

The Meaning and Nature of African Philosophy in a Globalising World

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Abstract: *The clash in positions of the Universalist and Particularist schools of African philosophy are to a great extent determined by the degree to which a philosopher has been globalized. This is seen in the fact that most philosophers who did their philosophical studies abroad advocate for the Universalist school. As the world globalizes and is globalized, this piece considers it relevant to study the meaning and nature of African philosophy. It studied the nature of philosophy, the meaning of African philosophy, the factors that stimulated the debate on African philosophy, the universality of philosophy as a basis for Africa philosophy, and the Africanness and philosophiness of African philosophy. Moving in-between the Universalist and Particularist schools of thought, this piece submits that in a globalizing world, African philosophy must have a universal and particular character. While the particular emphasizes its Africanness, the Universal emphasizes its philosophical character.*

A paper presented at the 2014 Conference of the Association of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars. Held at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Chike Okoli Multi-Purpose Hall. 25th -28th June 2014.

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of the nature of African philosophy has engaged the minds of African philosophers for decades. This has been the preoccupation of Tempels (1959), Jahn (1958), Mbiti (1969), Gyekye (1987), Edeh (1985), Oruka (1991), Iroegbu (1995), Masolo (1995), Hountondji (1995), Odhiambo (1995), etc. Gyekye (1987) had argued that the issue of the nature of African philosophy became recurrent in the reflections of contemporary African philosophers for two reasons: first is the lack of indigenous written philosophical tradition in Africa, excluding Ethiopia and Egypt. He avers that "... there was no existing tradition of written philosophy not only to guide their perceptions of the nature of African philosophy, but also to constitute a coherent and viable conceptual and normative framework that they could explore and develop" (p. x). It becomes evident therefore, why such questions of unwritten tradition very evident in discourses on African philosophy might not emerge in Western, Chinese and Japanese philosophy because of their long tradition of writing linked to their cultural and historical experiences. These notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to observe that African philosophy is not a written philosophy, not implying that it cannot be written, but that it is basically embodied in proverbs, aphorisms and pithy sayings; its philosophicality is not determined by writing. It is in this regard that Busia (1963) avers that "The African has not offered learned and divergent disputations to the world in writing, but in his expression in conduct of awe, and reverence for nature, no less than in his use of natural resources, he demonstrates his own epistemology" (p. 148). Moreover, the Pre-Socratics did not write, the Upanishads and Vedas, which are Indian religious and philosophical classics were not written down for centuries and yet they are philosophies. Thus, the absence of writing does not mean the absence of philosophical thinking or ideas.

Second, the argument is determined by the fact that many African philosophers received their philosophical training in western countries like Britain, USA, France, Germany etc, and are finding it difficult to accept African thought as philosophy. For most of them, their understanding of philosophy has been shaped by their experience of western philosophy. Thus they judge the validity of African philosophy from what they know as western philosophy or from the framework of the categories forged by the West. A paramount member of this school of thought is

Paulin Hountondji. To this colour of minds, the outcome of the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists held in Rome in 1959 is very instructive,

Considering the dominant part played by philosophical reflection in the elaboration of culture, considering that until now the west has claimed a monopoly of philosophic reflection, so that philosophic enterprise no longer seems conceivable outside the framework of the categories, mentalities, concepts and experiences forged by the West, considering that the philosophic effort of traditional Africa has always been reflected in vital attitudes and has never had purely conceptual aims, the commission declares:

1. that for the African philosopher, philosophy can never consist of reducing the African reality to Western systems;
2. that the African philosopher must base his enquiries upon the fundamental certainty that the Western philosophic approach is not the only possible one; and therefore, (a) urges that the African philosopher should learn from the traditions, tales, myths and proverbs of his people, so as to draw from them the laws of a true African wisdom complementary to the other forms of human wisdom and to bring out the specific category of African thoughts. (b) calls upon the African philosopher, faced by the totalitarian or egocentric philosophers of the West, to divest himself of a possible inferiority complex, which might prevent him from starting from his African being to judge the foreign contribution (p. 441).

