

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND INNOVATIVE TRENDS AND ADVANCES: A CRITICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

African philosophy has now joined in the innovative trends and advances in global philosophical thought. But there has been question on whether African philosophical trends and advances are in consonance with general philosophical principles. This paper, using the method of critical analysis, examines African philosophy, its innovative trends and advances in order to determine their congruence with the form and structure of philosophy. The study acknowledges some positive innovative trends and advances in African philosophy. But the study exposes the ambiguity and irrationality surrounding some African philosophical innovative trends and advances. Consequently, this paper determines how these innovative trends and advances in African philosophy can remain consistent with and fit into global philosophical principles. Along this lane, it analytically contends that African philosophical innovative trends and advances still lack originality and essential philosophical qualities. This is as there are abstractions largely borrowed from Western philosophical current and elsewhere that are brought to bear in these trends and advances. This is, too, as African philosophy is not objectively a fierce critique and protector of the African world. The paper, therefore, concludes that African philosophy will be truly African and philosophical when its nature, structure, form,

meaning and methods are genuinely African and objectively critical.

Keywords: Advances, Africa, innovative trends, inquiry, philosophy

Introduction

The evolution of African philosophy has been visible in its innovative trends and advances. As such, the best way to understand what African philosophy means today “is to examine what ideas, doctrines, methods, properties and attitudes which philosophies of various schools regard as philosophical” (Nwala, 2010: 28). Setting the pace for the innovative trends and advances is, however, the question of the existence of African philosophy which propelled a great debate in the past decades. This debate underscored the present innovative trends and advances in which thinkers universally and rationally reflect on one African problem or the other, evolving and reclining on existent methods. Hence, characterising Africa philosophy are innovative advances and trends peculiar to the African world as well as philosophical trajectories characterising philosophical currents in other environments. As such, African philosophy is a reflection of African culture and spirit. Yet, it is marked by a move away from traditional often illogical scholastic or religious idea of thinking, which is idealist in nature, to a more scientific thought in which knowledge or truth is obtained by abstraction and experiment (Nwala, 2010).

As paradoxically characterising every philosophy, there remains continuity in African rational thought. This is glaring in its often display of dialectical relation between traditional categories of thought and scientific categories. In fact, there is a natural radical interpenetration of science and mysticism in every thought. As such, “there is science in African traditional philosophy just as there is mysticism in modern scientific culture” (<http://uzodimmanwala.com/igbo-philosophy>. retrieved 30/5/2021). Sequel to this,

African philosophy has become an interpretation of an African interpenetrating culture, religion and spirit in scientific context. This rational exercise is towards unraveling African philosophical nuances and African philosophical place in solving present African predicament.

However, the transformation of African philosophy from traditional-religious category to scientific materialist category has some inevitable permanent character. Adding to this are great advances from cosmological perspective of thought to anthropological perspective in seemingly Socratic mode. Hence, the reality of present African philosophical trends is in consonance with Socratic transformation of Greek philosophical thought from cosmological hermeneutics of the universe to anthropological base or interpretation of the universe (Obijekwu, 2018; Stumpf, 1994). In all these, the present African philosophy possesses outstanding reflective thought which is still more deficient in the empirical or scientific reflection and knowledge of natural, social and human dimensions of realities.

African Philosophy

African philosophy is generally a multifaceted human rational endeavour consisting in plausible inquiry into issues and problems contextual in Africa. In this inquiry, unorganized and uncritical mass of realities, beliefs and unfounded views about nature and human experience in the African world are subjected to rational scrutiny. This is in order to determine the rational, systematic, coherent, and consistent grounds for maintaining them. As such, Mbaegbu (2008: 76) maintains that African philosophy is “a critical thinking on the African and his experience of reality...a path to a systematic, coherent, articulate, organized scientific discovery and disclosure of the African as a being-in-the-African-world.”

