

REVISITING THE DEBATE ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURAL IDEAS

Abel Idebe

Department of English
Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria.
and

Augustine Omosa Obazee

Department of Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Nigeria.

Abstract

The definition of what exactly constitutes African Philosophy has been problematic and the issue has giving rise to debates concerning its constitutive ontology, content, authentic nature and methodology. For two decades beginning from the 1970's till the close of 1990, the debate on the existence of African Philosophy has raged among scholars of philosophy in and outside Africa. The great debate was centered on whether or not there is African Philosophy. These philosophers polarized into two opposing position namely the Eurocentric scholars of the western and African descent and the Afrocentric scholars. The Eurocentric scholars of the western and the African descent stood in rejection of the possibility of an African philosophy its member include Peter Boudurin, Kwasi Wiredu, Henri Maurier, Paulin Houuntondj, Lucien Levy Bruhl only to mention a few. While the Afrocentric scholars argue in defence of the possibility of the existence of African Philosophy. Its members include Joseph Omoregbe, John S. Mbiti, Richard Wright, Kwame Gyekye, C S. Momoh and so on. This paper deals with the issue of what constitutes African Philosophy. It also debunked the idea of consenting to using the western paradigm of philosophizing to ascertain African Philosophy because of their historical difference. The paper concludes that there is African Philosophy which must not necessarily conform to the demands of Aristotelian and Russellian logic for is not a necessary condition of philosophy, but African philosophy is embedded in the culture and experiences of the people.

Keywords: *Africa, African Philosophy, African culture and community thoughts,*

Introduction

What constitutes African philosophy have been a controversial debate down the years. It has been criticized by some scholars that it lacks the element of philosophy such as logic and rationality. The definition of philosophy has remained a perennial philosophical problem and there is little agreement as to what it is. Rather, what many seem to agree on is the descriptions of philosophy, that is, what it encompasses which will provide the basis for our definition. In the same vein, it has been difficult to define what African philosophy is, rather most philosophers have contented themselves in describing what African philosophy is. According to Sogolo, the controversy over what constitutes an African philosophy tends to dominate sometimes so much that it forms almost the entire content of the course.ⁱ

In this paper, the attempt is to say what African philosophy is, in spite of the seeming unending debates. In doing this, we shall start by attempting to describe and possibly define what philosophy is. Subsequently we shall define African philosophy by looking at the various debate on African philosophy which was as a result of the charge of irrationality leveled against the

Africans. The postulations of these scholars are largely anthropological, psychological and sociological as the philosophy of the primitive people or Africans. In the same vein any attempt by contemporary African philosophers to present a purely descriptive, conjectural account of the African worldview as African philosophy will also be rejected. Thus, we conclude that African philosophy is embedded in the culture and experiences of life in general. The first book of Aristotle's metaphysics opens with the words: all men by nature desire to know", that is, humans have a natural inclination to know and take delight in knowledge. The senses furnish them with information about the world. As individuals, humans are embodiments of a world shared with others in the community. And history starts with a certain occurrence in time; his tribe, the clan, the village and the small town represents kinds of small worlds within which all his living is done.ⁱⁱ So one wonders within a certain environment of occurrence. Humans are situated beings, at least as a starting point. The sense of wonder is universal to man; but their point of departure is situated in time and space. Adopting a philosophical position of wonder, one tries to understand one's life and place in the universe. It is against this background that some claim that philosophy also has a cultural root or bent to it, for every experience has a cultural environment of occurrence. Humans are culturally situated beings. They do not speak from nowhere. They speak from within their cultural environment with the particular expressions of language. Philosophy is thus embellished by a variety of experiences. Hence philosophy is not a product of a particular culture but a product of different cultural experiences and epoch. Addressing the issue of African philosophy can only be understood when it is examined as a product of culture, the society, environment and individual experiences and reflection.

