



RESEARCH ARTICLE

DISCOURSES ON THE EXISTENCE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

*Tadie Degie Yigzaw

Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social Science and Humanities, Dilla University,
P.O. Box 419, Dilla, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on the existence of African philosophy is the Archimedean point to most Philosophers of the 20th century. There is for and against views on the existence of African philosophy among philosophers. However, in this article I try to develop an argument that illustrates the existence of African philosophy (African philosophy resulted due to western discourse on Africa and Africans reaction on it). Almost all African philosophers agree on the existence of African philosophy albeit there is disagreement on the issue of what constituted African philosophy. Western's (many of them) argued that African's don't have philosophical texts, don't come up in a common definitions of the subject and they are not doing philosophy. As a result, it is difficult to consider or assume African's as doer of philosophy. However, in reaction to this thought of the western's, African thinkers toiled day and night, investing their energy and resource to provide convincing evidence that African's are really practicing philosophy and have accessible philosophical texts. In my point of view, African philosophy should be the appropriations of the African thoughts and non-African thoughts. Therefore, in this article I try to develop sound premises that prevails the existence of African philosophy even if it is at level of minimal.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years (particularly in the 20th and 21st century) there were unsettled and hot discourses on the existence of African philosophy among philosophers. For many philosophers, particularly, for the western's African philosophy doesn't exist due to a dozens of reasons; on the other hand African philosophers believe on the existence of it. They believe that African philosophy exists as a result of western discourse on Africa and African response on it in the 20th and 21st century (western's denial on African philosophy and African's reaction on it). This was resulted following extensive discourses on the nature and existence of African philosophy. There are also philosophical discourses between African and western scholars on the availability of philosophical texts that shows African philosophy. For western's Africans don't have written philosophical text; but, it is wrong for African's. In addition to this, western philosophers argued that African's are not come up in a common definition of the subject. However, for African even the western's are not come up in a common consent on the definition of the subject (Kresse, 1997). Even having a common connotation about what philosophy is not a criterion for philosophy. There are

disagreement between Universalists and particularists on the issues of what constitutes African philosophy. And yet they are not come up in a common accord on the issue. There are two basic kinds of criteria to consider a given scholar as an African philosopher for Henry Odera Oruka; these are: the nature of philosophical interest and the cultural experience of the thinkers. For Henry Odera Oruka there are numerous theories and methodologies developed during the course of the discourses on the nature and existence of African philosophy; and these serve as foundations for African philosophy (Roux, 2003). According to Mudimbe African clergy men's, anthropologists, and European missionaries were the once contributing to African philosophy. For him, African philosophy is the composition of both the African's and the western. According to Crahay, Tempels was wrong in his attitudes towards African philosophy. He recommended rational critic on the work of Tempels called *Bantu philosophy*. For Tempels Bantu were not themselves competent in developing their philosophy since they don't have their own terminologies¹. There is no philosophical value in African culture since it is the creation of primitive state of mind. For

*Corresponding author: Tadie Degie Yigzaw,
Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social Science and Humanities, Dilla University, P.O. Box 419, Dilla, Ethiopia.

¹ One proponent of this form, Placide Tempels, argued in *Bantu Philosophy* that the metaphysical categories of the Bantu people are reflected in their linguistic categories. According to this view, African philosophy can be best understood as springing from the fundamental assumptions about reality reflected in the languages of Africa.

him Africans thinking is primitive, savage and undeveloped. As a result, there is an in-depth debate in the existence of African philosophy (Makinde, 2007). I argued that, Tempels was misguided when he was asserting that there is no philosophical value in African culture since it is the product of primitive state of mind. I insist that, his idea about African's was unfair; since, every human being shares some common elements i.e., to have the rational talent regardless of race, color, gender, economic development and other differences. All human beings process the same faculty of thinking. The difference lies merely in the use of our talents due to anthropogenic and natural factors. For instance, in the 17th century Zara Yacoqob of Ethiopia was doing philosophy on Ethiopian culture. This case disproves Tempels idea of African's thinking as primitive, savage and undeveloped.

