

# THE FUTURE AND SURVIVAL OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AS A GENRE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper asserts that African Philosophy has come to stay as it is obvious from the protracted and heated debate that has consumed four decades of philosophical discourse. This is well captured in the sagacious words of Makinde “African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy” (2010). What now remains is the burial of the controversy and then the consolidation of African Philosophy looking forward. In this article, we chart the path forward in consolidating African Philosophy marking out the path it needs to tread to establish its relevance. The article opines that there ought to be a deepening of the philosophic enterprise, a critic of previous positions and the expansion of new areas and dimensions of African philosophy. The paper uses the philosophical method of critical examination.*

**Keywords:** African, Genre, Future, Philosophy, Survival

## INTRODUCTION

After well over four decades of robust and rigorous intellectual gymnastics on the existence (nature, scope, periodization and relevance) of African Philosophy as a unique brand of philosophy on its own right, one would expect that African Philosophy would now be on the road to consolidation of its existence and relevance in global philosophical interface. The time has come therefore for Africans (and all those who are inclined to African Philosophy) to settle down for the actual work of doing philosophy. The time of debate as to whether it exists or not is over (Uduigwomen, 1995). “Time and superior argument has relegated the debate on the existence of African Philosophy to the background” (Ogbogbo, 1997:38). Through philosophical reflection on African realities the unique nature of African philosophy will certainly issue out. The future of African philosophy and its survival will certainly depend on this: how Africans do philosophy. How Africans philosophize, using the critical reflective and evaluative approach, as methods that are consistent with philosophy.

In this paper, we shall posit the new approach to African Philosophy for its future and for its survival. We shall look at African Philosophy from three broad perspectives, yesterday, today and tomorrow. In doing this, we shall equally examine the challenges inherent in these periods of African philosophy. In our conclusion, we shall pose a challenge to African philosophers to really end the debate on the existence and nature of African philosophy and to start or rather to continue with the business of philosophy; that is philosophizing. We must begin to philosophize on objective global pedestal with humanity. The most pressing intellectual need is to show that Africans can indeed philosophize and that Africans are sensitive to the

philosophical needs of the world (Ozumba, 2003).

Even as we totally agree with Wiredu (1980:47) when he asserts that “without argument and clarification, there is strictly, no philosophy.” It is this argument (positive or negative, constructive or destructive) with the sole aim of clarifying issues, concepts, principles, values and ideas that constitute philosophy. “Philosophy as we know feeds on criticism which nourishes its growth and makes way for progress” (Ncha, 2004:129).

It is important and even expedient for the Africans (African philosophers) not to look at philosophy (African Philosophy) from the and with the binocular lens of others continents or brands of philosophy. But to rather see African Philosophy from its own unique and peculiar nature as African Philosophy in its own right (Chukwudum, 1992). We shall follow this outline. African yesterday, today and tomorrow and its challenges.

### **AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY YESTERDAY**

This paper totally disagrees with the convinced opinion of Chukwudum B. Okolo, (1992) a renowned Professor of African Philosophy) when he avers that, “then it did not exist; now it does.” My point of disagreement is in the question, is philosophy an invention or something that is co-terminus with a people's view of life? Chukwudum's position gives away the pre-historical, pre-critical and primitive primeval philosophical traditions that are found latent in any cultural milieu. According to Okwuidegbe, (2011:34) “African Philosophy may well exist in traditional Africa, and indeed may form the basis or model for philosophy in the rest of the world.” To say that in pre-historical and pre-critical African world view, Africans have not produced a philosophy is to reduce African philosophy to the mere academic discourse in the universities. Chukwudum has committed a fundamental philosophical flaw; of denying Africans in the ancient or primitive stage, the ability to engage in philosophy and by so doing has restricted philosophy and philosophizing to the academic domain of philosophers through scholarship. But the questions that still begs for attention is: Is philosophy only a classroom affair, involving only the academic intellectuals? Does it entail that the non-literate Africans, who were not privileged to acquire the western styled education, cannot pass the test of philosophical enquiry? Does one need to go to school, study philosophy, before one can qualify as an African philosopher? Chukwudum's convinced opinion seems to disparage illiterate African perhaps because of lack of documentation and literate materials. Instead of this outright denial Chukwudum could have talked more in terms of periodization or the history of African Philosophy, which he later noted; “earlier discussion on the precise nature of African Philosophy, whether or not it exists, when it started, its history and possible periodization...” (Chukwudum, 1992:13). It is important and even imperative for African philosophers to be engaged in rigorous studies to establish the history of African Philosophy. Ozumba's (2004:1-2) insight is striking when in an article titled; the originality of philosophy: African or European? He posited fundamental questions on the nature of philosophy.

