In Defence of a 'Problem-Centric' Research Agenda for African Philosophy

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Abstract

Over the years, African philosophy has contentiously centred on the philosophical history of its existence, its possibility and effort by its protagonists to show a body of literature that can be representative models of a corpus of discourses that can be called African philosophy. There is little problem in this. However, not much has been offered as a body of philosophical inquiry that interfaces the existential problems and challenges of the African society of today. Today's African is blighted with a plethora of problems in search of solution for her development and progress. It is in dire need of a problem-solving philosophy, one that this paper has called a "problem-centric philosophy." The paper has relied on the articulations of Karl Popper that the philosopher should be a student of problems and not a student of subject matters. Consequently, it argues for a problem-centric approach and agenda for African philosophy; one that is hoisted on as well as goes beyond the existing African philosophy, one that we have called an "archaeological excavation" of philosophical elements from the intellectual chests of the African past. The new problem-centric philosophy we proposed is a refinement of existing African philosophy. This philosophy will be one that is built upon the contemporary social foundation and milieu of Africa such as suggested by the African Union. The conclusion is thus reached that an interdisciplinary approach with the social sciences and other fields of inquiries will be needed for doing a problem-centric African philosophy.

Keywords: *African experience; African philosophy; problem-centric philosophy; research agenda; social foundation/milieu*

1. Introduction

The questions if there exists a body of knowledge that could be genuinely qualified as philosophy in Africa; if there can be genuine African philosophy; and what constitutes African philosophy have preoccupied existing literature on African philosophy. No doubt, brilliant answers have been put forward by experts that have settled many sceptics. Hence, for Kanu (2014:86), "The question of the nature of African philosophy has engaged the minds of African philosophers for decades." This has been the preoccupation of Tempels (1995), Jahn (1958), Mbiti (1969), Gyekye (1987), Edeh (1985), Oruka (1991), Iroegbu (1995), Masolo (1995), Hountondji (1995) and others. Gyekye (1987) has argued that "… the issue of the nature of African philosophy became recurrent in the reflections of contemporary African philosophers." Today, unless philosophers in African studies go beyond these themes, African philosophers will be largely 'archaeological excavators' of elements of philosophy embedded in the 'intellectual shelves' of the African past. How to glean it from, or tease it out of, or analyse philosophical contents from African proverbs, folklore, and socio-cultural practices is thus the preoccupation and modus operandi of African philosophers (Uduigwomen, 1995). Notions such as *umbutu*, *omoluabi*, *erhi* and *otha* are daily being dug out and analysed into becoming authentic categories of African ontological experience in the past. Consequently, most of what is called African philosophy is more or less African narratives made meaningful against the backdrop of purely Western or Eastern philosophies. For example, in order to explain reincarnation in African ontological experience, scholars would refer to Descartes' theory of body and mind, Hume's personal identity, Indian philosophy's theory of *moksha*, *samsara*, *nirvana,* and so on. Thus, it can be safely argued that if the foreign contents (categories) are expunged from the literature of African philosophy, most of its scholarship (on what is called African philosophy) may be meagre; and a looming question will be if it is possible to do an African philosophy without resorting to or devoid of non-African (philosophy) literature. Consequently, it can be established that the many 'useful' weeds in the garden of African

philosophy surpass its intended harvestable crops. Paradoxically, it can be argued that this nature of African philosophy has given it its global character and understanding. This point is however outside the scope of this paper.

African philosophy, like African music, literature, sculpture and art of old, was never written down. It was not credited to any individual philosopher or sage. It had no written tradition. It was rather oral (Uduigwomen 1995;36-43; Oluwole, 1999). Nevertheless, African philosophy is the philosophical conception of 'Africans' on man in the cosmic order of things, as man relates to fellow man, supra-natural beings such as the 'ancestors,' God and the gods, and the universe. Ancient African - which was highly ethical, religious and expressed in the mythologies and proverbs, religions and the way of life of Africans - has been qualified in various ways. Anyanwu (1988:43), for example, describes it as the 'philosophy of vitality.' An important characteristic of African philosophy is that it did not emerge out of scepticism or doubt about the existence of the world, God, the universe, knowledge and so on. In Africa, human experience and cognition are not doubted. Rather, African philosophy attempts to rationalize human experience and the world of man.

