance, the Moroccan government's refusal to host the 2014 African Cup of Nations due to the Ebola outbreak appears to be a testament to the unreality of the legendary African solidarity. Likewise, political crises some of which involving senseless armed rebellions in DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia, etc., continue to destabilize the continent. Underneath these crises lies the reluctance by many Africans, especially power-hungry populist politicians, to embrace a pluralistic and melioristic approach to the African's life fundamental questions. As Kwame Nkrumah noted more than six decades ago, the three segments of post-colonial Africa continue to coexist uneasily each one intent on making a claim to some absolutism which is neither desirable nor possible.[12] Amidst all these destabilizing circumstances, can African philosophy be taught in a way that might alleviate some of the consequences of these crises? Could, for instance, a school curriculum offering a serious critique of the theory of vital forces as presented by such thinkers as Placide Tempels and Chinua Achebe, provide the necessary platform

for reforming the African beliefs in what is deemed to be a decent traditional funeral? Could such an approach to education prevent the spread of infectious diseases? Could it prevent the spread of such beliefs as those related to the divinity or invulnerability of some political, religious or military leaders? As Ali A. Mazrui notes in his examination of what he refers to as the "Six Paradoxes of Post-colonial Violence" which has been born out of the struggle for "nationalisms" and ethnic (tribal) identity, the African continent needs serious self-examination that might help reduce the severity of its ever-growing conflicts mainly caused by its "fatal borders" inherited from colonization.[13]

1. **Defining "African Philosophy" for Pedagogical Purposes**

In the light of John Dewey's conception of philosophy, African philosophy can be defined as the "criticism of goods and values"[14] related to the concepts "Africa" and "African." As such, it can also be construed as a "criticism of criticisms"[15] that ought to be contingent on these two concepts. This approach to philosophy avoids the false dichotomy forged by such distinctions as those between traditional and modern beliefs, religious and philosophical traditions, particular and universal values, etc. It rather seeks to conceive of these beliefs, traditions, and values as continuous. Those involved in the teaching and scholarship of American philosophy have come to realize that this conclusion is inescapable.

Consider, for example, how some college and university teachers of American philosophy approach the complexity of the modes of thought that stem from the ever-growing complexity of the American experiences. A course on American philosophy or philosophies, one could argue, must not fail to acknowledge all the modes of thinking that preceded the European invasion of the Americas. This means that to deliberately ignore the various Native Americans' ethnophilosophies would fail to do justice to American philosophy as an academic discipline since the experiences of the Seneca, Cherokee, Seminoles, among many others, are without any doubt of significant relevance to current American ways of both living and thinking. Here, for example, the arguments for and against the renaming of some American football teams either at the college or professional levels have provided ample evidence of the relevance of the Native Americans' ethnophilosophies in the lives of all Americans associated with these football teams.

In addition, genuine discussions of the early and current confrontations between the Native Americans' modes of thinking and living and those of the newcomers must provide foundational components to all courses that embrace the progressive conception of American philosophy we have discussed throughout this paper. This might include discussions on how, for example, such schools of thought as puritanism, American Enlightenment, American transcendentalism, and American pragmatism, in all its instantiations, have been enriched by their coexistence alongside the myriads of Native Americans' ways and modes of thinking and living which are spread out throughout the Americas. As Erin McKenna remarks in "The spirit of American Philosophy: Both/And," the vibrant debates that are currently prevalent during the annual meetings of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP) provide sufficient proof of the embrace by American philosophy teachers and scholars of "a sensibility to human fallibilism, an awareness of contingency and chance, and a willingness to own up to the inescapable plurality we face—the very things Bernstein called on us to embody in our thoughts and actions."[16]

