

Proceedings of 9<sup>th</sup> Multi-Disciplinary Seminar



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# **Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Multi-Disciplinary Seminar**

**Research and Knowledge Management Office  
St. Mary's University**

August 2017  
SMU-Multipurpose Hall  
Addis Ababa

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**Substantial Debates on the (In) Existence of African Philosophy**

Biruk Shewadeg<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

Africa is largely absent from the stage of world philosophy. People's level of philosophical advancement is always appears to be a sine qua non in measuring their intellectual development. Although, we can assert the existence of African philosophy, when the question is asked whether this tradition has justified its existence, our confidence diminishes and threatens to evaporate altogether. The failure to achieve justification by far accounts for the peculiar absence of Africa from the stage of world philosophy. The books of ethnologists, historians and even philosophers that portrayed Africa as savage unable to do anything, develop nothing, and can't make history, has gave birth to the question of whether there is an African philosophy. The bastardized image of Africa presented by continental philosophy raised the question as to if the people so ascribed could own a philosophy of their own. However, a cursory glance at the thought system of Africans reveals that they can and do philosophy. This short essay discusses the foundations as to how and why Africans are denied a second order thought and challenges these foundation by making an in-depth analysis which ultimately brought to use Messay's word, 'relativizing' the West. To this end, the paper employs a discursive reason methods and analysis of various literatures in the area.

Key Words: Philosophy, African Philosophy

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1 Lecturer of Philosophy, Addis Ababa Science & Technology University

*E-mail: biruk\_shewadeg@yahoo.com*, Tel: 0913714459

**Introduction**

The context of the debate has to be seen in light of the Western discourse on Africa. The discourse basically anchored in a binary opposition of 'civilized and barbarous', 'rational and savage', 'Logical and prelogical', etc., - admittedly underestimated and disparaged African culture and identity which eventually designed an ideological justification of colonialism and neo-colonialism. In order to unravel these underestimation and social subjugation, the initiation of counter discourse and destroying the foundations of the colonial and neo-colonial enterprise appears inevitable. The aim of this discourse is about reclaiming African personality. The reclamation should

primarily involve relativizing the West which claimed to possess a monopoly of knowledge.

### **How the West Perceived Africa?**

It's important to apprehend how Africans are seen from the Western vantage point for it has a concomitance with the ontology of a quest for the in (existence) of African philosophy. The works of enormous Western scholars that denigrated Africa (Levy-Bruhl, 1995, Hegel 1956, & others), have given birth to the question of whether there is an African philosophy. The ill-gotten image of Africa raised the question as to if the people so ascribed could own a philosophy of their own. For centuries, there was a deep rooted, systematic, and ruthless attempt in denying Africa the fundamental human right of self-determination, self-identity. And, this further goes to even the denial of Africa's self-explanation.

The rank-ordering, as Messay (2001) would like to express, racial characterizations which were conditioned thoroughly by European colonial domination and exploitation of African people shaped the historical context of the debates and discussions on the African capability of engaging in a second-order thought.

The intellectual efforts of well-known European thinkers were utilized as canons of rationalizing such rank ordering. Hume (1742), in this regard, in a footnote of his "of Natural Characters" philosophized about the 'natural inferiority' of blacks to whites. Kant (1778) strengthening Hume's idea, elaborated his theory of 'inferior and superior racial types' in his writings of Anthropology. More importantly, Hegel (1770-1831 AD), who, for the first time attempted to give a holistic account about the world's philosophical history made an exclusion of Africa and Africans from world's philosophical history. Hegel, in his famous work, "The Philosophy of History", claimed:

The Negro ... exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thoughts of reverence or morality – all that we call feeling – if we are to comprehend him: there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this character... in Negro life, the character point is the fact that consciousness had not yet attained to the realization of any substantial existence ... thus distinction between himself and the universality of his essential being, the African in the

uniform, underdeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained. ”

(Hegel, 1956:93)

By this, Hegel has derogatorily detached Africans from rationality; He conceived the Africans as one who does everything but the ability to reason or reflects philosophy. Indeed, such biased assertion of Hegel about Africa as a race could plausibly be regarded as not only been obsolete but also inconceivable and inconsequential, especially when we objectively re-examine African history and culture in addition to the diverse corpus of literature on African philosophy. Nevertheless, Hegel has intrinsically influenced the subsequent philosophers and the philosophical academia at large, to deny the very existence of African philosophy.

