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pre-occupation of African philosophers in African philosophy must be relevant to the improvement of the Africans in their worldly outlook (Opladipo, 1992). In this regard, African philosophy is an attempt by philosophers to make the folklores, myth, sooth sayings, religion, education, socio political organizations and other aspects of the African culture relevant to African needs not through any dogmatic attachment to standards used in evaluating the African culture or African culture itself, but through creative critical examination and logical methodologies which are not peculiar to the Western culture.

While it is a fact that cultural isolation is not possible in contemporary world and it is also true that cross-cultural interdependence and mutual borrowings cannot be over-emphasized, we should use African philosophy to create a fertile ground for cross-cultural pollination of ideas between the Africans and people of other races. Except for argument sake, any philosophy that does not recognize the importance of cross cultural interaction, for instance, the impact of science and technology, in contemporary times, is nothing but a waste of time, a mere hair splitting exercise, because whether we like it or not, whatever affects any part of the world will necessarily affect us in Africa, directly or indirectly either positively or negatively. Hence, we cannot afford to waste time. Our philosophy and indeed African philosophy can only be made relevant to the needs of our time only through speculative construction and critical examination of the ideas that govern our existence as Africans.

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relevant culturally and professionally (p.5).

In this way, one can say that Sogolo in a surgical way, has tended to overcome the shortcomings of the main rival schools of thought in African philosophy, viz., the traditionalists who seem to be very much in love with ethno philosophy and the modernists who are of the western analytic frame of mind. It is only through this way that major problems confronting the African culture and people can be solved. By this method too, the pre-occupation of African philosophers would not only be relevant to the socio-historical context of the Africans, but would at the same time be meaningful to others outside the African culture whether they embrace it or not.

### **Towards a Definition of African Philosophy**

Following from the above, one seems to be in a vantage position at answering our initial question: “what is African philosophy?” which is the main task of this paper. It is true that there are as many definitions of philosophy but it is possible, according to Staniland, to say that it is the critical examination of the ideas which men live by. In the same vein, it is a difficult task to give an accurate or faultless definition to African philosophy. However, be that as it may, we can recognize some essential ingredients about what philosophy is. For anything to be philosophical it has to do with the reflection on the experience of a society, group or an individual. This reflection has been necessitated by wonders about some compelling problems of life and existence. Another essential ingredient is that such reflection must be critical and logical. As long as anybody or group meets these requirements such a person or group can be said to engage in what is called philosophy. To that extent, for anything to qualify as African philosophy, it must meet the requirements stipulated above. Hence, we submit that what African philosophy is, involves the application of the above categories of conceptual analysis, logic, criticism and synthesis to the reflections on issues that are of paramount importance to the African needs and ways of life. African in this context is not based exclusively on geographical congruity, but also on certain shared values among Africans.

### **Conclusion**

Philosophy assumes man to be a rational agent who can distinguish between that which is good and bad, useful or otherwise. Therefore the

dynamic in content since the existential imports of the Africans change from time to time.

In his article "Options in African Philosophy", which is similar to what Kant did in modern philosophy as regards the rationalist and empiricist controversy, Sogolo is of the view that professional African philosophers present a double faced appearance, one in fulfillment of their professional calling and the other, perhaps, adapted to social and material pay-offs. This dilemma identified above has made some African professional philosophers to engage in intelligent expression of ignorance, insincerity and clear abuse of erudition which are hardly noticed by the ordinary mind. He opines that the issue of whether or not there is African philosophy gives the uncomfortable impression that the question itself is what African philosophy is (Sogolo, 1990, pp.40-41).

Some philosophers in their bid to protect continuity in their professional callings shut the door against alternative conceptions thereby leaving aside the realities of change in modern society. Though Sogolo strictures African oral tradition as constituting philosophy compared with the European culture characterized by continuity and utility, he nevertheless believes that some category of African philosophers has so much been given to western style of philosophizing, consisting mainly of analysis, that these philosophers have trended to apply this analytic method to anything called philosophy whether African or otherwise. By so doing they are not helping the growth of philosophical knowledge since the method is westernly biased. In the words of Professor Sogolo "this is the kind of cultural divergence African philosophers of my first category are seeking to overcome" (p.49). On another level, Sogolo believes that other group of philosophers whose cultural outlook is still basically African posits anything as African philosophy without any critical analysis like equating the rationality and wiseness of animals with that of men (p.50).

