The struggle for reason in Africa, from Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings, / P.H. Coetzee

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The expression 'African philosophy' often animates the question 'What is African philosophy?' In an attempt either to answer this question or demonstrate examples of African philosophical thought, various proposals and findings have sprung up. A deeper analysis of them reveals the idea that there are generally two radically distinct senses or usages of the expression 'African philosophy'. In one sense, African philosophy is explained or defined in opposition to philosophy in other continents but in particular to Western or European philosophy. It is assumed that there is a way of thinking or a conceptual framework that is uniquely African and which is at the same time radically unEuropean. So African philosophy is conceived as a body of thoughts and beliefs produced by this unique way of thinking. To the extent that European philosophy is known to manifest critical and rigorous analysis, and logical explanation and synthesis, African philosophy is considered to be innocent of such characteristics. It is considered to be basically intuitive, mystical, and counter or extra-rationalistic.

In the other sense, philosophy in general is viewed as a universal activity or discipline. And so its meaning (if not content) is believed to be independent of racial or regional boundaries and specialities. Philosophy is taken as a discipline that, in the strict sense, employs the method of critical, reflective, and logical inquiry. African philosophy then is not expected to be an exception to this meaning of philosophy. So the talk of a uniquely African conceptual framework or way of thinking (African mentality) with respect, at least, to the discipline of philosophy is not entertained. African philosophy is seen to exist not as a peculiarly African phenomenon (for most philosophical problems transcend cultural and racial confines), but only as a corpus of thoughts arising from the discussion and appropriation of authentic philosophical ideas by Africans or in the African context. African philosophy in this sense is considered in terms of African past, current, or potential contribution to philosophy in the strict meaning of the term. Philosophy as a discipline that employs analytical, reflective, and rationalistic methodology is therefore not seen as a monopoly of Europe or any one race but as an activity for which every race or people has a potentiality.

Besides the two broad senses, one is likely to detect a third sense, i.e. one which consists of aspects of each of the two but which nevertheless is not yet clearly explicit or articulated. There are also of course significant differences within each of the senses.

But from all this myriad of differences on the issue of meaning and existence, four significant trends can be delineated: (1) Ethno-philosophy, (2) Philosophic sagacity, (3) Nationalist-ideological philosophy, and (4) Professional philosophy.

ETHNO-PHILOSOPHY

If one presupposes that in philosophy the African conception and contribution have a completely different nature from those of other people and in particular from those of the Europeans, one is, as a matter of logical move, faced with the challenge to demonstrate the nature and uniqueness of the African contribution. In the demonstration two factors which are often associated with European or Greek thought, do readily become obvious targets of rejection. These are logic and individuality.

*A slightly different version of this paper was read at the Commemoration of Dr William Amo Conference, Agbara July 24th-29th 1978. This version is for the 16th World Congress of Philosophy, African Philosophy Section, Düsseldorf, Sept. 1978.
Léopold Senghor, for example, has argued that logic is Greek as emotion is African. European philosophy is also taken for granted to be individualistic, i.e., a body of thoughts produced or formulated by various individual thinkers. So communitary as opposed to individuality is brought forth as the essential attribute of African philosophy. Fr. P. Tempels puts it in his mythological Bantu philosophy, the 'wisdom of the Bantu based on the philosophy of vital force is accepted by everyone, it is not subjected to criticism', for it is taken by the whole community as the "imperishable truth" (sic.) (1945:75).

Replacing logic (at least in the usual sense) and individuality with emotion and communality still leaves one with the challenge to show the exact examples of African philosophy or at least the areas of African culture where it can be found. But here idiosyncracies of the traditional or communal African customs, poems, taboos, religions, songs, dances, etc. easily come up as undeniable candidates for what is required. These actually form a radical contrast with the rationalistic elements in a reflective, critical, and dialectical philosophy. And so the result usually is that African philosophy is identified with a communal or 'folk philosophy'. The impression given is that a whole community can as a group philosophize, which is an open denial of Plato's maxim that the multitude cannot be philosophical. But perhaps this communal or group thought is not strictly speaking a philosophy but only 'ethno-philosophy', as my colleague Paulin Hountondji has described it.

Most of those works or books (and the majority of them are works of anthropologists or theologians) which purport to describe a world outlook or thought system of a particular African community or the whole of Africa belong to ethnic-philosophy. Since the works are not strictly speaking philosophical, I have referred to those of them which explicitly claim to be philosophical as being philosophy only in the unique and 'debased' sense of the term (Oruka 1972 and 1975).

