

Mangena's Defence of Ethno-Philosophy: A Critical Response

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Abstract

In a paper which the researcher published in 2013 with the title “Trends in African Philosophy: A Case for Eclectism” in “Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion”, the researcher adopted the Igwebuiké approach which explores methods and principles for the mediation, coalescing and comprehension of the different units of reality: universal and particular, ideal and real, progressive and conservative, and in this case, the universalist and particularist trends of African philosophy. However, in the same journal of the edition of January-June 2014, Fainos Mangena wrote a work he titled: “In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's eclectism” as a reaction to the researcher's article of 2013. This piece of Mangena is the motivation for this work. Seven years after, therefore, the researcher has decided to write a response to the reaction of Fainos Mangena arguing that the future of an African philosophy that we can all be proud of cannot be found within the parameters of narrow-mindedness. This narrowness is the problem that has necessitated this piece with the objective of opening vistas for a more balanced perspective in African philosophy. The researcher insisted on the need to expand the parameters of the narrowness of ethno-philosophy. It is through this expansion that the researcher believes that the African people can arrive at a philosophy that will not only compete with philosophies all over the world but one that the African scholar can be proud of. This does not in any way intend to undermine African philosophy but rather points to a process of growth for every field of human endeavour. The research method employed is the critical and analytic methods of investigation. It concludes that the position of ethno-philosophy is not enough and does not create a balance within the philosophical enterprise. There is need to reconsider her approach towards the universalist perspective.

Keywords: Ethno-Philosophy, Universalistic, Particularistic, Eclectism, African Philosophy

Introduction

There are two major categories of critiques in the philosophical enterprise. The first are those who challenge error and work forth towards the maintenance of basic standards lest the philosophical enterprise becomes less of philosophy and more of a parking space for the limited idiosyncrasies of individual thinkers and thoughts. The second group are those who criticize to make an impression and sometimes defend a position that is not only undefendable but overtaken by events. The good study of the history of philosophy and the development of thought is the only healing and antidote for such a predicament, and this we should have learnt from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, among others. To what category of philosophers Fainos Mangena belongs is yet to be clear to me; however, this will be revealed in the later pages of my response to what I refer to as 'his reaction'.

In 2013, I published a paper on “Trends in African Philosophy: A Case for Eclectism” in *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. In this paper I adopted the *Igwebuike* approach which explores methods and principles for the mediation, coalescing and comprehension of the different units of reality: universal and particular, ideal and real, progressive and conservative (Kanu 2017; 2018; 2021), and in this case, the universalist and particularist trends of African philosophy. However, in the same journal (*Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*) of the edition of January-June 2014, Fainos Mangena wrote a work he referred to as a response to my article on *Trends in African Philosophy: A Case for Eclectism*. This he titled: “In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's eclectism”. Seven years after, I have decided to respond to his reaction.

My response is coming seven years after for two reasons: first, because I have bordered myself with major issues of concern in African philosophy, and second, I had hoped that five to seven years are enough for an erring philosopher, upon further reading and openness to the truth, to discover his errors and stand with the true and realistic. However, since this has not been achieved, I felt it is high time I responded to Mangena, at least to save the future generation of philosophers who see us as models and who think that our positions are always true.

The Concerns of Fainos Mangena

In his paper *In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism*, Mangena raised the following concerns, which he claims were based on the paper I wrote the previous year. He wrote the following as an introduction to his position:

In this essay, I defend the thesis that ethno-philosophy is the only philosophy that an African of black extraction can be proud of as it is rooted in African traditions and cultures. This is notwithstanding, the amount of criticism that it has received over the years from the western and from fellow Africans who subscribe to the universalist approach to the study of African philosophy.¹

He holds that eclectism as a view complicates the debate on African philosophy “as it sounds like another universalist position and/or another western rebuttal of African philosophy”.² At this juncture, one wonders the basis for likening eclectism with the universalist perspective, especially, given that one would expect that Mangena should have at least known the difference between the two concepts or schools of

¹. Mangena, F., *In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism*. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 96.

