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THE AFRICANITY AND PHILOSOPHICALITY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

*One of the early debates in the historical development of African Philosophy has been on whether there is an African philosophy or not. While a school, primarily Africans, argued that there is an African philosophy, another school argued that there is no African philosophy. This argument in the negative was drawn from the poor concept and portrayal of who the African is and what he is capable of achieving by early historians and ethnologists. However, this piece revisits the argument and tries to argue for the philosophicality of African thought from the universalistic concept of philosophy, which is drawn from the fact that man is a rational being. From a particularistic point of view, this piece also argues for the 'africanity' of African philosophy, which speaks of the *sitz en leben* of African philosophy, and which provides the ingredients that defines it as African.*

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether there is an African philosophy or not was largely born out of the popular western portrayal of Africa in books by ethnologists and historians. They popularized the face of an Africa that was savage, who could do nothing, develop nothing or create nothing, even historical. The bastardized image of Africa raised the question as to if the people so described could develop a philosophy of their own. However, a cursory glance at the thought system of Africans reveals that they can and do have a philosophy. According to Uduigwomen (1995), the debate or controversy on whether or not there is an African philosophy is dead and buried. As such, at best, it is only as a matter of historical interest that it is considered. This is obvious, taking from the fact that the subject 'African philosophy' is presently being taught either as a self-subsisting course or part of comparative philosophy in many African universities, and even overseas. A number of thesis and articles have been written on this subject by a retinue of both graduate and post-graduate students, having their inspiration sparked off by scholars who stand at the base of the history of African Philosophy like

Bodurin P. O, Sodipo J. O, Omoregbe, J, Wirendu, K, Onyewuenyi, I, Egbeke Aja, F. O. C Njoku etc. This piece is a revisit and a contribution to the question of the existence of an African thought which could be described as philosophy.

WHAT IS AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Gbadegesin (1991) observes that there are four schools as regards what African Philosophy constitutes. For one group, African Philosophy is the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas. This view gives African philosophy a wider extension capacity. The second group understands African philosophy as, the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, African conceptual systems and social realities as undertaken by contemporary professional philosophers. This reduces African Philosophy to reflections by professionally trained philosophers who operate with the collaboration of traditional thinkers. The third group understands African Philosophy as the combination of these two approaches, without suppressing or looking down on any. The fourth group argues that African Philosophy is not any of the above; however, its proponents regard African Philosophy as any collection of texts produced by Africans and specifically described by their authors as Philosophy. However, while it can be said that all these views reveals the dimensional content of African philosophy, preference is given to the first definition. The second is treated with reservation; this is because African philosophy goes beyond the thought of professional philosophers. As regards the third, the comments for the first two definitions still apply. The fourth definition needs to be remodelled. What makes a piece philosophical is not the author. What if a mad man was to be the author of an idea, and he calls his thought philosophy, does it make it philosophy? There should be principles that make a thought philosophical.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF PHILOSOPHY AS A BASIS FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Makumba (2007) 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 an all-inclusive enterprise. It is not cultural or time bound. Philosophy rather targets and points to the human person as a rational entity. As a universal experience, it is not limited to whites or blacks. What may be called into question is the level of systematized thoughts, which certainly cannot be the same everywhere. Tempels (1969, p.21), in this regard avers, "Anyone who claims that primitive people possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men". Parrinder (1969, p.25), agreeing with Tempels (1969) wrote, "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 (2007, p.29), says that, "a consistent and unitary philosophical anthropology cannot downplay the place of rationality in the definition of the human person". If Africans are agreed to be human persons of a rational nature, it follows that they do and are capable of doing philosophy.

THE 'AFRICANITY' AND 'PHILOSOPHICALITY' OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

If philosophy is a universal enterprise, what then makes a philosophy African? What makes philosophy African is its 'africinity'. Every culture makes a contribution from its house of experience to the universal themes of philosophy, and this makes philosophy relevant to the reality of life. Each culture traces the unity of these themes, synthesizes and organizes them into a totality, based on each culture's concept of life, namely, the relationships between objects and persons and between persons and person themselves. However much this may sound repulsive, this cultural contribution to philosophizing is what particularizes philosophy as European, Indian, Chinese or African. The 'africinity' of African philosophy speaks of the *sitz en leben* or *the Locale* within which African philosophy is done, which provides the ingredients that defines it as African, while the 'philosophicality' of African philosophy speaks of the rational human person involved in the process

or enterprise of doing philosophy. This ‘africanity’ and ‘philosophicality’ speaks of its particularity and universality which are basic ingredients in the philosophical process.

For Philosophers like Makumba (2007), in defining the ‘africanity’ and ‘philosophicality’ of African philosophy, the culture of the African people and the person doing the philosophy are very important. 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 (1999) speaks of Africans by association, law, enterprise and relevance.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, if the question looming 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 problem of society. This explains why we have Indian philosophy, western Philosophy or Chinese philosophy. Like every other rational group of people in the world, Africans also have a philosophy which tries to explain reality from an African perspective. It arises from the special problem and unique experience of the African people.

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