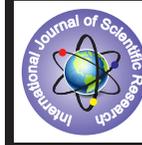


## African Philosophy and The Problem of Methodology



### Philosophy

**KEYWORDS :** African, philosophy, methodology, orature, collective, thought, problem.

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### ABSTRACT

*This piece asserts that the problem of methodology in African philosophy, like the issue of trends, dates back to the period when African thinkers began to question the perspective that traditional African beliefs and worldviews, as embedded in pre-colonial African cultures, constituted African philosophy. However, contrary to the universalist perspective, it argues that the cultural differences found among human beings accounts for the differences found in their methodology. To deny the differences in methodology is to deny the differences in worldview and culture. However, it observes that care has to be taken to avoid a situation of relativism, where every one's position, no matter what it looks like is considered to be good. It further addressed particular methodological issues of orature and collective thought dominant in African philosophy. However, this piece submits that the issue methodology in African philosophy, is a discourse between the universalist and particularist schools, between the modern and the traditional. While it hardly changes the dominant discourses in African philosophy, its relevance is that it keeps African philosophy alive on the dialectical path.*

### Introduction

The problem of methodology in African philosophy, like the issue of trends, dates back to the period when some African thinkers began to question the perspective that traditional African beliefs and worldviews, as embedded in pre-colonial African cultures, constituted African philosophy. Thus Ozumba (1995) would write that "The controversy that clouds the question of the existence of a corpus of work that can rightly be called African philosophy suggests a focus on methodology..." (p. 17). It is therefore not surprising that the classification of the developments in African philosophy by scholars as Ethno-philosophy, Universalist, Eclectic, Hermeneutic, Nationalistic trends or schools etc, are largely based on the methodologies that were employed by their proponents. So also the denial of philosophy to Africans by some Africans and Western thinkers is also based on the issue of methodology, precisely on the belief that philosophy everywhere should have a universal methodology. Reacting to the philosophical pride of the Universalist school, Ozumba (1995) argues that methodology cannot be the same because of the varied nature of opportunities among peoples. He writes,

The gift of nature varies from person to person, from locality to locality, from continent to continent. This being so, people can only use their naturally endowed gifts to meet their needs. To the extent that these gifts differ, the approach to the provision of solutions to these problems or need will differ as well. In essence, the argument is that our thoughts are fashioned along certain lines depending not only on our needs, but on our abilities. And as time goes on, depending on the path we have charted and followed, the divergence in terms of approach to meeting our needs will continue to widen.... We must not lose sight of the fact that a lot has happened in the world. Ranging from cross-cultural borrowing, wars, slavery, colonization involving deprivations, subjugation and necessarily the change of destinies of peoples of different localities. All these are very important in knowing why all areas in practice cannot do things alike (p. 18).

From the foregoing, Ozumba believes that the cultural differences found among human beings accounts for the differences found in their methodology. Thus to deny the differences in methodology is to deny the differences in worldview and culture. This is true, at least to the extent that we are not homogenous in many things that have determinant powers; thus, it would be impractical to think that we can solve our problems the same way. Agreeing with this perspective, Afolayan (2006) argues that,

It seems axiomatic that all philosophies are the natural products of cultures. That is, there is no escaping the "philosophical" in a people's experience once they begin to con-

front their environments. Philosophy therefore becomes a means of interrogating their relationship with their surroundings together with the various fundamental issues and problems they throw up for them. (p. 21).

Russell (1961), thinking along the same line, had argued that "... a philosopher is properly speaking, the outcome of his milieu, a man in whom were crystallized and concentrated thoughts and feelings which in a vague and diffused form, were common to a community to which he was a part" (p. 20).

This notwithstanding, care has to be taken to avoid a situation of relativism, where every one's position, no matter what it looks like is considered to be good. There are particular elements that should be present in the philosophical enterprise, no matter where it is done or how it is done, reason and logic are necessary elements. From this understanding, the Free Stylist perspective which emphasizes the putting of our thoughts together without any standard methodology is a perspective that negates the real nature of philosophy. While the Logical Analyst perspective which emphasizes rigorosity, clarity, precision and logicity, and the Conceptual Analysis perspective which emphasizes analysis and clarification of concepts, are very significant philosophical methods contain within themselves the basic ingredients for the doing of philosophy. While the Integrative school emphasizes a wide spectrum of methodologies, it must be emphasized that the elements of clarity, criticality, consistency, coherence, logicity and systematicity must not be absent. This notwithstanding, this chapter would concern itself, basically, with the treating of the methodological issues of orature and collective thought.

