

AN APPRAISAL OF THE CHALLENGES CONFRONTING THE NATURE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Williams O. ASO

Introduction

The place of adequate definition on any subject of discussion cannot be overemphasized. A proper definition of an idea is a true path way to better understanding and appreciation of its components, from the main topic to the minutest parts. Hence, a good definition of an academic subject tele-guides those who have interest in the subject to know what the subject holds, its concerns and what distinguishes it from other related subjects. A definition that involves all these concerns will help participants in the discussion at stake to avoid misconceptions and misgivings in one sense and overcome ambiguities and equivocations in another sense.

As a matter of fact, a justified definition is necessary for African philosophy to determine its scope, to illustrate its characteristics, to identify its concerns and inherent problems. This attempt will make anybody in an academic environment to have a clearer picture of what is African philosophy. There is no doubt that countless definitions of

African philosophy may come up as a result of diverse impulses from the background, the school, the culture and appreciated methodology of each philosopher. However, a notable parameter is necessary to judge if a particular definition of African philosophy is credible and acceptable. What count most in the definition of African philosophy is not as important as the relationship that such definition must have with African worldview. Therefore, any definition of African philosophy that reflects on African perspective either by an African or non-African is relevant for the understanding of African philosophy.

This paper tends to survey why African philosophy is facing challenges of recognition and acceptance in academic arena unlike European, Arabic and Chinese philosophies. The write up demonstrates some problems involved in an attempt by some scholars to provide a definition of African philosophy. A good number of identified problems in the definition of African philosophy clearly show some misconceptions and misrepresentations of African socio-cultural experience. For instance, some of the definitions provided by some philosophers illustrate different approaches that limit the scope and relevance of African philosophy as evident in this paper. By and large, the paper highlights the criteria for the definition of African philosophy that is more standard and attracts barest minimum of criticism. It is pertinent to note also that this paper identifies, emphasizes and recommends the necessary features that can make the identity and contents of African philosophy less doubtful and more intellectual.

The work depends strongly on the articles that G. E. Azenabor articulated in his book, *Understanding The Problems of African Philosophy*, published in 2002, to demonstrate the challenges that limit the growth and development of African philosophy and the way forward. Nevertheless, the works of other relevant scholars on African philosophy are examined to give more credence to this paper. As a matter of fact, evaluation and the recommendation for the way forward conclude the write up.

The necessity for a definition of African philosophy

Any standard definition of philosophy is expected to

focus on the love of wisdom, the desire and quest to know what, why and how of all the realities in human experience, both physical and metaphysical. But definition of African philosophy will give a leeway to the contents, the frontiers and the relationship of its contents to the experience of Africans and their society. An acceptable definition of African philosophy will show that their quest for knowledge is closely connected to every aspect of their existential realities: God and the gods, the land, the community and the ancestral world. The awareness of these peculiarities will put any scholar in a better position to understand the characteristics of African philosophy and the reason behind each of them. This implies that a typical definition of African philosophy ought to be an emblematic expression of what African philosophy is all about. The moment a scholar grasps the meaning and definition of African philosophy he can easily make connection with its contents and relevance to the African society. In other words, a good definition of African philosophy becomes a key for scholars to get access to its concerns and essential problems. African philosophy will never get acceptance in academic world if its definition and meaning of its terms are shrouded in oral tradition and ethnography.

Why the definition of African philosophy is difficult

In spite of the need to get a credible definition of African philosophy, there is no universal definition that covers all its characteristics. Scholars pitched their tents in different camps to give a definition of African philosophy according to the world-view of their background and eager to criticise different definitions coming from the other camps.¹ This insurmountable disposition renders any definition of African philosophy subjective. In spite of this, no definition of African philosophy is totally alienated from the issues associated with the philosophy. As we have it below, C.S. Momoh identified some factors behind the diverse definitions of African philosophy. It is pertinent to examine these factors to judge how relevant they are in the definition of African philosophy.

