



A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This piece argues that there is a possibility of a history of African philosophy, which is strongly linked to the problem of methodology, precisely the problem of orature and collective thought. Contrary to the perspective of the universalists, it traces the historical evolution of African philosophy from the Tempelcian period and even beyond. It moves beyond a discussion on the possibility of the history of African philosophy to a discussion of its periodization. It submits that the periods of the development of African philosophy can be categorized into the Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary traditions of African philosophy.

KEYWORDS : History, Historiography, African, Philosophy, Ancient, Medieval, Modern, Contemporary.

Introduction

Copleston (1946) in his discourse on the importance of the study of the history of philosophy, maintained that even if all the philosophies of the past are refuted and thus dead systems, errors can always be instructive. He wrote,

To him especially who does not set out to learn a given system of philosophy but aspires to philosophize ab ovo, as it were, the study of the history of philosophy is indispensable, otherwise he will run the risk of proceeding down blind valleys and repeating the mistake of his predecessors, from which a serious study of past thought might perhaps have saved him. (p. 3).

Thus Senghor (cited by Afolayan 2006) would say that "He who does not know his history is condemned to relive it" (p. 33). It is in this regard that Aristotle (1941), before the study of the four causes of things in his *Metaphysics* began by calling to his aid those who have conducted this investigation in the past. He wrote,

Evidently, we have to acquire knowledge of the original causes... we have studied these causes sufficiently in our work on nature, but yet, let us call to our aid those who have attacked the investigation of being and philosophized about reality before us. For obviously they too speak of certain principles and causes; to go over their views then, will be of profit to the present inquiry, for we shall either find another type of cause, or be more convinced of the correctness of those which we now maintain. (p. 693, No. 3).

He thus began his analysis from Thales, Anaximenes, Diogenes, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Leucippus, Parmenides, Xenophanes, Pythagoras, through Socrates to Plato, studying and criticizing their perspectives on the nature of reality. At the end of his historical study, he wrote thus of the fruit his historical investigation thus,

From what has been said, then, and from the wise men who have now sat in council with us, we have got thus much- on the one hand from the earliest philosophers, who regard the first principle as corporeal... and of whom some suppose that there is one corporeal principle, others that there are more than one, but both put these under the head of matter (p. 700. No. 4-5).

In the *City of God*, Augustine, in his study of the end of man, like Aristotle makes a historical survey of the different perspectives on this issue, through to Plato, who was his guide. Like Aristotle, by going historical, he positioned himself for a better analysis of the subject matter. Thus Oguejiofor (2008) avers that "To think historical in the philosophical enterprise is thus to place oneself in a position of relevance, which in turn involves understanding and self understanding" (p. 22). This spells the importance of the study of the history of African philosophy. The basic questions that a historiography of African Philosophy will be confronting are: when did the art of philosophizing begin in Africa and what are its historical antecedents? In responding to this question there is an opposing side and a proposing side. While the proposing side argues for the historicity of African philosophy,

which has been in existing long before the advent of colonialism, the opposing side argue that what is referred to as ancient African philosophy is no philosophy but sociology. This study would be divided into two segments: the possibility of the history of African philosophy and the problem of the periodization of the history of African philosophy.

The Possibility of the History of African Philosophy

The issue of the possibility of the history of African philosophy is strongly linked to the problem of methodology, precisely the problem of orature and collective thought. There is no doubt that the philosopher who believes that Placid Tempels' work and that of Alexis Kagame are part of the corpus of what should be regarded as philosophy, like Gyekye and Jahn will certainly date the history of philosophy to them and even beyond them, thus, they, maybe, serving as the Thales and Anaximenes of African philosophy. However, philosophers like Hountondji, who do not believe that the thoughts of philosophers like Placid Tempels and Alexis Kagame are philosophy, and rather consider them as sociological studies would not agree that the history of African philosophy dates back to Tempels and Kagame.

Hountondji (1976) had argued that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy on the grounds of orature and the absence of dialectics. 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).

Thus for Hountondji, as for Wirendu (1991) ethnophilosophical thinking wrapped within the pedagogy of orature, is a pre-text because it predates the emergence of a textual and discursive tradition, which they believe is significant to the formulation of the history of any philosophy. Oguejiofor (2002) criticized Wirendu in a way that leaves lesions for Hountondji. He argued that the straight forward implication of Wirendu's perspective is that "...he is arguing from the background of other regions or cultures of the world, and taking such standpoint as standard" (p. 118). More so, Wirendu and Hountondji's pattern of reasoning raises the same question over and over again; if as Afolayan (2006) has observed that Hountondji is uncompromising in his legislation of a fringe existence for orature outside the perimeter of universal philosophy; how about the work of Socrates, was it written

down by him? And yet it is included in the corpus of what we refer to as philosophy. As much as writing in the contention of Goody (1977) encourages an open system and the opportunity to scrutinize discourse, orature did as well at the time, even though not in the same way that writing does. We could argue that Socrates was an individual thinker responding to the Sophists basically, but who says that there are no individual thinkers in Africa philosophy? As Gyekye had argued,

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).