Besides, there was also an intense discourses in the nature and existence of African philosophy with professional philosophers; these professional philosophers making a scholastic disputation through two groups. The first group was represented by the universalists and they believed that, the thought of philosophy in terms of its methodology and content should be similar regardless of place and race. For them, African philosophy does not depend on a tradition of writing and does not analyze abstract conceptual issues. The proponents of this view were Hountondji, Wiredu, Appiah, and the like. While the second groups were represented under the particularists and they strongly believe that different cultures encompass different forms of philosophy. Thus, Africans' must have a philosophy that is different from others philosophies. The proponents of this view were Sodipo, Gyekye, Ayoade, and others² (Roux, 2003). As we have noticed in the above, both Universalist and the particularists debate in the nature and existence of African philosophy from different points of view. One against the others points of view, but for me, are not possible to reconcile these two different views rather than conflicting to each other or antagonizing? The particularists were incorrect when they are asserting that different societies encompass different forms of philosophy and reality; because truth is independent of any culture, tradition and way of life. For example, prior to the Copernican revolution people thought that the sun revolves around the spectators. However, after the Copernican revolution scientists thought that the sun is at the center and other planets revolve around it. This shows that truth is independent of any cultures, beliefs and practices. Although, culture serve as preliminary point for philosophical inquires. We can develop philosophical elements through careful examinations of our oral traditions or narratives, poems, myths, tales practices and the like yet we should not consider these by themselves as philosophy. Again, Universalists were wrong when they are asserting that African philosophy does not depend on a written tradition. For me, philosophy emerges through careful examinations of people's culture, practices and beliefs and eventually it develops its own methodology and subject matter. Accordingly, it is not logical to contend like this. It is better to reconciling rather than antagonizing these two basic views for the founding of African philosophy in African context. Therefore, in this article I argue that African philosophy exists even though it is at a phase of infancy. And I also insists that African philosophy should be

rest on African traditions and the philosophical works of African philosophers; because, philosophical elements emanates from history, institutions and cultural practices such as oral narratives, poems, myths, tales and so on. This doesn't mean that Africans' do not take or share philosophical knowledge and methodologies from the others rather African philosophy should be the appropriations of the African thoughts and non- African thoughts.

Evidences for the existence of African Philosophy

Philosophical Texts

For extended periods of time, there were a discourses between African and western scholars in the existence of African philosophy. The western scholars argued that there is no written philosophical text that shows African philosophy like western philosophy. African's not have written philosophical text; for them there are various philosophical texts that reveal western philosophy unlike African's (April A. Gordon). However, this is mistaken for African scholars for the reason that there were various philosophical materials done by both African's and non African philosophers that show African philosophy. For instance, the works of P. Tempels in Bantu philosophy, Nationalist-ideological philosophers like Leopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and others contributed different philosophical reflections (Kresse, 1997). Professional Africans philosophers also contributes different philosophical texts on African philosophy for example Odera Oruka's work on "*sage philosophy*", Claude summer work on "*the Treatise of Zara Yacoqob³ and Walda Heywat and classical Ethiopian philosophy*" the works of Mudimbe on "*the invention of Africa*" and the like. There are also different African philosophical journals published in different parts of the world. These journals reflect Africans philosophy and the works of different African scholars in African culture. Consequently, there cannot be any issue that African philosophy doesn't really be alive (Makinde, 2007). I argued that, in recent time there are inspiring works done in the areas of African philosophy; particularly in the publications of African philosophical texts. In Africa there are different philosophers that contribute their philosophical works. For instance, nationalist ideological philosophers like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and others, professional philosophers like Hountondji, Odera Oruka and so on, many Sage philosophers like P. Tempels, J.O. Sodipo, B. Hallen's work on the Yorubas and the others. But, for me African philosophers should do philosophy; that is the works of these philosophers shouldn't simply do for the sake of giving direct responses for the Euro-racist writers and philosophers. Since, these lead to other form of ethno-centrism and discharged philosophers not to do authentic philosophical works. Thus, Africa philosophical works should be authentic philosophical discourses. In addition to this, there should be a general frame in African philosophy that guides philosophers how to do philosophical discourses.

