CULTURAL AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The paper attempts an analysis of African philosophy from the commencement of its ontological debate and focuses on its relevance in culture. The paper does not contribute to the debate, since the debate is no longer a serious issue among African philosophers and scholars. It, however, states the importance of the debate to the field of African philosophy. It explains culture as an all encompassing phenomenon and that it serves as a relevant source for the discussion on African philosophy. It uses functionalism and structuralism as theories that could be used to understand African philosophy and culture. The theories are to expatiate how the concerned can analyze African philosophy and other relevant things. The paper concludes that given the understanding of these theories African philosophy can be understood in their directions.
KEYWORDS: functionalism, structuralism, culture, ontological debate.

Introduction

The commencement of African philosophy, in the contemporary period, is said to have been responses to the denial of the existence of African philosophy by some anthropologists. This started in the 60s to 90s. But towards the end of 90s to this present decade, scholars are not much preoccupied with the debate, but doing what I can call applied African philosophy. Functionalism is a theory in the philosophy of mind, which tries to explain how the mind is related with the external world and how it functions, while structuralism is a theory in both linguistic and anthropology, but which has crept into philosophy, trying to explain the whole through the parts.

In this paper, attempt shall be made to show the relationship that can co-exist between philosophy and these theories as regards culture, since philosophy is said to be part of culture and philosophers are products of culture.

African Philosophy: From Ontological Debate to Cultural Relevance

There have been arguments and counter arguments on the ontological status of African philosophy. While some believe that it "is still in the making" (WIREDUa 1980, 86), although this position is now obsolete, because of lack of written documents, which is one of the problems seen in African philosophy and

that it is founded on the "written traditions of other lands" (WIREDUa 1980, 7). The traditions are the languages of those that colonized the countries of the scholars, either French or English languages. There are some that claim that the argument should now be a forgone issue, since African philosophy has been addressing issues that are addressed by the philosophy of the West (MAKINDEb 2010, 437). Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the latter's view overrides the former, just because of the date and the time lag, there is still the problem of definition.

Many philosophers are faced with problems in attempts to define philosophy, given the fact that each definition faces a criticism or the other.[1] It is equally said of African philosophy that it does not have any universally[2] acceptable definition (OYESHILE 2008, 57-58). Based on this, attempts have been made to define African philosophy. While doing this, some try to say what African philosophy is not. Kwasi Wiredu, for instance, is of the view that it cannot be "congeries of unargued conception about gods, ghosts and witches" (WIREDUa 1980, 45). While for Peter Bodunrin, it is not "the collective world views of African people, their myths and folklores and folk-wisdom" (BODUNRIN 1984, 1). Instead African philosophy should be seen from another perspective.

However, some scholars have attempted to say what African philosophy is. One of the earliest definitions is John Mbiti's. He defines African philosophy as "the understanding, attitude of mind, logic, perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in different situations of life" (MBITI 1969, 2). Odera Oruka, in his own case, sees African philosophy as "the work dealing with specific African issue, formulated by indigenous African thinkers or by a versed in African cultural life" (ORUKA 1990, 112). C. S. Momoh views it as African doctrines or theories in the universe, the creator, the elements, institutions, beliefs and concept in it (MOMOH 1996, 318).

Looking at these definitions, each has a defect or the other. Some are too inclusive, that is, bringing what is not philosophy into its scope; this is the case with Mbiti's. While for some, too exclusive, trying to deny some that are supposed to be African philosophy not to be. One thing is, nevertheless, noted in the definitions. Each of them is concerned with African culture. That is, one cannot talk of African philosophy without the discussion of African culture. In my view, since philosophy is sometimes seen as the critical examination of life,

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[1] For some definitions of philosophy, see Solomon, R. C. and Higgins, K. M. (eds), *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995: xxxi-xli, Staniland, H. S., "What is Philosophy?" in *Second Order* Vol. viii, Nos. 1&2, Jan/July 1979: 8.
[2] The universe referred to here is Africa and, therefore, the people concerned are the African philosophers.

