

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY BEYOND EUROCENTRIC CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES: A CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

One of the major challenges faced by African philosophy is the persistent presence of Eurocentric concepts and categories in African philosophy discourse. Western philosophy in its hegemonic nature imposed its methods on African philosophy. Due to this, African philosophy is approached through Western Eurocentric narrative. This is explainable when we consider the 'double bind' argument. Oh yes, one cannot adopt Western philosophical method in addressing African philosophy and expect to arrive at something different from Western philosophy. The persistent presence of Eurocentric concepts and categories in African philosophy has continued to question the authenticity or genuineness of African philosophy. The unanswered question is: How can African philosophy go beyond Eurocentric concepts and categories? In this paper, we argue that African philosophy can achieve this feat under review, through conversational philosophy, which is multicultural and transcultural in nature. In line with this, we conclude that African philosophy should not be tailored to conform or gain Western Eurocentric acceptability; it should rather be designed to be inclusive, interdependence and intercultural, for global expansion of thought.

Keywords: African Philosophy, Eurocentrism, Conversationalism, Epistemic injustice, Concepts and categories

Introduction

African philosophy has passed through series of stages in its development. It has faced multifarious problems, till date, one cannot truly say that problems associated with African philosophy have been completely addressed. One reoccurring challenge within African philosophy discourse is the challenge of Eurocentric concepts and categories. Implicitly or explicitly, these Eurocentric concepts and categories have continued to thrive and have constituted a great impediment to the growth and development of African philosophy. To start with, we ask: what gave rise to this Eurocentric hegemonies and ambivalences in African philosophical discourse? In response to this question, we posit that Eurocentric presence which is in the form of Eurocentric concepts and categories were introduced in African philosophy during the great debate. Ethno-philosophers initiated a comparison between Western philosophy and African philosophy. For the Particularists such as Tempels and Mbiti, philosophy is all about tradition and culture of a certain people (Mangena 2014: 97). Here, they argue that what is obtainable in Western philosophy is also obtainable in Africa philosophy. So, African philosophy does not need

Western philosophy to thrive. It has a rich culture and cannot depend on any other culture to exist. In trying to defend the African cultural endowments, they ended up, presenting African philosophy as being uniquely African. This is not correct. If we admit this, we are simply saying that philosophy is culture-bound and can be presented at the expense of other philosophies or cultures. The Universalists such as; Odera Oruka (1990), Paulin Hountondji (1996), Peter Bodunrin (1991) and Kwasi Wiredu (1980), in trying to oppose the notion put forward by the particularists, enthroned Western philosophy above other philosophies. For them, philosophy is universal, the same everywhere and must adopt one method, which is Western method. By implication, the method that works in the West should also work in Africa and her philosophy. This view is absolutely unacceptable, as its acceptance will in turn destroy the interrelationship that ought to exist among opposite realities or existents. In fact, this, in our view, is the genesis or marked the entrance of Eurocentric concepts and categories in African philosophy.

More so, we disagree with the particularists like Tempels, Mbiti and Horton, who are of the opinion that philosophy is culture-bound. We also rejected the view of Universalists who maintain that philosophy is the same everywhere and must use a particular method, and even the Eclectics represented by Uduigwomen (2009), that talked about the marriage of the Universalists and Particularists' conceptions of reality. This is because both can never have one approach or parameter of accessing reality. We contend that philosophy is culture-oriented but not culture-bound. It is when philosophy is understood in this direction that African philosophy can be given its place in the global space, and Western philosophy cautioned or tutored to see other philosophies or traditions as missing links, capable of exploring their own methods within the intercultural community.

Jennifer L. Vest (2009) succeeded in charting a course for African philosophy. In her position, "it is pervasive for African intellectuals to devote all their intellectual energy in convincing the Western world that African philosophy is a worthwhile endeavor". For her, therefore, to engage and respond to questions about the intellectual capabilities of African thinkers or the possible existence of philosophical resources in African cultures is to respond to perverse questions. Good as this position may sound, discussing those things which Vest classified as necessary dialogue implicitly, one still fall into the pit of Eurocentric presence or Western comparison. This is because whichever way, there is an outright comparison of African philosophy with that of Western concepts and categories. Put differently, Western concepts and categories are used wittingly or unwittingly to analyse African philosophy. In all, there is the challenge of adopting Western philosophical methods in doing African philosophy or the challenge of comparing African philosophy with Western philosophy. Chimakonam (2017a) citing Robert Bernasconi pointed out the problem of "double bind" "either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be

in doubt”. It is on this note that Chimakonam argues on the need for a method in African philosophy. For him, “articulating the method(s) of our enterprise might be something that can justify it and entitle it the name 'African philosophy' as a tradition clearly different from, say, Western philosophy” (2017a: 12). In conversationalism we are provided with a method with which to address this problem of African philosophy. That is, the problem of subjecting African philosophy to Eurocentric concepts and categories.