The Connotation of African Philosophy

One of the central points in the advance of African philosophy was the issue of the nature of African philosophy. Many

² African Philosophy: A Survey of Contemporary Studies, <http://www.ontology.co/african-philosophy.htm>, accessed on 21-April-13.

³ Zara Yacob's thoughts on three perennial topics of philosophy: Method of knowing God and the disclosure of truth, Human Nature and The obligations of humans. And his philosophy is comparable with Rene Descartes.

western as well as African philosophers argued that there is no common definition about African philosophy. But various African scholars claimed that even the western and the eastern philosophers don't provide due attention in the definitions of the subject. Several philosophers pose different questions about African philosophy. That is, do African's develop their own philosophy that is significantly different from the others? Through along debate African philosophers concluded that there is no common definition about what African philosophy is all about and this shows that African's have their own philosophy distinct from the others (Kresse, 1997). Along with African philosophers even the westerners are not come up in common consensus what philosophy is in general. Western philosophers didn't squander their time by defining what philosophy is. Rather they were typically worried with the fundamental issues about human knowledge and human life (Roux, 2003). However, logical positivists and linguistic philosophers intensely pay attention in the area of defining philosophy. For instance, Rudolf Carnap and J. Ayer argued that verifications and empirical observations should be the criteria to define philosophical concepts. For them metaphysics is pseudo-science since it does not depend on verifications and empirical observations (P.J.Hountondji, 1995). This view greatly challenges the traditions of western philosophy; even for Wittgenstein Metaphysics and ethics are not considered as philosophy because they fail to fulfill the basic criteria. So for him, philosophy is pseudo-science. All the above clearly shows that like African philosophers western philosophers are not come up to a general agreement on what is philosophy (Kresse, 1997). It is also difficult to generalize by the common connotation of philosophy as a basic pillar.

Basic Corpuses of African Philosophy

There are incongruity between Universalists and particularists on the issues of what constitutes African philosophy. According to the views of Universalists philosophy in terms of its methodology and content should be universal and not confined within any cultural boundaries. That is philosophy should not be situated in any culture, history and way of life. For them, there is no philosophy like, African, western, eastern and whatever rather philosophy should be written, universal in scope and applications regardless of place, time, and other conditions. They claim that African philosophy fails to have all the above criteria (Makinde, 2007). Reason and science are the two imperative things that are used by the westerners to dominate and undermine African's. It is true that, if African's undermined this universal knowledge then we will become primitive, incompetent and underdeveloped. So according to Universalists African philosophy should be universal in character. On the other hand the particularists against the universal nature of philosophy and believed that philosophy should be situated in a particular culture, history and custom. Because for them different societies have their own philosophy that emanates from their oral narratives, poems, myths, traditions and so on. For some philosophers this debate affects philosophers not to do philosophy; since they believed that debating the nature of philosophy is not part of doing philosophy (Kresse, 1997). For me, it is not reasonable to think that, different forms of debate on the nature of philosophy affect thinkers not to do philosophy. Since, when we are debating, arguing, discussing on the natures of philosophy we are doing analysis, critical thinking and differentiating pseudo statements from genuine statements and this is a demonstration of doing philosophy practically. For example,

square circle are four dimensional figures, it is not the genuine statements; such statements are not really exist. Such forms of expressions could be differentiated through the process of clarifications; and clarification of concepts is possible if there is debating on the natures of philosophy. Accordingly, it is not persuasive to contend that the debate influenced the participants from actually doing philosophy.

Is there a marker to be an African Philosopher? Yes there is

There are two basic kinds of criteria/marker to consider thinkers as an African philosopher for Henry Odera Oruka. These are: the nature of philosophical interest and the cultural experience of the thinkers. For Oruka even a non-African thinker can be considered as an African philosopher if he/she has interest on the nature of African philosophy and the cultural experience he/she has. For example, Robin Horton, Tempels, C. Sumnuer are considered as African philosophers even though they are outside Africa in their birth place. This does mean that they are not qualifying to be philosopher in the other nations. For instance, Anthony Amo who was born in Africa and lived for long period of time in Germany considered as both African and German philosopher. On the other hand, Christian Neugebauer was not considered as an African philosopher since he doesn't have a life experience in Africa (April A. Gordon). For Oruka, birth place is not a guaranty for philosophers to be Africans, Europeans and what so ever. For instance, if we have an African person who was born in India but does not have any life experience in Africa doesn't qualify the criteria to be an African philosopher. In general, to be an African philosopher a person should qualify the above mentioned criteria's for Oruka (Kresse, 1997, pp. 105-106). Therefore, philosophical interest and cultural experience are criteria to be an African philosopher. In this definition, I deduced that Oruka is an advocator of particularist sentiment in philosophy.