African philosophy should then be seen as the critical examination of life. In this case, life will be all encompassing .

As it is always said that there is always a reason for doing a particular thing at a particular time, the same thing goes for African philosophy. There have been reasons, given by different scholars, which vary from one scholar to the other. For instance, Gbenga Fasiku states that it is the definition given by Mbiti that Africans challenge that led to the debate about the possibility of African philosophy (2008, 102). Olusegun Oladipo sees it from another perspective. In his view, it is as a result of finding ways in which African philosophers can make their works relevant to human interests in their societies (OLADIPOa 2000, 15). From Didier Kaphagawani's point of view, there are two reasons. First, it is an attempt to respond to the anthropologists who are denying Africans of many things, and philosophy inclusive. Second, it is the issue of post colonial identity (KAPHGAWANI 1998, 86-87).

Fasiku's opinion may not be right in the sense that there can always be different definitions for a concept. Since, in philosophy, there is no generally acceptable definition, they (the scholars) could have assumed that, though, Mbiti's definition might not be absolutely right, but there can be alternatives. On the other hand, He (Fasiku) may be raising this on the basis that Mbiti was not trained as a philosopher rather as a theologist, therefore, seeing philosophy from the perspective of theology. Nevertheless, whichever way one may look at it, African philosophy arose, in line with Olusegun Oladipo, to address "the interrelated issues of the nature and direction of African philosophy" (OLADIPOb 2006, 9).

The history of philosophy (Western) is always traced to Thales, thereby making people believe that (Western) philosophy has a date. For African philosophy, there is no actual date to which it can be traced. Instead, there have only been suggestions. Francis Ogunmodede, in trying to trace the probable date that African philosophy started, faults the claim of some scholars, who have given some dates (OGUNMODEDE 2001, 12-13; OLADIPOb 2006, 9; OKOLO 1987, 21).

For Western philosophy, there have been periods, ranging from the pre-Socratic philosophers, Ancient philosophers, medieval, modern (rationalists and empiricists) to the contemporary, so as to aid the date and history of western philosophy. The same attempt has been made by African scholars to periodize African philosophy, though, this may not be unconnected with the fact that they want to trace the date, but it can be said that it will assist in tracing the history (OGUNMODEDE 2001, 16-38).

Some have divided African philosophy, most importantly, to show types, methods or approaches. Odera Oruka who is known to have divided his into trends, to which people have responded, first gave four trends (1981). Kwasi

Wiredu, in his own case, divides it into levels and senses (1980, 37-50). While for Moses Makinde, his own division is into three phases (1988, 33-39).

Looking at Oruka's and Wiredu's divisions, only terminologies differ, their connotations are the same. For Oruka, the trends are ethno philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic ideological philosophy and professional philosopher. Wiredu divides into levels- traditional and modern and senses- folk-world view, native capacity for critical reflections and modern philosophizing. In Makinde's case, the phases are first phase- unwritten philosophy and unknown philosophers, second phase- re-orientation in philosophy and colonial ethno philosophers and third phase- critical re-orientation in philosophy and contemporary African philosophers.

Since, for Wiredu, the levels are broken down into senses, therefore, to effectively make use of his own division, I think the levels may not be relevant, so as not to create unnecessary tautology. For Oruka and Wiredu, and even Makinde, their first categories as ethno-philosophy, folk-world views and unwritten philosophy and unknown philosophers have almost the same idea. They can be said to be culture philosophy, the communal thought of the people arising from their beliefs, customs and traditions (KAPHAGAWANI 1988, 89). Oruka's philosophic sagacity and Wiredu's second sense-native capacity for critical reflection are similar. In both ways, they recognize individual thinkers, whose reflections are more of "inborn or presumably acquired skill or talent" (KAPHAGAWANI 1988, 89).

