

RE-EXAMINING THE PHILOSOPHICAL POTENTIALS IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

by

Peter ONI (PhD)
University of Lagos
Faculty of Arts
Department of Philosophy
Tel. (234) 8033486140
Email: onipeter@hotmail.com
pioni@unilag.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The practice of philosophy in Africa has been dominated by foreign languages. Indeed, philosophical ideas by African scholars are expressed in different languages such as Greek, Latin, German, French, Spanish, Arabic and English to the detriment of the indigenous African languages. The argument is that African oral tradition is inadequate to the practice of philosophy. Consequently, different schools of thought in Africa for some times now have been debating on the possibility of Philosophy in African languages. Four major trends are noticed. They are: first, the hardliners such as Hountondji, Mudimbe, Towa who see no philosophical attempt in any unwritten language; secondly, the school that explores the substance of African languages represented by Senghor; thirdly, the group of Nyerere, Gyekye and Gbadegesin among others that sees Philosophy in Africa through concepts in indigenous languages and finally the group of Kagame, Sodipo and Hallen who discovers a solid ground for conceptualization in African Languages. It is against this background that this paper through a phenomenological and critical analysis examines the space of African philosophy. It argues that of the four schools of thought, the fourth seems adequate and conform to the aspiration of contemporary trends in African studies. Consequently, the paper advocates a deconstruction of the mindset on African Languages and argues that conceptualization of thought can take place in African languages.

Key Words: African languages, conceptualization, oral tradition, philosophy.

The language question in philosophy has been debated and treated by many philosophers and scholars from Africa and beyond. From Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame to Alena Rettova and Bruce Janz to mention but a few, the language question has generated the philosophical question of the location of African Philosophy within the African space. By definition, language is a means through which emotions or ideas are communicated by way of speech and hearing among human

beings. However, linguists extended this faculty to the realm of animals such as apes. As such. Language is medium through which human beings and animals by extension express their emotions, feelings and ideas as the case may be¹. For the specific case of human being, Language is one of the most important features of the specie. It is the vehicle of communication. Thoughts, information, cultures, civilisations, values, philosophies, etc. are stored in and transferred through languages. Interestingly, the first form of language is through oral communication and it can survive in this form as long as there are speakers who pass it from one generation to another. It is arguable that before the advent of writing, generations of humans have navigated the spectacles of nature using language through speaking. Every group of humans in every part of the earth evolved a form of language for their wellbeing. But from its oral beginning, language now lives in writing just as it is spoken.

Like peoples in other parts of the earth, the peoples in Africa developed diverse languages for communication. African languages began orally and were used to establish a civilisation that tended their physical survival needs and intellectual transcendental speculations. But unlike other parts of the world, African languages lasted more in their oral modes. The intellectual endeavours were preserved orally against the written form of peoples from other parts of the world whom they interacted with as barriers of nature were broken and human movements reached ends of coastlines and stretches of deserts. In the course of these interactions, ideas and speculations of these newly interacting people were shared but the oral form of African languages limited the appreciation of African ideas and speculations. Hence foreign ideas and speculations clothed in the toga of philosophies held sway for a while in Africa until Africans (and some non-Africans passionate about Africa) began bring to the fore African philosophies.

As rightly pointed out by Fayemi, Philosophy, as an academic and human enterprise, is not possible without thought and language.² In philosophy, there is a dialectical relation between language and thought. One the one hand, thought makes language and shapes and molds it and on the other hand, language gives direction and brings it to life. Having been mostly schooled in foreign languages, the practice of philosophy in Africa has been dominated by foreign languages.

¹ Peter Oni, Challenging African Scholars through African Languages: A Re-examination of the question of Development.in *Lagos Notes and Records* Vol.22,2016 pp.187-188

² Ademola Fayemi, The Problem of Language in Contemporary African Philosophy: Some Comments, *Inkayiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2013 Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 2.

Philosophical ideas by African scholars are expressed in different languages such as Greek, Latin, German, French, Spanish, Arabic and English to the detriment of the indigenous African languages. The reason for this is hinged on the argument that African oral tradition (in which African philosophy is rooted) is inadequate to the practice of philosophy. Different schools of thought in Africa have been debating on the possibility of Philosophy in African languages. Four trends have emerged and this paper examines the goals of these trends through their representatives. In the end, the trend of Kagame, Sodipo and Hallen, who discover a solid ground for conceptualization in African languages, is favoured. Consequently, the paper advocates a deconstruction of the mindset on African Languages and argues that conceptualization of thought can take place in African languages.

The First Trend

Hountondji was one of the early African philosophers to argue for a move beyond the reasoning of what he termed ethnophilosophy and the attempt to specifically define philosophy from an African perspective without recourse to the general understanding of what philosophy is. In this wise, Hountondji rejects the idea that philosophy on the African continent could mean anything different from what it means elsewhere in the world. For him, philosophy is an emancipatory practice, based on rigorous modes of thought, put forward by individual thinkers.³ Furthermore, the oral nature of such thought was not acceptable. Philosophy, he says, is a discursive field of texts, in which philosophers situate themselves and communicate across time and space.⁴ Hountondji states this clearly at the beginning of his book that by African Philosophy I mean a set of text, specifically the set of text written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.⁵ Johnson emphasizes his view that African philosophy should be any view that is written (as opposed to being oral) by, and only by, Africans.⁶ Thus philosophy for him is a universal discipline that should be understood irrespective of location. Hountondji rejects as

³ Franziska Dübgen and Stefan Skupien, *Paulin Hountondji: African Philosophy as Critical Universalism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 14.

⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality*, (second Edition, translated by Henri Evans), Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 33.

⁶ Clarence Johnson, "Paulin Hountondji, African Philosophy, and Philosophical Methodology," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 36, 1998, p. 183.

preposterous the notion of an African philosophy. He posits a conception of African philosophy that he believes is in consonance with the standard conception of the term philosophy when applied to Western views.⁷

One way of orienting African philosophy is for African philosophers to write for African audiences (against the idea of writing for non-African audiences about African worldviews) about African and non-African experiences so that the individual can think about such experiences in the light of their existence. According to Hountondji African publics want to be informed about what is going on elsewhere, about current scientific problems in other countries and continents. This need comes first out of curiosity but more importantly in order to confront those problems with its own preoccupations, to reformulate them freely in its own terms and thus to steep them in the melting pot of African science.⁸ Oral tradition certainly does not achieve this purpose because it favours the consolidation of knowledge into dogmatic intangible systems whereas archival transmission promotes better the possibility of a critique of knowledge between individuals and from one generation to another.⁹

Another mode of orienting African philosophy is through philosophising in African languages. The reflection on human languages led instead to recognise that any individual thought, however personal and original, is based on a collective, pre-personal, anonymous way of viewing and classifying things around us.¹⁰ Mudimbe asserts that each human language is particular and expresses in an original way types of contacts that exist between man (producer of culture) and his environment (nature). Thus each language delineates in its own manner concepts, systems of classification, and knowledge.¹¹ Hountondji therefore pledges to engage in a debate about universals, starting from a particular space and a particular point of time.¹²

For example, rather than restricting ourselves to teaching particular customs and languages (in the sense of engaging in area studies), we should start to philosophise in local languages about universal topics:... instead of treating our languages as scientific objects, we should rather practice and use them as vehicles of science and

⁷ Ibid. p. 183.

⁸ Hountondji, Op, cit., p. 54.

⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁰ Dübgen and Skupien, Op. cit., p. 167.

¹¹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Language*, (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 43.

¹² Dübgen and Skupien, Op. cit., p. 149.

knowledge, vehicles which should be enriched and transformed so as to be elevated to the level of complexity of scientific knowledge.¹³

Laudable as this idea may be even Hountondji notes that it is difficult for the youths who should play a significant role in this are (like earlier African scholars) not as versed necessary in their local languages. In his political career (as education and culture and communication minister) in his country Benin, he encouraged the policy of local languages. The success of this policy does not meet the need to philosophise in African languages. He therefore submits that doing philosophy in African languages calls for a number of preparatory steps and intellectual exercises which can be fulfilled only at the university.¹⁴

Concerned about the impact of Western epistemological perspective on Africa, Mudimbe charges African scholars to rise up to the challenge of telling Africa through African theories of knowledge capable of clearly depicting African realities. The terms used by Western intellectuals to describe Africa were not as true hence the need to reach within African schemes of knowing to truly know Africa. Ngwena notes that as epistemological redress, Mudimbe calls for a dialectical model for cultural investigation and classification in which there is relational inflection rather than structural opposition so as to be capable of registering change within the spaces created by social, economic and political structures.¹⁵

African languages no doubt will play significant roles in philosophising about Africa. Mudimbe avers the existence of a universal theory that each human community expresses in its own way and according to its own needs. This "philosophy" would be always and everywhere particular in its cultural and historical manifestations, and universal in its essence.¹⁶ Written literature in African languages, he emphasized exhibited a good beginning or, in some countries, a positive vitality.¹⁷ Although he is not oblivious of some doubtful stance in African literature and language, he believes that it seems legitimate to consider this literature in African languages as an expression

¹³ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁵ Charles Ngwena, *What is Africanness? Contesting Nativism in Race, Culture and Sexualities*, (Pretoria: Pretoria University Law Press, 2018), p. 73.

¹⁶ Mudimbe, Op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 90.

of African condition.¹⁸ This allows it take on a power which could ultimately be used against foreign ideologies.¹⁹

The Second and Third Trends

Senghor's approach is a reflexion of his understanding of the rapport between the language of the colonial master and the African language which manifest through the daily conflicting experience of the African. In his characteristic manner, Senghor made a different analysis of the African language and the French language. For him, the African Language has a unique feature which is the colourful representation of the world and human experience. Through images, African languages express ideas, world views , some with philosophical characteristics²⁰.

Julius Nyerere's conception of African language as a mode of espousing African philosophy is embedded in his philosophy of education as a means of liberation from impositions of African colonial and imperial experiences. This follows from his broad spectrum of African socialism fondly tagged *Ujamaa*. At the base of this ideology is not the total rejection of European theories and understandings but a blend of what is believed to be worthwhile therein with what in his view already existed in African tradition before contact with the Europeans.

The Fourth Trend

Alexis Kagame, the Rwandan Priest made the most comprehensive work to date in the study of African languages in African Philosophy. The possible advantage was for him to use his language and produce what is known as Bantu Philosophy. In the same line of thought, the duo of Hallen and Sodipo explore the possibility of a Yoruba epistemology.

Philosophy in African Languages

Conceptualising in African Languages is related the usage of the language and the purpose to which the user gives to it. The usages can serve epistemological, moral, political and metaphysical ends which are branches of philosophy and major or core philosophical areas to be developed.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 90.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 90.

²⁰ L.S. Senghor Langage et Poesie Negro-Africaine. Liberte I Negritude et HUamnisme. Ed. Du Seuil Paris 1964 p.159