In this paper, we will first present how African philosophy is trapped within Western concepts and categories. Here, an overview of the Eurocentric hegemonies and ambivalences will be made, and the possible set back the said hegemonies and ambivalences have caused in the growth of African philosophy, especially, as regards intercultural engagement will be x-rayed. In the second part, we will show why conversationalism is a method in and beyond African philosophy. Within this sphere, African philosophy is seen as both cultural and intercultural philosophy. It is culture-inspired but not culture-bound. This will definitely handle the protestation and contestation the ethno-philosophers entered into with the Western thinkers. Finally, we shall bring conversationalism as a systematic method to bear on the discourse on African philosophy and contend in consonance with the position of (Chimakonam and Nweke 2018: 290) that instead of comparing African philosophy with Western philosophy, through its 'arumaristic' method, African philosophy interacts with other philosophies of the world without necessarily comparing itself with others. That is to say that African philosophy should be seen as a missing link to other philosophies, and never to be exclusive and divisive, as philosophy in general, is an interplay activity that is transcultural and borderless.

Eurocentric Concepts and Categories within African Philosophical Discourse

Right from the inception, African philosophy has always battled with Eurocentric concepts and categories. This challenge was as a result of what African philosophy has encountered over the years, and the challenge could be said to be in two different forms. First, there is this Western question on the authenticity or genuineness of African philosophy. Second, African response to this question; the way and manner African scholars responded to the Western question helped in the introduction of Western concepts and categories in African philosophy. The earliest European scholars who visited African societies provided narratives that undermined the possibility of philosophy in Africa (Onyeaghalaji 2015: 86). Scholars like James Frazer, Edward Taylor, Max Muller, Lucy Levy-Bruhl, Hegel and the likes have questioned the capacity of Africans to engage in philosophical thinking. In their thinking, for something to pass as philosophy it must be in the way and manner Western philosophical thinking is presented. In other words, they brought Eurocentric narrative in African philosophy. “Eurocentric narrative is a description of the universe of meaning through the European spectacle and rationality” (Onyeaghalaji 2015). For Onyeaghalaji, a critical examination of Eurocentric narrative reveals two interrelated things; (1) an inherent oppressive

conceptual framework and (2) lack of certain kind of sensitivity. On the other hand, “the first generation of African philosophers found themselves in the strange position of justifying the existence of African philosophy as a direct response to the Eurocentric skepticism of Western philosophers against the benchmark of Western philosophy” (Agada, 2017: 2). This first generation of professional African philosophers were mainly trained in Western philosophy. More so, Western philosophy has also constituted a major part of philosophy curricula in African universities. With this kind of default arrangement Africa philosophy is trapped within Eurocentric concepts and categories or Eurocentric narrative.