Similarly, African philosophy must also be conceived as, to use Leonard Harris's terms, (1) "an array of ways of life or ethnophilosophies" (Bantu, Yombe, Igbo, Yoruba, Luo, Akan, etc.) and (2) "an array of texts" whose subject-matter involves a critical examination of fundamental questions contingent on the real problems relevant to the past, present, and future of Africa. The latter conception of African philosophy would then count among its various orientations (among others, Afrocentrism, hermeneutics, sage philosophy, etc.) the trend referred to as ethnophilosophy in contrast to the African ethnophilosophies conceived of as carriers of the ways of living and thinking of the various African ethnic groups. Here, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga correctly points out that, as a discipline studied in schools and contained in handbooks and anthologies,

> "Philosophy, as one would say, is a type of knowledge. It is part of the intellectual package that makes one educated, a human of culture. Anyway, it is universal in essence, and Western, Chinese, Indian or African, by Accident. Its Western version is presumably the clearest, the most precise and developed. But it is not different in nature from the others. It is the reason why it may be exercised by anyone with bad conscience and without chauvinism. Philosophy is one, like nature, human or cosmic. It is the science of what there is as such, the science of Being as being."[17]

To define philosophy as a criticism (and criticism of criticisms) of goods and values is to embrace what Leonard Harris refers to as "a normative dedication to a picture of philosophy as progressive."[18] Such a view subscribes to the belief that if a tradition were to emerge out of these criticisms of goods and values, it ought to be as pluralistic as its accidental instantiations. Indeed, as Harris puts it:

> "Valorizing historical figures is as misleading as leaving important historical figures silent. In this tradition, to deny that our decisions are normative choices is as misleading as contending that the voices we select provide a true picture of all the relevant conversations of the past."[19]

Therefore, it would be fruitless to pretend that current conceptions of philosophy as an academic discipline do justice to the so-called non-western schools of thought.

2. On the Various Approaches to the History of African Philosophy

The history of African philosophy has always been as complex as the history of the continent itself. However, one could plausibly claim that two main lines of research have so far emerged as dominant. On the one hand, one could count the disciples of George James' belief in the "Stolen Legacy"[20] which, they claim, goes all the way back to Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia. Among these, the Egyptologists and Afro-centrists seem to agree on the need for the African intellectuals and their Africanist allies to not only explore but also expose the fallacy of their radical opponents: the Euro-centrists. However, as Ato Sekyi-Out notes, there is perhaps sufficient space in the African academic circles for a "left universalism" that is not only prevalent in various "Africacentric essays" but also needs no "unmasking of universalism as European parochialism." Indeed, as he emphatically puts it:

> These [Africacentric] essays contest the vogue of anti-universalism that unites some postmodernists and pragmatists, some American communitarians and African nationalists, certain proponents of multiculturalism and run-of-the-mill relativists, for whom the first and the last word we invoke and must invoke not only to *assert* our ethical, political and aesthetic claims and judgments, but also to *justify* them, can only come from our distinct language world and historical circumstance: in sum, the practice of justification as tautology of assertion, an exercise in self-referential particularism.[21]

On the other hand, as we stated earlier, if we conceive of philosophy as a critical reflection conducted on the fundamental questions of existence that is present wherever there are human beings who are subject to what Joseph Omoregbe refers to as "subjective" and "objective" experiences,[22] then one can easily recognize the fallacy of relying on the "genetic method" so dear to the radical Afrocentrists. In other words, it is plausible to claim that African philosophy has always existed, exists in the present, and will always exist in the future as long as there have always been, are, and will be Africans who, either in the broad sense or in the so-called strict or technical sense, engage in a critical reflection of the fundamental questions raised by their experiences. Such experiences might well be both uniquely African and conceivably universal, in other words, they will always be human.

3. On the Need for Trends in African Philosophies

Over the years, some scholars have been tempted to follow in the steps of Odera Oruka whose "Four trends" appeared to gain serious consideration in several academic circles despite their various inherent contradictions.

However, several scholars have convincingly shown, for instance, that Oruka's quick dismissal of the rich and various African ethnophilosophies is implausible. Indeed, the relevance of the works of such scholars as Placide Tempels, John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, Marcel Griaule, Kwame Gyekye, Chinua Achebe, etc., on the African ways of living can be demonstrated with very little effort.