Are there Methodologies and Theories in African Philosophy?

For Henry Odera Oruka, Yes! There are a lot of theories and methodologies developed during the course of the discourses on the nature and existence of African philosophy. These theories and methodologies serves as the base for African philosophy. Some of the theories that were advanced were: The Wiredu- Oruka debate, the Mudimbe- Neugebauer caveat, on the critiques ethno- philosophy, Hermeneutics and language philosophy and, Nairobi world conference of philosophy and the eco- philosophy institute (Kresse, 1997, p. 106).

The Wiredu-Oruka Discourse

The philosophical discourses held between Oruka and Wiredu called the Wiredu- Oruka discourse. It was one of the major manifestations that Africans are advancing their own methodology and tried to practice in doing philosophy. According to Oruka, in 1972 Wiredu introduced his article on "truth as opinion" in the area of analytic philosophy. Again Oruka himself introduce an article entitled "Truth and belief" in response to Wiredu's article. Wiredu responded in "Defense of opinion; Oruka published his second response under the title" for the sake of truth, a response to Wiredu's

critique of truth and belief. These types of Socratic Method between these African philosophers lead to something that is fundamental in the development of certain methodologies and theories in the history of African philosophy. And this open the way for African philosophers to do philosophy (A.P.J.Roux, 2003). Socratic believe that it through scholastic discourses that a new idea, methods come to exist.

The Mudimbe-Neugebauer Caveat

The central point in the discourse between Mudimbe and Neugebauer was in the traditional African thoughts. Mudimbe considered traditional African thoughts as “gnosis” rather than philosophy since for him “gnosis” refers to the collection of different knowledge like cultural, historical, and philosophical and the like. According to the views of Mudimbe African thoughts don’t have originalities and highly influenced by the western way of thinking. For him, science and philosophy in terms of its methodologies and theoretical systems are treated to be western. Even for him ethno philosophy has not genesis in Africa rather the system and the methodologies are situated by the outsiders (Makinde, 2007). Unfortunately, the works of Kagame disprove the views of Mudimbe, that Africans lack originalities in their philosophy. Kagame held a study in Bantus’ culture particularly in their language. In his study, he concludes that in Bantus’ language there is Aristotle’s form of abstraction. In opposition to this view Crahay and Hountondji forwarded their own critics on ethno philosophy. For them philosophy is not simply a world view rather it is a rationalistic logical argument that provides its own critic (Kresse, 1997). On the other hand Neugebauer argued that, whether the philosophical works of Tempels which are imperialist and colonialist ethno-philosophy or the works of Kagame and Oruka on the Kenyan sages; all African philosophers are conditioned by western way of thinking. For him Africans’ never developed any philosophical thoughts since for him Africans’ are naturally and genetically inferior, savage and primitive. Therefore for Neugebauer, African philosophers placing professional critics of ethno philosophy and they are also forming another form of ethno philosophy (A.P.J.Roux, 2003). Therefore, the debate held between Wiredu and Oruka, Mudimbe and Neugebauer show that, African philosophers are going on in the area of doing philosophy. Mudimbe argued that African thoughts don’t have originality and mostly conditioned by the system which are not African (April A. Gordon). However for me, Mudimbe was wrong in this regard because different forms of African cultures like oral narratives, poems and myths serves as the source of African philosophical thoughts. Through careful and systematic examinations of Africans culture, practices, beliefs and different forms of oral narratives, tales, poems and the like philosophers can develop philosophy. For example, a man called Callicott, develop environmental philosophy through careful examination of the oral traditions of South American peoples and he called it Ojibwa. These are not seen by Mudimbe. Again, Mudimbe was wrong when he says that, African thoughts need originality and particularly conditioned by the systems of the westerns. For me, Africans history and philosophy were as old as before the arrivals of Europeans into the African continent. If there is peoples that were live in a specific area, then these peoples also develops its own culture, history, and practices. In fact, following the arrivals of the European in the African land it will lead to the assimilations of cultures, belief and

practices; and this does not lead to the conclusion that, Africans thoughts not have originality. So, for me, he is highly influenced by the western way of thinking.