African philosophy attempts to rationalize what is experienced by man, in order to place man, who remains the predominant actor of African philosophy, in a better perspective and stead in the scheme of things among fellow men, the gods, and other metaphysical and ontological entities. Anyanwu (1988), therefore, argues that:

> "It would be rash to say that the African people, whether individually or collectively, have no philosophical thinking. In fact, colonial experience, the breakdown of the religious answers to certain questions of existence, and the transformation of the accustomed social institutions on the meaning of life gave rise to philosophical thinking. Man cannot live without the attempt to interpret the meaning of existence, and the African man has his own idea on this question."

This view tallies with the position of O'Connor (1957:23-24) who sees reason as "… the capacity to solve problems of whatever kind the problems may be, or the ability to answer questions appropriately." He states further that:

> "… There is no doubt that human beings do have such a problem-solving capacity as part of their makeup. Some of us may have it to a greater degree than others or have an especially good or especially poor capacity for solving some sort of problems (for example, those of mathematics or administration). But all human beings who are not very low-grade mental defects have this capacity to some degree, sufficient perhaps to justify us being described by the traditional epithet 'rational animals.'"

On this basis, there are philosophical studies that deal with African philosophical problems as they may concern ontological entities such as witchcraft, ancestral relation, reincarnation, socio-political philosophy of African, ethics and epistemology. Invariably, what is called African philosophy is not a contiguous body of a unified argued corpus of epistemologies. It is largely a collection of 'topical issues' discussed by scholars. The worry here is they are not 'problem-focused,' 'problem-directed,' or simply, 'problem-centric' on contemporary human existential matters relating to the African experience.

In Ogunmodede's (2004:83) account, philosophy as an intellectual enterprise is not new to Africans. He points out that the Egyptians had philosophical schools called Egyptian mystery systems. Ancient Egyptian philosophy was taught at centres or temples of religious worship at: (i) Memphis, (ii) Hermopolis, (iii) Heliopolis, (iv) Thebes, (v) Tel el Amarna, and (vi) Avaris. The Egyptian schools of philosophy were not called after any individual philosophers as was in ancient Greek. Quoting Masante, Ogunmodede (2004:82) states further that:

"The word used by the ancient Egyptians for philosophy was 'Seboyet" which means 'wisdom' of 'instructions', or 'teachings.' Thus, we had 'the teachings of Ptah-Hotep' which is the oldest and complete political treatise that has survived the vicissitudes of antiquity and is available to us."

For the ancients Kemites, Egyptians, 'Seboyet' has a double meaning and sense, 'theoretical wisdom' and 'practical wisdom.' 'Theoretical wisdom' namely means knowledge and truth, while 'practical wisdom' means justice, rectitude and perfection.

2. The Source and Nature of African Philosophy

How do we derive a body of knowledge to be called African philosophy? We may catalogue the sources of African philosophy as including the individual philosopher, African sages, African cultural heritage, oral tradition of Africans, philosophical implications of analysing African languages and so forth. It is obvious that African philosophy is not fashioned-out *ex nihilo*. As Gyekye (2004) rightly points out, it is the intellectual that is equipped to speculate critically on and carry out an analysis and scrutiny on the African experience. He says, "philosophers, who not only make inquiries into fundamental principles underlying human experience but also undertake analytic interpretation of that experience will have something relevant and important to say about the experience that can influence or guide individual action, public policy and the development of human culture." Hence Gyekye (2004) concludes thus:

"Philosophy is a conceptual response to the problems posed in any given epoch for a given society or culture. It would therefore be appropriate, even imperative, for contemporary African philosophers to grapple at the conceptual level –as has indeed done by philosophers of other cultures – with the issues and problems of their times."

To achieve this, it becomes the task of the philosopher to dig into the rich traditional culture of the African society, investigate the African experience, and so on in order to analyse, critique and make philosophical postulations, syntheses and conclusions thereof. This can be qualified as the documentary dimension of African philosophy. It deals with the history of African philosophy of the past or present. It is strictly not a problem-centric philosophy. Nevertheless, it provides a plank for an authentic African problem-centric philosophy.

This conforms to our position that the philosopher – professional philosopher – who is the main source of African philosophy, should leverage through their 'conceptual response to the problems posed in any given epoch for a given society or culture' to enable them to fashion a problem-centric African philosophy that has contemporary relevance. This is because the body of knowledge that is called philosophy is ultimately nothing but the "… the reflective responses by the educated or thoughtful class to the environment and social challenges of [the environment in which the thinkers live] (Osei 2004)."