... what does it take to philosophize, who can philosophize and what constitute the philosophic ingredient for philosophizing, is there an authentic philosophical proof of when philosophizing actually started in human history and in cultures... The question why must it be Thales or

Miletus rather than one Okonkwo of Igboland or Yusuf of Hausa land or Etuk of Ibibio or Kofi of Ghana or Essien of Efik land ...

We say this against the background of Chukwudum's outright denial of African philosophy in the yester-years. Is philosophy restricted only to the theoretical aspects of documentation or bearing more on man's ability to reflect and evaluate the world in his interaction with the universe. This is why we feel that in doing this Chukwudum is too dogmatic in his canons and therefore does not simplify the questions raised by Ozumba.

Perhaps, (and this likely) it is in this direction that Bodunrin's article, 'the question of African Philosophy' can be understood, where he (Bodunrin) carefully outlined four trends in contemporary African philosophy, as: Ethno – philosophy (2) philosophical sagacity (3) Nationalistic – ideological philosophy and (4) professional philosophy. What in my thinking could have been the proper thing that Chukwudum could have done was to carefully examine the unique nature of African Philosophy even in those pre-philosophical periods of African history, instead of bluntly denying its existence in yester-years. This is what Bodunrin has done in classifying African philosophy into these four trends. While I agree with him in all four points, I slightly disagree that scholarship makes one a philosopher in his fourth point on professional philosophy. Do we need rigorous academic orientations, tall degrees to qualify as African philosophers? Or one simply needs to philosophize so that his works would so speak for him. This same point Chukwudum (1992:30) emphasized when declared that:

My own understanding of philosophy is its formal aspects as a conscious (personal) critical reflection on human experience and man's place and prospect in it is clear. It is the fruit of trained reflection with reason as the main tool. This understanding of philosophy as a creative enterprise of a reflecting people “who have attained a certain level of literacy” as A. P. Sheptulin puts it, has not always existed and is not automatic (as opposed to natural) with man but emerges in time...

This is my point of departure with Chukwudum when he concedes philosophy and philosophizing to only a literate people and by literacy the acquisition of western education is implied. But Richard Wright argues that philosophy is not the pre-requisite of one people, but is a human understanding in which we have been engaged for thousands of years (Ozumba: 2003). In primitive Africa, did the Africans not have a unique and peculiar education system through which the values of the community were transferred to the younger generation? In talking about a people who are capable of using their reason! Does this imply that there was a time when Africans were not capable of using their reason. I think that the Africans perhaps reflected on human experience but perhaps also they did not follow the methodology of western criteria. This is what I can infer from Chukwudum's position. This is so because, even as Ozumba (2004) noted, philosophy is latent in all cultures. African philosophy yesterday did not really spring from the conscious disposition to really do

philosophy exactly the way it is being done today. Africans nevertheless, reflected on their world-view. The materials contents of these reflections can and should form the basis and springboards for today's and even tomorrow's African philosophy. In this vein the opinion of Momoh (1990:79) is apt here:

The substantive doctrines and reflections that can be extracted from African philosophy in its ancient settings about the strenuous attempts of Africa elders to ponder over the mysteries of the universe, hostility of the environment, the difficulties of living with fellow beings, human and non-human can and should serve as the starting point of African philosophy.

Corroborating this point Omoregbe (1985:5) adds, “all civilizations, all people, have their own philosophers, their own Socrates, their own Plato, their own Descartes, their own Hegel etc. in this Africans cannot be an exception” it is in line with these respected opinions of Momoh and Omoregbe, that I part ways with Chukwudum, who outrightly denied African philosophy in the yester-years. Momoh and Omoregbe are clear on this issue. There was African philosophy in the yester-years. But methods of reflections, absence of documentations, seem to have in a way crippled the acceptability of African philosophy in this period. In the context of documentation, perhaps, it may be enlightening to here note that the much celebrated and renown philosopher of antiquity, the god in human flesh, the wisest man on earth as revealed by the Delphic oracle, Socrates, (Pelliccia, 2001) Plato said of him,

Many are the marvels that I might narrate in praise of Socrates, most of his ways might perhaps be paralleled in another man, but his absolute unlikeness to any human being that is or ever has been is perfectly astonishing (Pelliccia, 2001:274).