Again, Neugebauer was wrong in the view that, African philosophy was conditioned by the outsiders; since colonialism influenced Africans ways of life. As I think, it is not persuasive because colonialism in Africa is the recent phenomenon and Africans were practiced their own philosophy much earlier. He also argued that, African Peoples and cultures never developed any philosophical thought because of inborn genetic inferiority. But for me, Neugebauer was also conditioned via the Euro-racist thinking. All human beings by nature possess the same faculty of thinking even though there are anthropogenic factors that affect and conditioned human way of thinking. We human beings possess the same rational parts of the soul as well as the same emotional parts of the soul, the difference were the matter of utilization. So, Africans are not genetically inferior to Europeans.

Hermeneutics Tradition in African philosophy

Like European analytic philosophers, recently African philosophers are also engaged in the analysis of African indigenous language. For instance, the study of Ocaya in the Acholi language is the primary one. In his study he found that in the Acholi language the law of inclusive disjunction does not found. This implies that even in the ordinary English language the law of inclusive disjunction is not also obtained. That means that, the ordinary English language is only restricted to exclusive disjunction (Kresse, 1997). For me, the analysis of African indigenous languages and African beliefs is really an important philosophical activity and one aspects of doing philosophy; because as I think the foundations of any philosophy is through the analysis of tales, poems, oral traditions, languages, and whatsoever. As I asserted earlier, language is a medium through which people’s viewpoint, thoughts, traditions, way of life, are authentically expressed, communicated and known. So, the tools that used as medium should be analyzed; because, cultures, traditions, and philosophical thoughts expressed through language. Therefore, the analysis of particular African indigenous languages is an indicator of doing African philosophy.

The roles of Philosophical Conferences for African Philosophy

Philosophical conference plays pivotal role in bringing new way of thinking, methodologies and contents. For instance, such things happened in the philosophical conference of Nairobi, in Kenya in 1991. The philosophical conference organized by a well known Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka leads to something significant for the progress of philosophy in Africa. The conference held with the general them of philosophy, humanity and environment. Within this there are different general issues discussed. The major issue that was raised in the summit was science and technologies are the main factors in the devastation of the natural environment. Developing an ethical values are the best solutions that science and technology don’t affected human societies. Having harmonies relationships between human beings and the rest of nature were the best solutions for the problems (A.P.J.Roux, 2003). Beyond this, the conference

brings a new way of sentiment among African philosophers and it paves the way for the emergence of African philosophy. All these show that, African's entered in a new chapter in the development of African philosophy. In general all the above discourses held between African philosophers' shows that African thinkers are actually entered in the new chapter of doing philosophy. This avoids the critics that are forwarded from the non-African, particularly western philosophers that claim African's don't have their own philosophy.

Accordingly, African philosophers should develop common philosophical methodologies and they should formulate African philosophy to be universal in its applicability regardless of color, race, culture and practices; when all these things meets then Africa enters in the new path of philosophy in the world.

Conclusion

In short, in this article I argued that, after long journey of discourses in the nature and existence of African philosophy between and among African as well as western philosophers; Africa entered in the practice of doing philosophy and this is clearly demonstrated by the works of African philosophers.

There was an intensive debate between particularists and Universalists on the question of what well be the foundations of African philosophy? And they forwarded their own views on the issue of its foundations. African philosophy should rest on the appropriation of others and the critical analysis of African culture. African Philosophy should be also applied and functioned outside Africa like, eastern and western philosophy. Generally, the scholastic discourses on Africa philosophy leads to the development of different methodologies, philosophical theories and African philosophers began to do philosophy.

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