

**UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY  
AS A DEFENCE OF AFRICAN CULTURE**

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**Abstract**

Quite sadly for Africans, there have been certain, or to put it in a better way, several attempts by external forces to either deprive Africans of the tenability of African cultures both as a tool of preserving philosophy or as a consequence of specific philosophical reflections. The consequence of this has been dire for the African experience. It is the realization of this that philosophy as a professional enterprise on the African continent became a tool both for extending the tenets of African cultures or for the expression of what African cultures are. In both cases, the idea of preservation of culture as well as the validation of cultural determinants is rightly expressed. The aim of this paper is to examine the philosophical discourse of African philosophy as a defense of African culture. In other words, this paper will consider how philosophy has been conceptualized, and used as a tool for addressing the protection, preservation and validation of African cultures from decimation from Western imperialism on all fronts.

**Keywords:** African Philosophy, African Cultures, Eurocentricism, Professional Philosophy, Philosophic Sagacity

**Introduction**

There have been several attempts to dismiss the tenability of African cultures. Some of the nuances of what qualify as African cultures have been often times subjected to the paradigms of Western cultures in a derogatory manner. On many occasions, these cultures have been declared to lack some rationality or to be barbaric, illogical and heathen. As if this is not denigrating enough, Western philosophers assume that African philosophy lacks possibility, and they do this on the basis of the influence of Hegel's claim that Africa is still at the stage of human history that lacks high sense of philosophical reliance and intellectual scrutiny. Other scholars such as Levy Bruhl also claim that Africans lack strong philosophical capabilities.

It is in response to this that several attempts have been made by African philosophers to assert the tenability, logicity and validity of African cultures. It is also in respect to the attempt by these scholars and professional philosophers that this paper asserts the connections between culture and philosophy on the one hand, and also of the tenability of African cultures on the other hand.

When the first set of philosophers, the Milesians, in Western philosophy were setting up their trades, they were reacting to specific cultural issues of what the right understanding of the universe could be. Contrary to the predominant mythopoetic tradition and the designation of all natural phenomena on the idea of the supernatural, they were willing to grant a natural and physical explanation. This view, taken from its more literal perspective would assume that they were able to dismiss all cultural notions and replace them with their ideas. Sound as the idea of rejecting the cultural notions they met could be, they were still decidedly steeped in certain cultural notions and influenced by certain societal and environmental ideas. For instance, Thales chose water as the primary stuff through which all things were made. In Bertrand Russell's explication, he could have been influenced by the fact that he was dwelling in a natural environment surrounded by water.<sup>1</sup> The relevance of this point is that cultural underpinning, no matter how little, has a role to play in our philosophy, and this calls either for such recognition or the willingness to defend our cultural beliefs using our philosophical conviction as a foil. This point will be made clear later.

In order to defend the view that African philosophy is imbued with the motive of defending African cultures against Eurocentrism, this paper will trace the debate on the existence or otherwise of African philosophy since this is what led to the problem in the first instance. This paper will give a clear opinion of the schemes used in rejecting the possibility of African philosophy as well as its broader notion of rejecting African Oral traditions. From these, the paper will examine how African thinkers have developed African philosophy and draw the connection between culture and their constructs. It is via these that Metaphysics, Political philosophy and Ethics will serve as the focus in order to establish a thesis. Finally, this paper brings the works of prominent African philosophers to fore, and this is done in an analytic way.

### **Intellectual and Pragmatic Foundation of African Philosophy**

It would be inappropriate to treat the debate on the existence of African philosophy without adequate understanding of the historical denial of the African experience by some European scholars, and particularly, by one of the most influential idealist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel. It was Hegel who arguably placed the African ideology and cultural structures on the platform of desecration, decimation and denigration. In one of his most influential works which speaks volumes about the understanding of history as a connection with the absolute reality, Hegel argues that there is a scheme of historical connection which must be made complete before any area of the world, or any race, may be assumed to reach a state of intellectual freedom.