Following the above closely is the fact that in every society and culture there exist a few who are usually the custodians of the people's wisdom and body of knowledge. These are the sages. Sages serve both the leadership and general populace of such a community. In Africa, a sage is not necessarily, even though may usually be, an elderly person. This status is bestowed on those who are knowledgeable in the wisdom of their society. They are consulted in times of conflict. They are the repertoire of their people's history, culture and tradition. They are the ones consulted not only by researchers into African philosophy and studies, but also by researchers into other aspects of African thought systems such as history, anthropology, religion and art. The early Arabic scholar-traders and visitors as well as European explorers and Christian missionaries found great use in these sages as sources with which they dug deeply into the African intellectual and cultural heritage. Indeed, the sages as sources of African philosophy are indispensable given the fact that what is largely known of the African past today is mostly transmitted through the oral, not written, medium. Odera Oruka has found this to be the best approach to carrying out African philosophy (Falaiye, 2006).

That African cultural heritage (mode of worship, burial, justice system, marriage, festivals and so on) as a major source of African philosophy is a point that is obvious and easily inferred from our analysis of African philosophy so far. This has been emphasized by most scholars who are experts in this field. (Gyekye is an epitome of this approach). The same can be said of the fact that the oral tradition is a major source of African philosophy. Folklore, proverbs and indeed music are imbued with wise sayings and ontological conclusions that ought to be indicators of philosophical statements. Sophie Oluwole (Gbadebo 2021:136-160) adopted this approach in order to bring out the philosophy of the Ifa corpus of the Yoruba.

The knowledge of any group of people is usually expressed in the form of symbols or signs. Common to all cultures is the use of language. The meanings of the concepts and categories with which African explains the subjective and objective experiences cannot be devoid of philosophical imputations. Wiredu adopted this approach of doing African philosophy in his investigations on the Akan thought system.

Placide Tempels (1995) gives some words of caution for those who disparage African philosophy,

> "Is our (western) philosophy based upon scientific experiment? Does it depend upon chemical analysis, on mechanics, or on anatomy? Natural sciences cannot refute a system of philosophy than they can create one. Our elders used to possess a systematised philosophy which the most advanced modern sciences have not broken down. Moreover, our ancestors came by their knowledge of being at a time when their experimental scientific knowledge was poor and defective, if not totally erroneous. The tool of experimental science is the sense experience of visible realities, while philosophy goes off into the intellectual contemplation of general realities concerning the invisible nature of beings. But no instrument exists for measuring the soul, though this fact does not exclude possibility that experiences may occur in order to furnish intelligence with reasonable proof of the existence of the spiritual principle in life. It is the intellect that creates science. Indeed, the experiments of the natural sciences, as also the generalisation of the philosopher ought to be made methodically and with discernment and analysed in accordance with sound logical reasoning…"

Our analysis so far has established that African Philosophy exists as an authentic corpus of knowledge and field of enquiry. Nevertheless, it is difficult to glean out from existing literature what legitimately constitutes this field of knowledge since there is a thin line between the narrow field of African philosophy and the broader area of African studies. Yet, this relation suggests the need for a cross-disciplinary study for a fruitful problem-centric African philosophy to be erected upon. Let us consider the nature of African philosophy offered by Kwame Gyeke, Raymond Osei and Kwasi Wiredu to buttress our point.

Kwame Gyekye (2004:26) stipulates that African philosophy is a [conceptual] 'response by the philosopher to the various problems of their society' and goes on to state that: "It nevertheless does not necessarily follow that the worth and significance of philosophical ideas or doctrines, propositions and conclusions is to be tethered to their cultural, historical contexts. They [philosophical ideas or doctrines, propositions and conclusions] can considerably gain plausibility and currency beyond the confines of their cultural or historical origin." Gyekye thus advises that: "It is most appropriate for African philosophers to respond conceptually to the various problems of their society."

Raymond Osei (2004:42-44) says African philosophy, being a "… coherent articulation of the ideas and experiences of a [the African] people," is borne out by the fact that the people, "… in order to understand the political, social, legal and religious institutions of society ... needs to examine the ideas upon which the structures have been constructed." It is thus, "… the critical examination of the ideas informing the structures of society that constitute the philosophy of the people." Accordingly, Osei (2004) says, "… philosophers have a duty to inquire into this legacy with a view to understanding and fleshing out the reason underlying their assumptions." African philosophy is 'that body of knowledge [that is] a product of second

order reflections on the African authentic ways of doing and being;' an intellectual activity [that is] likely to open vistas for enriching and advancing African culture and the material well-being of its people.