### Particular Methodological Problems

#### 1. Oral Tradition

Hounntondji (1976) had insisted that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy on the grounds that it is not written down. He further reasons that philosophy is a theoretical and systematic discipline motivated by a consciously dialectical discourse among individuals. He writes,

... philosophy never stops; its very existence lies in the to and fro of free discussion, without which there is no philosophy. It is not a closed system but a closed history, a debate that goes from generation to generation, in which every thinker, every author, engages in total responsibility: I know i am responsible for what I say, for the theories I put forward....A philosophical... work... is intelligible only as a moment in a debate that sustains and transcends it. it always refers to antecedent positions, either to refute them or to confirm and enrich them. It takes on meaning only in relation to that history, in relation to the term of an ever changing debate in which the sole stable element is the constant reference to

the one self-same object, to one sphere of experience, the characterization of which, incidentally, is itself part of the evolution. (pp. 72, 83).

The criticism of Hountondji of ethno-philosophy on the basis of oral tradition cannot be sustained. Philosophy is not philosophy because it has been written down; it is philosophy because it is first an idea. This would question the philosophiness of the ideas of Socrates who never wrote down his thought, but were later put down by his disciple Plato. Writing is not the only way of transmitting information, oral tradition is one. As has already been done by Tempels (1959) and Mbiti (1969), professionals can collect the African wealth of ideas and critically analyse them, especially for the enlightenment of many traditional Africans who are yet to be persuaded on the distinction between philosophy, religion, mysticism and telepathy.

Moreover, the importance of oral tradition in African philosophy is based on the importance the African attaches to the 'spoken word'. Jahn (1958) observes that "All the activities of men, and all the movement in nature, rest on the word, on the productive power of the word" (p. 126). As such,

If there were no word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no procreation, no change, no life... For the word holds the course of things in train and changes and transforms them. And since the word has this power, every word is an effective word, every word is binding. There is no 'harmless', noncommittal word. Every word has consequences. Therefore the word binds the muntu. And the muntu is responsible for his word (p. 133).

Jahn (1958) believes that African medicine, talisman, magic, poison etc are only effective through the word. Thus, all African medicines are ineffective without the genuine power of the word. A man is not just cured by the medicine but by the words that issue forth from the mouth of the medicine man. Thus, the stronger a medicine man, the stronger his word and the stronger will his medicine be. Generally, the African has more faith in the power of the word than in the power of the substance given to him by the medicine man. Blessing, curse, magic, incantation, exorcism, etc., are based on the power of the word.

Although Africa had recorded feats of civilization before her encounter with Europe, Jahn (1958) observes that two cultural achievements were absent: architecture and writing. This has further crippled the applause expected of African civilization since modern science rates writing as a basic tenets of civilization. For those who have writing are, according to Jahn, "thought to be capable of retaining past experience and so of hastening from progress to further progress, while those without writing are said to be at the mercy of historical accident" (p. 185). Citing the perspective of Levi-Strauss, Jahn contrary to Hountondji, gives another position on writing and cultural progress. Levi-Strauss has argued that there is no correlation between writing and cultural progress. First he believes that the greatest time in human history is not the discovery of writing but the Neolithic age which brought the cultivation of fields, domestication of animals and arts. Pointing out to the thousands of years that preceded the advent of writing in Europe, during which her civilization were still passed from one generation to another. He further argued that writing had led to the formation of castes and classes, favouring the exploitation rather than the enlightenment of men. Citing an instance, he spoke of the Egyptians who summoned thousands to work on monumental buildings through writing, and here lies the nexus between writing and architecture. Although writing is significant, Jahn observes that the 'word' is more powerful, permanent and mightier in Africa than any writing that can be lost. He further observed that the primary purpose of writing is not to preserve information but to communicate to people and Africans have beautiful ways of communicating. He wrote,

The African, however, did not need an alphabet to convey information; instead they developed the drum language, which is superior to writing for that purpose. It is quicker than any mounted messenger and it can convey its message

to a greater number of people at one time than telegraph or telephone. Only recently has the wireless come to excel in this respect the language of the drums. (p. 187).

When it was necessary to preserve the information, they were put into rhymes, alliterations and rhythms which aided memories, and were more retained than prose.