Oruka's professional philosophy, Wiredu's modern philosophizing and Makinde's critical re-orientation and contemporary African philosophers are the same. The three try to explain the contemporary African philosophers who are trained with the rigour and concerned with analysis of issues. They are referred to as purists (UDOH 2002, 98). It must be pointed out that for the fact that philosophic sagacity or native capacity for critical thinking and professional philosophy cannot do without "culture" philosophy makes the latter relevant, though, not defect free (OLADIPOa 2000, 57-58; KAPHAGAWANI, 1998, 91-92). "Culture" philosophy serves as the source material upon which sages reflect and modern/contemporary philosophers do their philosophy. These materials are embedded in culture.

Cultural and Social Relevance of African Philosophy
Without denying any fact, philosophy is a cultural phenomenon, because it is grounded in a cultural experience (GYEKYE 1987, x). This view is also shared by Olusegun Oladipo by asserting the fact that philosophy does not exist in vacuum. For him, philosophy is seen as a "social phenomenon which derives its being from the experience generated through the continuous interaction between human beings and their environment and between themselves" (OLADIPOa

2000, 25). This is the same point, as I believe, made by Masolo, that philosophy is done by a rational, reason-driven human being, who, at the same time, belongs to a setting,[3] where there are other beings. These people live together, relate with one another, but through internal reasons govern their affairs (MASOLO 1997, 290). This is also shared by Adeshina Afolayan (2006), but he, in his own case, sees a problem with the relationship between philosophy and culture, which is perceived as a result of the debate of having a standard for philosophical enterprise. This implies that the standard to be followed will be that of the west. This is, for him, the position of the *Universalist* (AFOLAYAN 2006, 21).

In this sense, philosophy will be seen as a field "responding to challenges and problems created by peculiarities and exigencies of the different era" (UDOH 2002, 101). It also serves as the defence of the strong bound between philosophy and culture. Establishing the relationship between philosophy and culture, the materials of culture are objects or materials for philosophic reflections,[4] because the philosopher cannot think, interpret and find meaning in a vacuum (OKOLO 1987, 42). It is with wisdom, intelligence and ability to reason that the philosopher brings what has already been thrown apart by common reason (WIREDUa 1980, 175).

Different conceptions have been given on what culture is about. Moses Makinde gives, at least, three conceptions of culture. But these conceptions are directed towards two theses. First, culture is not static but evolutionary/dynamic. Second, the dynamism in culture is as a result of the people, who reflect on it critically (MAKINDEa 1988, 15). The person that reflects on it critically is the philosopher, because he is first and foremost a person of culture, product of the education and belief of his society (MAKINDEa 1988, 15).

Wiredu, however, sees culture in two senses. He sees it as social forms and customary beliefs and practices of a human group. The other sense is language, upon which the first sense depends (WIREDUb 1998, 36). Language performs some important role in human society. It serves as the fulcrum to human interactive process (BEWAJI 2002, 271; FASIKU 2008, 101). Though human language is important in human society and that without language, there will not be what is called human society, it does, however, not mean that it is language that investigates or captures reality; rather it is the users of language. The users are philosophers, who have been "equipped".

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[3] The setting here is spacio-temporal, which is the background against which the human being grows and is used to.

[4] This is to prove the definition earlier given that philosophy being a critical examination of life.

Plato has explained how the mental aspect of man is developed.[5] What is meant here is that the philosophers are the ones that can do a critical reflection upon the culture. Though the sages, who are reputed for individual critical reflection can do this, but it may not be as critical as those with philosophical training. This is not to relegate the sages out rightly, but we still have some of them that are just moralists. And even those that are not moralists would not have gotten enough philosophical tools, since, according to Kwasi Wiredu, they are not affected by "modern intellectual influences" (WIREDUa 1980, 37). The task of African philosophers, therefore, is to examine the cultural values of Africans critically and bring out the ones that are still good and discard the ones that are not relevant.