These notwithstanding, in responding to the question of the nature of African philosophy, this chapter would study first the nature of philosophy, and analyse the meaning of the concept African. It would further enquire into the factors that stimulated the debate on African philosophy, the universality of philosophy and the philosophiness of African philosophy.

2. THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy is from two Greek words: *φιλο* (*philo*) meaning *love* and *σοφία* (*sophia*) meaning *wisdom*. Brought together, it means 'the love of wisdom'. The concept is a neologism attributed to Pythagoras. Thus he presents philosophy as a high and supreme achievement of man, and philosophers as aspirants to or proponents of wisdom. According to Maziarz (1987), in this relatively strict sense, philosophy implies both the process of questioning and the results of this interrogation as embodied in a personal or public enterprise of value to mankind. As an academic discipline, it exercises the principles of reason and logic in an attempt to understand reality and answer fundamental questions about knowledge, life, morality and human nature. Thus Teichmann and Katherine (1999) define Philosophy as:

... a study of problems which are ultimate, abstract and very general. These problems are concerned with the nature of existence, knowledge, morality, reason and human purpose. (p. 1).

Quinton (1995) corroborates with Teichmann and Katherine when he avers:

Philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value). Each of the three elements in this list has a non-philosophical counterpart, from which it is distinguished by its explicitly rational and critical way of proceeding and by its systematic nature. Everyone has some general conception of the nature of the world in which they live and of their place in it. Metaphysics replaces the un-argued assumptions embodied in such a conception with a rational and organized body of beliefs about the world as a whole. Everyone has occasion to doubt and question beliefs, their own or those of others, with more or less success and without any theory of what they are doing. Epistemology seeks by argument to make explicit the rules of correct belief formation. Everyone governs their conduct by directing it to desired or valued ends. Ethics, or moral philosophy, in its most inclusive sense, seeks to articulate, in rationally systematic form, the rules or principles involved. (p. 666).

With Quinton's definition of philosophy, which brings out its metaphysical, epistemological and ethical dimensions, it is obvious that philosophy could be defined from a variety of perspectives. This is evident in the historical evolution of philosophy. For the Ionian School of Philosophy,

philosophy would be nothing more than asking and offering rational explanations of the universe. For the sophists, it would be questioning the foundations of traditional religion, morality and the gods from a subjective perspective. In Socrates, philosophy is acquiring knowledge through questions and answers; thus would involve a process of asking questions and questioning answers until answers are unquestionable and questions unanswerable. For the Cynics and Cyreniacs, who exaggerated Socrates' teachings, philosophy would be a path to self-knowledge and thus self-sufficiency. Patristic and Early Medieval philosophers would understand philosophy as the handmaid of theology: an instrument for clarifying theological concepts. Descartes would understand philosophy as a search for the certainty of knowledge. This notwithstanding, the primary purpose for enquiry in philosophy, according to Grayling (1998) is for insight into reality. He writes: "The aim of philosophical inquiry is to gain insight into questions about knowledge, truth, reason, reality, meaning, mind, and value" (p. 1). These questions are related to concrete circumstances. Thus even though philosophy is general and abstract, it also relates to concrete circumstances as it enables people to understand the issues at stake on the political, economic, social, ethical, religious etc concrete circumstances of life, and thereby contribute to changing the world.

3. AFRICAN AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Africa provides the *locus* or *locale* for doing the philosophy called African. It is in this regard that the analysis of the concept Africa is of great importance. Achen (1913) argues that the origin of the concept *Africa* depicts its geographical setting. *Africa* is of Phoenician origin and it was first used by the Romans to refer to the territory about the city of Carthage. However, Ki-zerbo (1981) states that *Africa* is used to denote the land of sunshine, of black race and mostly refers to the sub-Saharan regions of Negroes. Its etymology can be traced to the Latin adjective "aprica", which means sunny. This notwithstanding, in this piece, the idea of Africa encompasses the territory about the city of Carthage and the sub-Saharan Africa.



Fig1.

