

The Hermeneutical Task of Postcolonial African Philosophy: Construction and Deconstruction

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Abstract

Meta philosophical issues surround the topic of African philosophy. What should be counted as African philosophy, and what makes African philosophy so notable has long been a matter of reflection by African and African descended thinkers? One stance taken by African thinkers leans toward ascribing philosophical status to the collective worldviews of Africans embedded in their traditions, language, and culture. By criticizing ethnophilosophy as being unanimous and uncritical, professional philosophers epitomize a philosophy to be a universal, individualized, and reflective enterprise. This tendency of appropriating cultural traits as philosophical and thereby tending to emphasize particularity by ethnophilosophers on the one hand and the universalist claim by professional philosophers puts African philosophy in a dilemma and whereby makes it counterproductive to the neocolonial liberation struggle. The article's central argument is that African philosophical hermeneutics is a panacea for the 'double blockage' that the philosophers currently look into contemporary African philosophy. African hermeneutics is the extension of German and French hermeneutical tradition with the works of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricœur. Hermeneutics is a mediation between culture and philosophy and also universality and particularity.

Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Ethnophilosophy, postcolonial, Construction, Deconstruction*

Introduction

The contemporary discussion on the nature and character of African philosophy was embarked by Placid Temple's book *Bantu Philosophy* in 1945. The discussion amounts to the meaning of 'Philosophy' itself and the unique meaning of adding the prefix 'African' to Philosophy. Father Placide Temple's book *Bantu Philosophy* was the first manuscript to initiate a keen interest in African philosophy. With the prevailing colonial domination mediated through persistent theoretic discourse thwarted Africans from philosophical reflection and rationality, *Bantu Philosophy* was welcomed feverishly by black people to challenge Eurocentric biases. The impact of Temple's *Bantu Philosophy* was reflected by Wiredu, who says, "Tempels [has] formed the impression, which in the circles in which he moved was quite revolutionary, that those African peoples had a coherent philosophy and that it governed their day-to-day living." Of course, he thought much of the validity of the *Bantu philosophy* (Wiredu, 2004).

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Tempels studied the Baluba culture to explore Bantu philosophy. According to him, the Bantu people, represented by the Baluba, consider force the primary 'being'. If for western people, 'being' refers to 'what is', for the Bantu, it means the 'force that is'. When western people think of being, the Bantu think of force (Tempels, 1959). Thus, the Baluba culture is reducible to a hierarchy and an interaction of forces with God at the highest level, as the supreme force; followed by founders of clans or 'arch patriarchs'; then come dead people shadowed in their turn by the alive generation. Below the alive generation, we have lower forces - animals, minerals, and vegetables. Tempels also outlines the laws of interaction between forces: upper forces directly influence lower ones; man can thus use a lower force - animal, mineral, or vegetal - to destroy another man or force (Tempels, 1959).

This traditionalist perspective in African philosophy epitomizes communal beliefs and tradition of a given African culture as philosophy has been supported by other African thinkers like Alexis Kagame and John Mbiti. They endorse Tempels' approach of African philosophy as a collective worldview shared by all those who belong to the same culture.

Since then, there has been a hot debate on whether the so-called 'ethnophilosophy' deserves philosophy's status. Indeed, when Bantu philosophy came into being, it was warmly welcomed by the African people described as uncivilized, alien to abstract thought, and inferior by the Europeans. However, shortly after a while, it has been a subject of contention among philosophers. Among others, for instance, Paulin Hountondji describes Bantu Philosophy as 'the product of the ideological structure of the time' (Hountondji, 1996). Hountondji further challenged ethnophilosophy because of its unanimity. He says,

I acknowledged clearly that any human group could live on a set of assumptions shared by all its members, whether or not this set of assumptions is systematic enough to be considered, as it often is, as a 'system of thought'. I still rejected, however, the hasty way in which ethnologists and some philosophers tended to label such sets of assumptions as 'philosophies'. To me, these assumptions represented instead of the initial material in relation to which philosophy could develop as a critical, personal body of thought (Hountondji, 1996).