². Mangena, F., *In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism*. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 104.

thought. More so, the connection he made between the universalist perspective and Western rebuttal of African philosophy, intensifies the question of Mangena's understanding of these concepts in the first place. This is very important as there are African philosophers who hold the universalist perspective. In another page he writes: "I then outline and discuss Kanu's eclectism project, which, to me, is not any different from the Universalist and Eurocentric project which is seeking to disparage and downgrade African philosophy".³ The problems with concepts raise serious questions regarding Mangena's preparedness to discuss the issue at hand.

For Mangena, the argument by the defenders of the eclectic school to which Kanu belongs proceeds thus: because African philosophy has been criticized by Hountondji and Western philosophers like Hume, Hegel, Bruhl and others for being illogical, incoherent and unsystematic, there is need to combine the Universalist and Particularist approaches to African philosophy and this would involve sifting the philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc., and ask professionally trained philosophers to reflect on them. Defenders of the eclectic school believe that at the point of this romance between the professional and unprofessional, authentic African philosophy is realized. He further understands the eclectic position from the context of his Shona proverb which says: "A real hunter does not hunt with his neighbour's dogs because he does not know how they were trained". He concludes that "we need to put our heads together and take ethno-philosophy to the level where we will be proud

³. Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 97.

of it”.⁴ How Mangena has contributed to making an African philosophy one that the African people will be proud of through his article is a question that his or her readers cannot but ask at the end of reading his work.

My Critical Response

Unfortunately, Mangena begins with a misreading of my paper and my position on the African philosophical project, and one wouldn't be surprised at his conclusions. First, he situates my paper within the context of the debate regarding the existence of African philosophy. While such categorization could have a relationship with the debate, mine was a 'post-debate' discussion as it focussed on the different patterns or trends in the African philosophical enterprise. It is, therefore, not surprising that he brings in figures who are irrelevant to the discussion initiated by me such as Hume, Hegel, Bruhl, etc., therefore, twisting the tone of my paper and argument for his own advantage. It is the pattern of certain scholars to twist or shift an argument beyond the set parameters of an author simply to create a scene of relevance. That wasn't necessary in this case, and in his article, Mangena has made himself of their college.

Mangena wrongly understands eclecticism or the eclectic perspective of African philosophy, given that he equates it with the universalistic perspective. He writes: “Eclecticism, in my view, complicates the African philosophy debate as it sounds like another universalist position and/or another western rebuttal of African philosophy”.⁵ He forgets that that which is eclectic makes a synthesis of both the particularistic and

^{4.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 106.

^{5.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 104

universalistic perspectives, therefore, making ethno-philosophy stronger than it was. He uses the phrase: “it sounds like another universalist position”,⁶ therefore, forgetting that the fact that a thing sounds like another does not mean that it becomes that thing it sounds like. For instance, 'meet' sounds like 'meat', and yet, 'meet' does not become 'meat'.

By taking the discussion to the works or writings of Hume, Hegel, Bruhl, etc., about the African personality, Mangena presents the African philosophical enterprise as a reaction to the western perspectives. No wonder, he brings in so much emotions than is required in a philosophical discussion. In another text he writes: “I then outline and discuss Kanu's eclecticism project which, to me, is not any different from the Universalist and Eurocentric project which is seeking to disparage and downgrade African philosophy, in general and ethno-philosophy, in particular”.⁷ This is not to say that philosophy should not at any point be able to respond to positions or circumstances, but it must not be reduced to an outpouring of emotions rather than a rational business.

It is a narrowness of thought to think as Mangena did that: “...the only philosophy that an African of black extraction can be proud of as it is rooted in African traditions and cultures.”⁸ It is expressive of some limitedness which affects thought in general as there are many other African thinkers who are proud of philosophies of African origin and

⁶ Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 105

⁷ Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 97

⁸ Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 96

beyond that are not of the shade of ethno-philosophy as it is seen in the works of Gyekye, Iroegbu,⁹ Asouzu, etc. To imagine that every philosopher of African extraction can only be proud of ethno-philosophy is not only a sign of deafness to the stark reality of globalization but an attempt to do philosophy in an un-philosophical manner as philosophy must outgrow all forms of limitations.