Philosophy as A Search for Knowledge

According to Joseph Omeregbe in his essay entitled *African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today*, philosophy is essentially a reflective activity.ⁱⁱⁱ To philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to some fundamental questions. As man takes a reflective look at himself or the world around him, he is filled with wonder, and some fundamental questions arise in his mind. When he reflects on these fundamental questions in search of answers, he is philosophizing. Both Plato and Aristotle tell us that this wonder is the beginning of philosophy. It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize.^{iv} Plato echoes this same view in *The Republic* when he says that there is no other beginning of philosophy than this wonder. Thus, the first step in the philosophical activity is this wonder that accompanies man's experimental contact with himself or the world around him. This wonder gives rise to some fundamental questions and this is the second step. The third step is taken when man begins to reflect on these fundamental questions in search of answers. At this stage, the man in question is philosophizing, and if it puts down his reflection in writing he has written a philosophical book.

Human experience is the source of the reflective activity known as philosophy. This experience could either be man's own experience of himself (subjectivity) or his experience of the world around him (objectivity). Hence philosophy could start from subjectivity or from objectivity. The early Greek philosophers began from objectivity. As they observed the world around them, they were filled with the philosophic wonder. They were amazed at two things that struck them with particular interest. First, they were struck by the diversity and the unity in the universe. They observed that there was a basic unity in the midst of this diversity. Second, they were struck by

the fact of change in the universe. They noticed that things were constantly changing: but at the same time, they also observed that there was a basic continuity in the midst of these changes. Thus, they observed that the universe combined unity with diversity and continuity with changes. These phenomena set the early Greek philosophers thinking, in search of explanations. Thus, the marvels of the physical universe led the early Greek philosophers into philosophizing. Indeed such phenomena as the immensity of space, the immensity of the universe, the amazing variety of things, the idea of time, the ceaseless changes going on in the midst of diversity, the seasons of the year; the heavenly bodies and their orderly circular movement, the starry sky, the sun, the moon, etc., have led to deep reflections and philosophizing all over the world. In his critique of practical reason, Kant tells us that two things fill him with wonder, namely, the starry sky above and the moral law within.

But, as it has been already mentioned, philosophizing can also start from the human person. Indeed, man has within himself a richer source of philosophy than the physical universe. For the marvels and the complexities of the human person far exceed those of the physical universe. The brevity of human life, the vicissitudes of life, man's superiority over the rest of nature which he controls and dominates, his power and weaknesses, his joys, sorrows, success and failures, his finitude, his experience of suffering, misery, disease, death and decay, man's greatness and misery, and others, have led to deep reflection and philosophizing all over the world. Buddha's philosophy, for example, arose from his reflection on human suffering. Reflection on these phenomena of human existence gives rise to some basic questions about the nature of the human being: what kind of being is man, so powerful and yet so weak, so great and yet so miserable? Today he is strong and powerful, tomorrow he is gone, and that is the end of him. Man has a natural yearning for continued existence; his strongest instinct is the instinct of self-preservation; his wish is to continue living. Yet his life-span is brief and is often terminated contrary to his deepest desire, and all his efforts to resist this imposed termination are futile. Man has a strong natural desire to know, he is by nature curious. Yet his knowledge is so limited that he does not know even himself. He does not know why he exists and he has no answers to his own basic questions about himself. He did not choose to come into this world, he simply found himself in it without knowing why: and sooner or later he will be forced out of it. Like everything else in the universe, man simply appears in it and eventually disappears from it. "What a chimera is man!" exclaimed Pascal, a chaos, a subject of contradiction. Thus, man is to himself a problem, a mystery. What is his origin? What is his ultimate destiny? Why is he here? What happens when he is forced out of his life? Is he completely part of nature or does he transcend nature? Is the difference between him and the lower animals a difference in degree or a difference in nature? What is he living for? Has his life any ultimate meaning?^v is there is a force over and above man that controls all these? If there is such a force can it be known?

These and similar questions are fundamental questions about the human person. They have led to deep reflections all over the world. To reflect on such questions in search of explanations or answers is to philosophize. There is no part of the world where men never reflect on such basic questions about the human person or about the physical universe. In other words, there is no part of the world where men do not philosophize. The tendency to reflect on such fundamental philosophic questions is part of human nature: it is rooted in man's natural instinct of curiosity – the instinct to know.