Africa is the second largest of the Earth's seven continents, covering 30,244,000 sq km (11,677,000 sq mi), including its adjacent islands with 54 countries. Robert (2003) observes that it encompasses 23 percent of the world's total land area. In 2000 some 13 percent of the world's population, an estimated 797 million people, lived in Africa, making it the world's second most populous continent, after Asia. Knappert and Pearson (1976), state that its peoples are divided into more than 1,000 ethnic groups, with different languages, social customs, religions and way of life. Onyeocha (1997), articulated the geo-numerical identity of Africa thus,

Africa is the world second largest continent. It covers an area of 11, 617, 000 square miles. It is three times the size of Europe (10, 400, 000 square kilometres and 4,000, 000 square miles) and contains about four hundred million inhabitants. Africa is divided into twenty five major ethnic groups speaking about seven hundred languages. It contains within it every known type of topography and climatic condition, except the Arctic cold. There are in the North the Sahara, and in the South the Kalahari Desert, with permanent snow in the Kilimanjaro. Also found in Africa are jungle areas, temperate zones, swamps and Savannah. Finally, some of the highest falls and longest rivers in the world- the Nile, Niger, Zaire (now Congo), and Zambesi rives- are also found in Africa. (p. 16).

From the geo-numerical designation of Africa, one can point to a place, or even on a map and say that this is Africa. With this, one can call someone from this area an African. However, Njoku (2002) argues that the question of who is an African goes beyond mere geographical location or designation. This is because, there are so many people in the African continent who are not Africans, as there are many people from African in Diaspora who do not accept that they are Africans. As such, a single characteristic such as colour, ancestry or geography does not settle the question of who or what is an African? Be that as it may, it does provide an insight into what or who an African is, but still makes difficult the question of which ideas are to be regarded as African philosophy.

4. FACTORS THAT STIMULATED THE DEBATE ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

The question of whether there is an African philosophy or not was largely born out of the popular Western portrayal of Africa in books by ethnologists and historians. They popularized the face of an Africa that was savage, who could do nothing, develop nothing or create nothing, even historical. The bastardized image of Africa raised the question as to if the people so described could develop a philosophy of their own. Benjamin (2010) observes that for centuries, there was a systematic and ruthless attempt to deny Africa the fundamental human right of self-determination and self-identity. The *Black Consciousness Movement* in Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, South America, and throughout the Pan-African world was a reaction and an attempt towards reaffirming the identity of Africa and its people. Three factors gave rise to the emergence of the debate on African identity, and thus philosophy.

4.1. Ideological Race Classification

The 19th century was the age of racism par excellence. It was a season when theories and ideas about the nature of the human person were at cross-roads. Charles Darwin produced his theory on the "origin of species by natural selection" in which he stated that from all variations of life found in the world, nature selects certain of them for survival while others are marked for extinction. Drawing from the impact of the Darwinian racial ideology, Berge (1973) insists that evolutionary thought is the alleged rationale for the many evils and harmful practices of the 19th and 21st centuries. It swept through Germany in the 20th century and sowed in it one of the most heinous manifestations of racism in human history, culminating in the crematoria of death camps in the 1940's; and also through Africa, giving rise to the most widespread, enduring and virulent form of racism. This according to Masolo (1994), was based on cultural bias, expressed and intensified in the writings of Western scholars.

Linnaeus (1758), writing in the 18th century, stated that all creatures were arranged by God in a great chain of hierarchy with human beings at the head. He further indicated that human beings have their own hierarchy of being, with the black race closest to the lowest animals. In this hierarchy, the white race occupied the highest position and as such the superior race. The *Americanus* were considered as tenacious, contented, free and ruled by custom. The *Europeaus*,

he says are light, lively, inventive and ruled by rites. The *Asiaticus* are stern, haughty, stingy and ruled by opinion. *Africans* are cunning, slow, negligent and ruled by caprice.