Geographical location

Africa is the only continent where you have the largest number of black people living together with some whites and Arabs especially in the northern part of Africa. They all have similar culture, history, tradition, colonial experience but have diverse cultures and languages.² The attempt to get an acceptable definition of African philosophy leads to the challenge of determining the source of a credible definition of African philosophy. All scholars of African philosophy are not limited to African continent, some non-Africans are found in Europe like Placide Temples and in the United States of America like Barry Hallen. Besides, there are African scholars in diaspora like William Amo in Germany, Anthony Appiah in Canada, Molefi Asante in the US, Geoffrey Onah in Italy and a host of others in other parts of the world.³ Again, we cannot fail to acknowledge the African scholars in places like Brazil and Caribbean Islands as part of African community. As noted by J. I. Ebeh, geographical location can easily affect one's perception of certain realities of life. For instance, apart from basic relevance of water to man, the perception of water and its relationship with those living in riverine areas of Africa tend to be different from those located in the tropical and the savannah regions of Africa. The world and life experience of those in the riverine areas revolves around water while those that populate tropical region centres on forest and in the savannah is incomplete without reference to drought and dryness. Hence, the geographical location of African philosophers influences them to have diverse definitions of African philosophy.

The definition of African philosophy traceable to any of the scholars outside the confined of Africa are sometimes viewed as less important to the ones given by the scholars within the continent. This claim sounds absurd because geographical location of a scholar does not count as much as the content of his definition of African philosophy. As Moses Oke rightly posits, "it is by the content of a philosopher's work, and not by either his/her nationality or domicile, that an African is to be identified. In this connection, Barry Hallen is a good example of a non-African (an American national) African philosopher. On the other hand, though he is an African and a philosopher, J. T. Bedu-Ado (an Akan

colleague of Wiredu) does not qualify to be called a substantive African philosopher.”⁴ One can easily deduce from this position of Oke that the primary concern in the definition of African philosophy is the identity of African philosophy while the background, tradition, language and the name of the philosopher that identified the identity is insignificant.

Influence of cultural background

There is no doubt that every man is a product of his culture and environment. The culture determines the values appreciated, the frontiers of belief and accumulated knowledge. No man can be easily alienated from the influence of his cultural milieu; he speaks, thinks and writes through his culture and vice versa.⁵ As Momoh succinctly asserts, “a philosopher, like any other professional or individual, is a child of his culture and a culture often influences a philosopher's definition and perception of his subject-matter.”⁶ In addition to this claim of Momoh, Lucius Outlaw believes that appreciated African philosophical ideas and ideals are associated with particular African communities. As he maintains, “philosophizing is inherently grounded in socially shared practices, not in transcendental rules. When we view philosophical practices historically, sociologically, and comparatively, we are led inescapably to conclude that 'philosophical practice is inherently pluralistic', and philosophical ideals are local to communities of thinkers.”⁷ If this is indisputable, one cannot be surprised if cultural influence makes many scholars of African philosophy to generate diverse definitions of African philosophy.

There is no need for people of different cultures to condemn the definition of African philosophy that are not based on their cultural roots. This is one of the reason why African philosophy seems to be stagnant and difficult to grow. It is obvious that we do not have one language and culture in Africa which is part of African uniqueness. This reality makes it difficult for African philosophy to have a universal definition. Therefore, it is reasonable to accept any definition of African philosophy that captures the common African world-view and appreciates realities no matter the cultural background of the definition. After all, an attempt to

accept the cultural in-put of diverse peoples in Africa will enriched African philosophy and make it holistic.

Influence from the school of thought

As the cultural background often manifests and determines the perspective of any scholars on academic issue, the school of thought that an African philosopher belongs also influences his reasoning disposition on African philosophy. This implies that an African philosopher is a representative of the school of philosophy that nurtured him to maturity. As a matter of fact, he is expected to think and write according to the principles and values appreciated and projected by his school. Basically, there are some prominent philosophical schools of thought that contemplate on the subject matters of philosophy like metaphysics, epistemology, logic and ethics. We have philosophers that belongs to analytic school, some are trained in speculative school and there are others notable for logical positivism and practical philosophy. It is understandable if the school background of each philosopher tends to influence the way he defines African philosophy. Hence, it should not be a surprise to see that we have many subjective definitions of African philosophy.