No one can deny the fact that Philosophers are products of culture. It will be correct if one says that philosophy cannot be done the same way Descartes has done philosophy. For philosophy without cognizance of one's environment can, at best, be described as pseudo-philosophy. The philosophy of Descartes, his assertion of the *cogito* (the thinking thing) as the only certain thing is heavily criticized because of its neglect on his environment. According to phenomenology, consciousness is always directed towards an object.[6] The implication of this is that consciousness, or simply put, Descartes' thinking thing cannot exist without that which is thought of. Therefore, there cannot be a *cogito* without a corresponding *cogitatum*. Human consciousness does not exist in vacuum. For Brentano, the human consciousness is that characteristic feature of psyche or mental phenomena. Intentionality is a causal connection between the external concrete of things (SEARLE 2004, 159). Therefore, the problem of Descartes consists in the fact that even if the cogito is the most certain thing in the world, nevertheless, the thinking thing ends up denying the existence of the world (KOLAK 2001, 480).

Against this background, it therefore corroborates with the fact that, while a philosopher is doing philosophy, it must be done, not as an arm chair philosophy, like Descartes, without minding the society, but in recognition of the society to which he belongs (MASOLO 1997, 283-299). This can best be explained via functionalism and structuralism

Functionalism is the doctrine that what makes something a thought, desire, pain (or any other type of mental state) depends not on its internal constitution, but solely on its function, or the role it plays, in the cognitive system of which it is a part (LEVIN 2009, Web. N. P). It did not arise in isolation or

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[5] This is detailed in his analogy of the line in book six of his *The Republic.* In this analogy, the mental development is explained and that one can only know and be able to reflect on anything, if the mind has reached a certain level.

[6] This is what is referred to as the intentionality of the consciousness.

come as a theory in the 20th Century; its antecedent is dated back to the ancient[7] and modern philosophy as well as in early theories of computation and artificial intelligence.[8] It is, however, a modern successor of behaviourism (BLACKBURN 2005, 144). For the functionalist, the mind is characterized in terms of function. The function of the mind is examined, but with comparison with computer program. The mind and the brain are equated to be computer program and hardware respectively (SEARLEa 2004, 65).

Three types of functionalism have been influential in Philosophy of Mind. They are functional analysis, computation-representation and metaphysical functionalism (BLOCK 1980). Francis Njoku tries to give a further explanation on each of them. He explains functionalism in the sense of functional analysis to mean research strategy of looking for explanation (NJOKU 2006, 84). This type of functionalism is less relevant in this discussion, and I tend to discard it.

The metaphysical functionalism is a theory of the mind concerned not with how mental states account for behaviour but rather with what they are (NJOKU 2006, 85). On this, mental states are characterized by metaphysical functionalists in terms of their causal roles, particularly in terms of their sensory stimulations, behavioural outputs and other mental states. The third analysis is computation – representation. This applies to a special case of functional analysis or explanation designed to provide a computer program for the mind.

> It decides, deciphers and dissolves the mystery of mental life by function analysis of mental process to the point where they are seen to be composed as computations as mechanical as the primitive operations of a digital computer. (NJOKU 2006, 84)

The computer is programmed such that there are three basic devices; input, processing and output devices. The computer has a function for which it is made. It is in this sense that computation functionalism conceives of human mind:

> as an enormously complex machine, incarnated in the neurological processes of the brain. Like coke machines, human beings take inputs in the form of sensory and perceptual information, and output them in form of behaviours. (MASLIN 2001, 142)

So what make the mental entities are the ideas that are impressed into the mind, perceptions of the world around us (NJOKU 2006, 87). Functionalism has been

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[7] It can be traced back to Aristotle's theory of the soul, where he argues that the human soul is a form of a natural organised human body.

