



CULTURE AS THE FOUNDATION OF PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THEOPHILUS OKERE'S HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY



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Abstract

The major contribution of Theophilus Okere to African philosophy centres on the issue of method. He believed that every philosophy stems from a cultural context and uses the elements of that culture as its raw material. It is by extracting meaning from culture that philosophy creates understanding. So, the originality and credibility of African philosophy rests on its ability to make meaning out of Africa's unique experience. However, one precondition for the successful execution of this philosophical enterprise is the establishment of its correct methodology. So long as culture (which Okere calls 'non-philosophy') remains the raw material for philosophy, hermeneutics – the science of interpretation – becomes the only viable method for the philosophical enterprise. The paper explores how Okere used the hermeneutics of these philosophers to extrapolate

philosophical propositions from the deposits of culture, especially with respect to cultural symbols which embody meanings for people's existential experiences within a culture. The paper is however critical of Okere's philosophy on three points: and finally commends him for raising the consciousness of Africans to appreciate their culture more deeply.

Keywords: Culture, Foundation, Philosophy, Theophilus Okere, Hermeneutical Approach

Introduction

The major work of Theophilus Okere - *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of Its Possibility* - was published in 1983. Summarised by Okere himself in three words - philosophy, culture and hermeneutics –

the book “does not purport to present an African philosophy, rather, it takes a critical look at those works published so far under such or similar titles, or with such intentions. . . it suggests that their main fault is a fault of method, a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophy, and a failure to see that the nature of the problem is essentially hermeneutical.”¹

¹ Theophilus Okere, (1983). *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Philosophy* Lanham: University Press of America, pg. V.

In the book Okere in particular challenged the position of the sceptics who question the possibility of African philosophy, as well as the position of ethno-philosophers. In the first chapter he criticised three chief protagonists of ethno-philosophy: Placide Temples, Aléxis Kagame, and John Mbiti.

Although he acknowledges the significant cultural turn of ethno-philosophers, Okere rejects, on two count charges, their pretentious and exaggerated ethnologic. According to Maduakolam, philosophy is not just an ethnic enterprise, neither in the subject (content) nor in the manner (method) of the enterprise. With a similar premise, we can add that philosophy's instrument and intention are far from being exclusively ethnic affairs. Ethnologic or ethnophilosophy confuses philosophy with culture and confuses culture for philosophy”.²

In particular he critiqued Temples's theory of vital force, pointing out that Temples was trying to impose a collective philosophy while philosophy is an individual enterprise. He also held that Kagame's philosophy

² I. Maduakolam Osuagwu, (2005). “Philosophy of Non-Philosophy: Okere's Trilogy on African Philosophy”, in *African Philosophy and Hermeneutics of Culture, Essays in Honour of Theophilus Okere*, ed. J. Obi Oguejiofor and Godfrey Igwebuike Onah Münster: Lit Verlag, pg. 53.

is based on the assumption that the philosophy of a people is deductible from their analysis of their language structure and grammar and deducting from these the philosophical implications and teaching about life and reality. Again, Okere described this project as an effort to ontologize Ruandese grammar through a systematic application of Aristotle's to this grammar. It is for him also an effort to establish a bi-univocal correspondence between Aristotle and the Ruandese language structure.³

The last criticism was directed at Mbiti's different conception of African time based on the latter's research among the Kikuyu of East Africa. According to Okere:

This concept is usually three-dimensional time with its past, present and future. African time includes a long past and an ample idea of the present but the future is so limited and does not go beyond the projection of a few years. As a consequence, the Africans of Mbiti have no lineal understanding of time, and as a result

³ J. Obi Oguejiofor, (2005). "Ethnophilosophy and Hermeneutics: Reviewing Okere's Critique of Traditional African Philosophy", in *African Philosophy and the Hermeneutic of Culture*, pg. 77.

have no lineal conception of history, no idea of the end of the world, and also no strictly eschatological concepts. For Okere the errors of Mbiti arise from the failure to make relevant distinctions between time as social, scientific, mythological and philosophical.⁴

An area that was of particular interest to Okere is the relationship between philosophy and hermeneutics. Exploring this relationship in depth Okere tried to establish how and on what conditions an African philosophical tradition could emerge. His main objective was to establish philosophy from what he called 'non-philosophy' or culture. Through hermeneutics he also tried to establish the relationship between philosophy and culture, arguing strongly that culture is the foundation of philosophy – the claim he believed was valid for philosophy everywhere without exception.

