

# AFRICAN ARTS AS BEDROCK OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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## **Abstract**

*This paper makes case for African Philosophy. While it tries to defend it just like previous papers have done, it differs on the mode of defence. It, instead, shows the content that serves as ingredient, which other papers have failed to show, for African Philosophy. It argues and concludes that the existence African Philosophy is grounded on the existence of African art works and aesthetics, which are philosophical.*

**Keywords:** Ontological debate; African Arts; African Philosophers

## **Introduction**

The existence of African Philosophy has been variously criticized and denied. It is not as if scholars have not responded to the criticisms. It has, however, not been adequately responded to; what is lacking in the response are the forms and contents of the so called African Philosophy. This paper shall lucidly serve as a rejoinder to the responses of scholars. Bearing in mind that some scholars have opined that the debate should not be elongated more than necessary (Makinde, 2010: 437; Fasiku, 2008: 085-090), it shall show that the

responses of the scholars are not sufficient enough to silence the sceptics.

While the scholars have shown that there is truly African Philosophy, they have not been able to reveal the contents of African Philosophy, instead, what they have been doing is to do philosophy that is claimed to be African just the way the sceptics do theirs. The paper demonstrates that the ingredient of African Philosophy is African Arts. It also maintains that their arts are not the same with their western counterparts.

### **African Philosophy, African Philosophers and Ontological Debate**

African Philosophers can be classified into three. They are Philosophers in Africa, Philosophers from Africa and Philosophers of Africa. The first, I will refer to as Philosophers living on the continent of Africa; by implication, they include indigenes and non-indigenes. The second category contains purely indigenes of Africa. They are either residents on the continent of Africa or elsewhere. The third could be both indigenes and/or non-indigenes. One thing noted is that their unifying factors are less than their distinguishing factor. It is on this that scholars have asked themselves the question “who is an African Philosopher?” At least, three African Philosophers have tried to answer the question (Sogolo, 1988: 109-113; Òkè, 2002: 1935; Makinde, 2010: 56-60). This implies that while some Philosophers qualify to be African Philosophers, some do not. It can be argued that

Philosophers of Africa are those qualified to be African Philosophers. This has been appropriately and correctly answered by Òkè (2002: 27), they are “substantially intellectually pre-occupied with African Philosophy.” In this sense, we can have non-African (African) Philosopher and African (African) Philosopher. This explains why some are referred to as African Philosophers and some are not.

For there to be African Philosopher(s), there must be corresponding African Philosophy that they practise. They have been asked, therefore, that is there African Philosophy? To this as well, it has been debated. Makinde (2010: 437), however, has opined that it must be put to rest, for such ontological debate is not necessary. This is not necessary again, despite its relevance in teaching African Philosophy in our various Universities, especially, in Nigeria where philosophy is studied.<sup>1</sup> The claim of African Philosophers is that those who have criticized the existence of African on the ground of methods, tools, known figure, and especially, documentation do not have any serious objection.<sup>2</sup> At least, their objections could be described as pseudo.

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<sup>1</sup> The first discussion in every class of African Philosophy is usually to broadly discuss the debate and, in subsequent related courses, to re-visit the issue of debate. This makes the issue a recurrent one all the time. To this, students of philosophy are always acquainted with the debate, but not bothered with the extent to which it has gone, and its current stage.

<sup>2</sup> For some of these objections, see Peter O. Bodunrin, “The Question of African Philosophy” in Richard A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, Third Edition, Lanham: University Press of America Inc., 1984: 1-23

They argue that philosophy may not follow, necessarily the methods of the west (Makinde, 1988: 56).

It implies that on the debate over the existence or otherwise of African Philosophy, two schools of thought have emerged. One, proponents of the school of thought that denies the existence of African philosophy; two, proponents of the school of thought that argues and affirms the existence and possibility of African Philosophy. For the former, they are, and should be, neither concerned nor bothered about the proof of African Philosophy. The reason is that onus/burden of proof does not lie on them; the latter should be responsible for the proof Fasiku, 2008a: 100; Fasiku, 2008b, 085). It is not the case that they have not proven this; it is the case, however, that the proofs have not been adequately substantiated. All they have been doing is to react to their objections in 'harsh' manner, whereas what is expected of them is to show that there is philosophy in Africa. They have gone about this by drawing some philosophical (logical, epistemological, metaphysical, and especially, ethical) implications of their beliefs and thought systems (Fayemi, 2010: 1-14).