Talking about ethno-philosophy as being "...rooted in African traditions and cultures",¹⁰ one wonders if African culture and tradition are the hallmarks of ethno-philosophy. And if they are, the more reason why ethno-philosophy needs to look outside of her window to at least see what others think or are doing. This also says quite a lot about my critique's understanding of ethno-philosophy. Ethno-philosophy goes beyond culture and tradition, or else it would not pass for a philosophy. Mangena's concept of ethno-philosophy is a demeaned ethno-philosophy or better put: African cultural studies. No wonder Mangena makes reference to the "... amount of criticism that it has received over

⁹. Iroegbu, P., *Metaphysics: The kpim of philosophy*. Owerri: IUP, 1994. p. 250; Gyekye, K., *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*. Philadelphia: Tempel University Press, 1987, p. 56; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as a Complementary Approach to the Issue of Girl-Child Education. *Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research*. 3. 6. 11-17, 2017; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as a Wholistic Response to the Problem of Evil and Human Suffering. *Berkeley International Journal of Contemporary Education Research*. 3. 6. 56-72, 2017; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Ethic of Reciprocity. *Berkeley Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 115-124, 2017; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy for the Protection of the Environment. *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 3. 4.. 28-38, 2017; Kanu, I. A., Igwebuike as the Consummate Foundation of African Bioethical Principles. *Nnadiesube Journal of Philosophy*. 1. 1. 1-13, 2017.

¹⁰. Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 96

the years from the western and from fellow Africans...”¹¹ Unfortunately, Mangena refers to these criticisms as expressions of universalist perspectives “who subscribe to the universalist approach to the study of African philosophy”.¹² The fact that some philosophers of African and western origin have decided to call Mangena to order does not entail that they are of the universalist perspective.

More interestingly, Mangena describes ethno-philosophy and ethno-philosophers in such a manner that it looks like a band wagon rather than a rational school of thought or trend:

To begin with, according to African philosophers that subscribe to ethno-philosophy, philosophy is not the same everywhere and the methodology of doing philosophy depends entirely on the context in which the philosophy is situated. Ethno-philosophers are all agreed that African philosophy exists and is that kind of philosophy that is uniquely African in terms of its brand of logic, its values, its knowledge forms and its metaphysics.¹³

In describing ethno-philosophy and philosophers thus, Mangena seem to have forgotten that there is always a typical African reality and a typical human reality. In doing African philosophy, especially when it involves a typical African reality, the use of the forms, logic and values particular to African people has a fundamental place. But African philosophy does not only focus on typical African realities. And at such points when it

^{11.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 96

^{12.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 96

^{13.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 99

focuses on a typical human reality such African forms and values might not be at the center of the reflection of the African thinker.¹⁴ Thus the need for an expanded approach.

To further his argument, Mangena describes ethno-philosophy as a “a homegrown kind of philosophy that would lead to African renaissance (rebirth) which would see the African man and woman being able to chart his or her own destiny”.¹⁵ It is a simplistic understanding of the African condition to imagine that why the African man and woman has not been able to chart the course of their own destiny is simply because of the absence of a homegrown kind of philosophy. More so, a homegrown kind of philosophy must not and should not be antagonistic to alterity or the perspective of others. Otherwise, it blocks every avenue for its growth. Alterity has been at the heart of the progress of all philosophies. If ethno-philosophy has remained unattractive, it only points to the need for an eclectic position or perspective.