Given the above observations this paper examines Okere's methodological point of departure and his use of hermeneutics to establish culture as a foundation of philosophy. The paper will also critically evaluate his philosophical position as a whole.

⁴ Oguejiofor, "Ethnophilosophy and Hermeneutics", pg. 78.

Okere's Methodological Departure

Okere believed that the credibility and originality of African philosophy could only be established through a hermeneutical approach to the enterprise. As a result, he gave a lot of attention to the hermeneutical method. He examined in particular the hermeneutics of several philosophers, (for example, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans Georg Gadamer etc.) principally to show that philosophy is hermeneutic. He then used the method to establish how culture is the foundation of philosophy. Because of the centrality of hermeneutics to his philosophy, attempts will be made in the following paragraphs to explore that influence on Okere.

The Meaning of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics as a word is etymologically derived from the name of a Greek mythical figure, Hermes—the messenger-interpreter god of ancient Greece. Hermes was associated with the function of announcing, promulgating and interpreting the minds of the gods by rendering and translating their messages. As a noun hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, is rooted in the Greek verb, 'hermeneuein', generally translated as 'to express', 'to explain', 'to translate', or 'to interpret'. It

⁵ TsenaySerequeberhan, (1994). *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy, Horizon and Discourse*, New York:Routledge, pg. 1.

⁶ Okere, *African Philosophy*, pg. 19.

means “the investigation of the nature and principles of correct interpretations of realities whose meaning is not immediately evident.”⁶ It entails making explicit what is implicit. It is thus a quest for meaning, one's own meaning in one's life, society, milieu, in short, the totality of one's universe which could be said to be constituted by one's cultural symbols”.⁷ Simply put, it means 'interpretation'. It thus suggests the process of bringing a thing or situation or text from unintelligibility to intelligibility. In fact,

as a discipline however, hermeneutics is the process of deciphering which goes from manifest content and meaning to latent or hidden meaning. For Panikkar, it is the art and science of interpretation, of bringing forth significance, conveying meaning, restoring symbols to life, and eventually letting new symbols to emerge. Jean Ladriere defines it as the discipline concerned with the interpretations of signs in general and symbols in particular. Every interpretative venture intends to disclose a signification which is not immediately apparent. Signification is a relation between a sign belonging to the real or the ideal world.⁸

⁷ Oguejiofor, “Ethnophilosophy and Hermeneutics”, pg. 74.

⁸ Raphael Okechukwu Madu, (1992). *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths: The Hermeneutics of Destiny*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, pg. 3.

Hermeneutics could also be understood as a movement in twentieth century philosophy and theology, or as a special method of interpreting literary texts. Heidegger, for example, noted that philosophy is hermeneutical. Many modern and contemporary philosophers also insist that hermeneutics should be the basis for all literary and philosophical interpretations. Hermeneutics is thus both “a historical concept and the name for an ongoing concern in the human sciences”⁹ and could be used to designate those disciplines in the human and social sciences which make use of the methods of understanding and interpreting.

Culture as Non - Philosophy

According to Okere culture provides the raw material for philosophy. This vital role of culture is better understood in the context of how Okere views culture as non-philosophy. It is important, however, to begin that inquiry by examining the meaning of culture itself.

Ordinarily people live in more or less organised clusters we call society. The members of society share a number of distinctive modes or ways of behaving that taken as a whole constitute their culture. That culture

⁹ Madu, *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*, pg. 4.

¹⁰ Ralph L. Beals and Harry Hoijer, (1965). *An Introduction to Anthropology*, 3rd edition, New York: The Macmillan Company, pg. 265.

includes civilisation and is distinct in its entirety from that of any other society.¹⁰

Culture could also mean an abstraction from behaviour and should not to be confused with acts of behaviour or with material artefacts like tools, works of arts, etc. Instead, it is “manifest in acts and artefacts, basket, pottery, weapons, paintings, sculptures, and many other items of the same sort are collected and studied because they represent the end products of ways of behaving current in a given society.”¹¹ It is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹²

People's ways of life become the culture of their society and also represent generalizations of the behaviour of all or the majority of the members of that society. Thus, culture is understood as “a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society.”¹³

Culture is learned, unlike racial characteristics that are genetically transmitted. At the same time not, all learned behaviour is culture. So, culture also means

¹¹ Beals and Hoijer, *An Introduction to Anthropology*, pg. 269.