It is interesting to note that this great and highly revered philosopher did not write anything. But for the timely intervention of Plato, his ideas could have been extinct. “The activity of doing philosophy is not necessarily writing philosophy. Socrates, Buddha, and Confucius, who are usually referred to as the paradigmatic individuals, did philosophy and probably taught it (although not in the formal sense of nowadays) without writing it” (Russell, 1968:14). This may also apply here in African philosopher. It is now time, ripe enough for the Africans to properly document their philosophy. Omoregbe (1995) goes on to make a contribution that should not be taken lightly in this context, that writings or no writings the fragments of these philosophical efforts have been transmitted to us through channels other than writing such as mythologies, formulas of wise sayings, traditional proverbs, stories and especially religion African philosophy therefore is essentially a reflection on African mystery (Uduigowmen, 1995).

In the yester-years of African philosophy what some philosophers prefer to refer to as the primitive, ancient or pre-critical period of African philosophy, there was no real formality or

methodological consistency in the way African philosophy was carried out. At this period, African philosophy was very elastic and with a lot of flexibility in combining myths, science into an open wisdom. It is unlike western philosophy which stresses much on logic and science (Uduigwomen, 1996). Uduigwomen also like Chukduwum, thinks that African philosophy is just beginning and it cannot but draw from African proverbs myths, folktales, belief system, concepts and categories.

What has happened over the years is renewed consciousness on the part of philosophers engaged in African philosophy to re-understand and re-define and therefore re-direct the contents, thought, and reflection on African philosophy. It is a decisive move away from the debate and controversy to actually doing the business of philosophy, using the African experience of reality in the African universe. This is the direction that philosophy (African philosophy) has taken in recent years. This is the direction it ought to take to put African philosophy on the right footing.

#### **AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY TODAY**

In small book written by Chukwudum Okolo (1992), titled African Philosophy: An Overview, he argued passionately about the non-existence of African philosophy in the yester-years. He was so convinced that one can only talk about African philosophy 'today' and "tomorrow" and not as Omoregbe argues, "Yesterday" "Today" and "Tomorrow" (Chukwudum, 1992). We have already registered our objection to his position and equally argued out why and how African philosophy can be granted existence in the yester-years, in the past history of African. We equally advocated for a proper historical survey of African philosophy. Any discipline without a history would have a truncated growth. As we were settling our disavowal of Chukduwum's submission about the non-existence of African philosophy in the yester-years, we stumbled over another article written by Ogbogbo (1997) with the caption "The Poverty of African Philosophy." In his abstract, Ogbogbo, highlighted two ideas that I consider derogatory to African philosophy. He concluded,

Unfortunately, the fortunes of the discipline of African philosophy has dwindled due largely to its increasing irrelevance in providing solutions to contemporary African problems. This paper argues that this irrelevance is a product of the poverty that afflicted African philosophy right from its conception and like a plague has persisted, manifested in various forms and dimensions (Ogbogbo, 1997:35).

Our headache is in the irrelevance and poverty of African philosophy and in further adding that "although very serious minded practitioners of the discipline have been brainstorming over the issue. Their efforts have not yielded the desired results." At the time Ogbogbo wrote his article, African philosophy was at its peak with rigorous and robust debates spread across African. I found this irrelevance out of place and this poverty is a misplaced or a misguided

word. Even as he went on to argue that,

That this poverty has to do with the discipline's lack of a tradition rooted in the African past, in other words, in domesticating philosophy as an intellectual discipline in Africa. The *corpus* that was to provide raw materials for philosophizing was largely alien to the African philosopher as it was externally derived (Ogbogbo, 1997:36).

Is there any discipline (or any other thing) that begins ready-made? Is there any discipline or any other thing) that is not influenced by other forces operational in the vicinity? Ogbogbo seem to be stretching the point beyond reasonable limits. We had at the introductory part of this paper appealed to Africans (and all those with special interest in African philosophy) to stop the blame game and to rather settle down for the business of doing philosophy. This is more important than our unfortunate history of colonialism. Having re-illiterated this point, I agree with Ogbogbo (1997:36). On his submission of the task before the African philosophers when he said,

...to stimulate African philosophers into examining more critically and rigorously the content of what is brandished as African philosophy... there is a need for a shift in the discipline from the dominant western orientation to an essentially African orientation.