Human nature and human experience are basically the same all over the world, and the tendency to philosophize is part of human nature. Hence the German philosopher Karl Jaspers says that man cannot avoid philosophizing.^{vi} In a certain sense, that is, in a loose sense, every man is a philosopher in as much as every man at one time or another in the course of his life reflects on some of the fundamental philosophic questions about human life or about the physical universe. At funerals, for example, or at the sight of a dead body or in the face of suffering sickness, pain, misery and others, men are apt to reflect on the meaning and value of human life.^{vii}

Joseph Omoregbe asserts that in the strict sense of the word, a philosopher is one who devotes a good deal of his time reflecting on these questions and who frequently and habitually does this. There are such people all over the world; they are to be found among all peoples, in all civilizations and in every part of the globe.^{viii} It is not only in the Western world that men reflect on the fundamental questions about human life or about the universe. Those who, in any civilization were particularly struck with wonder at the marvels and complexities of the human being or the physical universe and frequently devoted a lot of time reflecting on the fundamental questions arising from these marvels or complexities constitute the philosophers of these civilizations. It is not necessary to employ Aristotelian or Russellian logic in this reflective activity before one can be deemed to be philosophizing. It is not necessary to carry out this reflective activity in the same way that the Western thinkers did. Ability to reason logically and coherently is an integral part of man's rationality. The power of logical thinking is identical with the power of rationality. It is therefore false to say that people cannot think logically or reason coherently unless they employ Aristotle's or Russell's form of logic or even the Western-type argumentation. In relation to the aforementioned, J. S. Mbiti asserts the distinction between philosophy as a way of life and philosophy in the strict academic sense may be very helpful in appreciating African philosophy.^{ix} There is no doubt however, that African religions and philosophy has become a must read for all scholars in African religion, theology, ethnology and philosophy.

Debates on the Reality of African Philosophy

In his book *An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, Professor Antony Flew says that philosophy consists of argument "first, last and always", and since there is no argument in Eastern thought (or so he thinks) there is no consequently no philosophy in Eastern thought, similarly, referring to African traditional philosophy, Professor Wiredu has this to say: "without argument and clarification, there is, strictly, no philosophy."^x African traditional philosophy, according to him, is termed philosophy only on a generous understanding of the term. Professor Wiredu is well-versed in Western philosophy, especially the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition which sees philosophy essentially in terms of logic, analysis and clarification of terms. This is certainly one of the leading African philosophers of today and he has contributed a great deal to African philosophy. However, when he says that without argumentation and clarification there is strictly no philosophy, he means Western-type argumentation. In other words, he means that if the reflective activity is not carried out through the western-type argument and clarification (which the British analytic tradition insists on) then it is not philosophy. In the first place, the essence of philosophy is not argument but reflection, and this does not have to take the form of the Western-

type argument. Wherever there is reflection on the fundamental questions about man or about the universe (whatever form this reflection may take) there is philosophy.

We must distinguish between philosophy and its mode of transmission and preservation, philosophical reflections can be preserved and transmitted in a number of ways. By far the best way to transmit and preserve them is by writing, in the form of books. The advantages in this mode of preservation and transmission are enormous and intact. The philosophers whose reflections are so preserved and transmitted are also identified and known individually. In this way it is possible to know who the original authors of certain ideas or views are, either through their own writings or through the writings of those who wrote about them (as in the case with men like Buddha, Socrates, Jesus Christ who in themselves left no writing behind). The Western world then has been in existence for a very long time in the west and consequently, this has made it possible to preserve substantially the reflections of its philosophers we therefore can now talk of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, etc. But who can say that other civilizations do not have their own philosophers?^{xi} Who can say that men of other civilizations do not think, do not reflect on the basic philosophic questions about human life or about the universe? Men of the Western world were not the only people blessed with rationality, with intelligence, with thought, with the instinct of curiosity. These are all characteristics of human nature and are to be found among all peoples over all over the globe. All civilizations, all people, have their philosophers – their own Socrates, their own Plato, their own Plato, their own Descartes, their own Hegel, etc. In this Africa cannot be an exception. Unfortunately, due to the absence of records in writing in Africa until recent times, the philosophical reflections of African thinkers were not preserved effectively.