Like Linnaeus, Gobineau (1915), writing in the 20th century, also developed a biased anthropology. He placed human beings on a hierarchy with Africa at the bottom. He argued that Europe had attained civilization while others are yet to. Following the same line of thought, Hume (cited by Chukwudi 1998) wrote, "I am apt to suspect that the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even an individual eminent in action or speculation" (p. 214). Hegel (1956) also had a biased perception of the Negro. He wrote,

In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness had not yet attained to the realisation of any substantial existence.... Thus distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained. (p. 93).

He thus posits that the Negro is yet to go beyond his instinctual behaviour to identify a being outside of himself. Following the same line of thought, Levy-Bruhl (cited by Njoku 1993), questioned the veracity of an untutored African knowing about God. For him, the African way of thinking is non-logical and full of inner self-contradiction. Corroborating with Levy-Bruhl, Baker (cited in Richard 1964) wrote,

The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced in idolatry.... he has never grasped the idea of a personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a future state of reward and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress. (p. 199).

In the contention of Masolo (1994), at the heart of this debate on the identity of the African is the concept of reason, a value which is believed to stand as the great divide between the civilized and the uncivilized, the logical and the mystical. The systemic unity in the African way of thinking, among other factors, diverse from that of the west was at the root of the denial of reasoning to the African. This perception of the Negro by Western scholars have made Negrohood a burden for the Negro, accounting for why many have denied their identity, while some live with the regret of being one. All these basically were prompted by prejudice, and it is not surprising that scholars like Levy-Bruhl renounced his theory of pre-logicism before his death. In the contention of Jahn (1958) in Levy-Bruhl is found "a rare example of scholarly integrity. In his posthumous notes, he asks himself how he could have ever conceived so ill a hypothesis, and he comes to the conclusion that 'the logical structure of the human mind is the same in all men'" (p. 97).

4.2. Slave Trade and the Dehumanization of Africa:

Having classified the Negro as backward, inhuman, primitive, illogical, emotional and capricious, and by no way equal to the white race, the West had no qualms in exploiting Africans to their benefit. With the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the Western hemisphere, the European expanding empires lacked manpower to work on new plantations that produced sugar cane for Europe, and other products such as coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton. Contrary to the native Americans, Africans were excellent workers: they often had experience of agriculture and keeping cattle, they were used to a tropical climate, resistant to tropical diseases, and so the Atlantic slave trade became an integral part of an international trading system which was then guarded by international laws.

This period of carnage lasted for about five hundred years during which an estimate of 12 million viable Africans were enslaved from their home lands to locations around the Atlantic. The vast majority went to Brazil, the Caribbean, and other Spanish-speaking regions of South America and Central America. Smaller numbers were taken to Atlantic islands, continental Europe, and English-speaking areas of the North American mainland. For about 200 years Portugal dominated in this trade (they are said to have begun slave trade at about 1440), and were not long after joined by the Spanish, French, Dutch, after 1560 the English also joined in the trade and merchants from Liverpool were not exempted. Kanu (2008) avows that it is estimated that during the five centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Portugal was responsible for transporting over 4.5 million Africans, which is about 40% of the total. During the 18th century however, when the

slave trade accounted for the transport of a staggering 6 million Africans, Britain was the worst transgressor - responsible for almost 2.5 million. This was a trade in which human nature was depraved and fellow creatures manipulated in infinite variables.

4.3. Colonialism and the Exploitation of Africa:

Since Africans were regarded as sub-humans, Njoku (2002) states that colonialism became a gospel of redemption and elevation of the black man to some human status. Before 1830, Mountjoy and Embleton (1966), argued that European settlements were for the most part restricted to small coastal trading stations. Both physical and economic factors combined to retard penetration. However, during the mid 19th C, Hodder (1976), observes that European Explorers began to make significant advances into tropical Africa. As a result, the great puzzles of African geography for Europeans – notably the course of the Nile, Niger, Congo and Zambezi rivers – were solved within the space of half a century.