It is this idealism that Hegel used to justify the claim that there is an *Absolute Spirit*, which is responsible for shaping the world order. Consequently, every race that has come to its full circle must take a part in the understanding of how the absolute spirit moves and enhances human capability. In all of these, only the races that have been able to attain the full course of the dialectical relationship with the absolute spirit may be capable of all the rational activities which distinguish human beings from other beings in the world.

In a clear racist manner, therefore, Hegel was able to neglect the African experience and placed the African people and their cultures on a pedestal where it became impossible for them to grasp the full understanding of the absolute spirit on the one hand, and of its intervention in their history on the other hand. What this means therefore, is that Africans are

at the lowest rank of human race, and they also unable to partake in the 'good' that the absolute spirit is capable of offering. This is the general perspective of Hegelian thoughts as far as human history is concerned. Other scholars have added their own arguments to the decimation of the African character and of repudiating the validity of African cultures.

It is as a reaction to these evils of the African experience in the intellectual world that numerous African scholars called for the rejuvenation of African past as the exploration of the right description of African cultures. In the same vein, given the connection of history to philosophy and culture, it became pertinent to assert the African identity in the face of Eurocentric tyranny.

Let us consider the input of two African thinkers on this necessity. First, Wole Soyinka raises a germane question concerning whether Africans can afford not to bring their own idea of history and the right description of African cultures to the front burner of the intellectual environment within which the African experience is now deeply steeped.

Can the African continent truly afford the luxury of glossing history or sweeping its painful lessons under the carpet in an endeavour to enter mainstream world acceptance, especially of the 'progressive', 'radical' affirmation? If the history of the African peoples has no significance, then the continent's present claims to existence are sham, and do not matter to anyone.<sup>ii</sup>

What Soyinka aims at is the defining character of the African realities, philosophy and history. It is also in tandem with this pragmatic need for asserting that African cultures are existent, and can also cater for the intellectual validity of African philosophy that Leopold Sedar Senghor also reiterate the need to identify and preserve African cultures. He asserts:

The problem we blacks now face is to discover how we are going to integrate African Negro values into the world of 1959. It is not a question of resuscitating the past, of living in an African Negro museum; it is a question of animating the world, here and now, with the values of the past.<sup>iii</sup>

The relevance of this statement is that a people's philosophy must be entrenched if their ideas are to be considered as appealing and relevant to the world. Consequently, we cannot divorce the role philosophy must play in the protection of culture against foreign domination and desecration. This point is reiterated once again for the purpose of emphasis. In an attempt to ensure that the idea of cultural preservation of African cultures is not achieved, there was a deliberate aim by Western thinkers to eliminate the possibility of African philosophy because such could be used as a means of propagating the ideals of the past. Granted that African philosophy may not be the same as Western philosophy, does that at any rate mean that it is not a philosophy? The answer ought to be a capital NO! The denial of a people's philosophy will invariably lead to the denial of their culture and of course their humanity. This is where the idea of African philosophy as a means of preserving African cultures takes effect. In furtherance of this discourse, this paper would examine the debate about the existence of African philosophy.

**The Debate on the Existence of African Philosophy and its Racist Underpinnings**

There is no doubt that the debate on the existence of African philosophy has certain racist undertone. This assumption is made on the expressly observable notion of the defensive mode through which African philosophers at the time of the inauguration of professional African philosophy tried to defend their views against western denial of the subject-matter of African philosophy. To make it more explicit, it would be irrelevant to start a discourse from a defensive perspective unless one's position is threatened. It is with this same understanding that we may assert, without contradiction, that African philosophy is a product of systemic doubt of African cultures, African rationality and the tenability of African worldviews.

The debate on the existence of African philosophy is based on three fundamental assertions. First, philosophy has a written tradition in the West, hence, for any idea to qualify as a philosophy at all, it must be written. Unfortunately, it is not the case that African philosophy is written down; therefore, African philosophy does not exist. Secondly, philosophy must have certain figures that are believed to have propounded its lasting dictums. In other words, there must be individuals who are identifiable with certain philosophical ideas. On the African soil, such figures are missing, and on that basis, African philosophy does not exist. Thirdly, and this is also extracted from the second position, the collective worldview of Africans are decorated to be their philosophy, hence it is objectionable that Africans have philosophy, this is also based on the fact that a people's collective worldview is only ethnography, and this is what Africans intend to decorate as their philosophy, not only is this objectionable, it is highly illogical.