The fact that the philosophical reflections of African thinkers in the past were not preserved or transmitted by writing accounts for the fact that these philosophers remain unknown to us. But this does not mean that they did not exist, for we have fragments of their philosophical reflections and their views preserved and transmitted to us through channels other than writing such as mythologies, formulas of wise-sayings, traditional proverbs, stories, and especially religion.^{xii} This is to say that writing, though the most effective, is not the only means of transmitting knowledge across generations. Apart from mythologies, wise sayings, world-view, knowledge can be preserved in the socio-political set-up of the people. These are the channels through which the reflections and views of African philosophers have been preserved and transmitted to us in Africa. These philosophical reflections and views have therefore become, in the process of transmission over ages, part of the African way of life, part of the African culture and heritage. But the individual original authors of these views remain unknown to us. Yet we know that these views must have been the fruits of deep and sustained philosophical reflections by some individual African thinkers in the past. For where there is smoke there must be some fire even when, for some reason, the fire is not seen. The fragments of philosophical reflections, ideas and world-views transmitted to us through the formulas of wise-sayings, through proverbs, stories, socio-political organizations, mythology, through religious doctrines and practices did not originate from a vacuum. They are evidence of deep philosophical reflections by some gifted individual thinkers who were the African philosophers of the past, the African counterparts of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, etc. Professor Wiredu calls African traditional philosophy “community thought” and says that it is not the creation of any specifiable set of philosophers.^{xiii} He says it is common property of all and sundry. Does Professor Wiredu mean

that these ideas, these insights, these world-views and the rest did not originate from thinkers? How then did they originate in the first place? We know that there is no such thing as collective consciousness or community consciousness in the strict sense of the word. For consciousness is always an individual consciousness and thinking is always done by individuals. The term “community thought” can mean nothing other than the thought of individuals in a community, for thinking is always done by individuals. African traditional philosophy must have originated from some particular individual thinkers, individual philosophers who have reflected on the fundamental questions arising from human experience.^{xiv} Professor Wiredu says that they are the common property of all and sundry, but this does not mean that they originated from all and sundry. Thoughts and ideas put forward by individual thinkers do eventually become common property of all and sundry in a given community, but this does not mean that they had no original individual authors. Let us take the example of the Akan concept of the human person described by both W. E. Abraham^{xv} and Kwasi Wiredu^{xvi}. According to the Akan concept, the human person is made up of five elements:

- (1) *nipadu* – a body
- (2) *okra* – a soul, the guiding spirit.
- (3) *sunsum* – that part of a man which accounts for his character.
- (4) *ntoro* – that part of man which is passed on from the father and which is the basis of inherited characteristics.
- (5) *mogya* – that aspect of man which becomes a ghost after death. It is something passed on from the mother and it is what determines one’s clan identity.

Now, this is a highly complex concept of man and it is obviously the fruit of deep and sustained reflection on the human person. Such a reflection culminating in this complex notion of the human person must be carried out by some gifted individual thinkers among the Akan people. Although this Akan concept of the human person has become the common property of all and sundry among the Akan people, yet it did not originate from all and sundry or from a vacuum. The authors were the Akan philosophers at some time in the past whose ideas have become part of the Akan heritage, part of their culture. These Akan philosophers must evidently have been reflecting on the nature of the human person, and this theory of man is the fruit of their reflection. The fact that we do not know these philosophers does not mean that there were no such people, no such thinkers and that these ideas had no original individual authors. This concept of man is richer and more complex than anything we find in Western philosophy and it evidently has original individual authors. These were the Socrates, the Plato, the Descartes of the Akan people.