Professional philosophers like Hointounji and Wiredu, trained in western philosophical perspectives, challenged ethnophilosophy as uncritical, collective, and anonymous. For them, philosophy is an individual enterprise that is critical and rational. This stance characterizes the universal nature of philosophy and undercuts unanimous collective views of people who share a culture. Hermeneutics transcends the shortcomings of these two views. On the one hand, as Okere says, philosophy is "essentially an individual enterprise and is often a *mise-en-cause*, and a radical questioning of the collective image" (Okere, 1983). Moreover, the complete appropriation of the view that emphasizes the universal nature of philosophy, which avoids culture and traditional stance that epitomizes professional philosophers, has challenged particularity. Professional philosophers have made African culture and traditions little value in African philosophy by highlighting philosophy's universal, individualistic and rational character. The other shortcoming of ethnophilosophy, as Wiredu opined, is that the ethnophilosophical approach takes up communal ideas without making any evaluation and assessment; instead, they are prone to be descriptive and interpretative.

Philosophy is a narrative and an evaluative enterprise, the latter being an essential aspect of the discipline. On this view, philosophers should not content themselves with just informing others of the ideas entertained by their communities; they should also concern themselves with figuring out, for their own enlightenment and, perhaps, that of others, what in them is true, if any, and what is false, if any (Wiredu, 2004).

Therefore, this piece of work is geared toward discussing ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy underlining on transcending their dearth to articulate a viable forward-thinking through a hermeneutical tradition. The writer considers that Hermeneutics, as a philosophical approach, is a good means to overcome the dichotomy between particularity/universality and culture/philosophy for doing philosophy in Africa in this postcolonial era.

'Double blockage' in African Philosophy

Maricien Towa characterizes the difficulty that African philosophy currently faces. Towa has described: the danger to which African philosophy is currently exposed is that of a 'real blockage.' Here, the important issue should be inquiring about the essence of this real blockage in contemporary African Philosophy (Towa, 1991).

The debate between the two trends in contemporary African philosophy - ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy - that is, the interest, on the one hand, is focusing on the communal worldviews, values, and beliefs of a society or an ethnic group by ethnophilosophers. On the other hand, the denial of these traditional African thoughts in the name of being uncritical, unanimous, and unscientific by professional philosophers is what Towa has described as a real 'blockage' in contemporary African Philosophy. Similarly, Okonda Okolo has described the contention between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy as "the expression of a problematic that oscillates between a naïve philosophy and unproductive criticism" (quoted in Serequeberhan, 1994). Another thinker, Komo, says that the different ethnophilosophical works

create confusion between philosophy and culture and the essence of philosophy itself. Thus, ethnophilosophy presents a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, ethnophilosophers underscore the undeniable link between philosophy and culture, but, on the other, they fail to define philosophy as a personal reflection or interpretation of culture. They speak of philosophy as a common idea (Komo, 2017).

Tsenay Serequeberhan, in his Hermeneutical orientation, did not satisfy with this 'double blockage' in contemporary African philosophy in a sense either of which is not sufficient enough to explain the conditions and problems of what he calls 'Africa in Metamorphosis.' Instead, he insists that contemporary African philosophy should transcend beyond the debate on what Towa called occlusion and exclusion of traditional thoughts by ethnophilosophers and professional philosophers, respectively. In a nutshell, Serequeberhan criticizes both ethnophilosophers and professional philosophers, i.e., ethnophilosophers focus on dead traditions and the appropriation of Western paradigm to appraise traditional thoughts by the latter.

Hermeneutical Approach to African Philosophy

The researcher's central argument in this article is that African hermeneutics is a panacea for this 'double blockage' in contemporary African philosophy. African hermeneutics is the extension of German and French hermeneutical tradition with the works of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. Hermeneutics is a mediation between culture and philosophy and also universality and particularity (Komo, 2017). Philosophy, as Okere says, "is always determined by culture. There is, therefore, a need for mediation between philosophy and culture. For Okere, hermeneutics is this necessary mediation. Philosophy is essentially an interpretation of symbols embedded in a

culture and language to render their meaning to make use of them for our present concerns and exigencies. Komo says, "Philosophy always grows out of the cultural background and depends on it. Without this background, there cannot be a foreground. Although philosophy is not to be confused with myths, weltanschauung, and religion, it is always rooted in a specific culture" (Komo, 2017). Okere regarding philosophy also maintains a similar view as essentially hermeneutical, who says, "Symbols are pregnant of meaning. In them, all have already been said. Nevertheless, to philosophize, we have to interpret them at the level of reflection. So hermeneutics, that is, interpretation becomes "the mediated factor between the two poles - culture and philosophy" (Okere, 1983).