At the core of the controversy was the pressing question whether African persons were fully and sufficiently human and capable intellectually in comparison to the model human par excellence: the man of Europe, the White Man, the avatar for all White people and for humanity proper, whose defining characteristics were capacities for reasoning and articulate speech (logos). Levy Bruhl (cited in Njoku 2002), contends that African way of thinking is illogical and full of inner self contradiction which is not able to apprehend a second-order thought. In line with this, Baker (cited in Richard 1964: 99) again wrote:

The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced in idolatry ... he has never grasped the idea of personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a further state of reward and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible inducers of human progress.

All this accounts for the historical development of whether or not African Philosophy exists. While a school, primarily African argues that there is an African philosophy. Another school argued that there is no such a thing as African philosophy. The argument in the negative was drawn from the superiority complex that the West is endowed and from the above poor concept and portrayal of who the African is and what is capable of achieving by early historians, ethnologists and philosophers.

This short essay discusses the foundations as to how and why Africans are denied a second-order thought and challenges these foundation by making an in-depth analysis which ultimately brought, to use Messay's (2004) idea, 'relativizing' the west. To this effect, first the writer will engage in the ideas forwarded to deny the very existence of African Philosophy and then pass to discuss about the counter arguments and articulates the possible phases in which African traditional thought has passed through.

### **Arguments for the Inexistence of African Philosophy**

There could enormous arguments which can be presented in the denial of the very existence of African Philosophy. However, it's possible to categorically put those arguments into the following three sorts of:

1. The African traditional thought is not logical and lacks a linguistic analysis. Thus, the failure to meet these two substantial underpinnings of philosophy is manifestation for the African traditional thought not to be philosophical.
2. The lack of identification with empirical sciences is prevalent in the African world view. Therefore, it's problematic to argue that there is an authentic African philosophy.
3. African philosophy has no tradition – there is the absence of great influential figures whose philosophy could be studied.

### **Counter Arguments**

The writer shall pass to discuss the counter arguments by providing a general working definition for the discipline 'Philosophy'. Makinde (2007) defines philosophy as an "attempt to arrive at reasoned answers to important questions." In fact, there is no definite and clear cut answers to philosophical questions. But, the method that philosophers employ makes a philosophical distinction. By important questions, Makinde could mean questions like, what is the purpose of living. Has the universe any purpose? What is an experience of God? Is there life after death, etc? The attempt and engagement to provide reasoned answer to such questions, then, distinguishes the discipline called 'Philosophy'.

However, it is important to note that the above definition of Philosophy is neither exhaustive nor perfect but it's important. Since, there are various schools and philosophers; there might not be a single universally accepted

definition. Philosophers are of different temperament and their approach to philosophical problems may not be the same. Apart from the fact that philosophers do not agree on the definition of philosophy, they are yet to agree on the subject matter of philosophy and the issue to be concerned as philosophical issue.

Coming to the counter arguments, it may be argued that African traditional thought is not philosophical because it's not logical or lacks linguistic analysis. This claim can be invalidated from two perspectives. First, the criteria of knowing what constitutes philosophy should not only be limited to linguistic analysis. If we do so, only two branches of philosophy would stand recognition – Logic and Epistemology (Hallen, 2006). But, that cannot be the criteria of delimiting philosophy because metaphysics and ethics and also politics are core areas of philosophy notwithstanding the attempt of linguistic philosophers to reject those (Messay, 2004). In fact, metaphysics with its speculations ushered in the era of philosophy. So, African worldview need not be identifying with linguistic rigor or analysis before it can claim to be philosophical (Bernasconi, 1997).