Personal ambition of scholars

It is apparent that every philosopher has an inner force that determines his philosophical orientation. It could be a disposition towards innovation and transformation of existential realities in his society or the desire to protect and promote the status quo. The passion involved often consumes each scholar that he invests his rational ability and available material resources to fulfil his goal. Hence, he often has sleepless nights to write articles, books and preparing for academic seminars where he can define, defend and expatiate on his personal opinion on fundamental issues that form the subject matter of philosophy. For instance, in the process of defining and promoting his views and understanding of African philosophy, he can come up with personal definition of African philosophy. In most cases, such definition of African philosophy is traceable to the perspective and school of philosophy that fostered the scholar. In other words, no personal ambition of a philosopher that has no affinity to a

particular way of doing philosophy. Therefore, every philosopher with his cherished ideas and world-view is a product of his school of thought.

Influence of the era

There is a common saying that ideas rule the world and ideas that dictate how existential realities in the world affect man are not static. They change from time to time and man and his environment cannot resist this fundamental transformation. The periodic changes in human consciousness about dominant issues in the world also affect the disposition and the subject of concern for philosophers.⁸ The history of philosophy is characterised with different philosophical concerns of philosophers like the periods of idealistic and rationalistic philosophy, the scientific and the humanistic philosophy, the ideological and the feminist philosophy.⁹ All these diverse era and changes in the understanding of philosophy determines different interpretations and meanings of African philosophy. The constant change in the existential experience of man also makes it difficult for African philosophy to have a definition that covers all time and season. As D. A. Masolo asserts, “philosophy is invariably tied to social reality... The mode of doing philosophy, e.g. its methods, dominant issues, questions, and schools of thought vary as society changes.”¹⁰ As social change and transformation is indispensable, African philosophy cannot have a dogmatic definition. And as Joseph Omoregbe would say, the way traditional African philosophy of the past can be defined is quite different from the meaning and definition of the contemporary African philosophy.

Religious background

As cultural and scholarship backgrounds exercise dominance in the writing and thinking of any scholar, religion also has indispensable influence over a scholar that is rooted in a particular religion. Although, C. Momoh paid less attention to this type of influence in the definition of African philosophy but I think it deserves our consideration. It is observable that religious education often imparts some basic values and principles that characterised a particular religion.

A scholar that is exposed and educated with the values and principles cherished by a religious group cannot avoid its sway in his writings and approach to philosophical issues. In Africa context, there are many scholars like Placide Temples, Pauline Hountondji, Peter Bodunrin, Moses Makinde, C. B. Okolo, Pantaleon Iroegbu, Francis Ogunmodede and similar others that have Christian background. It would not be a surprise if any of them give a definition of African philosophy that has relationship to the religious context in which they live, think and write. However, the likes of C. Momoh of Islamic religious setting and J. S. Mbiti of traditional religious milieu may not be totally at home with the definition of African philosophy that gives attention to Christian dogma and general worldview. The reality of diverse religious beliefs and appreciated values makes the possibility of getting a universal definition of African philosophy always difficult if not an impossible task. At this point, it is relevant to examine some definitions of African philosophy from notable philosophers that recognised African philosophy.

Some notable definitions of African philosophy

It is necessary to have a cursory look at some of the definitions of African philosophy provided by those that believe there is an African perspective of philosophy. The examination of these definitions will give credence to the fact that we can have as many definitions of African philosophy as the number of interested scholars. Any dogmatic definition of African philosophy has the potential to cause controversy among philosophers in the past and even more provocative today. Every interested philosopher will like to give a definition of African philosophy that is supported with the values and worldview that characterised his socio-cultural background. At the end, one would see what ought to be the criteria for giving a definition of African philosophy that may attract negligible degree of criticism. It would be an utopia for anyone to think he can provide a definition of African philosophy that all scholars of various contextual roots will accept without any modification.

