
THE SEARCH FOR LANGUAGE AS A PANACEA FOR AN AUTHENTIC AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

It has been generally argued that Africans do not have a philosophy. How can it be that Africans do not have a philosophy when they are among the three known world cultures namely oriental, western and African cultures? If we say Africans do not have a philosophy we are saying directly or indirectly that they are not human beings and therefore cannot reason and reflect like other human beings. In other words, it means that Africans are sub-humans. This cannot be a fair assertion to Africans since Africans possess all the qualities that all other human beings possess. Hence, in this work, attention is focused on examining whether or not Africans do have a philosophy by establishing at least one of the avenues through which any philosophy can be expressed i.e. through a language. The oriental philosophy can be expressed in oriental language while western philosophy can be expressed in western language. Can African philosophy be expressed in African language like the other two world cultures? If it can, then, the existence of African philosophy is not impossible. Thus, this paper stands to examine language as a source through which authentic African philosophy as one of the authentic world recognized and famous philosophies can be possible.

KEYWORDS: Language, African Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

That there is a debate as to whether or not African philosophy exists has been recognized as a fact that cannot be gainsaid and the present question is whether what is regarded as African philosophy can be accepted as true and authentic African philosophy just like Western and Asian philosophies since some scholars have argued that what is claimed to be African philosophy is not qualified to be called philosophy because of the inadequacies and shortcomings inherent in it. However, an outright denial of the existence of African philosophy would turn out to have some devastating consequences on the African culture or worldview. It would also directly or indirectly imply that Africans are not qualified to be regarded as human beings. This also amounts to saying that they do not exercise the basic characteristic features that humans are known by. Be that as it may, the debate as to whether or not African philosophy exists has ultimately culminated in the revelations that some problems (issues) stand as impediments to the emergence of an authentic African philosophy. In other words, the contention is not whether or not African philosophy exists but whether it is true and authentically African. Prominent among these problems is the problem of an African language through which African thinking can be possible. It has been contended that the entire African continent does not have one common language that its people can speak or express themselves in, without the possibility of misinterpretation (misconstruction) of the intended meaning of their thought. It is a truism that Language is a tool of development that has a great deal of role to play in the totality of any culture especially the African Culture and worldview.

It is against this backdrop that this paper is precipitated. The paper is poised to examine the meaning of African Philosophy as professed by its exponents, objections to the possibility of African philosophy and the problems with African philosophy. Thereafter, the problem of language will be singled out and examined, looking at the meaning, feature, uses, types and functions, with a view to pointing out the nexus or otherwise between language and African philosophy. This will most probably result in the much needed authentication of African philosophy.

The Meaning of African Philosophy

For the purpose meaningfulness and relevance, it would be prudent to carry out an enquiry or survey on the ontological and etymological meaning of African philosophy. So, what is African Philosophy? All the thinkers and scholars, who have variously attempted to define African Philosophy, have all, without exception, directly or indirectly referred to the very meaning of philosophy. Put differently, reference to the meaning of African

philosophy ultimately implies the very meaning of philosophy itself. Although many thinkers argue that there is no universal or univocal definition of philosophy (Popkin and Stroll, 1956) they, however, agree that there is an etymological meaning of philosophy; that philosophy is the love of wisdom, i.e. wisdom about God, man and the universe. (Stumpf, 1994). Among all the beings and creatures in existence, man is the only being asking fundamental questions about existence and is thereby interested in the quest for wisdom.

Sequel, to seek for wisdom expressly involves thinking and extension. "I think therefore I am". An assertion adopted by Descartes in establishing an indubitable fact about man and reality. By implication therefore, every human society is one that constitutes thinking (cognitive) and existing (extension) beings. Thinking is a human feature, which implies rationality and consciousness, and not merely awareness. Thus, philosophy reveals that man is a rational and conscious being. Following this definition, thus, African philosophy is the quest for African wisdom. (Ukagba, 2000).