¹² Philip K. Bock, (1969). *Modern Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction*, New York : Alfred A. Knopf Inc., pg. 17.

¹³ Bock, *Modern Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction*, pg. 274.

¹⁴ EAdamson Hoebel, (1972). *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 4th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, pg. 22.

“the integrated system of learned behaviour patterns that are characteristic of the members of a society and that are not the result of biological inheritance.”¹⁴

It is against the backdrop of the above understanding that Okere uses the term 'non-philosophy' technically to mean culture. Thus, for him culture is not philosophy itself but has something essential to do with philosophy. To underline that essential positive role Okere conceives culture as being synonymous with non-philosophy “in order to demonstrate its intimate and inevitable connection with philosophy. It is non-philosophy without being anti-philosophy or enemy of philosophy. It is rather pro-philosophy as a friend providing philosophy with the enabling sources and resources, locus and environment to thrive”.¹⁵

Culture as the Foundation of Philosophy

In Okere's thought philosophy, unlike non-philosophy, is characterised by reflexion, and both philosophy and non-philosophy have a dialectical relationship in which the experience and concept of philosophy must be conceived within the context of non-philosophy as its existential precondition. Philosophy thus grows out of non-philosophy and is “a reflection on non-philosophical experience....

¹⁵ Osuagwu, “Philosophy of Non – Philosophy”, pg. 55.

¹⁶ Okere, *African Philosophy*, pg. 83.

Philosophy reflects on experience, experience contradicts the resulting system, a new philosophy arises taking into account what the former ignored, and this is the pattern of development in the history of philosophy.”¹⁶

Okere, reflecting the influence of Gadamer's hermeneutics on his thought, insisted that culture (which he describes by the term *philosopheme*) is a necessary background, ingredient, raw material, etc. for philosophy. According to him,

philosophy is always the interpretation of reality within a certain culture. It follows then that the relationship between philosophy and culture is governed by the dialectics of background to foreground, of presupposition to explicit statement, of prejudgment to judgment. . . . In this relationship, both play definite roles. While culture plays the role of the background, presupposition and prejudgment, philosophy on its own side plays the role of foreground, thematic statement and explicit judgment.¹⁷

By his analysis of the dialectics between culture and philosophy Okere reclaims and reinstates for

¹⁷ Nnoruka, “The Paradigmatic Status of Western Philosophy”, pg. 140.

¹⁸ Osuagwu, “Philosophy of Non-Philosophy”, pg. 55.

culture “its old age pride of place and irreplaceable role in philosophy, its primacy, constancy and perennality for philosophy”.¹⁸

The dialectical relationship between philosophy and culture also means that philosophy is culture-sustaining. This sustenance is richly identified in the interpretation of cultural symbols through which, Ricoeur affirmed, one can arrive at reflection or philosophy. By reflection Ricoeur meant

the connection between the comprehension of signs or symbols and self-comprehension. . . the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be across the works which bear witness to this effort and to this desire. . . the incorporating of our new understanding of our culture into our own self-understanding.¹⁹

To establish the movement from culture or non-philosophy to philosophy or from symbol to reflective thought, Okere employed Ricoeur's hermeneutical analysis of three levels of interpretation. The first level he called the 'phenomenological' stage. This is characterised by “an impartial description relating one symbol to another, in interpreting a symbol in terms of

¹⁹ Okere, *African Philosophy*, pg. 17.

another and generally showing the coherence of the various symbols.” By interpreting he meant demonstrating such a coherence of symbols.²⁰

He called the second level the 'hermeneutical' stage which is reached:

when one becomes engaged, concerned and spoken to by the symbol, and thus is obliged to pose the question of truth: whether this is true for me. Thus, the question of belief comes in here. It is here that the meaning inherent in the symbol is delivered by a sort of hermeneutical circle whereby in order to understand one has to believe and vice-versa, shows that hermeneutics proceeds by a precomprehension. In this context interpretation means “making explicit this precomprehension. But it has to do each time with a single symbol.²¹

At the third stage which Ricoeur described as the 'reflexive' stage:

one thinks from the explicated symbol. Reflexion takes off from the symbol and organises it in discourse. But it should avoid two pitfalls; either allegorizing or pretending that a symbol, for example, a

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

myth is already structured, reflexive thought, which has only to be stripped of its symbolic clothing. Midway between these two extremes is the way of a creative interpretation which respects the original enigma of symbols, learns from this enigma and from there generates more meaning.²²

According to Okere one can philosophise from culture or, to be precise, from the elements of culture that can be called symbols. It is precisely within the context of hermeneutics that African culture can equally give rise to African philosophy, because it is by interpreting the symbols of culture that one arrives at reflection which is philosophy. This is why Okere defined philosophy as an interpretation of culture, implying that culture is the foundation of philosophy; culture becomes philosophy through the mediation of hermeneutics.