Secondly, it's not a must to study logic to think logically. There is no anywhere in the world in which principles of logic are never employed consciously or unconsciously. Thus, Logic is universal and cannot be relativized. It is one of the conditions by which we distinguish human beings from other lower animals and that is why language is an important part of logic and reasoning. If we consider logic as universal then we cannot deny it in any thought system, without denying its universality. And, if we consider it to be relative, we lose an objective standard to evaluate the thought system of others and full-fledged subjectivity inevitably endows it. This, in fact, understandably challenges the prelogicism accusation against the African thought system.

As to whether African traditional thought need to be a scientific worldview in order to be philosophical, Makinde (1988) argues that it need not be-seeing a worldview to be a wider concept than philosophy. So, we can have ethical, religious, philosophical, scientific, political worldviews and so on. A philosophical world view is different from a scientific worldview and so African philosophy need not be a scientific worldview. Furthermore, Hallen (2002) avers that Philosophy is not a science to prove things true or false. The central tenets of Philosophy and Philosophers rather incline with novel

speculation, cogent argumentation, and conceptual analysis. The most one can require is that it offers a new perspective on the human situation and the reality that it confronts. As Appiah (1992) rightly articulated, Philosophy possesses its own worldviews embedded in a respective culture and it will be like throwing the baby out with a bath water if an attempt is made to relate traditional thought systems in terms of how they differ or resemble the dominant worldview in western Philosophy at the moment. Searching for truth, knowledge, and value as Anyanwu (2006) contends, not in vacuum but in a given socio-historical context is the purpose of Philosophy. And, this endeavour is inevitably reinforced or retarded by the socio historical process of the period. Thus, African traditional thought need not be scientific to be a philosophical worldview. It may be argued that some traditional thoughts, say that of Europe are better than the others. Masolo (1994) argues “there is no a priori method of showing which philosophical world view is better than the others.”

Finally, for the argument that African philosophy has no tradition as it lacks great figures whose philosophy could be studied and articulated; Mudimbe (1988) contends that the absence of known great figures in African philosophy does not mean that there is no philosophy in the African traditional thought. Staniland (1979) in this connection understands Philosophy as a critical examination of the ideas which men live by. For anything to be philosophical, it has to do with the reflection on the experiences of a society, group, or an individual. Wondering about some compelling problems of life and existence necessitates this reflection. As a matter of fact this wonderings were not written in Africa, which does not mean that it cannot be written but it's basically embodied in proverbs, aphorisms, and pity sayings (Hallen and Sodipo, 1986). However, it's philosophically must not be determined by writing. It is with this assumption that Busia (1963) argued, the African has not offered learned and divergent disputations to the world in writing, but in his expression in conduct of owe, and reverence for nature, no less than in his use of natural resources, he demonstrates his own epistemology.

Needless to say, the pre-Socratics were not able to write, Socrates himself did not write; the Upanishads and Vedas, which are Indian religious and philosophical classics in the same vein, and yet they are philosophies. This is because not all philosophical thoughts are written: Socrates, Buddha,



Confucius, communicated their thoughts through other writers. If the thoughts of these thinkers were recognized as philosophical, what presents similar thought by African thinkers as philosophical? On the identification of a thought with a thinker, it's obvious that there cannot be a thought without a thinker. Thus, the mere absence of writing tradition does not mean the absence of philosophical thinking.

What is clear however is that there is reportage problem of how to separate Socrates original thought from Plato? The same problem is what the African traditional thought suffers, more so that there is the problem of the absence of writing facilities. But, these thoughts were passed down from generation to generation through rote until the advent or use of writing materials.

Possibly, there is nothing that stops anyone from using thoughts or materials from unknown thinker as a basis for philosophical enquiry just as Plato did to the thoughts of Socrates and the myth of Homer. Wiredu (1995) then submits "of doing philosophy is not necessarily writing philosophy, and then the absence of written works by great African figures on African philosophy – is no proof that the African philosophy was and is, non-existent." A Hermeneutical approach in this regard will ease the tension prevailed (Tsenaye, 1994).