Momoh, holds

We define African philosophy simply as African doctrines or Theories on reality and the universe. The universe is made up of things like God, creator, gods, life, life after death, reincarnation, spirits, society, man, ancestors, heaven, hell, things, institutions, beliefs, concepts, and practices. What this means is that African philosophy is the African doctrines on, for example, spirit or society. (Momoh, 2000)

Iroegbu holds that "it is a philo-sophia, a quest for African wisdom. It is the reflective and systematic investigation into the fundamental questions that confront the human being" (Iroegbu 2000) Njoku concludes that "to a large extent, the debate about African philosophy can be summarized as a significant contribution to the discussion and definition of reason or what Hegel Called the spirit. Indeed it is commonly referred to as the rationality debate. (Njoku, 2001)" Meanwhile, Oladipo points out that Wiredu makes a distinction between what African philosophy is and what African philosophy is not. *Central to Wiredu's idea of African philosophy is the distinction between "African philosophy as folk thought preserved or oral traditions and African Philosophy as critical individual reflection, using modern logical and conceptual techniques...* (Oladipo, 2002)

Mbiti, holds that African philosophy is the "understanding, attitude of mind, logic, perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in different situations of life." (Mbiti. 1981)

One can go on and on exploring various notions of African philosophy as professed by scholars, but the point is that the perspectives of African philosophy are deeply rooted in the concept of philosophy. Just like philosophy that has numerous and divers' conceptions, so also is African philosophy.

Problems of African Philosophy

Two opposing schools of thought exist in the great debate (Ukagba, 2000) of whether or not African philosophy can be possible. They are the traditionalists' school, who strongly contend for the possibility of African reflection, and the modernists' school, who vehemently argue against the possibility or existence of African philosophy. The latter school holds that there cannot be African philosophy for the following reasons:

1. Philosophy is individualistic and not communalistic. So what is claimed presently as African philosophy is communalistic. The argument is that the African communalistic tendencies cannot be regarded as a reflection because it is more of an individualistic enterprise rather than a communalistic venture.
2. There is no known written documentation or authority that has done anything that can be regarded as African philosophy because for a philosophy to be regarded as such there must be known authors who have reflected and correspondingly documented their reflections. The modernists contend that not just any work of art or literature can be referred to as philosophy.
3. Philosophy transcends mere speculation because philosophy is systematic, scientific, and consistent, and involves a logical sequence which bothers on existence and being. The modernists hold that what the traditionalists' claim is African philosophy is not systematic, scientific, reflective and consistent and cannot stand serious scrutiny and critical examination.

Philosophy is not a particularistic enterprise but a universalistic one which will serve as the worldview of a particular known culture and having direct or indirect relationship and relevance with other world cultures. (Ukagba, 2000)

These and other reasons the modernists hold on to as their reasons for the refutation of African philosophy. The traditionalists, on the other hand, have a counter to each of these reasons for the rejection of African philosophy.

First, the traditionalists argue that every philosophy begins as a cultural orientation and eventually develops into what can be accepted as a philosophy. Hence, they believe that there is always a starting point which is in line with African philosophy. Second, to reject African philosophy based on the documentation of reflections does not hold water because one of the fathers or patriarchs of philosophy- Socrates, did not document his reflections and so do we disqualify his reflections. Also, there were numerous other western thinkers who were not recorded in many western literatures in the history of western philosophy but their thoughts and contributions are still celebrated even till date. Third, communalism does not eliminate individualism amongst Africans because communitarianism is not part of their nature but simply a cultural phenomenon that characterizes the people's existence. Hence, the traditionalists contend that there are individuals who reflect individually but share these reflections with others because of the communal tendencies inherent in the people. Two people do not think together at the same time. Lastly, African philosophy is not strange and peculiar to western and oriental cultures but having direct nexus with other worldviews, hence, the concept of God, gods, spirits, divinities, shrines, worship, customs etc. are inherent features in western and oriental worldviews. (Momoh, 2000)

By and large, it amounts to dehumanization if it were to be inferred that Africans do not think, (Ukagba, 2000) are not reflective, consistent as humans and systematic in their conception of the world or existence. Modernists would have to provide answers to the type of creatures Africans are if they are not qualified to have the nature of man.