Godwin Azenabor (2009: 69) has argued that the validity or authenticity of African philosophy is the antecedent of different methodologies formulated. These include Momoh's Canons of Discourse in African Philosophy, Hallen's Cultural Thematic, William Abraham's Cultural essentialism, Wiredu's Renewal or Reconstruction, Oladipo's Method of Relevance,

Bodunrin's Universal Philosophy, Oruka's Philosophic Sagacity. These are different attempts at proving the existence of African Philosophy and authenticity of it. This poses a problem. This is, perhaps, why Azenabor (2009: 70) asserts that Contemporary African Philosophy poses a methodological problem. Bodunrin's (1984: 1-23) argument tends towards this. To him, and his contemporaries, an authentic African Philosophy should be at *par* with others, for instance, western philosophy; that is, the method of writing and presenting African philosophy should be the same everywhere. What Bodunrin and his colleagues fail to realize is that it is not a must to do philosophy the same way. This will be correct if it is agreed that there are diverse cultures.

It may be raised that, for instance, is mathematics or physics done in Africa different from those of Europe or America? To respond, one can ask that are the topics or course outlines of Government as a Secondary School subject or Political Science as a University course in Africa same, or should be the same with those of Europe and America? If the answer to this second question is NO, then, it will be agreed upon that it is not a must to have the same method with philosophies of other cultures. It must also be agreed that cultural values influence philosophy(ies) of some particular areas. It, therefore, means that we have to jettison the claim of Wiredu, Bodunrin, Houndtonji that the philosophy of the West should be the paradigm standard or yardstick against which African Philosophy must be done

(Wiredu, 1980; Hountondji, 1983; Bodunrin, 1984: 1-23). We must also discard the 'unnecessary agitation for methodology'.

The failure of this school is what this paper attempts to correct. Hence, this study attempts to show that, although African Philosophy may lack documentation, but it has another essential thing as its bedrock.

### **African Arts: The Bedrock of African Philosophy**

There are, basically, two ways to preserving tradition, culture, and other related phenomena. They are language and artifacts. Language may seem all encompassing, given Kwasi Wiredu's (1998) conception of language attributing it to culture, where culture can be understood in, at least, two senses. One, it can be understood to mean the social norms and customary beliefs and practices of a human group. Two, it can also be understood to mean language (Wiredu, 1998: 36). Culture, as social norms and customary beliefs and practices depend on the existence of language, knowledge, communication, interaction, and methods of transmitting knowledge to born and the unborn (Wiredu, 1998: 36). Language is seen as an essential and peculiar feature that distinguishes clearly human beings from other species of being in existence (Fasiku, 2008a: 086; Alege, 2011: 91-100)). It, however, has its shortcomings; for it is sentimental. By language being sentimental, it is meant that while some can extensively

and intensively understand a particular language, some may not be able to comprehend and, of course, apprehend the same language.<sup>3</sup> It distinguishes human beings of different races, for “human languages are diverse both in structure and function and they change in time and through time” (Salami, 2010: 5). This does not have to do with the level of education one has. It must be borne in mind that expression of language could be in either verbal form or written form, or both. There are some that can speak a particular language but cannot put such into writing, while some can do both perfectly.

The other means of preservation is artifact. Except if Africans, and of course, Philosophers of Africa, want to accommodate deceit; this is the only means through which their ‘sermon’ can be accommodated, their convictions for the existence of philosophy in Africa can be welcomed. Hence, it can, then, be said that the bedrock of African Philosophy is African Arts/Aesthetics.

Aesthetics, for Simon Blackburn (2005: 8), is “the study of feelings, concepts and judgments arising from our appreciation of the arts or of objects considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime.” Some of the questions art works raise are: can art work be vehicle of truth?

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<sup>3</sup> This is, most times, as a result of ethnic plurality. See Nicholas Ojoajogwu Okpe, “Ethnic Plurality and Dilemma of Nationhood: A Socio-Ethical Appraisal of Nigeria” in *Anyigba Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 10, 2011: 192-201.