In the opinion of J. S. Mbiti, an African philosopher of religion, African philosophy “is the understanding, attitude of mind, logic, and perception behind the manner in which

African people think, act or speak in different situations of life.”¹¹ It is ostensible that Mbiti's definition of African philosophy does not take written documentation into consideration. Hence, African philosophers like Bodunrin and Wiredu will find problem with this type of definition of African philosophy. In a different approach to the definition of African philosophy, Olusegun Oladipo gathers from K. C. Anyanwu that African philosophy is embedded in African socio-cultural way of thinking and acting about issues that relate with African social concerns.¹² In addition to Anyanwu's perspective of African philosophy, Pantaleon Iroegbu, asserts that “African philosophy is the reflective inquiry into the marvels and problems that confronts one in the African world in view of producing systematic explanation and sustained responses to them.”¹³ The same view is evident in Francis Ogunmodede's assertion that, “African philosophy is the articulated doctrines and theories based on African cultural experience.”¹⁴ The definition of Ogunmodede implies that African philosophy is a contemplative activity based on the historical, cultural, religious and technological experiences of Africans in relationship with the divine, nature and harmonious society. It is obvious from the three scholars that African philosophy is concerned with reflection on African cultural realities observable in their day to day activities.

Nevertheless, Oladipo in his own view does not appreciate any definition of African philosophy that fails to enhance creativity and transformation capable of improving human existence. He is strongly opposed to any definition of African philosophy that lay much emphasis on static tradition, doctrines and culture. In the opinion of Okolo, African philosophy like other philosophies is a logical, rational and systematic inquiry into the existential realities in Africa society.¹⁵ For him, the contents of African philosophy are universal issues and concerns of peoples in other cultures of the world. The manner of approach to interpretation and expression of existential realities may differ from culture to culture.

Kwasi Wiredu in his own approach to the definition and understanding of African philosophy identified three-way to the definition and understanding of African philosophy. The

first one he describes as collective bold assertions that are rooted in “what our ancestors said”¹⁶ without adequate justification. This type of African philosophy is not written but inherited from one generation to the other in the community.¹⁷ This first category of African philosophy forms the body of communal thoughts and appreciated values that no particular individual can lay claim to them. He defined the second category of African philosophy as that,

in which one might refer to the thought of a class of individuals in traditional African societies who, though unaffected by modern intellectual influences, are capable of critical and original philosophical reflection as distinct as from repetitions of folk ideas of their peoples. Because the fruits of such reflections are generally not perpetuated in prints, they tend to be swamped in the pool of communal thought leaving it, if anything at all, only faint traces.¹⁸

This is a peculiar way of generating definition for African philosophy as evidenced in the dialogue between two legends, Griannule and Ogotemmelli as Wiredu claimed.¹⁹ It is observed that the categories of African philosophy identified by Wiredu are situated in ethno-philosophy. The third sense of African philosophy recognised by him is “the results of the work of individual Africans using the intellectual resources of the modern world to grapple with philosophical problems.”²⁰ The intellectual resources he meant includes written documentation with supportive arguments. For him, therefore, a credible definition of African philosophy must be based on the last category of African philosophy where scholars are expected, “to philosophise in a manner that takes account of development in logic, mathematics, science and humanities.”²¹ Nonetheless, Wiredu did not condemn ethno-philosophy in its entirety but recommended a kind of reconstruction with intellectual tools to determine its originality and justify its relevance to the contemporary world. From the aforesaid, one can see that it is hard to have a universal definition of African philosophy because of the strong influence coming from diverse affinities that are peculiar to every African scholar.

Criteria for a credible definition of African philosophy

It is generally believed that philosophy anywhere and anytime is the love and quest for knowledge about the physical and metaphysical realities recognised by man and how to bring growth and development to the society.²² What is African is anything that shares the characteristics that set Africans apart from people of different continents. Hence, what can be defined as African philosophy needs to illustrate African perspective of the desire for knowledge about all the existential realities in their daily experience and how they affect their social life. According to C.S. Momoh, “it is difficult, if not impossible to draw a sharp line between world-view and philosophy”²³ of any group of people in Africa. Hence, one cannot easily make a clear cut distinction between the world view, existential realities and the meaning of philosophy for any community.