In addition, one can easily dismiss the distinction Oruka attempts to draw between "professional" ethnophilosophy and its broader counterparts. There is, indeed, sufficient space for scholars interested in exploring the methodologies and orientations of these ethnophilosophies. One could engage, for example, in the criticism of what some have labeled the "anachronism" of the "contradictory and yet fecund legacy of the African liberation struggle" and "'folklorism' of our theoretical efforts."[23] There is space for work on the denial of African authenticity or the "philosophication,"[24] to use Oruka's own contradictory characterization of some of his contemporaries' approach to the African sagacity, inherent in the works of the so-called professional African ethnophilosophers.

One could also explore how African philosophy, as an academic discipline, fits within the category of philosophy in Africa. Here, African philosophy as an academic field of study involving teaching and scholarship could be shown to be distinct from the work of philosophers of African or non-African origins engaged in teaching and scholarship not related (directly or indirectly) to the concepts "Africa" and "African." As Dennis Masaka correctly remarks:

> African philosophy has the potential to grow into a philosophy that could eventually attain a significant place in the philosophy curricula in Africa if those who are genuinely concerned with its present demotion to an inferior philosophy actively participate in its development and

> dissemination through the educational curriculum. Here, one might have in mind those people who genuinely want to see African philosophy reclaim its status as the principal philosophy that informs the lives of the indigenous people of Africa, and to become a significant part of the philosophy curriculum in Africa. This is necessary because, now, it would appear as if African philosophy is treated as a perverse philosophy and the promise of its inclusion in the philosophy curriculum arouses some feelings of disapproval within certain segments of the human race.[25]

In fact, today, several anthologies and collections have already brought to light the richness and diversity of the African ways of philosophical thinking. For example, in *African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women*, Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Louise du Toit bring together several voices that shed light on the real problems of real women who live real lives in Sub-Saharan Africa. As Chimakonam and Du Toit note, there is urgent need in African academic circles "to rethink women discourses in Africa, in African philosophy and in Africa's intellectual history, with the aim of ridding Africa's intellectual history of distortions and misrepresentations on the subject of women."[26] Such an ambitious project will stand no chance of any type of success if African intellectuals persist in their embrace of the speculative philosophies of their colonial masters. Here, as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni recommends, the African intellectuals must join in the fight for their "epistemic freedom" so far undertaken by some notable members of their circles such as, among many others, Ali A Mazrui, Kwame Nkrumah, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, etc.[27]

4. **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to show that African philosophy, as an academic discipline, does not need to rely on any genetic methods to prove both its existence and legitimacy. When it is approached correctly as a "criticism of goods and values" related to the concepts "Africa" and "African," African philosophy does not need to embrace some radical Afrocentrism that demands that it prove both its existence and validity in opposition to some parochial Eurocentrism. Although the particularity of the past, present, and future Africans' experiences might call for some *Africacentric* focus, it does not necessarily exclude a universalist approach to the various real problems that the real people of the African continent face in their daily existence. These problems demand solutions produced by philosophies of action born out of, to use Leonard Harris' words, "a normative dedication to a picture of philosophy as progressive." For the African intellectuals, the time for such philosophies of action is now. Obviously, in the challenging political environments currently expanding in most western societies where diversity or so-called non-western studies used to be valued and promoted through teaching and research fellowships and grants, African philosophy as an academic discipline needs urgent support from both the African political and academic leaders.

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[1] In his "African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today," Joseph I. Omoregbe, discusses at length the confusion displayed by such prominent African thinkers as Kwasi Wiredu and Anthony Flew.

[2] Tamba Nlandu, "The Fallacy of Universalism: The Nature and Status of African Philosophy Revisited," *International Studies in Philosophy*, 33:1, pp. 86-88.

[3] Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani, "African Philosophy and the Lingering Questions of Methodology." *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, 2020, p. 59.