The Western grip on African philosophy started from the very beginning. The implication of this, is that professional philosophers of African origin are more exposed to Western philosophy than African philosophy. Even in their approach to African philosophy they were more likely to adopt Western philosophical method. A good example was observed by Sanya Osha (2019), in his critique of Wiredu. He argues that Wiredu's project on conceptual decolonization was a sort of cultural synthesis between Euro modernity and a traditional African culture. He posits that Wiredu's understanding of philosophy is clearly not Afrocentric in the usual sense of the term. For him, Wiredu adopted Western analytic framework in his attempt at recuperation of the African subject as a central object of discourse. This becomes a case where African subject suddenly finds him/herself with a Western alien canon of rationality. Osha hence states thus; “The mere incongruity of this presence disrupts the 'normal' dynamic of analytic philosophy” (2019: 3). One can infer, going by Osha's position, the incompatibility of Western philosophic method and African philosophy. Using Western philosophic method in addressing African philosophy only compounds the problem. In the same vein, Reginald Oduor (2019: 2) in reacting to Osha's view on Wiredu also accuses Osha of adopting the same line of argument as Wiredu. For Oduor, Osha seems to be implying in his article that all African scholars of philosophy only feel accomplished in the discipline if they can expound the thoughts of the ancient Greek philosophers. It raises question on the suitability of Western philosophic method in African philosophy. Western philosophy has consistently presented itself as the only universal philosophy which every other philosophical tradition must conform to. Chimakonam and Nweke (2018: 279) saw this arrangement as politics against African philosophy and argue on the need for it to be discontinued. For them, there is this pretention of Western philosophy as universal philosophy, hence, all other philosophical orientations are rejected and even worse certain people are judged to be inherently incapable of doing philosophy. More so, there seems to be an institutionalized structure within Africa that exists in the form of discrimination perpetrated by Western philosophy against African philosophy. In the view of Chimakonam and Nweke (2018:280), “the study of philosophy as an academic discipline in either the West or Africa is more or less a proper soaking and tanning in the intellectual heritage of the West”.

In the same manner, Agbanusi (2016) raised the following questions on the problems of

African philosophy or rather what we would call the challenge of Western presence in African philosophy. Firstly he asked; what percentage of African universities study African philosophy? Secondly, in those Philosophy Departments where African philosophy is studied, how many African philosophy courses are studied? Thirdly, at the postgraduate level where sometimes provision is made for students to study African philosophy as a major course in the programme; what is the ratio of African philosophy courses to other philosophy courses in the curricula of the departments in question? In his finding, Agbanusi observes that only few universities in the world study African philosophy and even within Africa, not enough number of African universities study African philosophy. And even in many philosophy departments of African universities where it is studied, only few courses are offered in African philosophy at undergraduate level. From his findings, one can deduce that even within Africa more attention is given to Western philosophy than African philosophy. There is also the existence of methodological confusion. The problem of using Western philosophical method in doing African philosophy. This could be seen as the reason behind the continued existence of Eurocentric presence in African philosophy. This Eurocentric presence is what breeds Western concepts and categories in African philosophy. It is important for us to note that, while Agbanusi's position was tilting towards decolonisation and Africanisation project, Chimakonam and Nweke were projecting intercultural philosophy.

Hardly will you see a trained academic African philosopher who is not well tutored in Western philosophy. It is our contention that their training in Western philosophy tend to influence their position on African philosophy. They argue for African philosophy using Western exclusivist approach. This will lead them into Africanisation project and invariably make them guilty of the same accusation (exclusivist) against Western philosophy. They are guilty of using Western philosophical method to approach African philosophy. Arguing on the suitability of adopting the method of a particular philosophic tradition into another, Chimakonam raised the following questions; "Do we take our methods with us when we cross borders? Or: Do we weave different methods from different traditions together? Or: Do we formulate a custom method for intercultural engagement? (2017b: 124). The Western epistemic tradition has been accused of presenting its method as the only method of philosophy. In view of the aforementioned, one can argue that cultural encounter between the West and Africa degenerated to relationship of domination and subordination. This has placed African philosophy in a strange position, in that, it is becoming nearly impossible for discourse on African philosophy to exist without recourse to Western philosophy. Western philosophical concepts and categories tend to shape or influence discourse on African philosophy. In conversationalism, we have a philosophical method devoid of this politics of exclusion and marginalization of philosophical ideas from other traditions. The method of conversationalism has the potent force to address some forms of epistemic injustices emanating from Western hegemony by creating the necessary balance that accommodates and recognises diverse philosophical views (Chimakonam&Nweke,

2018: 280). Conversationalism as a method in philosophy is not peculiarly designed for African philosophy. Its application goes beyond African philosophy (Chimakonam 2017a: 14). We will now turn our attention to conversationalism as a method in philosophy.