The debate has reached a point where both the traditionalists and modernists have come to the conclusion that the existence of an African philosophy is not entirely impossible because of the implications thereof. So the issue now is the possibility of an *authentic* African philosophy, i.e. the question of whether African philosophy is before us i.e. whether or not it is in view, yet to be obtained or whether it is traceable to the past i.e. whether it is behind us. If it is behind us (in the past), then the problem of its origin presents itself i.e. at what point did African philosophy begin if it is behind us. If it before us, how can we obtain an authentic African thought system that will properly portray the African culture and people? Can the African people boast of a common language through which they can present their thoughts? What in the first place is language and how can it ensure an authentic African philosophy. (Oladipo, 2000)

Besides the problem of language are the problems of history, definition and documentation. Scholars have argued that if authentic African philosophy were before us, ahead of us, then the problem is compounded because of the three "Cs"- Civilization, Christianity and Colonialization. (Ukagba, 2000) Arguments are that these will obscure the possibility of an authentic African Philosophy. Nothing but authentic African philosophy will rescue this dying reflective cultural worldview.

The Meaning of Language

For a while now many scholars have carefully and deliberately avoided focusing attention on evaluating the very etymological meaning of language which is an inevitable aspect of culture, specifically human culture. Language is a significant portion of any human society. So why the lack of interest in the subject, could it be due to the complexity behind the meaning of language or is it that it is not worth reflecting on? So, what is language and how does it impact on the human society and on existence in general? Conventionally, a handful of thinkers and linguists contend that language is a means of communication and understanding. (Otakpor, 2000) Literarily, language is referred to as "the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country... the use by Humans of a system of sounds and words to communicate." (Otakpor. Ibid. p.21) This literary definition of language does not adequately represent the proper meaning of language because language does not only imply speech (speaking) and writing, it transcends that. Otakpor defines language as "an important aspect of human culture..." (Otakpor: ibid. p. 22)

Types and Features of Language

Language does not only consist of writing and speaking i.e. language does not only entail written and spoken dimensions. There are other means through which language can be expressed;

1. Sign Language: Sign language requires no sounds; words or writing before the intended message or meaning can be passed across and comprehended by the audience or listener(s). Sign language involves gesticulations, descriptions, drawings, etc. e.g. road signs.
2. Symbolic Language: Symbolic language is a little different from sign language because it involves the use of symbols to convey messages. Symbols are sort of pictorial presentations and drawings. In ancient Egypt, for instance, symbols were predominant in the preservation of their history, relics and cultures. The art and science of writing is said to have started in Egypt. The symbols of Delta, Omega, Alpha, Beta, titer etc. i.e. Δ , Ω , α , β , θ etc. are symbolic languages and that do not require sound or writing.
3. Signal Language: This type of language might be sound, words or writings but the message or content of the signal is not directly explicit in the sound or writing. Signal language is most common with some sects such as the military, cot, cult, unique group or organization which can only be comprehended by members of the group. In the army for example, the use of such word as, alpha, delta, Romeo, papa etc. can only be decoded by those who have been specifically trained in this regards."Delta, Imo, Papa" could mean "dip"

Features of Language: Language has three main features that make it a unique portion of human culture. Once again, Otakpor argues that it is almost impossible to conceive of any human group without language, hence, we talk of language as having a Universal, Relative and Transparent composition.