Sogolo therefore calls for a philosophy, which will be uniquely African in content and methodology. He calls for cultural relevance. For the start one may use some descriptive accounts of the raw ingredients of thought beliefs, folk wisdom, worldview etc, which though necessary, are no more than rudiments yielding philosophical questions. This is the new orientation he proposes in studying African philosophy. According to him "it is therefore an orientation that puts one foot ahead of ethno philosophy and the other beside professionalism by way of domestication" (p.51). By this way, African philosophy becomes more

referred to Professor Odera Oruka as identifying four trends that are supposed to constitute African philosophy. The first is Ethno-philosophy, which largely consists of the collective world-views of Africans, their folklores, myths and so forth. Other trends include Philosophic sagacity which is exemplified in Marcel Griaule's conversation with Ogotemmel; Nationalist ideological philosophy which is exemplified in the works of African political thinkers such as Nkurumah and Nyerere. The last of the trends is Professional philosophy which is believed to be what is practiced by contemporary African philosophers in African universities (Bodunrin, 1984, pp.1-2).

To Bodunrin, the type of philosophy being expounded by African philosophers in the African universities, which is characterized by rigour in analysis and criticism of African cultural beliefs and those issues that affect the African society, is what could be said to be African philosophy. All the trends in African philosophy are attempts to meet the challenges facing the African continent. The challenges range from the accusation that Africans are irrational and non-logical in thought, as argued by European anthropologists and clergymen, for example, Levy Bruhl. Another challenge was necessitated by the so-called African nationalism and the need for a stable polity as a consequence of the independence of many African states. There is also the challenge of comparison, which consists of finding African equivalence of Plato and Aristotle and lastly the issue of providing an adequate philosophical world-view to meet the challenge of contemporary global development.

A point that is worth noting is that all the African philosophers and Europeans philosophers unequivocally agree that the traditional belief system of the African people is an integral part of African philosophy. Probably, the major task in African philosophy has to do with the methodology of carrying out African philosophy. In the words of K.C. Anyanwu, "philosophers are looking for knowledge, truth and value not in a vacuum but in a given social historical context, and their knowledge of reality has tended to reinforce or retard the socio-historical process of a period" (1981, p.4). If the above statement by Dr. Anyanwu is correct, then African philosophy should have as its focus such issues that will tend to ameliorate the sufferings of the African people. And here one may be tempted to say that the attempts at constructing ethno philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist ideological philosophy and professional philosophy will be inadequate to the extent that they do not accord with the existential needs of the Africans which they attempt to represent. In other words, African philosophy should be such that is

The second group, which is of the analytic bent, emphasizes the present in relation to the future. To this group, African philosophy should be pursued in the light of modernization through science and technology which are the most useful axioms for development. The method of this group is akin to that of the western philosophers which is characterized by freedom of inquiry, openness to criticism, skepticism and fallibilism and non-veneration of authorities. This group believes that Western scientific and philosophical categories should be used in the study of African traditional culture which is largely dominated by intense religiosity, spiritism, authoritarianism and superstition (pp.XI-XII). It is worth noting however that the two groups identified above are strange bed fellows for they constantly charge one another of being unphilosophical or unAfrican.

Gene Blocker also believes that African philosophy must utilize the traditional tools of philosophical analysis to clarify and offer solutions to social and political problems of contemporary West Africa. He stated further that African philosophy has no particular style but several prominent features. The most dominant feature according to him is social-political and ethical. He concludes that West African philosophers are striving to reshape their human affairs and we are thus brought close to the optimism of Plato and Aristotle attempting to rebuild society from the ground on the basis of philosophical reflection (1987, p.7).

Joseph Omoregbe is of the view that African philosophy encompasses the traditional African thought such as myths, wise sayings, folklores and the contemporary works of African philosophers trained in Western philosophical tradition which deal with evaluation and analysis of contemporary issues agitating the African mind such as African socio-political philosophy (1985, p.10).