[4] See for example Thabang Dladla's "African Philosophy? Questioning the Unquestioned," *Phronimon* 22, 2021, in which the author discusses at length the positions of several of these able defendants, including Peter O. Bondurin, L. Keita, C.S. Momoh, and Henri Odera Oruka.
[5] Tamba Nlandu, *Idem*.
[6] Henry Odera Oruka, "Sagacity in African Philosophy," in Tsenay Serequeberhan (Ed.), *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, New York: Paragon House, 1991, p. 48.
[7] By positioning himself as the only one capable of interpretating Mbuya's first order sagacious reasoning, Odera Oruka attempts to imply that the existence of a genuine, "academic," African philosophy that fulfills the criterion of "philosophy" as a second order discourse begins with him and the other so-called "professional philosophers," trained at and in Western schools of philosophy.
[8] Leonard Harris, "Prolegomenon to a Tradition: What Is American Philosophy?" In L. Harris et al (Eds.), *American Philosophies: An Anthology*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, pp. 5-6.
[9] John J. Stuhr, "John Dewey: Introduction," in John J. Stuhr (Editor), *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, 2nd Edition. New York: Oxford University Press p. 436.
[10] Tsenay Serequeberhan, "Philosophy and Post-Colonial Africa," p. 11.
[11] Henry Olela, "The African Foundations of Greek Philosophy," p. 43.
[12] Kwame Nkrumah in *Consciencism: Philosophy and ideology for De-Colonization*, Monthly Review Press, 1964, correctly predicted that Africa would be hit by all sorts of conflicts if its people fail to reconcile the fundamental differences of the principles underlying the three segments of its societies: the traditional, Western, and Islamic.
[13] Ali A Mazrui, p. 479-481
[14] John Dewey, "Existence, Value and Criticism," in *Experience and Nature*, LW 1: 298, 302.
[15] John Dewey, *Idem*.
[16] In this article, published in *The Pluralist: The Journal of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy* (Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 2025) under the theme "Reconsidering Pragmatism as a Living Movement: A special Issue Dedicated to Richard J. Bernstein," Erin McKenna notes that after years of approaching pragmatism as a canon resulting from "essentialist definitions of pragmatism," albeit divorced from the fundamental understanding of "pragmatism as a critique of America" which might then results in "understanding pragmatism as 'a living, evolving movement,'" "the diversity of invited societies on a SAAP program demonstrates an interest in the mutual transformation of often isolated philosophical discourses," and that is, indeed, "a sign of health," P. 79, p. 85.
[17] Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014, p. 173
[18] Leonard Harris, "Prolegomenon to a Tradition: What Is American Philosophy?" p. 5.
[19] Leonard Harris, *Ibid*., p. 6.
[20] See for example the contradictions inherent in Henry Olela's main arguments in his "The African Foundations of Greek Philosophy" in which he not only sets up philosophy as a universal and inevitable human activity but also goes on to assert the historical primacy of Ancient Egyptian thinkers over their Greek counterparts.
[21] Ato Sekyi-Otu, 2019. *Left Universalism, Africacentric Essays*. New York University: Routledge, 2019, pp. 12-3.
[22] Joseph I. Omoregbe, *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.
[23] As Tsenay Serequeberhan reminds us, both Kwasi Wiredu, in *Philosophy and An African Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 1), and Paulin J. Hountondji, in *African Philosophy: Myth and Realty* (Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 67), correctly call all of us "to interpretatively engage the present situation in terms of what Africa 'has been'—both in its ambiguous pre-colonial 'greatness' as well as in its colonial and neocolonial demise," p. 12,
[24] See Odera Oruka, *Ibid*., p. 55.
[25] Masaka, Dennis. 2018. "African Philosophy and the Challenge from Hegemonic Philosophy." *Education as Change* 22 (3), 2018, p. 17. See also, among others, Isaac E. Ukpokolo (2023), Kibujjo M. Kalumba (2006), and Wilfred Lajul (2013) for extensive discussions of various ways African philosophers can expand the horizons of their discourses.
[26] Jonathan O. Chimakonam, and Louise Du Toit, Louise (Eds.). *African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 7.
[27] See examples of these "epistemic freedom" fighters in table 2.2 titled "Decolonial intellectual currents /movements/philosophies," in *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. New York: Routledge, pp. 49-53.