In what follows, the researcher will present the hermeneutic views of Tsenay Serequeberhan. Serequeberhan argues that every philosophy, whether European, Asian, or African, departs from the lived concerns and historical horizon from which it is emitted. Serequeberhan, in his book *'The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse'*, defines horizon and discourse as:

Horizon designates the historico-hermeneutical and politico-cultural milieu within and out of which specific discourses (philosophic, artistic, scientific, etc.) are articulated. It is the overall existential space within and out of which they occur. On the other hand, discourse refers to these articulated concerns interior to the concrete conditions of existence made possible by and internal to a specific horizon (Serequeberhan, 1994).

Alternatively, to put it in other words, philosophy, by whatever name we call it, is the reflection of the lived concerns and historicity of the horizon within which it is articulated. For this reason, Antonio Gramsci clearly says:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (quoted in Serequeberhan, 1994).

As Gramsci puts here, the beginning of every philosophical reflection is a critical 'inventory' of the lived contexts and historical horizons from which it is emerged. Thus, the departure point of every philosophical elaboration, Gramsci claims, is making a critical 'inventory' of 'what really is.' When we see both trends in contemporary African philosophy, i.e., ethnophilosophy and professional Philosophy – lack the sharp historical awareness of what Gramsci called critical 'inventory' of "what really is as a departure point of African Philosophy."

Another important point related to this is Towa's characterization of philosophy. Towa recognizes that the general essence of philosophy is that it should serve the supreme importance of humanity. This general essence of philosophy is conditioned by differentiated particularity - cultural, spiritual, history, political and economic particularities within which a philosophic discourse is articulated (1991). Accordingly, Serequeberhan defines African philosophy as "the exercise by Africans of a specific type of intellectual activity within a specified lived concern and historical horizon" (Serequeberhan 1994).

To substantiate his claim, Serequeberhan identifies instances from different lived actualities and historical horizons. These are the modern European philosophy that begins with Descartes and Zara Ya'aqob and his pupil Walde Heyward. He says, "the discourse of modern European philosophy beginning with Descartes... originates in the concerns arising from the horizon of modern science. Out of these concerns, associated with the names of Galileo and Newton, the discourse of modern philosophy is articulated" (*Ibid*). The philosophic discourses of the sixteenth century Abyssinian Philosopher of Zara Ya'aqob and his disciple Walde Heyward, in contradistinction to Descartes, Kant, and others, are grounded in the lived concerns of their day (*Ibid*). That is, the religious confrontation provoked their philosophy rained during the time between Abyssinian Coptic church and the Jesuits missionaries. In other words, the fact that Zara Ya'aqob was born and brought up within a specific historical horizon, his Hateta was preoccupied with reflecting upon the nature of faith and religion.

Although the concerns and historical horizon that has ignited Zar'a Ya'aqob to philosophy is quite different from his European counterparts, what we see both in Zara Ya'aqob on the one hand and philosophies of Descartes and Kant on the other, is a critical attitude towards the tissue being interrogated. Zara Ya'aqob did not blindly accept his forefathers' views, which is what we can find in the philosophies of his European counterpart.

What we have, in each case, is a 'critical inventory' always located in and concerned with the issues of a specific tradition and awareness. It has its own lived limits of the historicity on which it is unleashed and out of which it formulates and forms its conception (Ibid).

A similar argument has been provided by Towa, who affirms that to philosophize is being aware of the lived actualities and historical horizon of one's milieu; and to make some kind of critical 'inventory' upon it.

Philosophers are not themselves abstractions but are beings of flesh and bones that belong to a continent, a particular culture, and a specific period. Moreover, for a particular philosopher, it is necessary to examine the essential problems of his milieu and his own period critically and methodically. He will thus elaborate philosophy that explicitly or implicitly relates to his times and his milieu (1991).

The postcolonial Africa horizon is basically political. This is the reason that Serequeberhan says, "for us [Africans], the question of our existence, of our 'to be' is an inherently political question...when we ask or reflect on our own humanity when we examine the actuality, "the substance of our existence as human beings, there we find and are confronted by an internalized imperious Europe dominant over the contradictory remains of our own indigent and subjected indigenoussness" (Serequeberhan, 1994).

