

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY, BETWEEN MISREPRESENTATION AND RE-  
ASSESSMENT

Daniela-Irina Darie

PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

*Abstract: In approaching African philosophy one must answer the question of the identity of a philosophical frame, read within the modern discourse. Is the modern scholar referring to a perceptual or to a conceptual view of the world, as Claude Lévi-Strauss questioned, or are we the witnesses of an entirely new means of defining the reality and its ultimate assertion – human destiny? And in what way could the African thought reconcile its individuality in a world in which science defines who we are, what we think, right or wrong, magic and reality. Many researchers tried - and few succeeded – to create a Western frame for defining, translating and equating the core elements of African philosophy and, most relevant, the avenues on which such elements could be integrated in the universal philosophical system to which the Western philosophy strives. The nature of the society, as historical anthropology shows and P.H. Coetzee systematizes, plays an important role in crystalizing and shaping the higher constructs such as God, life and death, destiny, the meaning of existence, and so on. We aim to analyze various approaches and conclusions in the literature dedicated to African philosophy against the background of the renewed interest in highlighting the processes endured by the African psyche, especially as a result of the contact with the colonial oppression. The position of the African thought between négritude and the hybrid created by the Western influence alternates between questioning its existence and aggressively promoting it. Alienation, hybridization, syncretism, all are internalized instances of the attempt of African thought to identify itself as unique and, at the same time, as a result of a conjecture of phenomena. Our analysis will center on the complex edifice in which African thought may meet the Western one, without being annihilated, contorted or misrepresented.*

*Keywords: African philosophy, historical anthropology, human condition, négritude, philosophical hybrid*

In trying to identify and outline landmarks of the African philosophy, one must first of all contradict the long-held belief that such a philosophy does not exist. Africans are considered to live in an essentially symbolic and ritualized world, expressing their beliefs and values through symbols and rituals. Such a definition excludes from the start their capacity of expressing a coherent discourse, other than myths and proverbs. This lack of articulation is perceived as an obstacle in establishing a scientific philosophy (in the Western sense). If we take into consideration the fact that many Western philosophers embrace the concept of the philosophy as a universal system, and that the mapping differentiation functions on “historical contingencies, not essential differences”<sup>1</sup>, it becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain in a scientific way the uniqueness of the African philosophy. Much simpler is for modern Western philosophers to claim the thinking frame of the African as imagery for translating a magic realm. We shouldn’t dismiss the reality of such a philosophy only because it does not mold in our patterns of conceiving the world. What is unfamiliar is not necessarily without merit.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce B. Janz, *Philosophy in an African Place*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2009, p. 46.

In its essence, philosophy serves at facilitating the approaching of the unknown without preconceptions, the acceptance of another order of things which could be translated in a unique system. The claim that a new philosophy in order to be accepted as such, must assume the scientific coldness of the Western thought excludes from the start any system not based on rationality or based on an internalization of aspects strange to the Western world.

Among the African philosophers who maintain – and demonstrate – that African philosophy exists we could mention Odera Oruka, Pauli Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, and Peter Bodunrin.

Considered the first scientist to shape an order of African philosophy, H. Odera Oruka construed the background on which all the subsequent attempts at understanding the African thought are based.

In *Four Trends in Current African Philosophy*, a study presented at William Amo Symposium (Accra, July 1978), Oruka identified four trends in Africa philosophy: ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy.

Ethnophilosophy is the concept used by Hountondji in referring to the endeavors of anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers and philosophers who consider that the African folklore, folk-wisdom and myths constitute the real African philosophy<sup>2</sup>. Hountondji's conclusion was that sage philosophy is an important research avenue for underlining what constitutes the real African philosophy and that African philosophy is much more than a simple folk wisdom<sup>3</sup>. The sage philosophy, based on the research by Hallen and Sodipo in Nigeria (in the mid-1970s) and the works of Odera Oruka, includes "critical aspects of certain oral traditions as well as some artistic and literary works of Africans"<sup>4</sup>. Still, in his view, the African sage is "in need of the mediating influence of the professional researcher"<sup>5</sup> to become the exponent of a scientific endeavor but he is in the end the potential of a philosopher. Because, as Oruka underlines:

"A wise person is he who knows the world belongs to three people, God, man, and woman; and he is one who takes the past, present, and future into account when making judgment. But (...) such a person enlightens people by what he/she says. He is also one free from internal and external «hungers»."

And, because this is, as Janz acknowledges, an objective criterion, it applies to the African philosopher as well as the Western one. This could constitute one way of approaching the African mind through the understanding of the Western one.

Not rarely, Africa has been objectified in analysis and deprived of its subjective manifestations, and as an object, it has been considered incapable of voicing its inner constructs from which a philosophy to be derived. And because the philosopher is an intellectual, we must point out, together with Janz, that some Western researchers do not consider the African intellectuals real intellectuals, until they gain the mastery of the Western tools of a philosophical study.