There is need to note that the definition of African philosophy that goes along the above line of thought can come either from African or non-African philosophers located anywhere in the world. This implies that as we have African philosophers whose works are based on European perspective of the quest for wisdom and knowledge, there are also non-African scholars who are experts in African perception of philosophy.²⁴ The language of writing must not necessarily be African for any definition of African philosophy to be credible. As we have different stages in the history and meaning of Western philosophy, the same standard is applicable in African philosophy. The approach may be different but the experience and the desire to get involve in philosophical activities is the same.

Evaluation and Conclusion

A guarded look at the history of African philosophy shows that the challenges against the recognition and acceptance of African philosophy are derived largely from early European bias of mind as evidenced in the denial of Africans' ability to engage in intellectual endeavours. As a matter of fact, they do not believe that Africans have any history and peculiar approach to the understanding of realities of life. It is popularly known that “European scholars and historians, until recently, had approached the question of African history with racial prejudice, just as it is being done to

African philosophy today.” Therefore, it is not a surprise that African philosophy is going through a difficult time to imprint herself into the consciousness of all that care for its contents.

There is no gain saying that the heroic goal of many European scholars is to deny the historical contributions of the African continent to the growth and development of Greek philosophy described as the origin of philosophical enterprise. As a matter of fact, it has been imparted into the perception of an average European many years ago that every African philosophical creativity is not better than materials meant for refuse dump. As Maurice M. Makumba highlights, “genuine African (philosophical) contribution is dismissed by some (European scholars) as unphilosophical on the basis that it is unwritten, as if literacy was a condition for logical or philosophical thinking.”²⁶ After all, the great historian, Herodotus, was clear in his writings that many notable ideas in human history and icons of history have their roots in African civilization.²⁷ This was possible because Egyptian cities like Memphis, Thebes, Hermopolis and Heliopolis were described as the centres of learning before Ionia and other Greek cities.²⁸ But today many European scholars are not ready to acknowledge these evidences and are even trying to frustrate any attempt to bring them to the lime light, perhaps because of their national pride or superiority complex.

It is incontrovertible that Africans are capable of rational thinking and to hold any contrary view to what is real and evident is to be unphilosophical. According to Placide Tempels, “anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men.”²⁹ This implies that anthropological enquiry has established the fact that every human being, including Africans, is capable of intellectual activities. The scholars of every culture, black or white, contribute to the universal pool of knowledge that helps man to have a better understanding of the realities that constitute his existential experience in a particular society. It is the contributions of every culture to the contents of philosophy that is known as African or European, American or Arabic, Indian or Chinese philosophy. If history of African society provides supportive evidence to show that she makes reasonable contributions to the concerns of

philosophy then African philosophy deserves its rightful place in the academic world.

Now that the problems confronting the growth, development and acceptance of African philosophy have been identified, it is the responsibility of every contemporary African philosopher to resolve the problems that are holding back her progress and position in the world. Contemporary African philosophers are duty-bound to put into writing the diverse ethno-philosophical ideas that are identified in African cultural society as the wisdom of the elders. The same obligation is required of them for any philosophical thought traceable through oral history to an African personality. After all, that was how some philosophical ideas in Greek culture were later written down and circulated to the whole world. For instance, Plato and Xenophon put together in writing a lot of Socrates' philosophical thoughts. Plato actually developed and taught them to his pupils in the academy he established.³⁰ This is one of the ways that traditional African philosophy can be salvaged from oblivion.

When it comes to the problem of language in African philosophy, it is not feasible now to have a single language for expressing African philosophy because African continent has the largest diversity of languages in the world. This paper subscribes to the view that African philosophy needs to be written in African language of the author as much as it is possible. This is because the essence of a philosophical idea and concept can only be expressed in the language of the author. Nonetheless, efforts must be made to get a good translation of such African philosophy in relevant languages for wider audience. This is how Western philosophy made herself domiciliary nearly everywhere in the world. But where this ideal is not possible, the work could be written in any language of the author's choice.