African philosophy, too, should focus on understanding a critical 'inventory' of the lived concerns and historical horizons of the African people so as to make it helpful in addressing the needs and problems of the continent. To put it in other words, "philosophic discourse is a reflexive and reflective response to the felt crisis of the lived and lived horizon" (*Ibid*).

Africa is currently facing both historical and ahistorical problems. Slave trade and colonialism have left on the Africa black scare. Although the physical domination of the continent has come to an end, it is apparent that Africa is still in a subordinate position in every aspect of life comparing to the west. Because of this, Serequeberhan argues, "the central concern for the practice of philosophy focused on the formerly colonized world should be directed at helping to create a situation in which the enduring residue of our colonial past is systematically overcome" (*Ibid*). Thus, the task of philosophy in postcolonial Africa is:

for us contemporary Africans, what impels us to think is precisely the estranged actuality of our present deriving from the colonial experience, the specific particularity of our history. Thus, in view of the inert presence of neocolonialism - the diremptions and misunderstandings consequent on colonialism - that radical hermeneutics becomes the proper task of contemporary African philosophy.

Moreover, more than the economic and political dependence on the west, Serequeberhan claims, Africa is still in a subordinate position in terms of theoretical works on the west. In our history, slave trade and colonialism have left their own legacy on African beings; and even after colonialism has been wiped out, a different form of 'colonialism' still persists on the continent under the guise of science, technology, and economic aid. Because of this, Africa could not yet come up with its own theoretic framework and scientific paradigm that would reduce our dependence on the west by offering an alternate scientific paradigm.

In this context, African philosophy should be construed to serve the needs and exigencies of Africans by undermining those values and assumptions that put Africa in a subordinate position and developing its own alternate ways to contribute to the 'world system of knowledge'. The place of Africa in a globalized system of knowledge is still too minimal. How could this condition be averted? Serequeberhan identifies two interrelated points that could shape contemporary African philosophy the 'way ahead'. These are i) The reorientation of philosophic work, and ii) The critique of eurocentrism in philosophy.

Contemporary African Philosophy: Construction and Deconstruction

With this regard, contemporary African philosophers have a double task: constructive and deconstructive. It is, indeed, the task of contemporary African philosophers to make a critical 'inventory' of their traditions and come up with ideas that could ameliorate the existing African problems. The promises that African leaders have made since post-independence forfeited owed to neo-colonialism and a weak bureaucratic setup. Moreover, as Hountounji noted, Africa has remained lingered in terms of theoretic dependence on the west. The upshot for such dependence is far-reaching. The total usurpation of ideas from the west, which downplay the contribution of indigenous knowledge in Africa, has abated sound and sustainable development in the continent. UNESCO briefed this case as follows:

It is not surprising... that culture has increasingly come to be seen as crucial to human development in the second half of the twentieth century. We understand better not just that culture can be a mechanism for, or an obstacle to, development, that it is intrinsic to sustainable human development itself because it is our cultural values which determine our goals and our sense of fulfillment. Development processes that fail to recognize this simplistically divide people's resources from their aspirations or their health from how

they struggle to produce lasting improvements in people's lives. Instead, we have to engage with development in the context and through the medium of human cultures.

In other words, making a critical 'inventory' of our traditional values is vital for overcoming the problems that the slave trade and colonialism have left on us. Only by making such a critical examination of our traditional thoughts and indigenous knowledge systems can we reduce our theoretic dependence on the west. This is the constructive task of contemporary African philosophy. Gyekye, in this regard, noted:

[t]he starting points, the organizing concepts and categories of modern African philosophy be extracted from the cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds of African peoples if that philosophy is to behave relevance and meaning for the people if it is to enrich their lives (Gyekye, 1987).

Although such a critical 'inventory' of tradition is a vital practice, it does not mean that whatever is in tradition is valuable. Some sterile elements in our traditions should be annihilated. Nevertheless, there needs to be what Serequeberhan calls 'selective analysis'. He argued, "The philosopher/interpreter who works out of the context of the present, as it relates to and arises out of a specific tradition, should not passively adhere to what is given by the tradition" (Serequeberhan 1994). It is by such 'selective analysis' that we can bring those traditional values which are helpful for ameliorating the postcolonial problems of the continent.