---

<sup>2</sup>Cf. PO Bodunrin, *The Question of African Philosophy*, in *Philosophy*, vol. 56, April 1981, pp. 161-179, <http://journals.cambridge.org/PHI>

<sup>3</sup> H. Odera Oruka (ed.), *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Nairobi, Kenya: African Centre for Technology Studies, 1991, quoted in Bruce B. Janz, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy. A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> H. Odera Oruka, *op. cit.*

Also, Janz speaks about the “practicality” of philosophy in Africa and cautions that though most of the African philosophers consider that their philosophy should attend to some practical aspects of the African life – such as mediating the formation of ethics - such a philosophy must at the same time go beyond serving the simple duties of a community in order to attempt answers to questions of a more intellectual substance, closer to the Western model.

On the level of practicality, we should mention Ngugi wa Thiong’s’s approach to practicality, as quoted by Janz:

Practice is both the starting point and the testing ground of our conceptualization of the world. What is needed is not so much the recovery of practical philosophy as the recovery of the philosophy of practice<sup>6</sup>.

No conceptualization of the world should remain at a theoretical level, in other words, a philosophy, including the African one, says Ngugi, must serve as a scientific frame for bettering the society it applies to and speaks of.

Regarding the philosophic sagacity, we must speak of the rejection of the holistic approach proposed by ethnophilosophy in order to turn to the sages of a certain society, “critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgments by the power of reason and inborn insight”<sup>7</sup>, thus excluding literacy as a precondition for practicing philosophy.

The nationalist-ideological philosophy, theorized, among others, through the works of Leopold Senghor, attempts at developing a political theory, representative for Africa, based on African socialism and familyhood, with a continuous appeal to the authentic African humanism.

The four trends, professional philosophy, refers to the scientific background of the African philosophers, rejecting the premises of ethnophilosophy and embracing the universality of the concept of philosophy. Any commitment to the various philosophical systems, metaphysics, logic, history and so on, if it’s pursued by an African, it becomes African philosophy.

The aforementioned directions refer to two horizons in pursuing of which African philosophy could be considered authentic philosophy. These horizons have been analyzed in the history of African philosophy, both of them answering to major questions in the development of African thinking: the animistic world view or the universalistic strain and the pluralistic nature of ethnophilosophy<sup>8</sup>, which includes the négritude movement.

The concept of négritude is generally understood by contemporary African thought as “a form of universalistic ethnophilosophy”<sup>9</sup>, with which it served in formation of African identity during the independence struggle. Proposed by a group of students – Africans and Afro-Caribbeans / in the early to mid-1930s in the Latin Quarter in Paris, this African movement is seen by some researchers as embodied by African nationalists in Paris and French West Indies<sup>10</sup>. Their inspirational roots stay with the Harlem Renaissance – W.E.B.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’s, *The Universality of Local Knowledge* in „Moving the Centre; The Struggle for Cultural Freedom”, Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1993.

<sup>7</sup>Paulin Hountondji, “Le Mythe de la Philosophie Spontanée”, in *Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*, No.I (Lubumbashi, 1972), quoted in PO Bodunrin, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Richard H. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>Idem, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, p. 24.

Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Sterling Hayden, Paul Vesey and James Weldon Johnson.

Négritude and ethnophilosophy both strived to identify the shared cultural features determining what it meant to be African. The leader of the négritude movement was Léopold Senghor who maintained that “the particularity of the African racial and cultural consciousness contributes to the idea of its singular cultural identity”<sup>11</sup>.

Three elements were identified by Senghor as markers of the African aesthetics: “the symbolic image; the melody of forms and movements, sounds and colors; and the rhythm of asymmetrical parallelisms”<sup>12</sup>.

Négritude, according to Senghor, aimed at shaping “a new world of harmony and equilibrium, a world where each continent, each race, each nation and, above all, each culture would contribute its own irreplaceable virtues”<sup>13</sup>. But, as Bell underlines, Senghor’s vision argues for a “collective African consciousness”, in which the various cultures of the African continent would blend. In such a process, the originality and individuality of each African nation would be lost, and while speaking of a new philosophical proposal, “the intuitive or romantic counterpoint to the West’s sterile rationalism and scientific, material society”<sup>14</sup>, it would mitigate the complexity of the African fabric.