Philosophy, according to Professor Wiredu, should not be academic and technical because it can lose its quality of being relevant to the need of the people. On the other hand, he says that technicality and high degree of complexity are inevitable in any serious and sustained philosophical inquiry. There seems to be a dilemma in this view. However, Professor Wiredu insists that for African philosophy to be useful we cannot run away from rigour in analysis and criticism. He is of the view that African philosophy, as distinct from African traditional world-views, is the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary African philosophers, which to him is still very much in the making (1980, pp.16-36).

In his article "The Question of African Philosophy", Peter Bodunrin

situation and the reality that it confronts. Philosophy has its own world-views and if we only relate to traditional thought systems in terms of how they differ from or resemble the dominant world view in western philosophy at the moment, we are throwing the baby out with the bath water (1977, p.89).

Barry Hallen states further that the world-view that prevails in much of academic philosophy today is a particular virulent and dogmatic form of empiricism. It is an empiricism that can be traced to the ever increasing cultural predominance of contemporary science (which has, in effect, exploited philosophy in the hope that it would produce suitably scientific ideology), and has led to a formidable series of recent 'schools', such as logical positivism, logical empiricism, ordinary language philosophy and even conceptual analysis. For one contriving preoccupation throughout has been that any term used to describe reality must either stand or fall purely on the level of 'empirical experience' (pp.89-90). For Barry Hallen therefore, contemporary analytic techniques are neither timeless nor acultural. The fact that they can afford interesting insights and comparisons is not sufficient reason to stop there. Other speculative, critical elements and standards of verification should be of equal importance if analysis (and philosophy) is itself to evolve, progress and perhaps even metamorphose. It cannot be contested that non-western cultures have a significant contribution to make in this regard (p.90).

Peter Bodunrin is of the view that what philosophical arguments do is to compel us to make a choice since we cannot live with inconsistent beliefs. On African philosophy, extra philosophical considerations account for the divergent views which African philosophers hold. These considerations all have something to do with anti-colonialist and post-colonialist intellectual liberation. Professor Bodunrin accordingly distinguishes two groups of African philosophers on what African philosophy is. The first group known as the traditionalists emphasize the present in relation to the past. Their concern is the discovery of authentic African ideas and thought systems uninfluenced by alien accretions. This group thinks that the crisis of identity in which Africa is enmeshed is because Africa has lost its roots. The materials of this group include African myth, folklore, social organization and oral literature and culture. This group, according to Professor Bodunrin, had hitherto been referred to as ethno-philosophers but the name has been dropped because of its pejorative connotation and for the fact that this group now carries out its discussion with greater analytic rigour and less dogmatism than previously (1985, p.XI).



or implicitly did, whether their theses were psychological or sociological. All their attempts fitted in very well with colonialist and other interests, and some were prepared to admit that some of the discredit must go to the American ethnologists who wanted an excuse for slavery, and some also to those who desired to find the missing link between men and monkeys. Evans-Pritchard stressed that the first error of those theorists was the basing of interpretations on evolutionary assumptions for which no evidence was, or could be adduced. The second was that, besides being theories of psychological origins, their label of sociological could be said to rest ultimately on psychological suppositions. We should not interpret the thought of ancient or primitive people in terms of the European psychology; which has been moulded by a set of institutions different from theirs. Some of these writers even talked of the people they did not see. Pritchard concludes that the errors in theories purporting to account for primitive religions consist in demand for the logical analysis of their contents and testing of them against recorded ethnological fact in field research (pp.101-102).

### **The Response of African Philosophers to the Eurocentric Views on the African Conception of Reality**

The attempts at answering the Europeans of the charge that the Africans were irrational by some of the scholars discussed above constituted the motive force for the propagation of all sorts of beliefs and ideologies as African philosophy. These attempts are glaring in the works of John Mbiti's *African Religious and Philosophy* (1969) and Father Placid Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* (1959) to mention but a few.

The attempts by the anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists stated above do not in any way constitute the philosophy of the people they studied due to most of the shortcomings of such theories. Hence, any attempt by any African scholars, African philosophers or any philosophers for that matter to present this kind of African world-view as constituting African philosophy will be anything but African philosophy. The above is what philosophy and African philosophy are not and can not be.

Barry Hallen is of the opinion that since philosophy is not a science, philosophers are not out to prove things true or false. Novel speculation, cogent argumentation and conceptual analysis are the centres of interest of philosophers. The most one can require is that speculation be empirically relevant, that it offers a new perspective on the human

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that is to say, things, set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite, into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them (p.57).