Professor Wiredu also says that folk thought consists of bald assertions without supportive arguments.^{xvii} Yet we know that they are not gratuitous assertions, for the original authors of these ideas and views obviously had their reasons for holding and advancing them. They are not bald assertions but the fruit of reflection, the conclusions of a reasoning process. These African thinkers did not just advance these ideas and views without reasons or without thinking and reflecting on the issues in question. They did not put their reasoning in form of Aristotle’s syllogism or Russell’s logical form, but they evidently had their reasons. When for example they held the view of reincarnation they evidently reasoned before coming to conclusion. They must

have reflected on these phenomena before coming to the conclusion that certain aspects of man are reborn after death. Similar observation and reflection must have led the Akan philosophers to hold the view that the human person is composed of five elements as enumerated above. African philosophers therefore must have gone through a process of observation, reasoning and reflection before arriving at the ideas, views or world-views which they have transmitted to us through the channels of proverbs, wise-sayings, stories, mythology, socio-political organizations, religious doctrines and the rest.

Now, how do we find out the reasoning process which led them to hold these views? How do we get at their reasons for the ideas, views and doctrines transmitted to us? In a culture whose philosophy is preserved in books, this is an easy task. If for example we want to know why Plato held view that the soul is immortal all we need to do is read the *Phaedo*. But in a culture whose philosophy was preserved by memory through wise-sayings, proverbs, stories, mythology, religion, and the rest, handed down from generation to generation, elderly people (since they are the nearest we can get to the original thinkers) can be of some help. Since the philosophy was preserved by memory rather than by books, the memory of the elderly people should therefore, as it were, be consulted in order to find out the reasoning process that led to these which have been handed down to us. The memory of the elderly people therefore takes the place of books. In the Western culture research of this nature is normally done in the library. Because of this peculiar situation of African traditional philosophy, there is need for field-work in our researches. This field-work aims at finding out the reasoning process that led to the views handed down to us by interviewing the old, elderly and the aged. In other parts of the world, if you want to know the philosophy of the given people, says Professor Wiredu, you do not go to aged pleasant or fetish priests or court personalities, but to the individual thinkers in person or in print.^{xviii} In the case of African traditional philosophy, the memory of aged peasants or court personalities can be of immense help.

Theophilus Okere corroborates by asserting that philosophy is not a cultural universal, that has specific histories that are traceable to Greece, Indian and China.^{xix} These are what he calls the cradles of philosophy. As for the presence of philosophy in Africa, Okere contends that one cannot say apriori that there is or that there is no philosophy in the whole of the African continent, it is only an exhaustive research that can lead us to such affirmations.^{xx}

It is of course perfectly possible that among some other people especially those without the act of writing there may have been (or there may still be) some unrecorded, Socrates, some unsung Plato and Aristotle blooming unknown in an unappreciative environment. We cannot be dogmatic about the existence of philosophies yet unknown, undiscovered and unpublished.^{xxi}

A statement like this already traces a faint outline of Okere's position. Philosophy for him is an individual enterprise. It is not the work or thought of a whole community. The community, the tradition or the culture constitute the seed ground for the sprouting of philosophy but it must in the final analysis be the individual self-understanding or appreciation in the context of his culture. Such works as Tempel's *Bantu philosophy*, Mbiti's *African Religious and Philosophy* and Kagame's *La Philosophie Bantou Ruandaise Di L'etre* can by no means pass for African philosophy. Based on his understanding of philosophy as an individual critical interpretation of

his culture, he gives a dismissive critique of these works. For him, the turn that the quest for an African philosophy has taking so far has been towards the false routes. To correct this mistake and to turn to the right track towards African philosophy, there is need to question philosophy as such to see what it consists of.

This task leads Okere to wade through the works of many leading philosophers of hermeneutics including Paul Ricoeur, Martin Heidegger and Hans George Gadamer.^{xxii} This is followed by another study of the history of western philosophy with a view to showing that what we know there as philosophy arose from particular specific circumstances, without which the said philosophies could not have existed in the first place.^{xxiii} These contexts, culture in a general sense, constitute the non-philosophy of any system. It is from non-philosophy that philosophy arises. But it is possible that philosophy becomes so generally disseminated in a community that it once again turned to a non-philosophy, awaiting the advent of another interpreter to spring up philosophy. There is thus, a dynamic and dialectical relationship between non-philosophy, culture and philosophy. Culture as such, with all its manifestations, proverbs, myth, literature, folklore, religion is not philosophy. Philosophy arises from culture and the mediation between the two is the process of hermeneutics, which consists in the interpretations of the symbols of the culture in question.