This is what will really and truly give African Philosophy the Africanity that defines the Africanness of the African and of his philosophy.

Every philosophy is a reflection of a people perception of their experience of the universe and every philosopher equally philosophizes from his own appraisal of that experience (How he sees the world). African Philosophy therefore is also a reflection of, and on, the African experience of his universe. The difference forces that operate in the *Spatio temporal* cosmic reality, the place of man, gods, God and other spiritual beings (ancestors, witchcraft, ghost, ogbanje, mamiwater) and African metaphysical science in general, ought to form the fulcrum of African Philosophy today as it grapples with the nature of the existence of these beings and the Being, and their impact on human activities on earth. Chukwudum (1992:51) supports this position when he asserts that, "African Philosophers have increasingly found in African philosophy a significant way of responding to the multifarious problems of the African and his environment." It is this consistent effort to constantly respond to these multifarious problems confronting the African in his world that will make African philosophy truly African philosophy. For the African has a peculiar way of looking at his universe, a unique way of understanding events (their origin and causes), African Philosophy today should philosophically (looking at ultimate reality, ultimate causes) analysis these events in the light of African experience. Anyone familiar with the African terrain would very easily observe that Africans have a unique way of seeing/conceiving the universe. The African sees the world as a

bond of inter-connectedness and nothing is really loosed and isolated from others. This being-with relation is very dominant in African experience. This calls for a perspective in African philosophy, in African ethics of communalism as a distinctive trait of African existence in the world. Socialism is a foreign concept. But in the African sense, it means living together in a spirit of love and brotherhood. It also means as Nyerere puts it, Ujamaa: familyhood or community spirit (Makinde, 2010). The Ejagham people describe this as *ndibhi nju* and *moninyen*. Those dual concepts of *ndibhi nju* and *moninyen*, reveal a lot in the ethics of communal life that characterize and define the Ejagham mode of life and existence in the universe. The concept of *ndihi nju* conveys the idea of a house and a home that has accommodation for everyone. A house and a home that there is always room for everyone and anyone. Everyone without recourse to any factor is a welcome guest. One's membership is not dependent on one's contributive ability. In fact, sometimes, it is one's consumerism that establishes that membership. *Ndibhi nju* creates a deep bond that welds people together and reminds them that they do not have any other home but this one common home.

Among the Ejagham people, if one says this is my *ndibhi nju*, one is stating a fact that transcend all factuality. one is simply saying that my life, my livelihood, my death, are all tied inextricably to this stake. One simply means, I am nothing with this *ndibhi ju* – family, a house, a home, where everyone's interest is catered for. African community is communal, egalitarian and humanistic. African communalism is opposed to individualism and opposed to capitalism as well. African communalism is distributive and not acquisitive in nature (Makinde, 2010). African philosophy ought therefore to give a properly foundation to these obvious realities of African mode of existence and survival in the world.

We agree with Ncha Gabriel Bubu in his honest review of Abanuka's, "A New Essay on African Philosophy," when he points out that our interest in African Philosophy is how to make it relevant to modern society by making it a universal philosophy that an bake bread. African Philosophy should no longer be issues concerning folktales; African Philosophy should be the isolation of philosophical themes and relevant elements that can better the lot of Africans and the world (Ncha, 2004). Our point of convergence with Ncha is in the isolation of philosophical themes and relevant elements that can better the lot of Africans and the world and our postulation of these philosophical theme and relevant elements is in the areas of a new formulation of African Philosophy in the area of, African communalism as an ethical principle, African aesthetics philosophy, African axiology, Africa symbolic philosophy. Even as Ogbogbo, (1997:39) also suggested, other African oriented discipline, African history, there is need for a multi-disciplinary agenda." Since Africans are a richly symbolic people, rather than remain at the level of myths, folktales, and fetishism, African philosophy today should espouse those philosophical themes that can really improve the lots of African life in the world. We are fascinated with Ozumba's position when he averred that, "we must begin to philosophize on objective global pedestal with humanity as both the unit of analysis and the focus of attention" (Ozumba, 2004:11). Philosophy (African Philosophy) must keep paste with the global issues that confront mankind in the world and not just limit itself to the African predicament (Ozumba, 2004:15) went on to add, "African philosophers must prove both to be relevant and potent in addressing increasing existential needs of mankind." Philosophy even though an abstract speculative science, must have existential orientations for the welfare of people. Philosophy (African Philosophy) must be people-centred and solution-driven in

addressing the new and emerging needs of mankind as he struggled to earn a living in the world.