- (i) Universality of Language: "It is impossible to conceive of a rational being or of a society, without implying the existence of a language. Language and thinking are so closely related that any study of the former is bound to be a contribution to our understanding of the human mind" (Otakpor, 2000) The universality of language implies that every human community has one form of language or the other. No human community or group exists without interaction or relation. As social animals, everyman tends to exchange with his neighbor one thing or the order. Put differently, language is a universal thing, no less.
- (ii) Relativity of Language: Despite the fact that every human group worldwide has language, there is no general or conventional language for all of them. In other words, all humans do not speak one general or common language, each group or culture has a language that is unique or peculiar to it. Hence, we can boast of diverse languages such as Polish, German, Italian, Russian, French, languages, etc.
- (iii) Transparency of Language: This is the third and general feature of language. It means that language is not a hidden activity but rather one that is open to everyone who belongs to that group or sect. Language is a public affair because everyone within the group or culture is not prevented from comprehending the contents of the language used by it. For instance, no French man, born and raised under French culture would claim ignorance of the French language. So also, no Bini man, born and brought up under the Bini law and customs can claim that he/she does not understand or speak the Bini language, etc.

Functions of Language

There are numerous functions of Language which are not less than five in their distinct ways of advancing the life of man. These include;

Informative Function of Language

The first thing that language does is that it stands to inform, increase the vocabulary content, information volume and wealth of knowledge of the listener(s) or hearer(s) by the speaker. By listening to the speaker the hearer or listener now has information that he/she hitherto did not have. Put differently, the listener or hearer is now better informed of the prevailing situation, without necessarily having the hearer or listener perform any overt action or carry out any command. Example, "it is raining heavily outside"

Expressive Function of Language

This function of language involves a situation whereby the speaker reveals the innermost contents of his mind- his feelings or emotions. When language is used in this regard it means that the speaker is telling the hearer(s) or listener(s) the way he/she feels regarding the prevalent situation i.e. the way he/she feels about a particular thing, event or situation without expecting anyone to feel the same way or expressly do something about the way he/she feels i.e. the speaker does not expect the hearer(s) or Listener(s) to do anything overt about his expression. Example, "I am very hungry", "I feel very sick and tired", "I am bored" etc

Emotive Function of Language

When language is used emotively, it involves the emotions of the speaker in communicating with his/her listener. This language function is very closely related to the expressive function of language but the difference is that in this function the speaker intends to evoke the feelings and attitudes of his/her listener/hearer to feel the same way the speaker feels and there is the tendency that the listener/hearer will behave the same way as the speaker. Example, "Armed robbery is a heinous crime against humanity, let's stop and fight it", "Abortion is murder let's fight against it"

Declarative Function of Language

This function of language is always closely related to revealing the authentic situation of things and events as they actually are. When the speaker uses this function he is not necessarily expressing his/her feelings but revealing what the situation is and implicitly implying the performance of certain overt actions. It is closely related to the informative function of language but the latter expects no overt action to be performed. Example, "My father just passed on", "The police are coming", "The Bridge is now open for use" etc. In as much as one now knows that the bridge is declared opened

Commissive Function of Language

When language is used commissively, it means that the express performance of an overt action is expected either immediately or in the future by the speaker or the hearer(s)/listener(s). So, when the speaker says for instance, "I will visit your family next week" it, means that the speaker has expressly committed himself to performing an overt action sometime in the future. So the hearer(s) or listener(S) expects the speaker to go to a certain family by the week stated. The speaker can commit the listener(s) or hearer(s). Example, "Musa and Jane will contribute to pay your school fees".

Directive Function of Language

Directive language function is also known as command or instructive function of language. This is a situation whereby the speaker gives an express command that must be obeyed. It means that the performance of an overt action is compulsory. The command could be polite or impolite but it is always firm, as it were. A person of authority and power is always the speaker. Example, "get me a glass of water". "get out of my office now". "Open the car door for me" etc.

Interrogative Function of Language

This function of language involves the making of enquiries or the investigation of occurrences and events to determine the true state of things. Thus, the use of questions characterizes the speech of the speaker and most of the questions require express answers or responses. Examples "where were you when the armed robbers struck", "How old were you when your father died", "Who gave you money for your journey"? etc. this function of language can also be referred to as the investigative function of language.