The foregoing captures the central theses of the arguments against the existence of African philosophy. The implications of these assertions can only be dire for the African experience on the one hand, and for the entire philosophical outlook of Africans on the other hand. If we can decimate all arguments one after the other, then we can inaugurate the claim that African philosophy is a means of protecting African cultures as well as repudiating the absolute description of things using Western paradigms. The aim of this paper is to establish this fact.

First, the claim that philosophy must be written is fallacious on some grounds. It has no historical validity as far as our idea of African thought system is concerned. For instance, it has been argued and also supported with facts that Socrates, one of the most prominent figures in Western philosophy never committed his thoughts into writing, and it cannot be denied that he is one of the most interesting figures in the history of philosophy. His philosophy was only documented by one of his students, Plato, in an attempt to preserve his philosophy and make it available.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, the claim that there is a radical difference between written philosophy and orally transmitted philosophy is faulty on pragmatic and procedural grounds. It is faulty on pragmatic grounds because both oral words of intellectual discourse as well as the written words have the same capability of affecting people's ideas and worldviews either positively or negatively, so there is no reason to accept written while the oral forms of intellectual presentation which Africans embrace should be dismissed.

Omotade Adegbindin, Wande Abimbola and Kola Abimbola among others have maintained that both written and oral words proceed through the same manner. They all begin in conceptualization. For anything to be written or transmitted orally, it must first be conceptualized, and this involves high mental activity which makes use of serious thinking. It

is maintained that if Africans decide to endorse the oral, then it does not in any way make it inferior to the written words, hence, the claim of the lack of written records of African philosophy could now properly be dismissed as lacking any moral virtue or intellectual basis. It could be argued that it is all based on Eurocentric thinking.

To dismiss the claim that African philosophy does not have identified individuals, we will turn our light back on Socrates. The Western condition of affixing philosophical ideals to individuals could be responsible for Plato's choice of ascribing numerous philosophical dictums to Socrates. Since Socrates never wrote anything, why should we believe that Socrates was not some fictional character developed by Plato only for convenience? This is one way of dismissing the claim that individuals must be identified with certain philosophical dictums. Suppose we wish to argue that there is no correlation between individual thoughts and philosophy, will that make philosophy less interesting or less valid? Kwasi Wiredu opines that there is no reason to suggest that the Western canon of conceptualizing philosophy or for setting the paradigm for validating philosophical thoughts. This is so because there are various canons of conceptualizations, and certain Western canons do not reflect African canons.<sup>v</sup> Odera Oruka has equally been able to identify original thinkers in Africa who have had no influence from the West, and they prove to be capable of individual thoughts contrary to what the West will make us believe about Africans. Oruka uses this as the basis for his philosophic sagacity.<sup>vi</sup>

According to Russell,<sup>vii</sup> numerous aspects of Plato's idea of immortality of the soul was borrowed from the Orphic culture. If this is the case, then we may argue that the wish to forcefully attach philosophical thoughts to individuals as explained by the West may be unnecessary. Africans, wary of this, have decided not to try and usurp the notion of communal thoughts as well as the claim that there are certain sages in African societies in the past. For its worth, it is undeniable that there were sages capable of expressing philosophical thoughts in African societies. The fact that Africans did not bother to canonize them does not in any way mean they were non-existent. There have been several attempts to prove the wisdom of African sages. The encounter Barry Hallen and Olubi Sodipo had with Yoruba thinkers is a testimony to this.<sup>viii</sup>

The third point which treats African philosophy as non-existent on the basis of its communal outlook could also be rejected on grounds of different cultures. There is no doubt that the West places much premium on individualism while Africans value communalism or communitarianism. The view that African thought system is a conglomeration of folktales, communal, moral underpinnings as well as consensual beliefs does not make African thoughts subservient to Western ideals. This is where the West got it wrong by assuming that a people's philosophy may be rejected because it is in direct contact with their cultures. This paper attempts to critically repudiate the Western bastardization of African thoughts as well as the rejection of African philosophy.