One great shortcoming of ethno-philosophy is that it is derived not from the critical but from the uncritical part of African tradition. A tradition or a culture often consists of critical and uncritical aspects. Thoughts or works of the individual man and women of intellect (sages, philosophers, poets, prophets, scientists, etc.) constitute the critical part of a tradition or culture while beliefs and activities of the type found in religions, legends, folk tales, myths, customs, superstitions, etc. constitute the uncritical part. Philosophy proper is always found in the critical, not uncritical, aspects of a people's tradition. The latter is usually only emotive, mythical, and unlogical. Even Europe has its uncritical tradition and it is interesting (as a contrast to what has been done in Africa) that we never look for European philosophy from the uncritical culture of Europe.

However, ethno-philosophy has provoked criticisms from rigorous philosophical circles and caused debates on the question of 'African philosophy'. Inasmuch as such criticisms and debates are instrumental in inspiring and shaping the development of philosophical thought in Africa, ethno-philosophy may not be without a useful role in African philosophical history.

PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY

One may maintain that African philosophy, even in its pure traditional form, does not begin and end in the folk thought and consensus; that Africans even without outside influence are not innocent of logical and dialectical critical inquiry; that literacy is not a necessary condition for philosophical reflection and exposition. On these assumptions one has a possibility to seek for and find a philosophy in traditional Africa without falling into the pitfall of ethno-philosophy.

Among the various African peoples one is likely to find rigorous indigenous thinkers. These are men and women (sages) who have not had the benefit of modern education. But they are none the less critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgements by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus.
They are capable of taking a problem or a concept and offer a rigorous philosophical analysis of it, making clear rationally where they accept or reject the established or communal judgement on the matter. We have found that there are various sages with this critical and dialectical frame of mind in Kenya. But we infer that there must be many such sages all over Africa. Their thought and ideas if properly exposed and written down would form an interesting aspect of current African philosophical thought and literature.

Philosophic sagacity, however, meets with two important objections:

1. that sagacity, even if it involves an insight and reasoning of the type found in philosophy, is not itself a philosophy in the proper sense, and
2. that a recourse to sagacity is a fall back on ethno-philosophy.

The answer to these objections can be found. Not all sages are free thinkers, but some combine the conventional quality of wisdom with the dialectical and critical attribute of free philosophic thinking. 'Philosophic sagacity', then, is only the critical and reflective thought of such sages. It differs fundamentally from ethno-philosophy in that it is both individualistic and dialectical. It is a thought or reflection of various known or named individual thinkers, not a folk philosophy and, unlike the latter, it is rigorous and philosophical in the strict sense.

Although most of this philosophy will not be found to take the form of conventional elaborate or long-winded philosophical arguments, most of it is explicitly expressed in the enthymematic form. But an enthyme is a short-cut logical or philosophic argument in the exact sense of philosophy. Its full logical range can easily be uncoiled.

One of the tasks that modern students and teachers of philosophy in Africa may find rewarding, is to research into the sagious thought and find out the aspects of it that are philosophical in the proper sense.

NATIONALIST-IDEOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

It is sometimes conceived that in the modern world African philosophy, like African culture, can only be revived or authenticated on the basis of a truly free and independent African society. Thus in this sense the exact nature and existence of African philosophy would remain obscure unless we seek for it on the basis of a clear social theory for independence and the creation of a genuine humanist social order. Since colonialism was built on the ruins of what was supposed to be the cardinal ethical principle of traditional humanist Africa – communalism – the required social theory, it is argued, needs to embrace communalism as one of its basis tenets (Nkrumah 1964). In communalism the individual and society are said to have egalitarian mutual obligations: no individual would prosper at the expense of the society and the society would not ignore the stagnation of any of its members. In traditional Africa, Julius Nyerere argues, the individual was rich or poor only to the extent that the society was rich or poor, and vice versa (1968:9).