Another question is if the ideas expressed in African traditional philosophy were dialogical? Yes they were. Before these ideas were accepted, individual thinkers, evident in the Sage Philosophy of Oruka (1991), sometimes sat together and at other times as individuals through argumentation arrived at that which is collectively accepted.

Wirendu (1991) further argues that there is a need to develop a tradition of philosophy in Africa which presupposes a minimum of organic relationships among its elements. Oguejiofor (2002) interprets Wirendu's perspective as including "...a sort of independence in the sense in which the existence of the results of a given thinker is dependent on the existence or the activities of his forebears in the philosophical enterprise" (p. 118). Oguejiofor goes on to criticize this view thus,

However, it does not seem that organic connection is a determinant factor as Wirendu is supposing it to be. The reason for this is that, very often, such a structural connection and dependence is not too evident in other instances where we speak confidently of traditions of philosophy. Let us take the Greek philosophical tradition as an example. One easily finds a strong connection between Aristotle and Plato, his teacher, in spite of the critical stance of the student towards his master. But going backwards in time, is there any evidence that the theory of Thales, the father of Greek philosophy, that all is water is in any organic way responsible for Anaximander's theory that all is boundless, or that of Anaximenes that all is air? These early Ionian philosophers no doubt addressed similar cosmological questions which may have been influenced by some common circumstances of their lives. It is not however certain how far one theory is organically connected with the other. There is no convincing evidence that they departed from a consideration of the theories of their forebears or that they were even aware that such forebears ever existed. These so-called cosmological theories were formulated in maxims or legends cited by later writers. (pp. 118-119).

Commenting further, Oruka (1997) write,

What we know as the Chinese philosophy is no more than Confucianism from Confucius (551-479 BC). Taoism from Lao-tzu, Maoism from Mo-Ti and Maoism from chairman Mao-Tse-tung. We must note that these philosophies are not harmonious with each other. We call them Chinese philosophy only because they are composed by Chinese thinkers or philosophers. (p. 31).

If this is what Wirendu calls organic connection, then it is present in the history of African philosophy. Oguejiofor (2002) spoke of the emphasis on man as a special characteristic of African philosophy. This characteristic is present whether in oral tradition or written tradition. It serves as an organic connection, linking the thoughts of Africans, both past and present. In this sense, there is already an organic connection in African philosophy.

Moreover, the idea of a tradition of discourse is very evident in the work of Tempels, in fact, his work was a dialogue with the European colonial powers who thought at the time that Africans had no philosophy. His work was a response to a question raised by Europe. It was an antithesis to a thesis. In fact, in him is found the beginning of the

tradition of dialectical reasoning, and thus philosophy. Thus from the foregoing, one can say that there is the possibility of the history of African philosophy. There now remains the question of the possibility of the periodization of African philosophy.

The Problem of the Periodization of African Philosophy

A cursory glance at the development of literature in the history of African philosophy reveals variations as to what the number and designation of periods should be. While Ogbenga (1990) and Osuagwu (2001) have developed four chronological periods of ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary, Keita (1984) and Omoregbe (1990) have developed three periods of ancient, medieval and modern. Although these scholars differ in the number and designation of periods, they all arrogate great antiquity to the history of African philosophy. Certainly, thinkers like Hountondji and Wirendu will have nothing to do with this classification because of their emphasis on writing. Okolo (1987) and Sheptulin (1978) who argue that philosophy must be done, people who have attained some level of literacy, which in his perspective contributes to man's mental maturity and development, will also not arrogate antiquity to African philosophy. This period in Anglo-phone Africa is the period after the Second World War. Okolo talks about a period of formal philosophical reflection, designating the time of man's mental maturity. He further distinguishes between philosophy in a loose sense and in the strict sense. However, the question arising from these categorization is: if philosophy is formal or informal, loose or strict, is it still philosophy? If they are all philosophy, then he should have categorized two periods in the development of African philosophy and not to say that it did not exist. Okolo rather categorizes the history of African philosophy into the literate African past and the literate African present. These notwithstanding, it is my opinion that African philosophy be divided into four periods, which also are four traditions: the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary periods or traditions.