Besides, African ethno-philosophy and philosophical sagacity may sometimes replete of questionable evidence, logic and methodology because of the characteristics of their origin. As evident, they are the thought patterns of the ancestors of a community or intellectual acuity of an outspoken individual in a particular African society. Therefore, contemporary African philosophers are to rise up to the challenge of making any aspect of African philosophy

to have a standard methodology, scientific evidence and logical presentation. All these, including the definition of African philosophy, must be done to reflect African world view and understanding of the perceived realities that are part and parcel of their social lives. By the time African scholars consider the demands and recommendations of this paper, African philosophy will then attain her rightful place in the world philosophies.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ As G. E. Azenabor puts it, “understanding the concept or nature of anything is a formidable task, especially in an academic circle. This is because academicians, more than any other group of people, are intellectually cantankerous and ideologically unyielding.” Second edition of his book titled: *Understanding The Problems in African Philosophy*, (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 1.
- ² Ibid. p. 9.
- ³ Ibid. p. 18.
- ⁴ Olusegun Oladipo ed., *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu*, (Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd., 2002), p. 27.
- ⁵ G.E. Azenabor, p. 8.
- ⁶ Ibid. p. 2.
- ⁷ Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *African philosophy: An Anthology*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), p. 29.
- ⁸ G.E. Azenabor, p. 8.
- ⁹ Ibid. pp. 8-9.
- ¹⁰ D. A. Masolo, *African philosophy in search of identity*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 43.
- ¹¹ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1969), p. 2. He also sees African philosophy “in the religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the society concerned.” p. 2.
- ¹² Olusegun Oladipo, *The Idea of African Philosophy*, (Ibadan: Molecular Publishers, 1992), p. 4.
- ¹³ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Enwisdomization and African Philosophy*, International University Press, 1994, p. 116.
- ¹⁴ Francis Ogunmodede, unpublished class hand notes on African Philosophy given at Saints Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, Ibadan, 1993, p. 12.
- ¹⁵ ChukwuDum B. Okolo, *African Social and Political Philosophy Selected Essays*, (Nsukka: Fulladu Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁶ Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and An African Culture*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 47.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸. Ibid. p.37.

¹⁹. Ibid.

²⁰. Ibid.

²¹. Ibid.

²². “etymologically speaking, therefore, philosophy connotes “love for wisdom” or knowledge”. in **G. E. Azenabor, *Understanding The Problems of African Philosophy*, (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 2002)**, p. 3.

²³. C.S. Momoh, “African Philosophy: Past, Present and Future” in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 11, Nos. 1 and 2, 1991), p. 13.

²⁴. Ibid. p. 18.

²⁵. Ibid. p. 18.

²⁶. Maurice M. Makumba, Introduction to PHILOSOPHY, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), p. 133.

²⁷. Ibid.

²⁸. As quoted in the book of Makumba, Africanus Horton was credited to say that “pilgrimages were made to Africa in search of knowledge by such men as Solon, Plato, Pythagoras; and several came to listen to the instructions of the African Euclid, who was at the head of the most celebrated mathematical school in the world and flourished 300 years before the birth of Christ...Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Clemens, Alexandrius, and Cyril, who were fathers and writers of the primitive church, were tawny African bishops of Apostolic renown.” p. 133. This quotation is cited by M.M. Makumba in the work of James Africanus Horton, *West African Centuries and Peoples*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1868), p.59.

²⁹. Placides Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. Colin King, (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1969), p. 21.

³⁰. “Like Buddha in the East, Socrates left no writings, for he wrote nothing. But his life and teaching made such a deep impression on his friends and disciples that two of them wrote books about him. Xenophon and especially Plato wrote about his life and teaching.” Cited in Joseph Omeregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*, second edition, (Lagos: Joja Press Ltd., 2005), p. 91.