African philosophy is therefore hermeneutics of African culture. Okere believes that there are latent in African culture symbolic elements working on which the African can produce authentic African philosophy. But even then, such a production is not automatic. Philosophy is not simply a coming together of cultural symbol and the hermeneutical process. It is a creative enterprise and creativity presupposes the presence of genius.

Just as no amount of rules could mechanically produce Hamlet out of the English alphabet without the genius of a Shakespeare, so also can no philosophy be produced from a culture by the mechanical application of hermeneutical rules... any philosophy is always the creative work of an individual intellect.^{xxiv}

African traditional philosophy is not the only philosophy of Africa. Contemporary Africans also philosophize. We therefore agree with Professor Wiredu that the term “African Philosophy” should not be understood only in terms of African traditional philosophy since there is also contemporary African philosophy.^{xxv} There are cotemporary African philosophers and there is contemporary African philosophy. This means that a course on African philosophy should not be confined to traditional philosophy but should include contemporary African philosophers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold S. Senghor, Nyerere and Kwasi Wiredu. The first three are political thinkers and politicians who have contributed immensely to contemporary African political philosophy. The last named, Kwasi Wiredu, is a professional philosopher, a professor of philosophy. There are of course several professional philosophers in departments of philosophy all over Africa.

Professor Wiredu observes that contemporary African philosophers devote a lot of time on the question of African philosophy which is distinct from doing African philosophy. He believes it is

necessary at this stage to go beyond talking about African philosophy and get down to actually doing it.^{xxvi}

It must be insisted that the variety of philosophical experiences arises from the characteristic complexity of the universe, namely, human experiences in its rich varied forms. As D.A Masolo rightly points out, the Western judgment or attitude on Africa have been based on mere cultural bias, which gradually grew into a formidable too prong-reality.^{xxvii} Slavery and slave trade on the one hand and academic expressions on the other hand. In the Eighteenth Century, the Western cultural bias against the black man or Negro was eloquently given and intellectual rationalization by G.W. Hegel asserts that there is an ontological distinction which the Negro is as yet bereft of: he cannot yet go beyond himself, beyond his instinctual behavior and posit the existence of a being outside of himself.^{xxviii} In the spirit of Hegel, Levy-Bruhl queried how can the untutored African know God? Sir Samuel baker wrote about the Africans without exception they are without a belief in a supreme being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry, nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition.^{xxix} Whereas Levy Bruhl denied the possibility of theistic knowledge without western education, Baker denied the possibility of the endowment of such a knowledge at all.

At the centre of this debate is the concept of reason, a value which is believed to stand as great divide between the civilized and the uncivilized, the logical and the mystical. Thus, the African mode of thinking was taking to be mythical and illogical; while the Western thinking is taken to be scientific, rational and logical.

There are African themselves who are skeptical about the existence of African philosophy. Thus, they would not readily say yes to the question, is there an African Philosophy? Someone such as Henry Maurier thinking about philosophy in formalized way, as defined by the west says that there is no such a thing as African philosophy, and if it is, it has not come yet. So his answer is no not yet. Maurier claims and qualifies that the necessary conditions for, first, a philosophy and then, an African philosophy have not been yet. Olabiyi Yai Objects that if European philosophy provides only the valid paradigm for philosophy, then the feeling is that if there is an existence that African philosophy conforms to this paradigm in order to qualify, then we are still faced with the usual European ethnocentrism.