African philosophy is, therefore, an examination of challenges and problems emanating from Africa or elsewhere but confronts the African persons. As such, it consists in rational reflections and answers to African predicaments. These predicaments include the

marvels and problems that confront one in the African world which African philosophy attempts to produce systematic explanations and sustained responses to. In this sense, African philosophy as a critical thought anchors on African realities, conditions and questions. Thus, according to Oguejiofor (2010:7), African philosophy harbours plausible reflections and rational thoughts that have wide embrace of all that are “remotely and proximately linked with Africa and Africans both within the continent and in Diaspora, extending from the beginning of African history to contemporary times”. This means that, African philosophy articulates and critically reflects on the total experience of the African, on the way or ways, for example, how he perceives reality. African philosophy thus places special emphasis on the African, his world, history, values, etc.; and on the significance these have for him. In general, it explores the particular way or ways the African experiences, conceives and interprets nature, society, religion, man, God, human conduct, and so on. In short, it deals with the African in his radical subjectivity, that is to say, precisely as an African. (Mbaegbu, 2008: 76)

In all these, it stands that African philosophy is also “the result of the series of philosophical discussions that has been taking place in the continent starting from the last century” (Oguejiofor, 2001: 91). It is a collective scholarly effort to defend the use and function of philosophy in Africa. As such, Hountondji (1974: 23) describes it as “the kind of literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems”. In the same vein, African philosophy is a quest for wisdom and examination of fundamental questions on life, beings, vast geo-political and socio-cultural entities perceivable and visible in the African continent. It is a rational reflection into the African world and existence. It is a search for truth in the African universe, an interpretation and analysis of African realities and man’s place in the world. This critical reflection covers African experiences and all areas of the African world: logic, metaphysics, ethics,

aesthetics, politics, law, economy, medicine, ecology, religion, epistemology, history, and their significance to the Africans.

In continuation, in defining African philosophy, Ruch (1981:15) outlines the three characteristics of African philosophy, thus: “it is written or propounded or created by a person born of African stock...it is written or propounded or created on African continent; it deals [with] what one might call ‘African problems or themes’ or with some aspects or other of African culture”. For any philosophy to be called African philosophy, that philosophy has to possess at least two of these characteristics. For instance, it is not enough for a philosophy to be done by an African for it to be called African philosophy. There are many Africans today trained as philosophers but they do not for that reason alone become African philosophers. On the same note, there are many philosophers who are not from Africa but are referred to as African philosophers because they are interested in African problems or culture. Placid Tempels is not from Africa, but is today regarded as the father of African philosophy. Hence, Momoh (1989: x) argues that any work can be appropriately regarded as African philosophy if such work is “in African Philosophy... is not African Philosophy if it is actually not in harmony and congruence with the spirit of African Philosophy”. So, if an a philosopher from Africa writes on an aspect of philosophy of science relating to quantum mechanics, it will be stretching things too far to regard such a work as African philosophy. Also, if a philosopher examines African ethics in such a way that individualism is extolled at the expense of communalism, then such a work is not African philosophy because the work is neither in harmony with the letter nor the spirit of African philosophy.

Consequently, innovative trends and advances in African philosophy cuts through the entire spectrum of African culture which the Africans and the circumstances they face created. Thus, African philosophy examines “the material and institutional foundations of this culture, study their oral literature (fables, parables, proverbs, idioms, rituals, various forms of myth), and analyze their behaviors, ritual activities

and attitude to life” (Nwala, 2010: 41). These trends and advances extend to the critical study of African religion, art, music, dance, folklore, proverbs and the whole realm of African language.

Innovative Trends in African Philosophy

Innovative trends in African philosophy highly points to its popular stages of development over the years. In other words, it points to the several directions or pattern taken by African philosophy. These trends, according to Mbaegbu (2008), portray the diverse African inquiries. The responses to the debate over the nature and status of African philosophy, ignited by the celebrated work of Placid Tempels’s Bantu Philosophy (French Edition: 1945), gave rise to the various trends in African philosophy. Basically, these trends include: Ethno-Philosophy, Professional Philosophy, Sage Philosophy or Philosophical Sagacity, National or Ideological Philosophy, Hermeneutical Philosophy, Historical Philosophy and Literary or Artistic Philosophy. Okafor (1993:94) maintains that “any contribution to the subject of African Philosophy is either an apologetic defending the orientation of ethno-philosophy, or a devastating criticism rejecting that orientation *in toto*, or, finally, a constructive criticism seeking to modify this orientation”. The point is that these trends are different ways of doing African philosophy. They are varied ways African philosophers respond to the question: is there African philosophy? or, if there is, what is it?