#### **If all Jahn has said is true, Hountondji (1976) asked a fundamental question:**

Should we, in order to remain ourselves, renounce writing and pretend to ignore what we have long known, deceive ourselves and others as we continue to proclaim the superiority of our oral cultures, write lengthy indictments against writing, in articles which, by their very existence refute in practice what they pretend to say? Or should we take note of the real process of our thinking today, and the role of writing in the development of all research, including research in oral cultures? (p. x).

Hountondji needs to understand that what African philosophers like Jahn are saying in support of oral tradition is not that oral tradition be revived and written culture allowed to die. No! The argument of African philosophers contrary to his position is that African philosophy expressed in oral culture is philosophy. The oral stage is a period in the development of African philosophy, and the fact that it is not written does not make it unphilosophical as he had argued. Now that we have written tradition with its opportunities as regards preservation and transmission, it can be employed, but not to the extent of arguing that thoughts before written culture cannot be considered as philosophy.

#### **2. Collective Philosophy**

African philosophy has been compared to western philosophy by scholars, and they argue that while western philosophy is the record of the philosophies of individual persons, with their thoughts constituting its framework and its dialectical development, for instance, we have Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hegel, Russell, Whitehead, Raws, Rorty etc., when it comes to African philosophy, Afolayan (2006) wrote that "Instead of the gallery of individual philosophers who symbolize the cultures confrontation with its experiences, ... there is an attempt to summarize the philosophical enterprise in Africa into a collective, communal framework" (p. 22). Criticizing oral tradition as the cause of group philosophy, Appiah (1992), wrote, "Oral tradition have a habit of only transmitting consensus" (p.92). based on the collective character of African philosophy, Hountondji (1976) described African philosophy as simply a myth, the myth of unanimity and consensus. It is not surprising that he rejects concepts such as Igbo philosophy, Akan philosophy, Bantou philosophy or Dogon philosophy. Reacting to Hountondji's perspective, Gyekye (1987) accuses him of denigrating, if not ignoring

...the relevance and impact of the culture on the reflections of the individual thinker. Believing, as they do, that philosophizing is a wholly individualistic affair; they fail to recognize that the thinker performs operates on the diffuse and inchoate ideas of the cultural milieu. We obviously cannot divorce the philosophy of an individual thinker from the ideas current among the people, for the philosophy of the individual thinker is rooted in the beliefs and assumptions of the culture. (p. 25).

While it is accepted as true that African philosophy, in the past, is collective, it is also good to mention that its collective character does not mean that it ceases to be philosophy or critical. Gyekye (1987) argues that,

"In Africa's historical past, there has been an absence of ... known and identifiable individual thinkers who stand out and can claim to have originated specific philosophical doctrines and to whom we can trace such doctrines" (p. 24). But this is not to say that there were no individual thinkers, for that they are not known does not mean that they did not exist. He goes on to write,

But surely, it was individual wise men who created African 'collective' philosophy. A particular thought or idea is, as regards its genesis, the product of an individual mind. And although it is logically possible for two or more individuals to think the same thought or to have the same idea at the same time, nevertheless, the production of the thought as such is the work of the mind of each of the individuals concerned. It is always an individual's idea or thought or proposition that is accepted and gains currency among other people; at this stage, however, it is erroneously assumed to be the collective thought of the people. (p. 24).

Gyekye (1987), thus understands the idea of collective thought as employed by Hountondji as a misnomer. He writes further,

There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as collective thought, if this means that ideas result from the intellectual production of a whole collectivity. What has come to be described a collective thought is nothing but the ideas of individual wise people; individual ideas that, due to lack of doxographic tradition in Africa, became part of the pool of communal thought, resulting in the obliteration of differences among these ideas, and in the impression that traditional thought was a monolithic system that does not allow for divergent ideas. (p. 24).

Gyekye maintains that there is a strong link between philosophy and culture. Although African philosophy is regarded as a collective philosophy, borne from individual minds, and although we regard the philosophy of the West as composed of individual thinkers, they were furnished with the ideas, beliefs and thoughts of their society. Explaining why they are referred to as Oriental philosophy, speaking of the Oriental mind, British philosophy, speaking of the British Mind, European philosophy, speaking of the European mind, German philosophy, speaking of the German mind etc.

### Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the problem of methodology in African philosophy, focussing primarily on the methodological issues of oral tradition and collective thought in African philosophy. Although some scholars have treated issues of language and historiography in African philosophy as methodological issues, under one heading, I have decided to treat them as independent topics. However, generally, the issues on methodology so far treated is a discourse between the universalist and particularist schools, between the modern and the traditional. And the relevance of this discourse is that it keeps African philosophy alive on the dialectical path.

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