In other to strengthen his argument against the universalistic position, Mangena labels it or equates it with the effort towards the denigration of the African personality. There is an African proverb that says: “If you want to kill a dog, you give it a bad name”. As one would always expect, a wrong equation can only lead to a wrong result or conclusion. Worst still, Mangena addresses ethno-philosophy in a demeaning manner when he refers to it as placing less emphasis on “scientificity, logic, criticism, and argumentation methods which I consider to be the hallmarks of western

^{14.} Kanu, A. I., *African language as a tool-box for African Philosophy*. A PhD Dissertation, Selinus University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, London, 2014, p. 46.

^{15.} Mangena, F., *In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism*. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014, p. 101

philosophy”.¹⁶ If these, including criticism and argumentation are not the hallmark of a philosophy, what then is its hallmark? What kind of philosophy is it then?

As it is typical of Mangena, he wrongly describes the eclectic position so as to make his point. He writes: “While many other African ethno-philosophers ... believe that African philosophy needs to be anchored on its own logic, eclectics believe that we need to rely on western logic”.¹⁷ If by eclectic Mangena includes my position, then he got it all wrong, as I strongly believe that there is an African logic and have written copiously on an African kind of logic within the context of *Igwebuike* philosophy.¹⁸ To express the need for an African pattern in African philosophy, Mangena wrongfully used a Shona proverb which says: “A real hunter does not hunt with his neighbour's dogs because he does not know how they are trained”.¹⁹ This again makes the distinction between the professional and versatile hunter from the narrow-minded hunter who is limited by the lack of the knowledge of the things around him. And it is this professional and broader touch that eclecticism brings into ethno-philosophy. Mangena forgets that the hunter will be better positioned if he knows how his neighbour's dogs were trained. More so, developing

^{16.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014,p. 103

^{17.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014,p. 104

^{18.} Kanu, I. A., *Igwebuike and the logic (Nka) of African philosophy*.*Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1. pp. 1-13, 2017; Kanu, I. A.,*Igwebuike and Question of Superiority in the Scientific Community of Knowledge*. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*.Vol.3 No1. pp. 131-138, 2017.

^{19.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014,p. 105

what is ours does not succeed by condemning what is not ours.

Amazingly, Mangena ends in a manner that reverses all the arguments that he had presented in his paper. He writes: "I argue that while there is nothing wrong in having cultures borrowing ideas from each other, the problem comes when it is always African philosophy that has to borrow from the west and not vice versa".²⁰ This process of borrowing, which Mangena says he has no problem with takes place within the context of eclecticism. In another paragraph he adds: "We need to put our heads together and take ethno-philosophy to the level where we will be proud of it".²¹ In what better ways can we put heads together if not by considering the quality of our arguments and seeing how we can build it better? The eclectic position is a major step in putting heads together. Anyone who is reading to have his head alongside another's should be ready to tolerate differences.

Conclusion

The image that came to my mind while reading the work of Mangena is that of Plato's allegory of the cave. Plato imagined that some prisoners had their necks and legs chained in a cave so that they can only look in one direction, and not backwards. Before them is a wall that looks like a cinema screen. Behind them is a fire and between them and the fire is a platform stretching across the cave. Assuming that men passed across the raised platform carrying animals, statues and other things in such a way that it was cast on the cinema screen in front of the prisoners through the light of the fire, seeing the shadows, the prisoners assume that the

^{20.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014,p. 106

^{21.} Mangena, F., In defence of ethno-philosophy: A brief response to Kanu's electism. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3. 1. 2014,p. 106

shadows cast on the screen are the real things, given that they cannot look backward. One of the prisoners succeeding in freeing himself from the cave and seeing things for the first time under the light of the sun now sees others for what they truly are: prisoners. Coming back to the cave, he tried to free the prisoners from the cave, but they refused and even wanted to kill him because they thought that he wanted to deceive them believing that the shadows were the reality.

Holding on to ethno-philosophy and believing that it is the only African philosophical position that an African of African extraction can be proud of is like holding on to a world of shadows and believing that there in reality dwell. This allegory from Plato also helps me to understand the resistance of Fainos Mangena. These notwithstanding, it must be said that the future of an African philosophy that we can all be proud of cannot be found within parameters of narrow-mindedness.

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