What Levy Bruhl, means by prelogical does not mean alogical or anti-logical. Prelogical, applied to primitive mentality, means simply that it does not go out of its way as the Europeans do, to avoid contradiction. Levy Bruhl was described as being too subtle, for he means by 'pre-logical' little more than unscientific or uncritical, that primitive man is rational but unscientific or uncritical (p.82). Max Weber characterized societies into three viz the rational, traditional and charismatic. He described the primitive society as a traditional one which is characterized by piety for what has always existed typical of conservative and relatively changeless societies in which effective or effectual, sentiments predominate (p.117).

Accordingly, Pritchard opines that it is a remarkable fact that none of the anthropologists whose theories about the primitive religion have been most influential had ever been near a primitive people. They consequently had to rely for their information on what European explorers, missionaries, administrators and traders told them. Also there was the problem of interpretation. Their reports were inadequate and highly selective. He believes that statements about a people's religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution,

for the scholars are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words which require for understanding a thorough knowledge of a people's language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas which any particular belief is part, since it may be meaningless when divorced from the set of beliefs and practices to which it belongs. (p.7)

The selection on the level of bare observation had already produced an initial distortion. On the whole, they lacked any sense of historical criticism, the rules an historian applies when evaluating documentary evidence. Also the comparative method used was a misnomer.

These writers on African culture tended to speculate about what might have been the origin of some custom or belief, where there is absolutely no means of discovering, in the absence of historical evidence, what was its origin. And yet, this is what all the authors considered here explicitly

thought of in metaphor and symbol, which could be taken from what seemed majestic in the known world, such as the heavenly bodies, or rather their attributes. But these attributes then lost their original metaphorical sense and achieved autonomy by becoming personified as deities in their own right. So religions might be described as a 'disease of language', a pithy but unfortunate expression. To him the only way we can discover the meaning of the religion of the early man is by philosophical and etymological research which restores to the names of gods and the stories told about their original sense (p.21).

Herbert Spencer is of the belief that the primitive man is rational and given his small knowledge, his influences are reasonable, if weak. The primitive people had no idea of natural explanation as though they could have conducted their various practical pursuits without it. It is dreams, which are real experiences to primitive peoples, which chiefly gave man the idea of his own duality, and he identified the dream – self which wanders at night with the shadow-self which appears by day. This idea of duality is fortified by experiences of various forms of temporary insensibility, sleeping, swooning, catalepsy and the like, so that death itself comes to be thought of as only a prolonged form of insensibility. And if man has a double, a soul by the same reasoning so must animals have one and also plants and material objects. The origin of religion, however is to be looked for in the belief in ghosts rather than in souls. Spencer also believes that ancestor worship is the root of every religion (pp.23-24).

Tylor stressed the idea of the soul rather than of ghost. Both the ghost theory and soul theory might be regarded as two versions of a dream theory of the origin of religion. Primitive man then transferred the idea of soul to other creatures in some ways like himself and even to inanimate objects which arouse his interest. The soul, being detachable from whatever it lodged in, could be thought of as independent of its material home, whence arouse the idea of spiritual beings, whose supposed existence constituted Tylor's minimum definition of religion and these finally developed into gods, beings, vastly superior to man and in control of his destiny. It should be noted that in the absence of possible means of knowing how the idea of soul and spirit originated and how they might have developed, a logical construction of the scholar's mind is posited on primitive man, and put forward as the explanation of his beliefs (p.25).

Durkheim in his sociological theory believes that religion is always a group, a collective affair and that there is no religion without a church.

critical activity whose function embraces an interrogation of its own nature and meaning is undoubtedly a legacy of the Greek philosophers (Hountondji, 1983, p.7). It is worth noting that African philosophy according to Hountondji, bears a direct relation to history and culture and that the reflection of African intelligentsia upon our total historical being represents a significant moment in the intellectual response of Africans to the challenge of western civilization (p.11).