Notwithstanding its significance in the fight for the recovery of the African individuality and its independence, constituting a platform on which the qualities of the freed would be herald, once the black continent regained its liberty, négritude became “an abysmal angst of low achievement”<sup>15</sup>. The Africans were seduced, as Soyinka comments, by the search for Africanness, as something differentiating – and estranging them – from the world, a difference which would have quickly brought the segregation of the African mind. As Soyinka remarks, its aggressive-defensive role resembled the cry of the “black man [with] nothing between his ears...”<sup>16</sup>, and Hountondji considers it to be “a byproduct of underdevelopment, a consequence (...) of cultural amnesia”<sup>17</sup>. A major figure in contemporary African philosophy, Hountondji condemns the misrepresentation of the African system of thought as placing an unwarranted emphasis on tradition and a minimal one on scientific argumentation and criticism. As Hallen underlines, such an approach would excuse African philosophy “from having critical, reflective, rational, scientific and progressive content produced by individual thinkers in any significantly cross-culturally comparative sense”<sup>18</sup>.

As a reaction to the limits of négritude, the rejection of ethnophilosophy triggered the birth of a universalistic approach, a closeness to the Western philosophical tradition inherited from the ancient Greek world. We are referring, together with Bell to critical or scientific philosophy, whose advocates were PO Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu and Odera Oruka. The criticism advocated by Bodunrin aims at challenging the traditions and the folk cultural behavior, in order to construct a philosophical system which must be a “rational, impartial,

---

<sup>11</sup> Idem, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Léopold Senghor, *The Revolution of 1889 and Frobenius*, p. 78, quoted in Richard.H. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Léopold Senghor, *op. cit.*, p. 88, quoted in Richard.H. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 125/136

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Pauline J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. xxiv, quoted in Richard H. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Barry Hallen, “Contemporary Anglophone African Philosophy: A Survey”, in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004, p. 141.

and articulate appraisal”<sup>19</sup> of the world. With a broader vision, Kwasi Wiredu envisions a philosopher who combines Eastern and Western philosophical approaches and mediates them with “those gained from our own indigenous philosophical resources”<sup>20</sup> to create a working frame for the specific conditions of the African world.

Such a frame, as Wiredu implies, must *not* compare African traditional thought with Western thought. Whereas the Western science of mind is based on objectivity as the observation of phenomena and their quantification in structures well known and proven, the African world is populated by experiences in close relation with nature, supernatural and gods, in other words, with religion. As a result, a common feature which any of the philosophical systems African thinkers would endorse must be taken into consideration resides in the role the supernatural plays in the life of the people, reproducing “the whole psychic atmosphere... filled with belief in... mystical power”<sup>21</sup>. This dimension becomes a major axis in developing a coherent system of philosophic values, which must endorse spirits, gods, ancestors and their influence upon the life of the living with a potential of social regeneration. Any failure to observe this relation would render the African mind incomprehensible. An interesting aspect is that the relation with God in African philosophy is not governed by the dichotomy God-humans, and not reduced to it. The strong belief in the universality of the law includes God, as part of the world, and ritual, as another significant aspect of African philosophy.

Another dimension refers to the ancestors. On the one hand, the ancestor is endowed with the attributes of a deity, revered, honored and object for the awe of past customs. On the other hand, he is also a man, taking his place in the history of the social nucleus, and bringing with him his personal view of justice and truth. As Coetzee and Roux underlined:

The thinking is hierarchical, with God at the apex and extra-human beings and forces, humans, the lower animals, vegetation and the inanimate world, in this order, as integral parts of one single totality of existence.

The effect is that the way in which the African lives his life largely depends on the perpetual balance between the redemptive godly act and the human transgression. So, in interpreting African philosophy, one must take into account this complex existential fabric.

Wiredu proposes as a basis for comparison the customs and mores of Western and African societies. This “folk” philosophy responds to Wiredu’s contention that “a pre-requisite for judicious comparison(s) between African and Western cultures is that the materials selected share sufficient attributes (...) to constitute a legitimate basis for comparison”<sup>22</sup>.

The relevance of Wiredu’s work in redirecting the problem of African philosophy resides in providing “empirical evidence (predominantly linguistic) and a reasoned basis (universal rationalism) for Africa’s liberation from pejorative cultural stereotypes”<sup>23</sup>. A philosopher in quest of the African individuality must search for what such a culture shares with other cultures, principles of life common to all humanity, a concept challenged by other

---

<sup>19</sup> PO Bodunrin, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>20</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 153.

<sup>21</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, quoted in Ojaide, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Barry Hallen, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, p. 127.

scholars, such as WVO Quine, who speaks about the sacrifice of unique elements in a certain culture in order to facilitate the translation of a concept<sup>24</sup>.

Another supporter of the relativistic view, Godwin Sogolo, maintains that philosophical methodologies are culturally relative, which means that the aspects of African life which are unique cannot be understood using the Western representation. As Hallen says:

Africa will therefore only receive accurate and unbiased representation by this discipline when philosophers in and of Africa begin to develop methodologies for the study of their societies that are uniquely suited to the African cultural context(s).