Does art work express the feelings of the artist, communicate feeling, arouse feeling, purging or symbolize feeling (Blackburn, 2005: 8)? I think the truth here mentioned could be epistemic or moral. But for the sake of this study, epistemic is more concerned. It must be pointed out that the problem that has emanated from this is the same problem of using western yardstick to measure issues that concern Africans or are African. It must be made clear here that, according to the Yorùbá, *ení mọ̀ èdè ilù ní eni tí ó mú pàpá è lówó*. (the only person that understands perfectly what the drum [*gáangan* {talking drum}] says is the drummer him/herself). This implies that the only person that can say what and what not in African arts should be African artists or Africans, and/or non-Africans as well, who understand the Arts.

African arts differ markedly from other works of art. African art is embedded in African cosmology. African cosmology itself is “the way Africans perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe; the lens through which they see reality” (Kanu, 2013: 533). It expounds the meaning of life, for it serves as “the underlining thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social contract, morality, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theology” (Kanu, 2013: 534). This points to the fact that African arts are not for arts’ sake as it may be expounded by the west. This idea is a presupposition that it is only when there is a theory of art in place that one can really say whether or not a



particular work can fit into the realm of art (Eaton, 2006: 32-35). An artist, in this sense, is to perfect his/her work, especially its formal beauty (Beardsley, 2006: 41-63). Art, in this sense, seems to imply Cartesian notion of individualism, where artist is concerned about how he/she gives the public art work. The public/social society is passive as far as art is concerned. It also implies, as well, that only the owner of the art work has the hermeneutic power to interpret their arts (Robinson, 2006: 77).

Western views about African Arts are sometimes lopsided. This is because in Western thinking, whatsoever does not conform with laid down standards is not within the scope/fold of arts. The importance of art works lies outside the realm of aesthetics; that is, African arts are not arts for arts' sake. Although, Western arts obey the rules, which I am not trying to condemn, African arts also do but perhaps not in the same way as their Western counterparts do, which mostly concentrate on form. African Art concentrates on both the form and, specifically, content, for this is where their philosophy is embedded. This is where memory and museum come to play their roles. The roles are complementary.

The museum houses the artifacts and antiquities. It assists the memory to remember some of the things forgotten. The artifacts are kept in the museum for generations to come and see it. If they have heard about

it before, it will serve as recollection. This is the sense in which the museum is seen. Dada (2014: 9) sees it as an album where artistic, aesthetic and technological ingenuity of a people expressed in tangible and intangible forms, which illustrate their mode of philosophy, beliefs, norms, values and culture as a whole can be seen for purposes of learning, information, research and enjoyment.

This is to clearly show, that although, African Philosophy may be critiqued on the basis of document, it does not, however, mean that it is without content. The content as it has been shown lies in African arts. It is for this reason that it can be reasonably be argued that the bedrock of African Philosophy is African Arts/Aesthetics.

## **Conclusion**

Criticisms of Philosophers regarding the denial of African Philosophy by Western, and some westernized African scholars, are necessary for the growth of African Philosophy. It must, however, be stated that there is the need for sufficient justification. In other words, it is not enough to argue for the existence of African Philosophy, but also to show its content. One of the ways to do this is to expound the contents; hence, African Arts/Aesthetics.

This is an important area for, at least, two reasons. One, it is an attempt to respond to the sceptics who have denied the existence of African Philosophy on the ground of documentation. Two, it serves as an attempt to show the material, replacing documentation, processed by scholars of African Philosophy.

It must be emphasized that, although writing might not be evident for proper documentation, art works were available for assessment. These works are still being assessed today for philosophical relevance. It may be argued that art works may not be understood properly or may be difficult to interpret by people that are not practitioners. The same argument is applicable to documentation; not everybody can understand and interpret written work for some reasons. One, it may be written in the author's dialect/language. Two, it may be the case that the person presented with the document is an illiterate. For these obvious reasons, and many others but not mentioned here, it can be said that art works and written documents face similar problems. Hence, one is not to be condemned for the other. Art works are more authentic than written works for they seem to be rigid as against written works which are flexible. By being flexible, it is meant that it can pass through series of editorial processes leading to different editions.

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