An attempt to define African philosophy can help in understanding philosophy itself. Philosophy can be defined and at the same time be described as the critical examination of the ideas which men live by (Staniland, 1979, p.8), such as the idea of justice, morality, political and religious ideas, even the idea of God, average men, perfect men and so forth. In this critical examination, the philosopher engages in conceptual analysis of the issues involved and in doing this, the philosopher has the tool of logic solidly at hand. When we talk of conceptual analysis, for instance, of the principle of induction, we are looking for the validity or otherwise of the universal claim made as a consequence of examining particular instances. The conceptual issue arises as a result of the fact that the instances examined in inductive argument are not exhaustive of all the classes involved. Hence, the philosopher is apt to reject the universality of the claim made.

### **Views of European Scholars on the African Conception of Reality**

There were various attempts to engage in the interpretation of the religious world views of the so called primitive people by European scholars mostly anthropologists. According to Evans – Pritchard, these theories are no more than plausible and even, as they have been propounded, unacceptable in that they contain contradictions and logical inadequacies, or in that they can not be observed or proved either true or false and because, ethnographic evidence invalidates them (1965, p.18).

Max Muller in his own interpretation believes that things that are intangible like sun and the sky gave men the idea of the infinite and also furnished the material for deities. He did not wish to be understood as suggesting that religion began by men deifying grand natural objects, but rather these gave him a feeling of the infinite and also served as symbols for it. Muller was chiefly interested in the gods of India and of classical world, though he tried his hands at the interpretations of some primitive material and certainly believed that his explanations had general validity. His thesis was that the infinite, once the idea had arisen, could only be

most philosophers have contented themselves in describing what African philosophy is. According to Sogolo, "the controversy over what constitutes an African philosophy tends to dominate sometimes so much that it forms almost the entire content of the course" (1990, p.39).

In this paper, the attempt is to say what African philosophy is, inspite of the seeming unending polemics in the sphere and practice of African philosophy. In doing this, we shall start by attempting to describe and possibly define what philosophy is. Subsequently we shall be in a position to define African philosophy by looking at the origin of the debate on African philosophy which was as a result of the charge of irrationality levelled against the Africans. Let us recall that many European scholars mostly anthropologists and sociologists in the like of E. Durkheim, Auguste Comte, James Frazer, Sigmund Freud, Malinowski, Max Muller, Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor and even Levy Bruhl, have attempted to give an answer to what the African traditional world views were through their theories on religions of the primitive people. For instance, Levy Bruhl rejected the rationality of the primitive people and claimed that they were largely pre-logical and that what their practices point to is a kind of symbolism.

We reject the postulations of these scholars, which were largely anthropological, psychological and sociological as the philosophy of the primitive people or Africans. In the same vein any attempt by contemporary African philosophers to present a purely descriptive, conjectural account of the African worldview as African philosophy will also be rejected. We conclude that African philosophy consists in speculative, conceptual and analytical as well as the critical examination of the African traditional thought in the light of contemporary global events.

### Perspectives on African philosophy

According to Paulin J. Hountondji, philosophy can be regarded as the most self-conscious of disciplines. It is the one discipline that involves by its very nature a constant process of reflection upon itself. The process of self reflection, inherent in the nature and practice of philosophy bears not only upon its purposes, objectives and methods, upon its relation to the world and to human experience in its multiple expressions, upon its status among other disciplines and forms of intellectual pursuit and discourse, but also, most radically upon its very nature as an activity and as an enterprise. The view of philosophy as a

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## On Defining African Philosophy: History, Challenges, and Perspectives

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### Abstract

*Consequent upon Africans' denial of a rational mentality by early European anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists and religious scholars, through some so-called "Theories of the primitive people", many African scholars especially in the field of philosophy rose to the challenge of articulating a distinct philosophy for their people to combat their mental and intellectual denigration. However, due to the challenges posed by modern civilization, disagreement arouse concerning the focus and contents of African philosophy. This paper examines the background to the challenges of having a viable definition of African philosophy. It concludes that African philosophy must encompass basic attributes of philosophy such as reflection, conceptual analysis and criticism. But above all, these attributes must be applied to African needs and ways of life, which may not be geographically limited.*

**Keywords:** *African Philosophy, definitions, traditionalists, primitive people, rationality, Ethno-philosophers, modernists, relevance.*

### Introduction

The definition of philosophy has remained a perennial philosophical problem and there is little agreement as to what it is. Rather, what many seem to agree on is the descriptions of philosophy, that is, what it encompasses which will provide the basis for our definition. In the same vein, it has been difficult to define what African philosophy is, rather

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