However, owing to a reason that most professional African philosophers received their philosophical training in the West, is finding it difficult to accept African thought system as philosophical. Philosophy, for this group, including Hountondji (1995) Bodunrin (1981 & 1985) and others, has to be seen from the Western perspective. African Philosophy is judged by most of these professional philosophers from what they know as Western Philosophy and from the framework of the categories forged by the West. Considering the dominant part played by philosophical elaboration of culture and the West's perennial claim over a monopoly of philosophic reflection, so that philosophic enterprise no longer seems inconceivable outside of the framework of the categories, mentalities, concepts, and experiences forged by the West. Wiredu (2004) explains such an encounter as 'conceptual colonization'.

Having made a subtle defense on the very existence of African Philosophy above, the preceding pages makes a critical reflection on the phases in which African Philosophy has gone through. One can figure out three important

phases by which African Philosophy passed through. The next section discusses these classifications.

### **Phases of African Philosophy**

1. Unwritten Philosophy and Unknown Philosophers.
2. Colonial misconceptions and distortions
3. Post modernism: critical re-orientation in Philosophy.

#### **1- Unwritten Philosophy and Unknown Philosophers**

This is an era by which Africans did not write their philosophical tradition but able to do Philosophy and think philosophically. This era marked the transmission of important philosophical thoughts through oral tradition from generation to generation. One can consider this period as uneventful because until the second half of the twentieth century, the Africans were not able enter into print technology which made copyright to be problematic in African Philosophy. This ultimately becomes an important reason presented by Anthropologists for their mistaken consideration of the African thoughts as ethno-philosophy, i.e. the collective thought of the people of Africa.

Though there is no evidence as to when Philosophy started in Africa, yet as Diop (1974), Mbiti (1969), Oyeshile (2008) all argues, there is an evidence that Philosophy was done and written between 570 BC and 430 AD; and late in the 17th Century by St Augustine, a native of Tagaste in North Africa born in 354 and by the first African Rationalist Worqe (Zara Ya'cob) of Ethiopia. Indeed African Philosophy existed from time immemorial if we consider the fact that the doctrine of immortality and transmigration of the soul in many parts of Africa (Makinde, 1985). It seems paradoxical then to describe this period as unwritten Philosophy and unwritten Philosophers because there were few Philosophers who wrote what they thought and, there might be others whose record was lost. But, in comparison with the West this time was significantly lacked written sources. The above two personality are exceptional of the time.

However, it's logical at this juncture to argue that Philosophy existed in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans and Africa has a philosophical worldview of its own. A critical analysis of the African past reasonably assures the presence of traditional African thought before the advent of colonialism.

## **2. Colonial Misconceptions and Distortions**

The scholars of this phase, which were mainly European missionaries, ethnologists and ethnographers - whose main aims or interests were in studying African thought through the occidental traditional, religious and cultural outlook. All the current profound misconceptions about African philosophy could be traced to these scholars.

The colonial scholars obtained a hidden agenda which aimed at showing Africa is incapable of second-order thought (Gordon, 1945). With this intension, any discovery which entails a philosophical insight to anthropologists and ethnologists of the evolutionary school; for colonial educationalists and particularly for those who were concerned in African education- was troublesome and disturbing (Kanu, 2012). This was basically because the recognition of such a discovery invalidates the rational justification of colonialism that considers the whole of African mind was like a tabularaza which has to be educated and civilized (Horton, 1993).

The recognition of African engagement in the second-order thought would further contradict with the colonials' preconceived idea of situating the Africans as barbarous. For this reason, to achieve their aim that Africa could not engage in a second-order thought, wherever philosophical traditions are discovered, it was turn out to be ethno-philosophy meaning philosophy of a group mind or collective thoughts of a people (Hallen, 1996). These scholars fail to recognize the philosophical content and implication in a people's way of thinking.

## **3. Post-modernism: Critical Re-Orientation in Philosophy**

Post-modernism is often linked to post-structuralism- emphasizes the importance of plurality and difference. Modernism and pre-modernism, according to post-modernism are thoughts that confined in binary opposition – set of opposites in which one half is privileged and other down-graded. The avoidance of general Meta narratives that dominated modernism and a quest for concentration on the local and particular is what characterizes post-modernism ( Buthler, 1995).The movement created a space for re-orientation in Philosophy in which professional African philosophers polemically entered into the debate whether or not African Philosophy exists.

This era marked opening of the debate as to whether or not there is African Philosophy. Professional philosophers reacted against ethno-Philosophers.