Cultural Symbol And Philosophy

Okere believed that there is a tremendous influence of culture upon human behaviour and interaction and that culture constitutes a people's entire social heritage. But the human ability to develop culture stems particularly from the human ability to manipulate symbol which, in Okere's view, is not an

²² Okere, *African Philosophy*, pgs. 17-18

isolated compartment but, rather, a synthesis of a cultural, social and philosophical thinking. Symbols are words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry particular meanings recognized by those who share a particular culture. These meanings are arbitrary in the sense that they have no necessary relations to the physical properties of the phenomena which they represent. For example, there is no necessary relation between the physical properties of a cross and the symbolic values attached to it by Christians. A non-Christian unaware of its symbolic values cannot discover those values by simply examining the cross itself. Similarly, the meanings of words are bestowed on them by the society that uses them. A stranger must be told what the words mean. Language is the major device for symbolizing.

Now symbol exists at the level of knowledge. It is a reality we can apprehend with the aid of our consciousness and with which we can connect meaning. Though often normative, stable and with fixed meaning and value, symbol emerges, disappears and changes in its value and function. The disintegration of individual symbols and the change in the emphasis on the role of symbolism in general are partly due to cultural, intellectual, social and economic transformation.

The Role of Symbol in Philosophy

It has been argued that philosophy ought to be conceived in terms of interpretation. Seeing philosophy as interpretation makes it clear that language (which is a particular cultural symbol) plays an important medial role in the interpretative process, and it is this interactive or communicative medium of language that provides the common ground for understanding. As Ricoeur argued, interpretation is always “interpretation by language before being interpretation of language”.²³ In Okere's view language offers a mirror of interpretation,

allowing us to see the latter not only as a limit but also as a possibility, not only as an inhibiting, determining factor but also as a factor of free spontaneous creativity. Just as language limits what a poet can do with it as well as offers him conditions of more possibilities of inventiveness, so does culture both channel the philosopher's interpretation as well as offer him infinite possibilities for the creation of meaning.²⁴

That language, Okere further argued,

is a way of interpreting the world which

²³ Madu, *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*, pg. 51.

²⁴ Okere, *African Philosophy*, pg. 66.

antedates all reflexive activity is, however, also the point to which the development of phenomenological thought in Heidegger and those stimulated by Heidegger has led to new insights which draw philosophical consequences especially from historicism. All thinking is fixed within the track of language, limitation as well as possibility²⁵

Through language, therefore, meanings are given to symbols, and it is through the interpretation of symbols of a culture that one arrives at philosophy or reflection.

A Critical Evaluation of Okere's Philosophy

Okere's philosophical attitude can be summed up in three words: philosophy, culture, and hermeneutics. These words echo and re-echo all through Okere's work. They embody an advocacy for African philosophy that has as its fundamental objective the establishment of a philosophy of non-philosophy. Okere must therefore be commended for his originality in introducing the hermeneutical approach to African philosophy.

There are, however, a few issues on Okere's philosophy that are problematic. The first is his criticism of the ethno-philosophers. On this point he singled out Temples, Kagame and Mbiti for special criticism. His

²⁵ Okere, *African Philosophy*, pg. 69

concern is that philosophy should not be a collective but an individual enterprise. For him, therefore, philosophy should be 'ego-philosophy' rather than ethno-philosophy. However, culture is collective and philosophy emerges only when culture undergoes a re-creative process, or is retrieved and interpreted by an individual. The philosophical project is undertaken through the effort of an individual from within his culture. As Osuagwu rightly argues, philosophy

is rather a project of appropriation, of assumption and identification with one's total culture in a process of intellectual alchemy from which results a new creation, the meaning of this culture as interpreted by this unique experience which is the philosopher's insertion in it.²⁶

The point here is that it seems Okere was a victim of his own criticism. For example, he criticised ethno-philosophers for concentrating on African culture. However, he himself ended up concentrating on the same African culture albeit from a hermeneutical standpoint. But insofar as a particular culture and its symbols are the focus, the universal relevance of the understanding to be generated philosophically is already hampered by the limits of that culture, and this will appear to be inconsistent with Okere's full

²⁶ Osuagwu, "Philosophy of Non-Philosophy", 59.

subscription to the universality of philosophical truths.