A landmark in the evolution of African philosophy is established by the seminal work of VY Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. With a three-fold background, his native culture, and the tradition of the European and the Anglo-American academics, Mudimbe seems uniquely equipped for a contrastive analysis of how the West perceives the African world. According to Mudimbe, Africa is “as much a product of Western cultural priorities and prejudices as it is of anything African”<sup>25</sup>. The consequence is that African philosophy becomes “an extension of the Western philosophical traditions embedded in an African context”, which opens the path for Mudimbe’s question: Is this authentic African philosophy, or just an exposé in the flexibility of applying known systems to new cultures?

As within the Western world, there is a non-Western Marxist tradition of Caribbean, South.-American and African origins, which can be associated with “...thinkers who address the issues of (European) colonialism, of neocolonialism, of Africa as a victim of the Cold War...”<sup>26</sup>, such as Amilcar Cabral, Aime Cesaire, and Frantz Fanon. Philosophers of African origin, such as the Nigerians Oladipo Fashina and Olufemi Taiwo, focused their works on the division of the Marxist theory in two stages: the humanistic period, the quest for a community in which classes and exploitation would disappear, and the “social scientific” period, in which the means of production influence the social, political, and cultural development of a society. While the former philosopher considers that the two stages could be better understood if they were reunited, because together they speak about the multitude of condition to be met by the human development, the later sustains the principle of “legal priorities or principles, as part of any economic system”<sup>27</sup>. In analyzing the works of Fanon, Fashina concludes that the universal concept of humanity cannot be applied non-discriminately, because the Africans and their former colonizers do not share the same vision on humanity. As a consequence, African philosophy cannot be understood in terms of Western experience.

As we have seen, there is a significant lack of consensus among modern scholars regarding the basic features of a scientific African philosophy, and indeed, if African philosophy must be scientific... And from the various attempts at establishing such a philosophy, how can one discern between authentic African philosophy and, to quote Masolo, “European construction(s) of previously inexistent realities in traditional African ontology

---

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, p. 135.

<sup>25</sup> Barry Hallen, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>26</sup> Barry Hallen, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 150.

(...) inventions that emerged through the imposition of Eurocentric taxonomies on African cultures”<sup>28</sup>.

As Joseph I. Asike underlines, the major issue for the African thought is not the selection among the dominant ideologies of the contemporary philosophical universe, but “the much more deeply philosophical issue of the consensus concerning the framework within which the dialogue may take place”<sup>29</sup>. The experiences are happening, but they must be registered, understood and translated in a system of values which has to encompass the shared elements, in order to facilitate the translation, without excluding the specificities of the system analyzed.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bell, Richard. *Understanding African Philosophy. A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*. Routledge: New York, 2002.

Bodunrin, P.O. “The Question of African Philosophy.” *Philosophy* 56, 1981, 161–179.

Brown, Lee M. (ed.), *African Philosophy. New and Traditional Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004

Coetzee, P.H., Roux, A.P.J. *The African Philosophy Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Routledge, 2003.

Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction. Seeing with a third eye*. London-New York: Routledge, 1998.

Fanon, F. *Black Skin, white masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986.

Hountondji, Pauline J. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996

Janz, Bruce B. *Philosophy in an African Place*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2009.

Lugira, M. Aloysius, O’Brien, Joanne, Palmer, Martin (eds). *African Traditional Religion*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. New York: Chelsea House, 2009.

Mbiti, J.S. *African religions and philosophy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Heinemann, 1990.

Senghor, Léopold. *The Revolution of 1889 and Frobenius*, in Isaac Mowoe and Richard Bjornson (eds.): “Africa and the West: The Legacies of Empire”, New York: Greenwood press, 1986.

Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ wa. „The Universality of Local Knowledge” in *Moving the Centre; The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*, Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1993.

Ojaide, Tanure. „Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity.” *African Studies Review* 35.3 (1992): 43-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/525127>

Okere, Theophilus, ed. *Identity and Change*, Nigerian Philosophical Studies, I. Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change. Series II. Africa, volume 3. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2009.

Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976

---

<sup>28</sup> DA Masolo, “The Concept of the Person in Luo Modes of Thought”, in Lee M. Brown (ed.), *African Philosophy. New and Traditional Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph I. Asike, “Cultural identity and Modernity in Africa: A Case For a New Philosophy”, in Theophilus Okere (ed.), *Identity and Change*, Nigerian Philosophical Studies, I, Cultural heritage and Contemporary Change. Series II. Africa, vol. 3, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2009.

**Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda, Cornel Sigmirean (Editors)**  
**MEDIATING GLOBALIZATION: Identities in Dialogue**  
**Arhipelag XXI Press, 2018**

---

Wiredu, Kwasi. "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought", in R. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1977.

Wiredu, Kwasi (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004.