Conversationalism as a Method in Philosophy

Conversationalism was propounded by Jonathan Chimakonam (Chimakonam 2017a: 14, Nweke 2016, Chimakonam and Nweke 2018). For Chimakonam, conversationalism as a method is not the same as a procedure for an informal exchange of opinions between two people. Though, that could be seen or referred to as the literal meaning of the word conversation (2017: 16). His idea of conversationalism goes beyond this and was derived from Igbo notion of 'iruka' or 'arumaru-uka' which translates to mean; "engaging in a critical exchange or conversation" (2017a: 17). It has two senses of usage, first as 'the act' and second as 'the mechanism', the former has to do with engaging in a critical exchange while the latter is concerned with the mode of this exchange. In other words, just as was articulated by Chimakonam, "the first sense describes its doctrine of conversational philosophy, the second sense describes its methodic ambience" (2017b: 17). From the word 'arumaru-uka' one arrives at 'arumaristic' which is the anglicized form of the word (2017b: 17). Hence, one can as well refer to conversationalism as arumaristic method.

What then is this conversational method or conversationalism or arumaristic method? Chimakonam explains it thus;

As a method, conversationalism is a formal procedure for assessing the relationships of opposed variables, in which thoughts are shuffled through disjunctive and conjunctive modes to constantly recreate fresh thesis and anti-thesis each time at a higher level of discourse, without the expectation of the synthesis. It is an encounter between philosophers or rival schools of thought and between different philosophical traditions or cultures in which one party, called nwa-nsa (the defender or proponent), holds up a position and another party, called nwa-nju (the doubter or opponent), questions the accuracy of the position in light of the demands of arumaristics, cross-culturalism and transculturalism. (2017b: 121).

From the above one can deduce the unique nature of conversationalism. Though it may seem similar to dialectics yet both are fundamentally different from each other. While in dialectics, two opposing variables thesis and anti-thesis interact to produce synthesis, but in conversationalism it is only one variable or position that is questioned at every point in time. The essence of this questioning is to reveal the loopholes in that position as held by 'nwa-nsa' and possibly for 'nwa-nsa' to fill up the gaps. The relationship between 'nwa-nsa' and 'nwa-nju' is that nwa-nju compels nwa-nsa to constantly reevaluate her position in the light of new ideas. This constant reevaluation gives room for continuous progression and expansion in thoughts and ideas. Both complement each other, while nwa-nsa by constant interaction with nwa-nju continues to advance in thought nwa-nju

fulfils the philosophic duty of questioning (Chimakonam, 2017b: 122).

Conversationalism is anchored on two main principles; the principle of multiculturalism and transculturalism. By multiculturalism, conversationalism gives room for every culture to interact and cross border. This cross border position enhances our acceptance, understanding and willingness to fairly and objectively engage with others (Chimakonam, 2017b: 123). While transculturalism has to do with “the idea of one seeing itself in the other or, one transcending its cultural centrism in judging, willing, and acting towards the other and vice versa.” (2017b: 123). This addresses the problem of hegemony or lop-sidedness that comes with superior/inferior thought dichotomy. The main thrust of conversationalism is that it recognizes the existence of different traditions of philosophy in different places and argues that all these different traditions house ideas that can be critically and creatively harnessed for the benefit of humanity. (2017b: 123). This will launch us to the main focus of this paper; addressing Eurocentric concepts and categories through conversationalism. The entrapment of African philosophy within Eurocentric hegemony can better be addressed using conversationalism.

Addressing Eurocentric Concepts and Categories through Conversationalism

It is our position that the entrapment of African philosophy within Eurocentric concepts and categories can better be addressed using conversationalism, especially in the light of its multiculturalism and transculturalism. When one considers the fact that the first generation of professional African philosophers were trained in Western philosophy, and that current generation of African philosophers are also subjected to the same process, one is forced to argue for a change in narrative. The challenge is that African philosophy as an academic field of study began with Eurocentric narrative. Both the first generation of African philosophers and the current generation of African philosophers were made to see philosophy through Western philosophic method. So, the more we argue against Western exclusivist mindset, the better and safer for all of us. Imagine, during our undergraduate programme at NnamdiAzikiwe University Awka, we were taught a particular course titled 'History of Philosophy' but today as we reflect on the content of the course; we can only but see the 'History of Western Philosophy'. We were taught 'History of Western Philosophy' as 'History of Philosophy'. Western epistemic tradition in its exclusivist nature has occupied the position of African philosophic tradition. This is incorrect, and can be seen as an epistemic hegemony that has disallowed the thriving of African philosophy and its ingenuity.