Besides, there are certain facts with which to do philosophy in the African culture. Philosophy emerges from those facts still through the individual's critical and reflective effort. It is also accepted that philosophy grew out of man's cultural environment through hermeneutics. Since Okere believed that every meaning is culture-bound and philosophy culturally situated, this position can easily give room to the relativism that characterise ethno-philosophy. Okere was right to insist that there is an element of the particular in whatever that is accepted as philosophy. This is so because humans are situated beings and do not philosophise from a cultural vacuum; they philosophise within their environment and culture, with the latter's particular expressions and language. This accounts for a variety of experiences and cultural differences and, thus, a variety of philosophies. On this basis we can rightly speak of African philosophy, American philosophy, European philosophy, etc.

However, to philosophise from a particular cultural context differs fundamentally from philosophising about a particular culture and its cultural symbols. While the former is capable of generating certain truths about human life that is of universal significance, the latter is not. To philosophise from a particular cultural context can generate universal truths, because its subject matter is those issues that

concern the whole of existence, particularly humanity existence. Though the understanding of such subject matter can be subject to certain exigencies imposed by that cultural context, it continues its universal appeal and relevance. Moreover, there can be a philosophy of culture. This will entail philosophising about culture generally as a specific expression of human existence, but not as culture particularised or concretised.

On the other hand, to philosophise of culture as particularised in a given context is collapse philosophy into a type of sociological enterprise. Thus, the interpretation of particular cultures or cultural symbols will not always yield meanings that are universally significant. Granted that there is always an element of the particular in every philosophy, philosophical truths, to pass for the name, ought inherently to be universalisable; else they become relative and, as such, lose their character as philosophical truths. For philosophical truths are fundamentally about humanity as whole and as such transcend particular cultural contexts and the meanings attachable to cultural symbols. It is on this ground that critics will always regard with suspicion an African philosophy that focuses essentially on African cultures and cultural symbols as its basic raw material, rather than on those elements that are common to humanity and that constitute the proper subject matter of philosophy.

It is not very clear that Okere fully appreciated this fact, hence the justification of the following criticism levelled against his position:

Okere gives impression that a truth that is a product of hermeneutics is not universalizable. I do not think this is very correct. Culture is idea expressed as a set of adaptive materials by humans to cope with their environment. Whether the mind records information about objects disinterestedly, or gives its own laws, it is arguable that ideas have recurrent universal structures evidenced in the human intellect, regardless of particular mentalities. . . . If this reasoning is correct, nothing then blocks a possible particular from being universalizable. Western philosophy presents itself as a philosophy with a universal appeal, why must African philosophy be relegated to cultural relativity as a birth right? If African philosophy is a philosophy by humans, it has an intelligible universality, unless we want to claim that humans have no common ground on which to converse as humans.²⁷

²⁷ Njoku, "The Originality of African Philosophy", pgs. 103-104.

In the introduction to his work Okere argues that “just as there were cradles of civilization, there are also cradles of philosophy: Greece, India and China.” This position of his has been rightly criticise. “By limiting to only three cultures the cradles of philosophy”, Oguejiofor in particular argues, “it appears that Okere was taking a rather strong position par rapport to the nature of philosophy. While not yet pinpointing what way of organising it, his conclusion appears to be that philosophy has three and only three cradles”²⁸

Finally, Okere could rightly be seen as a strong advocate of African philosophy. Yet his work is filled with Western influences. Perhaps it is an impossible task to come up with a purely African philosophy that is totally free of such influences.

Conclusion

A lot of credit ought to go to Okere for his immense contribution to African cultural revival and for connecting Cultural Revolution to philosophy. His emphasis on the connexion between philosophy, culture and hermeneutics is indeed a psychological boost to African mentality. The challenge his work poses now is for philosophy to be creative, not mechanical. One important lesson is that Africans

²⁸ J. Obi Oguejiofor, (2006). “Theophilus Okere and the Possibility of a History of African Philosophy”, *Koinonia* Vol. 3, NO. 1, pg. 30.

should familiarise and identify themselves with their culture, to enable them authentically articulate that peculiar understanding of life and reality embedded in their culture; this is what philosophy is about.

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