[8] For discussions on Artificial Intelligence See Boden, M. A. (ed), *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

attacked by some scholars. One of the criticisms of it is that functionalism is an insufficient theory of the mind (SEARLEb 1980). This argument is known as *Chinese room argument.*

Another serious attack on functionalism is from Block. He poses several problems for functionalism. The first of these is known as the "Chinese nation" (or China brain) thought experiment. The Chinese nation thought experiment involves supposing that the entire nation of China systematically organizes itself to operate just like a brain, with each individual acting as a neuron (forming what has come to be called a "Blockhead"). According to functionalism, so long as the people are performing the proper functional roles, with the proper causal relations between inputs and outputs, the system will be a real mind, with mental states, consciousness, and so on. However, Block argues, this is patently absurd, so there must be something wrong with the thesis of functionalism since it would allow this to be a legitimate description of a mind (BLOCK 1980, 268-305). This and several other criticisms are leveled against functionalism. The criticisms do not make functionalism a bad theory in its entirety. It can still be used, especially by Philosophers, for proper understanding of the relationship between culture, the people and the outside world.

Structuralism has been defined as a theory that considers any text as a structure, which various parts have meaning only when they are considered in relation to each other (HORNBY 2010, 1482). Text in this sense can be replaced with many other things, since it is used to symbolize things with parts. Structuralism is the name that is given to a wide range of discourses that study underlying structures of signification. From the point of view of structuralism, all texts, all meaningful events and all signifying practices can be analyzed for their underlying structures. Such an analysis would reveal the patterns that characterize the system that makes such texts and practices possible. Structuralism, therefore, promises to offer insights into what makes us the way we are.

Structuralism can be traced to Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed a branch of linguistics called "Structural Linguistics". But the term structuralism appeared in the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, thereby giving rise to Structuralist Movement. This has further given way to some other theories, for instance, post structuralism. It is, nevertheless, applicable to some other fields. For instance, it has been used in biological sciences to explain the physical composition of organism.

The position of structuralism, among other approaches in anthropology, can be located by means of Aristotelian notion of causality (MARANDA 1990, 291-320). For Aristotle, to know means to be able to map the different causes of phenomenon. Of the four causes of Aristotle, each of them can be explained in terms of structural theory. Each of these is explained against the cause it

corresponds with. They are formal cause (structural theory) and final cause (functional theory), material cause (biological, physical and cultural anthropology and compositions) and efficient cause (evolutionary theory) respectively (MARANDA 1990, 329). If, according to Edmund Leach, that "every real society is a process of time" (LEACH 1954, 5), it, therefore, follows that such a society must be given a system of transformation. The problem inherent in this is that it is not factually possible to understand every part so as to know the whole. Nevertheless, one can argue that better understanding of culture can be achieved if culture is not studied all at a go. It has to be studied systematically, and from its various parts. It is when culture is studied bit by bit that it will be understood properly; otherwise, it may not be understood in its entirety. It is from this realm that we would see the relevance of philosophy. Apart from being a cultural phenomenon, it is also a tool for social inquiry. This makes those within the field of philosophy to be critical about culture. By implication, it assists a cultural person to be critical about his/her practice of a particular culture or the other.

Conclusion

In African philosophy, there are also three *devices,* the input, the output and the processes. For the computer, if it is not well equipped, it is most likely going to malfunction. This can be interpreted in terms of Platonic analogy of the line, that there should be a thorough mental development. Culture, in this sense, will serve as the data that is processed. The senses of the philosopher represent the input devices with which his mind is furnished with ideas and that of the culture. The processing device is the philosopher (his mind) with philosophical tools (just like the computer programs). The end result, which is the output, is the observations that are put into writing for people to see and read.

In a nutshell, before one can understand the whole of a society, one must understand the parts of the society, which will be culture-customs, traditions, belief systems, religion, etc. When cultures have been understood and the minds of the trained scholars are capable of doing philosophy that is assumed to be purely understood. The problem then will be how to structure it. This is where the use of language, as a tool, will come in. How can this be explained in the language the 'native' people will understand? Fasiku, following Hallen, has proposed ordinary language, (FASIKU 2008, 110) which, to me, will be interpreted as the simplest language without the use of (philosophical) concepts, I guess, or with further explication of the concepts. Philosophy will not be a strange area among people who are owners of their philosophy. Can everybody read the ordinary language?

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