Thus, we will be able to overcome, in engaging our concrete needs, the dependent character of theoretic work ... is restricted to the collection of data and the implementation of results. In this manner, one can also imagine the future development of indigenously spun theoretic paradigms formulated out of a fusion of the traditional and modern in and out of Africa (Serequeberhan, 1994).

Therefore, through such a critical 'inventory' of our traditional values in light of the contemporary needs and exigencies, we can redefine our being to cope with the hegemonic western system of knowledge. To philosophize in postcolonial Africa is taking the specific cultural traits in our traditions as a departure point in conjunction with modern science and building our philosophical systems based on contemporary needs and exigencies.

... to interpretively engage the present situation in terms of what Africa 'has been' - both in its pre-colonial 'greatness' as well as in its colonial and neocolonial demise - is the proper hermeneutical task of African philosophical thought. Furthermore, this

interpretative exploration has to be undertaken in view of the future of freedom toward which Africa aspires – as exemplified by its undaunted struggle, and despite all its failings, against colonialism and neocolonialism (Serequeberhan, 1994).

The deconstructive aspect should supplement the constructive aspect of contemporary African philosophy. The deconstructive aspect of African philosophy aims to delegitimize the 'myths' imposed on African, which portray the inferiority of the colonized world. It is necessary to expose the internal weaknesses and inconsistencies of the ideas that western discourse had invented about Africa, which claims particular European existence as a standard to be imitated. Serequeberhan has remarked the aim of philosophy in Africa in these words:

African philosophy is aimed at unmasking these European residues [in the form of its educational, political, and cultural institutions] in modern Africa that still sanction - in the guise of science and enlightenment - the continued subordination and intellectual domination of Africa (Serequeberhan, 1991).

The colonial motives of imperious Europe were not only accomplished by the military strength of Europe but also armed with such 'myths' which portray the inferiority of the colonized world. After colonialism has been surpassed, the 'myths' that claim the Europeans' superiority still dominates the minds of the formerly colonized world in the form of 'false consciousness.'

Radiological thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx gave a philosophical basis that affirms the particular European existence as the historicity of humanity per se. This exclusion of non-western races from the status of humanity proper is possibly the defining character of western philosophical discourse. Thus, the constructive and deconstructive aspects of contemporary African philosophy are complementary in the sense that the deconstructive project could pave the way for a philosophical reassessment of our traditions and vice versa.

Conclusion

The task of African philosophy in the postcolonial period should be seen from its contribution to overcoming the historical and ahistorical anomalies of the continent. It seems that doing philosophy on the African soil could not be successful unless the African philosophers recognize the historical and social factors that have shaped the contemporary African reality. Therefore, through such an awareness of being thrown in a unique historical and social context, the future development of African philosophy can be viewed. Accordingly, contemporary African

philosophy should concentrate on reflecting upon the lived concerns and historical horizon of the postcolonial situation of Africa in such a way as to ameliorate the African predicament.

As Serequeberhan argues, Africa's contemporary situation is characterized by economic and political subordination of Africa to the west and in theoretic works. It is, indeed, a point of departure for contemporary African philosophers to reflect upon their culture and tradition in order to have access to bring any meaningful alternative to the hegemonic western system. Like any part of the world, Africa has its own traditional values and beliefs, which could give us an alternative scientific paradigm to the dominant western knowledge system if we could make a curious study and critical 'inventory' of our much-neglected traditions. We could not yet take a serious philosophical undertaking to make use of our values for the betterment of the continent. Given the Eurocentric dominance of the system of knowledge, we become vulnerable to be simply the recipient of the ideas, values, and practices that have been achieved in other parts of the world.

It is the deconstructive aspect of African philosophy aimed at undermining the metaphysical assumptions of western philosophy that could enable Africans to reaffirm their sense of dignity and worth. The appropriation of western values without questioning their worth simply in the name of 'science' and 'modernity' would be harmful to overcome Africa's contemporary needs and problems. The beliefs descended from the colonial past, which portrays the superiority of European existence, hinder Africans from being skeptical about those European values that negatively affect the continent. However, here researcher is not arguing that whatever comes from the west is worthless. Indeed, globalization forces us to integrate our values with that of the modern scientific system the way it is beneficial for our existence. So, the undermining of the metaphysical underpinning of Eurocentric thoughts is what Serequeberhan says is "a prerequisite for the concrete reorientation of our theoretic and practical tasks and not a vain antiquarian pursuit" (*Ibid*).

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