To set the records straight, it is not the case that only Westerners rejected the idea of African philosophy. There were some African scholars trained in the same Western tradition of philosophy who willingly rejected the idea of African philosophy, or who were willing to reject the notion of addressing African thoughts as a proper description and exemplification of African philosophy. Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, Olufemi Taiwo and more recently,

Kwame Anthony Appiah share this thought. From a pragmatic point of view, it is not their aim to reject African thoughts or African cultures. Their argument is that philosophy, as it is being practiced in the West does not share the same characteristics with African cultures. It is within this debate that the notion of the possibility of African philosophy was borne. Moses Akin Makinde, trained in the same Western tradition of philosophy attempted to resolve the debate by asserting that the debate on African philosophy has been allowed to fester for too long. In his construct, if African philosophy exists, it is the duty of those who assert that it exists to present what it is and not to continually debate whether or not it exists.<sup>ix</sup> It is with this same conviction that many African thinkers therefore, decided to pursue the affairs of African philosophy in its main pragmatic nature.

### **Professional African Philosophy and its aim of Defending African Cultures**

Perhaps, there is no other area of African philosophy that has helped in preserving African cultures more than metaphysics. Within the metaphysical expression of African philosophy, several issues and themes that form the central focus of the philosophical enterprise have been extended and placed on the scene of intellectualism. In all, the undoubtedly positive effect of the canonization of African metaphysics has through the most enduring aspects of African thoughts defied any form of Western desecration. The cultural dimension of many aspects of African metaphysics cannot be denied proper description. The same issues that form the central focus of metaphysics in Western philosophy also exist within African philosophy.

For instance, the issue of personal identity which has been considered as an aspect of metaphysics in western philosophy also has a replica in the notions of *akudaaya*, *abiku*, *ayorunbo* and other metaphysical phenomena in Yoruba thought. This is not to assume that only the Yorubas have this idea, rather several metaphysical issues that tread on the path of the seemingly-irresolvable personal identity is also present in African philosophy. So deeply woven into the people's culture is the idea of reincarnation, ancestral veneration and other forms of perpetual existence that it is difficult for any western mind to fully deny their tenability using Western paradigms alone.

The mind-body problem has also been made explicit within African philosophy but with a different approach. In his construct, Segun Gbadegesin<sup>x</sup> has made us understand the fact that what we have in the Yoruba traditional thoughts on human existence, or to put it more accurately, the conception of a person, is not substance dualism as maintained by many Western scholars especially Rene Descartes.<sup>xi</sup> Contrary to what obtains in Western philosophy, the Yoruba idea of a person has a spiritual dimension, the *emi*, which cannot be physically reduced to the substance propounded by Descartes. Furthermore, the Yoruba identification of a person goes beyond the physico-chemical composition of human description as maintained in much of the West. And it is through the explication of African philosophy that this rich cultural aspect of the human life is explained, hence metaphysics as a branch of philosophy has been used by African thinkers in a way that preserves the metaphysical dimension of human existence.

Within the area of political philosophy also, there is no doubt that a lot has been done in an attempt to redeem the African legacy of communal living. Quite interestingly, after independence, a number of African leaders felt the urge to transform their countries and they



felt only a system that places much premium on communal living, and that which opposes the predominant capitalist system of the West could do the magic of rapid transformation of African countries. While a number of leaders only achieved this ideal on paper, a couple of other were willing to go all the way for it.

Julius Nyerere, not only speak of the need to build Africa's future on its glorious past, he flecthes it out in a systematic programme that attempts to build a strong state on the basis of *Ujamaa*,<sup>xii</sup> which means familyhood in the Swahili language. This was a great attempt to preserve African communal way of life. One of the most critical critic of African cultures, Kwasi Wiredu, equally understands the point of exhuming the glorious models of African past and makes such the basis of a vibrant system for Africa. In one of his works, Wiredu attempts to give a theoretical basis of governance for Africa through the establishment and entrenchment of consensus form of government, which reflects and resonates with the traditional republican model of governance of many African communities.<sup>xiii</sup> All of these are pointers to the fact that African cultures cannot be denigrated, and that Africans have rationality which westerners are easily attuned to denying.