Multiple Function of Language

The multiple function of language simply refers to a situation where language can have more than just one function at a time. It means for instance, that language can serve as informative, declarative and expressive all at the same time. Example, "the police are corrupt". This can be interpreted to mean a declaration of the true situation of the police, it can serve as informative especially to anyone who previously did not know and as expressing the feeling of the speaker.

To any beginner or lay reader, the contents of language discussed above are adequate to aid a proper knowledge of language but not adequate enough for the linguist or a scholar of language who require a more concise and critical evaluation to understand and appreciate a discursive on language. Hence, for the purpose of this study the rudimental elements of language such as the one above serve in our analysis.

Language and authentic African Philosophy

It is indigenous languages that really take care of issues of identity, feelings, empathy, and meaning. Hence, a genuine African philosophy should be written in an African language, since language is societal and experimental... It is precisely this problem of language, "that has led to skepticism about African philosophy by some contemporary African philosophers (Oladipo: *ibid.* p.41)

It is no joke that language is an integral part of any culture and if authentic reflection must be possible of any culture then the indigenous language of that culture must be involved *ab initio*. So, for an authentic African philosophy to be possible it must be capable of being written or expressed in African language(s). Scholars have rejected Bantu philosophy as a foreign philosophy because it was not written in Bantu language or in any other African language. Their contention is that if foreign philosophies like Chinese philosophy can be written and expressed in Chinese language, German philosophy can be written and expressed in German language, Russian philosophy can be written and expressed in Russian language, etc. then, why can't African philosophy be written or done in African language(s)

If African philosophy is not done in African language, then the possibility of it losing its originality stares one in the face. Interpretation and translation will simply not do because there are problems inherent in the interpretation or translation of some indigenous concepts which cannot be translated or interpreted into a foreign language and still retain its original meaning. In the process of interpretation and translation, it is very likely that such concepts will lose the original meaning that will represent the intended message but in the process of translation or interpretation some terms and concepts need to be refined and modified to suit semantic requirement that befits presentation, and so, and this will in-turn render the message automatically incomplete. This ultimately results in the presentation of an inadequate picture that truly depicts the African worldview.

In Edo or Esan culture for instance, the concept of "iroro" could be interpreted as "thought" or "worry". In other words this single concept can mean different things at different times or situations and any attempt of misrepresentation will result to the loss of meaning. "Iroro" actually means thought in a particular sense and worry in another sense, and when the wrong interpretation or translation is applied in the wrong context, there is misrepresentation of meaning. Also, consider the concept "door" in Edo meaning "ekhu" nonetheless, there is no English concept for window in Edo language except the corrupted version of the English word pronounced "enwindo". Besides the problem of loss of meaning, there is also the alienation of culture if the African culture is presented in foreign language. For an authentic African philosophy to be possible, African language(s) must be evolved and taught in schools so that Africans can fluently read and write African language, even at the highest level of education.

It is pertinent to mention at this point that there are certain complications involved in the quest for African language in the presentation of African philosophy. One of this is the fact that there is no African language which has an international status and if this is so then it will be difficult for African philosophy to be international like western or oriental philosophies. This problem is so because there is no African language, as it were, in which African philosophy can be expressed. Put differently, it means that Africa does not have a common language. The first wise thing to do would be to search for and evolve a common language that all Africans will accept and understand.

To search for a common African language involves a serious revolution because no African culture would like any other culture's language to be imposed on her and if there is no other way it means that a new African language has to be evolved and this should be a language which all African cultures must be willing to accept, and it must be a language in and through which all African thoughts can be clearly expressed without the possibility of misconception and misinterpretation or errors in translation.