Most of the contributions to this trend of African philosophical literature have so far been politicians or statesmen. Some of the works in it are not in the strict sense, really philosophical. But it, however, differs from ethno-philosophy in several important respects. It does not, unlike the latter, assume or imply that European thought or philosophy is radically different from or irrelevant to African thought. Secondly, the authors do not give the impression that the philosophy they are expounding is not theirs but that of a whole African community or continent. It is clear that this philosophy is claimed to be rooted in the traditional or communal Africa, but it is explicit that it is actually a philosophy of the individual author concerned. Thirdly, this philosophy is practical and has explicit problems to solve, namely those of national and individual freedom, whereas ethno-philosophy appears as apolitical and free-for-all metaphysics.
PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY

This trend consists of works and debates of the professionally trained students and teachers of philosophy in Africa. Most of it rejects the assumptions of ethno-philosophy. Philosophy is conceived as a discipline or an activity whose meaning cannot depend just on racial or regional make-up. Philosophy is here taken in the strict sense in which it involves critical, reflective, and logical inquiry. Yet still it is maintained there must be a significant (not radical) difference between African philosophy and, say, European or Western philosophy. This difference it is believed, arises from cultural dissimilarities. However, it is admitted that cultural dissimilarities can cause disparity in philosophical priority and methodology but not in the nature or meaning of philosophy as a discipline. So in the professional literature African philosophy is seen as a whole, which includes what has been produced or can be produced by African thinkers or in the African intellectual context in any branch of philosophical thought in the strict sense. Therefore there is no reason why a work by an African thinker in, say, modern epistemology, metaphysics, or logic should not be seen as a part of African philosophy. In the 1730s a Ghanaian thinker, Dr William Amo, produced works on metaphysics, logic, and theory of knowledge while lecturing in the German universities. It would be absurd to treat Amo's works simply as a part of the German philosophical thought and as having nothing to do with the African contribution to philosophy. His works should be seen as both a part of the German intellectual tradition which trained and inspired him, and African cultural history which caused Amo's travel to Germany and must have dictated his interactions with the Germans and choice of studies.

One criticism often labeled against professional philosophy is that it is Western or European not African. It is argued that a modern student or teacher of philosophy in Africa has, for historical reasons, been schooled in the Western logic and philosophy and learnt hardly anything about African philosophy. So the criticism goes, he comes and treats the latter from a purely European angle; he employs 'European logic' and principles to criticize or create what he likes to call 'African philosophy'.

To this criticism there have been broadly two different responses. The first criticism comes from those philosophers who try to argue and offer historical proofs that Western philosophical thought as we know it today originated from ancient Egypt; and further that the thoughts of ancient Egypt are the heritage of black Africans. The implication is that the black man has a share in the philosophy of modern Europe.

The second response comes from those who argue that knowledge and intellectual principles are never a monopoly of any one race or culture. That it is a historical law of intellectual development that intellectual offerings in a given culture are appropriated and cultivated in other cultures. The Greeks borrowed and transformed the ideas of ancient Egypt. Northern Europe and America have done the same to the offerings of Greece. Therefore, seriously speaking, modern development in philosophy and logic, and in other fields of learning, are not an exclusive preserve of Europe or any other culture in which the developments have occurred. They are a preserve for any student of philosophy. And so they are relevant and subject matters even in African philosophical development. It is not therefore in this response accepted that African thinkers can only make their current and impending appropriation of European philosophical offerings relevant and indigenous if the ideas of ancient Egypt are a heritage of the African or black people. The appropriation should be seen as African by the ethics and historical law of intellectual development.
ENDNOTES

1 ‘European reasoning is analytical, discursive by utilisation; Negro-African reasoning is intuitive by participation’ (L. Senghor, 1964:74).

2 Kwasi Wiredu (1979) has competently advised against this.

3 See for example Hountondji (1972 and 1976).


5 Prof Sumner of the Dept. of Philosophy, University of Addis Ababa seems to be engaged in this sort of research, as is evident in Sumner 1978. From his explanation in this article it appears his findings so far are on the thought of dead or legendary figures. This is in order, but one would wish that the research be extended even to the living sages.

6 Nkrumah (1964) treats a development of philosophical thought in Europe in a whole chapter with the conviction, I believe, that such thoughts are not a monopoly of Europe, and Nkrumah and his book are no less African in giving them such a treatment.

7 Translations of his works appeared at the Martin Luther University, Halle Wittenberg, Halle (Saale) 1968. For more about him see Brenjes 1977 and Abraham 1962.

8 What is referred to here unfortunately as ‘European logic’ means actually no more than that it is a form of logic which is known to have been first formulated or discovered by a European. But this fact alone cannot make any principle of learning a monopoly of the person who made the formulation or the culture within which it was made. So when we talk of ‘Aristotelian logic’, for example, we mean or should mean no more than that Aristotle is given the honour of having first formulated or written down this form of logic. But we cannot, correctly, mean that this form of logic is uniquely Greek and must be strange, unknowable or irrelevant to other cultures.

9 See, for example, Keita (1979) and Oruka (1979).

10 Works of Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, Peter Bodunrin (e.g. 1981) and, I would add, myself reflect this position.