In continuation, African philosophy has been characterized by questions and discourses on its existence as well as its contents. With the affirmation of its existence, concentration of thinkers has been placed on the search for the identity and justification of such philosophy. This concentration has been a critical search towards sifting out the myths from realities and proffering justifications for these realities. As such, African philosophical pattern at this period towed the apologetical direction. The point is made clearer by Makumba (2007: 21) when he says, *Apologians* for African philosophy are on the decrease while research into contents and types

is on the increase. At the same time, this critical approach ensures that African philosophy remains relevant and in time with the general development of human thought.

The most outstanding innovative trend in African philosophy is the professional stage revolving around present academic reflections towards a coherent and systematic account of the multi-faceted universe of beings and knowledge in African context. An important aspect of this trend is that African philosophy is more descriptive and phenomenological than critically hermeneutical. These largely make African philosophical inquiries and reflections a narration of existent realities within African culture and values. Thus, African philosophy is descriptive in the portraying of the meaning of words and concepts. It is normative in its fulfillment of certain rational conditions revolving around African realities, situations, conditions, predicaments or questions. With the spread of literacy in the continent through colonial education and global the denigration of Africans as inferior beings, African philosophical trends became more rational, speculative and critical towards unraveling answers to critical African issues. The innovative trends in African philosophy extend to unravel different ways of viewing realities and creating better and rational insight into the meaning of realities, especially from the perspective of the African. In contemporary period, therefore, the direction of African philosophy has become more faithful to normative, analytic, dialogic and hermeneutic methods of thought.

Glaringly, therefore, African philosophy now involves a critical approach towards unveiling more transcendental objects of the ideal world as well as the philosophical and scientific principles in the African world. It seeks also to retell and rewrite history as distorted by “colonisation in order to create a new history, which is the history of humanity”(Isife, 2020: 121). Thus, African philosophy now progresses step by step from mere subjective perception and phenomenological description to synthetic objective thought, pragmatic and realistic knowledge that positively transforms governance and fosters sustainable development, especially in Africa.

Innovative Advances in African Philosophy

An outstanding innovative advance in African philosophy is its character of departmental branches like its Western counterpart. Thus, philosophical enquiries within African philosophy unfold in the contexts of logic, metaphysics, ethics, social and political philosophy, aesthetics and epistemology. Mbaegbu (2008) adds that these departmental branches also extend to philosophy of African language, religion, history, education and culture that houses diverse African philosophical inquiries. Reiterating this development, Momoh, in Bodunrin (1989: 23-24), asserts that “African philosophy is the one done by African philosophers whether in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics or history of philosophy... set in some African context”. The progress of African philosophy has even triggered increase in the number of courses within the departments of philosophy in African universities. It as well propels the present upsurge in African philosophical activities, associations, books and journals through which realities in the African world are analyzed and interpreted.

However, African philosophy is a rational enterprise focusing on African liberation from diverse challenges. As such, it has advanced into solving problems bugging contemporary African society. Sequel to this, Oguejiofor (2010) argues that the advances of African philosophy lie more in its ability to tackle the problems of the moment in the African world. These are problems revolving around political, economic, social and other areas of African existence. In solving these problems, African philosophy proposes indigenous theories such as Igwebuike (Kanu, 2018), Ibuanidanada (Asouzo, 2011), Ubuntu (Samkange & Samkange, 1980), and indigenized theories like Theistic Humanism (Dukor, 2010), Integrative Personhood (Odimegwu, 2008), Dialectics of Freedom (Isife, 2020), which are central in ameliorating African contemporary predicament and stabilizing African societies. As such, African philosophy is significantly viewed as a response to

the multifarious problems of the Africans and challenges from their environment.