The Three Cs

Besides the problem of language are the problems of the three Cs: *COLONIZATION*, *CHRISTIANITY* and *CIVILIZATION*. Now, even if the problem of language were to be solved, say on the discovery of an indigenous authentic African language, the originality of African philosophy will still be in contention because of the problem of *Colonization*, *Christianity*, and *Civilization*. So, it is most probable that an authentic African language will not solve the problem because of the three issues identified above.

First, the issue of *colonization* is argued to have strongly and seriously affected and altered the African orientation (mentality). In French West Africa, for example, the policy of assimilation (Igbinedion, 2001) was adopted and the intention was to make French men out of Africans. That is that, the French colonialists wanted to turn Africans into French men. So Africans had to learn the culture, language, tradition, etc. of the French. This resulted in the alteration of the African orientation and worldview, i.e. that the African mentality was adversely affected. Put in a different language, Africans were brainwashed and made to believe and accept a foreign culture and automatically a foreign worldview. The point here is that the original African worldview before her contact with the outside world had been seriously affected by her contact and contract with the outside world through the phenomenon called colonization.

Second, is the matter of *civilization and* scholars have argued that it has made authentic African philosophy impossible due to the fact that the African civilization has been infiltrated by foreign and non-indigenous culture and tradition – a worldview that is totally opposite from what they have come to know and accept as the true and original position. Put differently, the issue of tradition and modernity amounts to a battle of the authenticity or otherwise of Africans and their roots. Africa was exposed to a civilization new to her when she seriously needed to assert her superiority, relevance and humanity to the world and other cultures, and this was made possible, thanks to colonization and all its attendant consequences.

Third, *Christianity*, which is a religious belief, was introduced in Africa despite the existence of the powerful and already well established African Traditional Religion (A.T.R.). By virtue of the introduction of Christianity the originality of an authentic African worldview was highly obliterated. Without colonialism, Christianity wouldn't have got to Africa as early as it did. We know that the doctrines and principles of Christianity highly differ from that of the African Traditional Religion. Although African leaders made vehement attempts to resist and fight the introduction of the new and strange culture (better still belief), they however did not win the war, as it were.

The question then remains, can an authentic African philosophy be possible despite the seemingly insurmountable problems pointed out above, can it be possible to forget about attempts aimed at establishing the fact that there can be an authentic African philosophy, a philosophy genuinely and originally African? For African to remain as a recognized, respected and accepted world culture, she must assert and prove herself worthy to be reckoned with, and one way of doing this is to continue to search for a common language through which she can find expression for her thoughts and feelings. No one else can and will do this for her, she must find and discover herself by herself through her own scholars and intellectuals. One possible way out of this problem is that African philosophy should be expressed in indigenous African languages no matter how diverse they are. Through this, areas of similarities and nexus will be discovered, the gaps filled and the way forward charted. By and by an authentic African philosophy will be obtained. This invariably implies that African philosophy is before us and not possibly behind us.

CONCLUSION

The paper has been able to show what language is, its relationship to man, its importance to man and how it will go a long way in solving the problem of the authenticity of African philosophy. This quest for the discovery of an authentic African philosophy is an inevitable and gigantic project that constitutes a *conditio-sine-qua-non* for the corporate existence of the African people and will also go a long way in atoning for the damage and loss that the continent and its people have suffered in the past. The fact that the continent had a rather brutal encounter with the outside world, brutal in the sense that its land and people were plundered, explored and exploited to the maximum has been seen by many as a curse and blessing at the same time. Some argue that the many benefits accruable to Africa have been made possible thanks to the continent's contact with the outside world. Others nevertheless argued that all the present and numerous woes in Africa e.g. poverty, starvation, disease, underdevelopment, etc. have been made possible by her contact with the outside world. Some others only see the damage done to Africa and nothing more. Whatever the case, Africa must continue to move forward and must never bask in the euphoria of self-pity, failure, defeat and backwardness. An authentic African philosophy can be possible but with a serious search and sacrifice. So the final word is that a starting point for the discovery of what might ultimately lead to an authentic African philosophy is not a bad idea.

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