In the area of logic, Moses Akin Makinde demonstrates that contrary to the claim of the West that African thought system can be denied for lack of logical connection, he demonstrates that even his own grandmother had the same idea of modus ponens. He uses the idea of rainfall and the wetness of the ground to illustrate this point.<sup>xiv</sup> The argument is structured as follows:

If P, then Q:	If it rains, the ground will be wet
P:	It has rained
Therefore Q:	Therefore, the ground is wet.

It is obvious that the structure of the preceding argument is logically valid through the application of modus ponens.

### Conclusion

It is obvious that African philosophy has developed not only as a response to the denigration of African cultures by racist factors in the West, but also as a means of preserving African cultures. It is in tandem with the idea of eliminating all the criticisms and perceived shortcomings of Africa thoughts system that those aspects of African cultures that were initially orally transmitted have been recorded, and those that have not yet been recorded are going through the process of being codified for preservation for future generations.

African proverbs, folklores, as well as the spiritual injunctions of *Ifa* are now being recorded in permanent forms for accessibility and reference for the validation of African cultural heritage. Philosophers are not left alone in this as several sociologists, cultural scholars, priests as well as historians are also connected to this project. Omotade Adegbindin's 'unrepentant' penchant for the preservation of the *Ifa* corpus is also a testimony to this effect, and so is Wande Abimbola's continuous interpretation and interrogation of the yet to be written Odu of the Yoruba religious and moral book, *Ifa*.

Only a thorough going effort like this will be enough to surpass and dismiss the racist claims of the illogicality, barbarity and unjustifiable nature of African cultures like the one peddled by Evans-Pritchard in his description of the Azande beliefs. He argues that the Azande

worldview does not conform to the ultimate reality.<sup>xv</sup> A question we need to ask him is ‘who defines the ultimate reality?’

The world cannot continue to deny Africans the tenability of their worldview. At least in a postmodern world, it is assumed that plurality of worldviews as well as multiculturalism, trans-culturalism, cosmopolitanism and other global notions now take the centre stage of human existence. The implication of this is that no part of the world is a monopoly of knowledge or should transfer their own paradigm or scheme of explaining phenomena to others without a corresponding recognition of others’ importance as well. Let us conclude with the injunction given by Wole Soyinka. He asserts that:

Firstly, however, that external world must come to terms with a tradition of self-indulgence that encouraged layers of visual cataract to accumulate and harden over centuries, obscuring a truthful apprehension of the continent. The darkness that was so readily attributed to the ‘Dark Continent’ may yet prove to be nothing but the willful cataract in the eye of the beholder.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> See Russell, B. 1962. *History of Western Philosophy*. 18<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- <sup>ii</sup> Wole Soyinka. 2012. *Harmattan Haze on an African Spring*. Ibadan: Bookcraft, 16.
- <sup>iii</sup> Leopold Seder Senghor. 1959. *2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of African Writers and Artists*. Rome.
- <sup>iv</sup> Bertrand Russell is particularly of this view. For more on this, see Bertrand Russell. 1945. *The History of Western Philosophy*.
- <sup>v</sup> Kwasi Wiredu. 1993. Canons of Conceptualization. *The Monist*, 76, 4, 459-461.
- <sup>vi</sup> Henry Odera Oruka. *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Leiden: E.J Brill.
- <sup>vii</sup> Bertrand Russell. 1945. *The History of Western Philosophy*.
- <sup>viii</sup> This is contained in their work, *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft*.
- <sup>ix</sup> Moses Akin Makinde. 2007. *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- <sup>x</sup> See different papers written by Segun Gbadegesin on the Yoruba account of *Eniyan*, a human person.
- <sup>xi</sup> See Rene Descartes’ *Meditations* on the subject matter of substance dualism and the idea of the *cogito*.
- <sup>xii</sup> See Julius Nyerere’s *Ujamaa*, for more on this.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See Kwasi Wiredu’s plea for a non-party consensus model for Africa.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Moses Akin Makide. 2007. *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- <sup>xv</sup> Evans-Prichard. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Wole Soyinka. 2012, 22.