Central to Wiredu's idea, of African Philosophy is the distinction which he makes between African philosophy as folk thought preserved in oral traditions and African philosophy as critical, individual reflections using modern logical and conceptual techniques.^{xxx} For Wiredu, African Philosophy should not be equated with African folk thought. To grant this equation, he argues is to be content to the mere narration of the ideas Africans lived by as an adequate fulfillment of the philosophers' task in contemporary Africa.^{xxxi} But this kind of contentment is, at best, unfortunate. This is so because such narrations of traditional African conceptions are hardly critical or constructive. They do not enable us to see how these conceptions hang together or determine their explanatory fruitfulness within the context of the traditional form of life. Nor do they enable us to determine their significance for contemporary African Societies. A conception of African philosophy as folk thought should, therefore, be rejected because its acceptance would deny Africans the self-understanding which they require in order to be able to cope with what Wiredu has described as the exigencies of the cultural transition that is taken place in contemporary Africa.

E.A Ruch^{xxxiii} states one of the common arguments in this brief form. There are no African philosophers. There can be no African philosophers. He understands this claim to mean that what is generally referred to as African philosophy is a body of community thought not traceable to any set of identifiable individual thinkers. we are being asked according to Ruch, to produce African equivalent of Aristiole, Descartes, Kant, Hegel and the rest, in response one is immediately tempted to sight names such as Kagame, Mbiti, Nyerere, Senghor, Awolowo and s the rest of others, but critics normally retort by arguing that the works of these Africans are nothing more than mere collections, interpretations and dissemination of African worldviews and as such do not qualify as philosophy. More important they go further to say that these works do not, in method and intellectual depth compared with those of well-known philosophers elsewhere in the world.

Conclusion

First, it may appear true that for there to be a philosophy there must be philosophers. More so, if we go by the history of western philosophy in which most known philosophical doctrines are credited to specific thinkers or group of thinkers. However, for several reasons, the ideas of individual authors may either outlive them or may not simply associate with their names. The most easily conceivable situation is when a thinker nurses some original idea which he is unable to articulate clearly and which he lives behind haphazardly stated due to such contingencies. It is possible for another thinker to inherit this idea, assimilate and put it into a well systematized philosophical doctrine. Here, there is a philosophical doctrine, we may say, but it is difficult to say whose doctrine it is, that of the original thinker or that of the man who does the embellishing. It may be taught that the point has been mixed since whoever gets it will have the doctrine credited to him as an individual author but the example provides a more solid base which our main argument is to stand, namely, that there is hardly any philosophical doctrine that is wholly the product of one individual thinker. Every philosophical thesis is a crystalized form, a synthesis of concept, ideas, argument, and sometimes, half-baked formulations which the authours gathers both from identifiable sources and from sources which completely eludes his consciousness.

More importantly, there is a pool of floating cultural ideas familiar to all practicing philosophers but whose original sources nobody bothers to think about. They may be referred to as community thought or more specifically the floating thought of the community of philosophers. They are taught without identifiable thinkers, philosophy without philosophers. But their anonymity does not in any way affect their cultural authenticity. Therefore, the claim that there cannot be African philosophy because there are no African philosophers is wrong headed. Like myth, proverbs, fables and the rest which are cultural products not traceable to individual authors, these are floating thoughts which cannot be tied to any known authors.

The issue of who qualifies to be called a philosopher depends on the sort of works that we consider to be works of philosophy. Two major criteria, namely, method and content, play an important role in the assessment of philosophical works. Although it has been said that there is no one method which is the method of philosophy, some would insist that rational criticism is the definition character of every philosophical method. What this means is that philosophizing is a process where by all received ideas are critically examined. Going by this, it would seem that

everybody qualifies as a philosopher since we all, although not all the time we critically reflect on the ideas we received, however, the argument is that some of us do more of this critical reflection than others. Some do it only as a way of resolving practical problems while others do it all the time whether or not there are practical problems to be resolved. What this amounts to is that the difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher depends on the degree of reflective thinking. It follows also that a philosophical work is to be judged by its level of critical analysis.

In the contention of Makumba in defining the Africaness and philosophiness of African Philosophy, the culture of the African people and the person doing the philosophy are very important and indispensable elements.^{xxxiii} 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 speaks of Africans by association, law, enterprise and relevance.