Ancient Tradition of African Philosophy

This period in the contention of Osuagwu and Obenga, covers the North African Egyptian civilizations and mystery systems dating from 3000 to 300 BC. The elements within the time frame covered, registers its agreement with Onyewuenyi (1993) who maintains that Greek philosophy is the stolen legacy of ancient African philosophy. It includes the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. Thus, the philosophy of this period was indigenous to Africans, and untainted by foreign ideas. Looking back at this period, Tempels (1959) wrote that "I confidently hope to be able to convince my readers that real philosophy can be found among indigenous peoples and that it should be sought among them" (p. 17). Wirendu and Hountondji that excluded the Ancient era from the history of African philosophy, can be said to have only concentrated on the Modern tradition of African philosophy.

Medieval Tradition of African Philosophy

This period is further divided into two periods: the earlier and the later. The earlier period the North African history of Christian philosophy, covering the period from the second to the seventh centuries AD. The later period covers the Arobo-Islamic activities of about the 10th – 15th centuries. Onyibor (2006) disagrees with Osuagwu on the classification of the history of Medieval Christian philosophy as belonging to the history of African philosophy. He argues that they were not based on African experience but rather on the Greco-Roman and Jewish Christian traditions that dominated that period of the world. He says that they belong to period of philosophy in Africa and not African philosophy. It sounds very ridiculous how one can make such a distinction. The question we should be asking is, were they Africans? Were they born in Africa? To say that they are to be excluded is to deny Africa the contribution she made to the development of western thought. Augustine was the first religious man to introduce African communalism to the religious life. This is to indicate that there was an impute from their Africanness. They were Africans by birth and they did their work in Africa. As Onyibor observed "The history of African philosophy of this period should be geared towards discovering the influence of African culture and tradition on the Christian and later Islamic philosophy of this period" (p. 174).

Modern Tradition of African Philosophy

The modern period include philosophical activities in Africa between the 15th and early part of the 20th centuries. The works of scholars, such as Claude Summer, the Ethiopian philosopher who wrote on the works of Zaera Ya'eqob, Walda Heywat and the on the Maxims of Skendes; the works of Wilhelm Anton Amo, J. Jahn the second historian of African philosophy, J. S. Mbiti, Placid Tempels, Alexis Kagame, Marcel Griaule who philosophized in Europe is included. At this level, it is not necessary that the person who should be considered an African philosopher should be an African. As long as the person reflects on the African experience. This stage marked the beginning of philosophy as an academic discipline.

Contemporary Tradition of African Philosophy

The contemporary period of African philosophy covers from the 19th century to date. The contemporary age has marked a new page on the discourse on African philosophy. It was a time when issues regarding the nature of African philosophy and who should be considered an African philosopher was raised and reflected upon. Issues regarding the schools of African philosophy. It extends from the later part of the 20th century to the present. Philosophers who belong to this period are many and many are still coming up: Paulin Hountodji, Kwasi Wiredu, Godfrey Ozumba, Andrew Uduigwomen, J. O. Sodipo, O. Oruk, P. O. Bodunrin, J. O. Sodipo, E. Edeh, K. Gyekye, B. C. Okolo, Kanu, I. A. etc.

Conclusion

A cursory glance at the foregoing arguments regarding the periodization of African philosophy would reveal that their positions are determined by their understanding of African philosophy, and thus the beginning of African philosophy. There is a very strong link between the understanding of African philosophy and the period of its beginning. If on the one hand, philosophers argue that the periodization of philosophy should begin with the time when writing began as evident in Hountondji. It is worth observing at this juncture that there is obviously a long history of writing obtainable in different parts of Africa, like in Egypt, Ethiopia and Senegal. The works of Zaera Ya'eqob and Walda Heywat that were put together by Claude Summer, the first historian of African philosophy, were not handed down orally but were written down. Thus writing goes beyond Tempels. If on the other hand, philosophers lay emphasis on organic connection as seen in Wiredu, the idea of life and man in African philosophy provides enough organic connection.

However, I strongly believe that the difficulty towards the systematization and periodization of African philosophy has been greatly crippled by the criticisms of scholars such as Wiredu and Hountondji, given the fact that they are the most prolific and best known names in the area of African philosophy, this is not in any way to undermine their contributions. However, African philosophers must rise up to the challenge of developing their own history for the continuing evolution of African philosophy. As Oguejiofor (2006) said, "Writing such history will be the last complement of the history of Africa" (p. 35).

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