In addressing this problem, we adopted conversationalism in its inclusive and complementary nature. Conversationalism recognizes the existence of different traditions of philosophy in different places and posits that all these traditions contain ideas that can be harnessed in an intercultural setting for the benefit of humanity. Conversationalism is a composite of ideas from different traditions; critical analysis from analytic tradition; transgenerational formulation of problematics from the continental

tradition; result orientedness from American tradition; common destiny from the Asian tradition; mutual exchange and cooperation from Latin American tradition; and the idea of relationship from Africa (Chimakonam & Nweke 2018: 291). It is an all-encompassing and all-accommodating method of philosophizing. No particular philosophical tradition occupies the position of “episteme” within this method. With this method, the hegemonic nature of Eurocentric concepts and categories is abated and a horizontal relationship is created among different traditions. With the inclusiveness of conversationalism, no philosophical tradition is allowed to feel inferior or superior to the other; rather each philosophical tradition performs a complementary role. We shall now anchor our discussion on the two main principles of conversational philosophy which we had earlier mentioned; the multicultural principle (M-principle) and the transcultural principle (T-principle). Multiculturalism advocates for understanding and willingness to fairly and objectively engage other philosophic traditions in a bid to have a more peaceful world devoid of all forms of epistemic hegemony. By transculturalism, one is allowed to see oneself in the other and also transcend one's own cultural centrism while interacting with others and vice versa (Chimakonam & Nweke, 2018: 292). By these principles other philosophical traditions (including African) are allowed to thrive. The error of knowledge rejection because of its geographical origin is averted or better handled. Eurocentric concepts and categories are placed in their proper place, not as philosophical absolutes, rather as a philosophical tradition among many other traditions.

Though conversationalism as a method in philosophy seems to have provided the leeway against Western epistemic hegemony, but just like every other theory, concept or method in philosophy, it has its limitations or demerits that need philosophical tightening. Bruce Janz in his response to Chimakonam's idea of conversation raised four critical questions of which one is of utmost important to us and very crucial to this discourse; “What happens if not everyone cares to enter into conversation?” (2016: 41). As a follow-up to this question, I think the matter should be, how can we find within conversationalism a common ground to begin the conversation? Or rather what should be the common denominator among the various philosophic traditions that will serve as the converging point for this intercultural philosophy? How do we enter the conversation? What if the other party is not interested, as was pointed out by Janz? What if nwanja perceives the question of nwanju as destructive criticism and hence decides not to enter into conversation with him/her? This tends to defeat the essence of conversationalism; the creative struggle which helps in the expansion of thought and opening of new vistas of thought. This calls for further expansion of thought, as the inability to address this area will constitute a great impediment to the realization of the conversational philosophy's goal. Be that as it may, the issues raised above can only be a problem within the ambience of dialectics, say Socratic or Hegelian dialectics, which tends toward creative surrender unlike conversational thinking, where there is always a creative struggle, and where there is no room for the dumb and synthesis. In other words, nwanju and nwanja do not need to be silent or quiet. They should be eager to contest and protest; hence, both are fully aware

that such can bring about growth or development in knowledge acquisition and expansion of thought.

Conclusion

Though the Great Debate has long ended, and arguably, it is no longer fashionable to question the existence of African philosophy, yet, Eurocentric concepts and categories seem to reflect or persist in discussions on African philosophy. This is occasioned by Western epistemic hegemonic structure imposed on African institutions. While many scholars of African origin are busy propounding and developing African philosophical system, there is a system in place within Africa that undermines their efforts. New generation of African scholars are more tutored in Western philosophy than African philosophy. The resultant effect is that often than not, African philosophy is approached through the lenses of Western philosophical method. The question is; should Africans jettison completely Western philosophy and wholly promote African philosophy in African universities and engagements? Our answer is no; it will be a disservice to young emerging African scholars to be exposed to only African philosophy, but worst is to present to them Western philosophy as the only authentic philosophy. In view of interrelatedness of realities or complementarity as Asouzu would put it, there is need for an all-inclusive approach. In striking a balance we adopted conversationalism in its multiculturalism and transculturalism, to advocate for the principle of inclusiveness and not exclusiveness. This will put to rest the persistent Western epistemic hegemonies in African philosophy. Western epistemic tradition will only be treated as one of the many traditions that exist, and not as an epistemic or methodological paradigm. By this, a healthy conversation among many philosophical traditions will be created.

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