From the foregoing, if the question loaming 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 problems of society. Like every other rational group of people in the world, Africans have a philosophy which tries to explain reality from a cultural perspective. It arises from the special problem and unique experience of the African people. What may be called into question is the level of systematized thought, which certainly cannot be the same everywhere. Thus, Placid Tempels avers anyone who claims that primitive people possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men.^{xxxiv} Parinder 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. Concurring with the above views Makumba avers that a consistent and unitary philosophical anthropology cannot downplay the place of rationality in the definition of the human person. If Africans are categorized to be human persons of a rational nature, it follows that they are capable of philosophy.^{xxxv}

Makumba 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 all inclusive enterprise. It is not cultural or time bound. Philosophy rather targets and points to the human person as rational entity, a universal experience that is not limited to whites or black. In conclusion, it is a well-known fact that no system of philosophy much less any school of philosophy is all embracing and complete. It is always a philosophic system from a particular point of view and not from all points of view.^{xxxvi} Therefore, no philosophy can make itself a self-enclosed activity like a monad that has no opening to the external world. Life is all about cooperation, coexistence and mutual assistance. Every philosophic system reflects its own cultural value to the overall effort of man to give a comprehensive account of the truth of man and his experience of the world. Thus, J.I. Oguejiofor summarizes Joseph Omoregbe's position on African philosophy as follows:^{xxxvii} First, the human being is universally recognized as a rational being, a thinker who applies his thought to unravel the difficulties in his environment. The few humans who devote more time to do this are the philosophers of the particular community of humans. Secondly, since literacy was not widespread in Africa, the results of the

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

thoughts of the past African philosophers must have sedimented in the proverbs, the religious beliefs, myths and folklores, which must thus serve as the source of philosophy in traditional Africa. Finally, conformity to the demands of Aristotelian and Russellian logic is not a necessary condition of philosophy, for African philosophy is embedded in the culture and experiences of the people.

Endnotes

ⁱ Sogolo, G.S., 1990. *Options in African Philosophy, Philosophy*, Vol.65, No.251, pp: 39.

ⁱⁱ Benita Luckmann, *The Small Life-Worlds of Modern Man in Phenomenology and Sociology* ed. Thomas Luckmann. England: Penguin Books, 1978, p.276.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*. Ikeja: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1990, p. 4.

^{iv} Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b. 10.

^v Cf. Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the meaning of life*, C. U. P., 1969.

^{vi} K. Jaspers, *Introduction a la philosophie*, Librairie Plon, 1974, p. I.

^{vii} Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*, p.6.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} J. O. Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and the African Predicament*, Ibadan: Hope Publication Ltd, 2001, p. 96.

^x K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, C.U.P., 1980, p. 47.

^{xi} Hegel who saw philosophy as the self-consciousness of the Spirit was led by racism to say that in Africa the Spirit had not yet attained self-consciousness, meaning that there is no philosophy in Africa no rationality, no thinking.

^{xii} Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*, p.9.

^{xiii} K. Wiredu, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.

^{xiv} Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*, p. 10.

^{xv} W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, University of Chicago, Press, 1962, pp. 59-61

^{xvi} Kwasi Wiredu, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48

^{xix} J. O. Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and the African Predicament*, p. 118.

^{xx} *Ibid.*

^{xxi} T. Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeunetical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1983, p. 9.

^{xxii} J. O. Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and the African Predicament*, p. 119.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. xi.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*

^{xxvii} Francis Njokun, *Essays in African Philosophy Thought and Theology*, Owerri: Claretian Institue of Philosophy , 1996. 5-7.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*

^{xxix} *Ibid.*

^{xxx} Olusegun Oladipo, *Philosophy and the African Experience, Contributions of Kwasi Wiredu*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1996. pp. 14-15

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*

^{xxxii} Godwin Sogolo, *Foundations of African philosophy*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1993, pp. 8-10.

^{xxxiii} Kanu Anthony, *African Philosophy*, Jos Plateau State: Augustinian Publications, 2015, pp. 17-18.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*

^{xxxvi} John Chukwuemeka Ekei, *An Introduction to African Philosophy*, Awka: Smagh & Co. Nig. Ltd, 2014, p.32

^{xxxvii} J. O. Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and the African Predicament*, p. 95.