Referring to this, Oguejiofor (2010: 14) reveals that African philosophical reflection “is always contextual and intended to solve one or the other of numerous problems bedeviling the continent”. This trend is, however, in consonance with the idea of the American pragmatic philosopher, John Dewey, who holds that philosophy starts from some deep and wide way of responding to the difficulties that life presents. The reality of this direction is truly a manifestation of the vision of the foremost Ghanaian nationalist, Kwame Nkrumah, who, in Chinweuba (2019: 96), urges that “African philosophers be of immense help to the rediscovery and sustainable governance of Africa”.

The Congruence of African Philosophy with Form and Structure of Global Philosophy

Global philosophy is characterized by rigorous, systematic, rational and critical investigation of matters that are important in human existence. Philosophy generally has essential attributes of “criticality, consistency, logicity, comprehensiveness, profundity and coherence” which manifest in every inquiry (Agbanusi, 2011: 85). These characters are everywhere in the form and structure of philosophy. In line with these features, African philosophical trends and advances cut through the entire spectrum of African culture, norms and values. It examines the “intellectual basis, assumptions and social praxis” of culture to arrive at more rational synthesis” (Nwala, 2010: 41).

As such, African philosophical inquiry explores and examines in an unlimited and unhindered manner the sacrosanct, unorganized and uncritical mass of realities, beliefs and unfounded views about nature and human experiences in the African world. These realities are largely pondered on and subjected to rational scrutiny to determine the rational, systematic, coherent and consistent grounds for their being and for maintaining them. In this sense, critical analysis has become a

means to an end as African philosophy tends towards synthesizing and preserving that which is best in African culture, experience and world. This act is typical of Plato in his criticism of Homeric religion towards its rational synthesis and not its devastation. For, Plato exposed philosophy wherever it is practised as a second order activity, while traditional culture remained the first order activity. Thus, Plato attacked traditional Greek culture in an attempt to preserve the best in it. In congruence with Plato's goal, therefore, African philosophical trends and innovative advances have largely become a practice of the "skills of interior reconstruction, comparative criticism and synthesis" of African thought and culture (Hunnings, 1975:13). In other words, African philosophy has become a synthetic, synthetical and substantive philosophy (Momoh, 2010).

The further implication of these is that like global philosophy, African philosophy has a tendency or a tradition that makes it quite directional. This is a direction replete with holistic approach to African person, experiences and realities. Thus, as British philosophy is predominantly empirical, the American is pragmatic, the French is rational and dualistic, the German is idealist, the Russian is materialist, the Indian is spiritualistic, the Chinese is humanist, and African philosophy mainly communalistic, with a moralistic, metaphysical, spiritualistic, intuitive and mystical features. Buttressing this, Nwigwe (2005: 45) avers that, reason ...in its western sense is discursive and analytic. The African mind, on the contrary looks at reality holistically. It does not impoverish or sap or rob or press issues into cold schemata. Unlike the European intellect, which is mainly after the utility of things, the African reason is participatory and intuitive. In African thought, mysticism prevails – there is a great interest to forge unity and harmony among the various aspects of reality: the environment, man, animal, the ecology, etc. for the European, man lives in a world which is tangible and realistic: man himself is part of nature, which consists and functions according to certain principles and laws. In African

thought, the world is an organism, it is more properly understood, when taken as a whole. This means that the physical and spiritual realms of reality are inseparably bound together .

In congruence with philosophical orientation and dwelling on the true mode of philosophy, African rational inquiry virtually delves into all areas of African reality and life. It examines all subjects in African context within human perception and experience. Along this line, “the different levels of articulation and the various attempts to systematize traditional thought are becoming clearer” (Nwala, 2004 :7). This is more so as African philosophy now operates on analytic trend that makes fundamental concepts clearer, as evidenced in the scholastic direction that critically analyzes the religious thoughts of Africans, the liberation pattern that vies for societal and human positive change, and the logical positivism or rationalist school that is bent on depicting scientific rationality, logicity, epistemology, as well as the clarification of meanings, in African context.

Outstanding in African philosophy is, however, its alignment with the most basic essence of universal philosophy. This nature is glaring in the inability of philosophy to arrive at any generally acceptable agreement (Oguejiofor, 2010). While African philosophy exhibits this global philosophical trait of having no generally acceptable definition, thinkers in this rational enterprise “go on in practice as if the nature of philosophy has been determined” (Bodunrin, 1991: 75-76). Added to this character is the arrival of African philosophy at the universal core philosophical phase which is hermeneutics. For “philosophy wherever it exists or is practiced is hermeneutics of the entire world of the subject” (Oguejiofor, 2010 : 9).