Considering the fact that the debate alone does not amount to doing Philosophy, professional Philosophers began to examine the contents of African traditional thought (Oruka, 1995).

"African Philosophy is not rigorous as Western Philosophy" (Hallen, 1981), is a pervasive accusation of the time forwarded against African Philosophical tradition. However, as expressed above, we cannot use analytic Philosophy as a sole measurement of the prevalence of Philosophy in any thought system. And, it can by no means be a proper standard to evaluate other Philosophies as inexistent. Analytic is just one among the many approaches of Philosophy which remain dominant in the Euro-American ways of Philosophizing. Moreover, situating Philosophy only in terms of Analytic Philosophy is nothing but also counter-productive for the Euro-American Philosophical tradition itself for a lot of the contents of Western Philosophy such as Metaphysics, Moral-Philosophy, and Existentialism would be dismissed altogether as non-Philosophies (Lott 2011).

### **Conclusion**

There are some who argue that African Philosophy exists as specie of philosophy while some other argues that there is nothing like a genuine African philosophy. It is a provocative and controversial argument, indeed. Still, widespread disciplinary ignorance regarding the histories of ancient peoples and civilizations other than those stipulated as being ancestors of European White peoples is a direct and continuing consequence of racism in the formation, organization, and practices of communities of discourse and scholarship and the development of racially segregated idea-spaces, intellectual traditions and networks, and scholarly organizations throughout Europe and North America.

However, the production of interpretive and expressive orderings, the working out of the norms by which to structure, justify, and legitimate the interpretations so as to order personal and social life, were, indeed, "philosophical" endeavours: that is, labors devoted to the production of successful, time-tested, enduring thought-praxis and aesthetic strategies by which to resolve emergent and recurrent challenges to trans-generational survival and flourishing.

These were experience-conditioned thoughtful means by which to provide knowledge to guide the ordering of meaningful individual and shared life

integrated across generations past, present, and future. Such efforts are as old as the peoples now routinely referred to as “Africans.”

A cursory glance at the thought system of Africans reveals that they can and do philosophy. As Makumba (2007) avers, if philosophy etymologically mean 'love of wisdom', it's simple to understand that philosophy is an all-inclusive enterprise transcending racial boundaries. What might legitimately be questioned is the level of systematized thoughts, which obviously cannot be the same everywhere. In this regard, Temples (1969) argues "anyone who claims that primitive people possesses no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men" which understandably is inconceivable. Influenced by Temple, Parrinder (1969) claims "to say that African people have no system of thought is, explicit or assumed, would be to deny their humanity." The lexical definition of man as a rational animal has to be re-considered otherwise. If not and if Africans are agreed to be human individuals of a rational nature, it follows then that they are capable of doing philosophy.

Much, if not all, we were taught as students of philosophy were Western philosophies. In fact, many years after the introduction of the courses, there still remained arguments among scholars whether there was/is African philosophy. As a rational critical enquiry on Africans and their worlds', eventually, it's the task of African philosophy and African philosopher to make the uncoordinated coordinated, the uncritical critical, and the inarticulate articulate, particularly concerning the first phase.

Finally, it has to be clear that “African philosophy” is the name for an emergent and still developing field of ideas and idea-spaces, intellectual endeavours, discourses, and discursive networks within and beyond academic philosophy. Thus, the name does not denote a particular philosophy, philosophical system, method, or tradition. Rather it's a kind of met philosophical, umbrella-concept used to bring organizing oversight to various efforts of philosophizing— activities of reflective, critical thinking and articulation and aesthetic expression—engaged in by persons and peoples African and of African descent. In all cases the point of much of the philosophizing has been to confer meaningful orderings on individual and shared living and on natural and social worlds while resolving recurrent, emergent, and radically disruptive challenges to existence so as to survive, endure, and flourish across successive generations.

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African Philosophy is a philosophy produced by African people, philosophy which presents African worldviews, or philosophy that uses distinct African philosophical methods. It's a critical thinking by Africans on their experiences of reality. It's about the way in which African people of the past and present make sense of their destiny and of the world in which they live in.

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