African philosophy today should critically appraise the enormous literature that has flooded the academic documentation of the intellectual efforts of African (intellectual and scholastic) philosophers. This would further consolidate, properly articulate (refute or re-frame) some philosophical positions that may have been over-taken by recent philosophical discoveries and also fine tune them for their continuous philosophical relevance. In doing this, African philosophy ought also to look out for ways of expanding the horizons of its intellectual enterprise. Are there new areas of philosophical interest which need philosophical attention to broaden the scope of African Philosophy?

Africans, it appears are a people who seem to be driven more by fear than by faith and confidence as they interact with the universe. It is fear of the unknown; of unseen forces, of metaphysical influences. How can African philosophy ally these fears in the genuine pursuit of knowledge and authentic existence in the world? This may yet be another area where African Philosophy may throw its philosophical weight to strip these metaphysical occurrences of their mystification (to de-mystify these mysticisms) and to shed the philosophical lens of knowledge (rational/reflective) on this rather crippling aspects of African life.

### **THE SURVIVAL OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

In the introductory part of this article, we had make a passionate plea to African philosophers to really end the debate and to also stop the blame game and to start or rather to continue the business of philosophy – that is, of philosophizing. This opinion was also shared by Ozumba (2003:3), when he posited that:

Instead of going into straight forward philosophical explorations, discourses and treatises, the African scholar (philosopher) is busy dissipating his energy trying to make the following points, namely that her intellectual legacy was stolen, that western scholars are dishonest, that philosophy first flourished in Egypt before Asia minor or Greece. All these are not the main issues. The most pressing intellectual need is to show that Africans can indeed philosophize.

The time is now for African philosophers to stop the blame game and start/continue the philosophical articulation that will continue to put Africa in the philosophical market of ideas. What then should be the real nature of African philosophy? It is as Iroegbu puts it, “African philosophy is a reflective and systematic investigation into the fundamental questions that confront the human being” (Ozumba, 2003:5). African philosophy must exploit the philosophical intellectualism in addressing the multi-dimensional problems of the Africans.

This new spirit of African philosophy is a way of not

proving that we had a philosophy but to showing that we know what true philosophy pen for as to launch into a philosophy that will benefit all and sundry and by doing so we shall confound the gainsayer (Ozumba, 2003:4).

The survival of African philosophy would therefore strictly rest on how the African philosopher is able to reflect on the obvious experiences of the African in his universe. It is a philosophy that is called to be wholistic, integral and all-embracing of African world view, aimed at extricating the African from the present quagmire that has entangled the African in his search for authentic meaning in life. Authentic African philosophy must continually offer the insight into all and every aspect of life and living. It is not just about debate and criticisms (even though this is still part of it) but more so about how African philosophy can become even more relevant to solving the problems that plague human life on earth. African philosophy should examine the peculiar and unique nature of the African experience and proffer the way forward in decolonizing the African mentality. For it does seem, the African has been liberated from foreign imperialism, but he (the African) has not yet fully liberated himself from mental colonization; the process that requires that he re-affirms himself more in all domains of endeavours. What this entails is also captured by Oguejiofor as cited by Ozumba (2003:55) in talking about the African philosophical predicament. He averred that, "what is needed is not the relevance of philosophy to Africa but the relevance of Africa to philosophy." It is about how the African philosopher ought to engage himself in philosophy in such a way that the unique nature of African philosophy issues out. Even as Ozumba (2003:100) convincingly pointed out "what makes one an authentic African philosopher is not ideological inclination, but one's contribution in developing the African philosophy."

## CONCLUSION

In his article, 'the future and survival of African Philosophy as a genre,' we have argued that the age of the debate is over and the time of blame, game gone past the African what is left now that demands real and urgent attention is for the African to articulate his philosophy and authenticate it, to make it really and truly African. To properly bring out the Africanness and the Africanity that gives dignity to the African and even to his philosophy. African philosophy ought to widen the intellectual scope of it horizon even in courses offered in the classrooms and in research. It should be made a Compulsory General Studies (GS) course in all institutions of learning. This should also include other African related disciplines. For example, African Poetry, African Music, African Logic, African Art, African Culture, African Symbolic Philosophy and African Communalism as a veritable replacement of democracy that is not thriving in African. These and other allied disciplines can in so small way, sharpen African philosophy, making it relevant in solving African problems in the world.

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