Thus, the hermeneutical character makes African philosophy a patrimony of contemporary global philosophy. Within this hermeneutical trend, the concern with the actual context has become a special mark of contemporary African philosophy. Like universal philosophy, this African philosophical trend has also proven that there

can be philosophy of anything and everything, with the rational mind as the tool of critical reflection. As such, African philosophical trend has largely remained a re-enactment of pristine practices in continental and universal philosophy. Along this line, it also unfolds from human leisure which is the trajectory of pristine philosophizing. For, “initial philosophizing was based on leisure from which earlier philosophers with their extra-time reflect on the incommensurables of the universe” (Aristotle in Carruthers, 1984: 981). African philosophy can, therefore, remain consistent with and fit into global philosophical trends and advances when it continuously operates along the aforementioned universal philosophical trajectories.

Problems in African Philosophy and Innovative Trends and Advances

The major problem in African philosophy and innovative trends and advances is glaring in its contextual intent to solve the problems plaguing the continent. For owing to the irresponsible and predatory politics within the continent where liberal democracy exists in principle, contemporary African philosophy has become more of a liberation/redemption philosophy (James, 1992). This is in the sense that it greatly centers on the chaotic political situations of the continent. Thus, most critical reflections border on philosophy and governance, philosophy and development, and by extension philosophy and culture, given the turbulence experienced in African cultural world. In the same vein, African philosophy has not been holistic in its trends. As concentration builds on socio-political and economic problems, there is gross negligence of the educational sector, technological underdevelopment, poverty, ethnicism, eroding African languages and values.

Indeed, African philosophy’s overconcentration on the social, political and economic matters in the present African world leads to gross neglect of the general historical character of philosophy as a discipline stemming from its pristine ancient Egypt movement. This is a character in which philosophizing tends to emanate largely from leisure (Stumpf, 2004). Lending credence to this reality, Aristotle, in

Carruthers (1984), reveals that African philosophy was not initially spurred by human basic needs but by leisure. Speaking about Aristotle, Carruthers (1984: 981) contends, “This is why men began to philosophize after their basic needs has been satisfied. This is also why for him philosophy began first in ancient Egypt because Egyptian priests had leisure and could spent their extra-time in reflecting on the incommensurables of the universe.” Away from this noble original trajectory, therefore, African philosophy is fast becoming a utility philosophy. In other words, it is fast becoming an art in order to live than an academic inquiry propelled by love for wisdom. This, according to Oguejiofor (2010), drags philosophy in African context into the problem of its existence.

However, this shift in trajectory is not entirely odd from the philosophical practices of other regions of the world. The social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacque Rousseau, for instance, grew out of concern for the well-being of their societies. Hence, their theories were pure philosophical reflections on the basis of human peaceful community existence. It is, therefore, much in keeping with this tradition and the recurrence of such trends in the continent that African philosophy deeply focuses on African predicament.

Meanwhile, African philosophy still lacks comprehensiveness in its knowledge horizon. It as well lacks firm grip in its hermeneutical engagement. Hence, a lot of philosophizing on African experience is an assumption replete with sentiments and lack of objectivity. For instance, African philosophy still portrays Africans as communalistic and the West as individualistic (Oguejiofor, 2010). More still, African philosophical schools of thought still treat “African people as a collective unified one-willed organism leaving no room for individualism of any sort” (Nwala, 2004:1). In all these, African philosophy is not largely and objectively a fierce critique and protector of the African world.

A more pathetic problem in African philosophy is the continued dominance of Western philosophy in its curriculum, thought and language of study. Hence, “with colonial languages standing as lingual franca in many African states, coupled with western styled education curriculum” (Isife, 2020:127), African philosophy will continue to serve the interest of the West rather than being an instrument for decolonisation of the African. Also, the worst part of the problem is about the performance of African philosophy in the Philosophy programmes of African universities. A research carried out by Agbanusi (2016) on August 31st 2015 shows that the academic programmes of selected African universities have few or no courses in African philosophy. According to Agbanusi (2016: 184),

The findings as reflected above show that only a comparatively few universities in the world study African Philosophy. also and more worrisome, not enough number of African universities study African Philosophy and that even in many Philosophy departments of African universities where it is studied, only few courses are offered in African Philosophy at the undergraduate level... only few African universities have provision for African Philosophy to be studied as a major area of specialization in their postgraduate studies....