Missionaries took an increasing part in extending European interests. All this exploration and evangelism frequently led to trade. Yet it soon realized that profitable trade depended on maintenance of peace and that this peace could not be assured without administrative intervention and control in the hinterlands. Kanu (2012) holds that because the explorers came from several different European countries – Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, Belgium and Germany – Africa soon became a field for the conflicting ambitions of the major European Colonial Powers. By the early 1880's these conflicting ambitions were beginning to be expressed territorially. Sections of the coast were being claimed by traders and administrators of one or other of the European powers. Missionary, trading, military and administrative activities were beginning to expand. In the contention of Hodder (1978), the stage was now set for the European scramble for Africa, finally to be set in motion by the 1884-5 Conference and Treaty of Berlin. According to Walter (1982), the decisive effect of colonialism is that fact that one's power of self-determination was taken away from the other, and by that loss one society is forced into underdevelopment.

The idea of African Philosophy was an attempt, among so many other attempts, to reaffirm our heritage and personality collapsing before Western bias. Africans wanted to accept and define their responsibility to assess the riches and promise of their culture and also to open dialogue with the West. As part of the process of self-affirmation and identification, a college of intellectuals created images to project the African identity. And a cursory glance at the thought system of Africans, reveal that they can and do have a philosophy. According to Uduigwomen (1995), the debate or controversy on whether or not there is an African philosophy is dead and buried. At best, it is only as a matter of historical interest that it is considered. This is obvious, taking from the fact that the subject 'African philosophy' is presently being taught either as a self-subsisting course or part of comparative philosophy in many African universities, and even overseas. A number of thesis and articles have been written on this subject by a retinue of both graduate and post-graduate students, conferences are organized all over the world on African philosophy, having their inspiration sparked off by scholars who stand at the base of the history of African Philosophy.

5. THE NATURE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

A cursory glance at the historical development of the discourse on the nature of African philosophy reveals four perspectives or schools. Gbadegesin (1991) outlines these four schools of thought as follows.

- i. For one group, African Philosophy is the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, and untainted by foreign ideas. It is based on this understanding that 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).
- ii. The second group understands African philosophy as, the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, African conceptual systems and social realities as undertaken by contemporary professional philosophers. This reduces African Philosophy to reflections by professionally trained philosophers who operate with the collaboration of traditional thinkers.

- iii. The third group understands African Philosophy as the combination of these two approaches, without suppressing or looking down on any. This would involve sifting philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc, and reflecting on them by professionally trained African philosophers.
- iv. The fourth group argues that African Philosophy is not any of the above; however, its proponents represented by Hountondji (1976) regards African Philosophy as any collection of texts produced by Africans and specifically described by their authors as Philosophy.

However, while it can be said that all these views reveal the dimensional content of African philosophy, preference is given to the first definition. The second is treated with reservation; this is because African philosophy goes beyond the thought of professional philosophers. As regards the third, the comments for the first two definitions still apply. The fourth definition needs to be remodelled. What makes a piece philosophical is not the author. What if a mad man was to be the author of an idea, and he calls his thought philosophy, does it make it philosophy? There should be principles that make a thought philosophical. Another question which often arises is why the philosophy of many cultures and nations in Africa should all be called African philosophy? The reason is very simply, there is a common discernible in cultures and thought systems in Africa, and this justifies the name, African Philosophy. This is not again to say that there is a unitary or uniform perspective on issues in Africa in the sense that every African adheres to it, but the fact that these ideas are indigenous to Africa, seen, interpreted and analyzed by Africans qualifies it to bear the name African philosophy. It is used in the sense one uses Western, Oriental, Indian or Chinese in relation to philosophy.

6. UNIVERSALITY OF PHILOSOPHY AS A BASIS FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Makumba (2007) argues that if one were to look closely at the generally acceptable definitions of philosophy, even the purely etymological one as *love of wisdom*, it is very clear that philosophy is an all-inclusive enterprise. It is not cultural or time bound. Philosophy rather targets and points to the human person as a rational entity. As a universal experience, it is not limited to whites or blacks. What may be called into question is the level of systematized thoughts, which certainly cannot be the same everywhere. Thus, Tempels (1959) avers, "Anyone who claims that primitive people possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men" (p. 21). Parrinder (1969), ten years after Tempels resonates the same thought: "To say that African peoples have no system of thought is, explicit or assumed, would be to deny their humanity" (p. 25). Concurring with the above views, Makumba (2007), says that, "a consistent and unitary philosophical anthropology cannot downplay the place of rationality in the definition of the human person" (p. 29). If Africans are agreed to be human persons of a rational nature, it follows that they do and are capable of doing philosophy. The perspective of Gyekye (1995) is worth quoting at this juncture:

The denial of the philosophical component of African thought cannot really be accepted. The reason is that philosophy, as an intellectual activity, is universal; it cannot be assumed to be confined to the peoples of the West and the East. Philosophy of some kind is involved in the thought and action of every people and constitutes the intellectual sheet anchor of their life in its totality... we cannot but philosophize, that is, pose fundamental questions, and reflect on fundamental aspects of human life, conduct and experience. In other words, although the people of the world live in different cultural environments, there is nevertheless a common ground of shared human experiences, and hence there certainly are some basic questions relating to their existence on this planet that might commonly be asked by them, questions that are bound to exercise their minds as humans. Such questions, I believe, may be universal, transcending, cultural and historical frontiers, even though the philosophical doctrines and propositions put forward in answer to them may in fact be very dissimilar and divergent (p. 9).

Gyekye (1995) further expatiated that,

When I claim that philosophical activity is universal, I mean simply that thinkers from different cultures or philosophical traditions ask similar philosophical questions and think deeply about them. It is in terms of the philosophical attitude, of the propensity to raise questions relating to the fundamental principles underlying human experience and conduct, and not in terms of the uniformity of doctrinal positions, that philosophy can be said to be universal (p. 10).

The universality of philosophy is evident in the presence of philosophical thought diversely but universally named as Akan philosophy, Kikuyu philosophy, Igbo philosophy, Yoruba philosophy, bantu philosophy, Mende philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Japanese philosophy, Indian philosophy, oriental/Eastern philosophy, Western philosophy. While the idea of philosophy attached to it speaks of its universality, while the other speaks of its diversity and contextuality which makes it substantive. Thus African philosophy is universally substantive.

7. THE 'AFRICANNESS' AND 'PHILOSOPHINNESS' OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

If philosophy is a universal enterprise, what then makes a philosophy African? What makes philosophy African is its 'africanity'. Every culture makes a contribution from its house of experience to the universal themes of philosophy, and this makes philosophy relevant to the reality of life. Each culture traces the unity of these themes, synthesizes and organizes them into a totality, based on each culture's concept of life, namely, the relationships between objects and persons and between persons and person themselves. However, much this may sound repulsive, this cultural contribution to philosophizing is what particularizes philosophy as European, Indian, Chinese or African. The 'africaness' of African philosophy speaks of the *sitz en leben* or the *Locale* within which the philosophy is done. This provides the ingredients that defines it as African, while the 'philosophinness' of African philosophy speaks of the rational human person involved in the process or enterprise of doing philosophy. This 'africaness' and 'philosophinness' speaks of its particularity and universality which are basic ingredients in the philosophical process.

In the contention of Makumba (2007), in defining the 'africaness' and 'philosophinness' of African philosophy, the culture of the African people and the person doing the philosophy are very important and indispensable elements. When we speak of the culture of the African people, it means that African Philosophy must speak to African problems and situations. Secondly, the person doing the philosophy must either come from Africa, or an African living in Diaspora or someone not coming from Africa but living in Africa and involved in the life of the African people. Such a person can meaningfully and authentically contribute to the development of African thought. It is in this regard that Osuagwu (1999) speaks of Africans by association, law, enterprise and relevance.

From the foregoing, if the question looming at the horizon is 'Is there an African philosophy', the answer is, 'Yes, there is an African philosophy'. It is an established fact. However, granted that philosophy is philosophy everywhere, there are important areas that have to grapple with the problem of society. Like every other rational group of people in the world, Africans have a philosophy which tries to explain reality from an African perspective. It arises from the special problem and unique experience of the African people.

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