And the ratio of pure African philosophy courses to other philosophy courses in the academic programmes where African philosophy is studied is very low. Against this condition, Makumba (2007: 31) postulates that “an African who has been exposed to classical western philosophy as the basis of his philosophical training will always be influenced by the thought categories and patterns of that way of thinking, consciously or otherwise; which happens to be the case with the majority of African scholars”. In reality, therefore, the curriculum largely used in African philosophical education system deprives potential African thinkers of academic tools necessary for the task of hermeneutical engagements with the African world. Worse still, African philosophy has foreign languages as its vehicles. Thus, almost

all the philosophizing in African context is done in English and/or French. In fact, proficiency in these languages is allegedly viewed as expertise in African philosophy (Fanon, 2008). Yet, these languages do not totally represent and unveil all the realities, nuances and meanings lurking in African culture and thought. As such, they have not driven a complete and balanced African philosophy.

Besides, African philosophy in its innovative trends and advances is less ambitious. This is as it is not all-embracing as is the character of global philosophy. For the character of global philosophy is glaring in its examination and study of universal realities, while African philosophy reflects on Africans, the African world, its role, and the prospects it has for Africans.

Conclusion

In post-great debate on the possibility of its existence, African philosophy has become a professional enterprise dominating intellectual spaces in Africa and the Diaspora (Nwala, 2004). African philosophy is indeed at the forefront of the struggle to restore the humanity of the Africans. This is after the doubts surrounding this humanity consequent upon the continent's unprecedented history and predicaments. This is a history laden with unfolding events that made the rest of the world rethink the humanity, rational character of the Africans as well as the capability of the Africans rising above their predicaments (Oguejiofor, 2009). In view of this, thinkers like Hegel, Levy-Bruhl, Diedrich maintain that Africa has no history and philosophy, but only with mentality quite different from the rest of humanity (Odhiambo, 1995). Thus, the prejudices of western philosophers like Hume, Kant, Hegel, etc resulted in the relegation of the African, especially the Black, to the level of an irrational being...Hume, for instance, argued that the black man lacks mental capacity, invention, civilisation, ingenuity, and therefore inferior to the white race...Hegel excluded Africans from the movement of history, projecting that the continent has no human consciousness.... (Isife, 2020: 118 -119).

For these Western thinkers therefore, It is...evident that there are differences between the mental activity of the Negro and that of the European...A significant difference is that the Negro is more dominated by the unconscious or half-conscious impulses than we are, for him emotional thinking outweighs logical thinking, and when emotion is the guide, ideas and actions may result which are not in conformity with logic (Odhiambo,1995: 7).

These bias and assumptions were the rationale behind Hountondji's (1983: 11- 12) postulation that "Hegel provided a powerful philosophical base to the chorus of denigration of the non-white races which accompanied and buoyed up the European colonial white adventure all through the nineteenth and as well as into the twentieth century". These irrational postulations of Western thinkers, however, became the fertile ground for African philosophical innovative trends and advances. Thus, the fact that Africans are really humans and share in basic human character of rationality, despite her checkered history and contemporary burden, has therefore been proven in African philosophical innovative trends and advances.

Adding to this, the innovative trends and advances in African philosophy have driven quality governance that underscored sustainable development in many African states. Oguejiofor (2010: 19), for instance, holds that based on African philosophical trends and advances, the state of "Botswana has the highest per capita income in the whole of Africa. Its society is so ordered and well organised that it has become a station of choice for diplomats of other countries of the world". Despite this, African philosophical innovative trends and advances largely lack originality. This is as there are abstractions and methods borrowed from Western philosophical current and elsewhere. African philosophy will, therefore, be true to itself when its methods, nature, structure, form and meaning are genuinely African and objectively critical.

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