Kwasi Wiredu (1993:34-35) believes that African philosophy should exhibit an interface between that which is authentically African and that which blends with contemporary intellectual facilities. "African philosophy must include the critical and reconstructive treatment of the oral tradition and the exploitation of the literary and scientific resources of the modern world in pursuit of synthesis."

It follows from the above conceptions of African philosophy that inquiry into African culture and belief systems – African experience – are prerequisites to understanding or carrying out African philosophy. This justifies why Raymond Osei (2004:35) avers on this point. The African living space and time offer situations that are similar to those of the West and Asia. Colonialism, ancient Egyptian civilization, ancient/contemporary religions and political institutions, the question of 'the black Athena' and so on are situations that offer fruitful ground for issues of African philosophising. African societies have accumulated a body of knowledge, beliefs, values that define their ways of life. African philosophers cannot afford to be ignorant of these stores of knowledge that defines the history of their people. By deploying the tools of philosophical analysis to the data of African cultural legacy, the African philosopher will not only be educated about a personal legacy but might also be inspired to think about how this heritage might be deepened and advanced.

Examples of African indigenous conceptual schemes outlined by Osei (2004:35-40) include:

1. The high level of political organizations in Africa that amazed Arab visitors and scholars. There was a stable polity devoid of crisis.

2. The above was due to 'the people's conception of the universe.' The African universe was a uniform entity occupied and run in strict order by a hierarchy of beings. In the hierarchy, the being occupying the top was animated with power greater than the one immediately below it. The world is ordered like a vast equation: human animation (activity) corresponds to the animation of the cosmos, and each human movement stretches back to its cosmic precedence.

3. This implies that obeying the order by all is crucial to the common good and health of the society. Clearly any attempt to subvert, from within, such an order is tantamount to an act of suicide, one might even say, genocide, because the effect of successful subversion would be disastrous to both the whole community and to the culprit.

4. The kings and other leaders were checked by this cosmic arrangement. The king was the representative of the departed ancestors so they could do nothing that was tantamount to the tradition they were, in the first place, entrusted to preserve.

5. The African conceptual scheme did not uphold a Cartesian dualism, but 'was at once material realm and spiritual realm.'

6. The same metaphysical order that ensured social cohesion and political stability also predetermined norms of moral behaviour; infraction would therefore attract the god's wrath and the opprobrium of the people.

The import of this line of thought is that African scholars need to go back to their cultural roots; otherwise African indigenous thought systems stand the risk of denial and obfuscation. This (as espoused by Osei above) has been a predominant approach in scholarship in African philosophy, and as we have earlier stated

in this paper, it can be described as it as an "archaeological excavation" of philosophical elements from the intellectual chests of the African past.

Our analysis aims to show that African philosophy should not necessarily be either equated with African culture and belief systems, or gleaned thereof and no more. Invariably, it should not be akin to African anthropology, sociology, literature, art or music. Almost all extant literature points towards scholars in this area attempting to do this task of: 'we had a philosophy in the past and I can show it.' Today, this 'history of philosophy' approach would be a wrong route to follow solely. We thus suggest the inclusion of a problem-centric agenda for African philosophy's scholarship. Experts in the area of African philosophy are unanimous on the fact that the prevailing approach would only constitute a starting point in the 'doing' of a new problem-centric African philosophy.

Here the distinction is made between traditional philosophy and the tradition of philosophy. Wiredu (1980), perhaps seeing the danger of such entrapments, warns that "… if African philosophy means traditional African philosophy… then we can forget any pretence of modern philosophising." What is regarded as African philosophy today 'also' includes the corpus of critical reflection and analysis carried out on what may be termed African 'traditional philosophy,' a body of already existing knowledge that guided and communicated the African situation in the past, and that is still available – as raw material for philosophising – to the 'Africanist' scholar today. It follows that Africans, like other cultures, had their indigenous tradition of philosophy. Hence Gyekye (2004) notes a task for the "African philosophers to conceptually respond to the various problems of their society." Stating further that: "It nevertheless does not necessarily follow that the worth and significance of philosophical ideas or doctrines, propositions and conclusions is to be tethered to their cultural, historical contexts. They can considerably gain plausibility and currency beyond the confines of their cultural or historical origin."

Ideally, philosophy is a critical analysis and a rational reflection on human experience and the ideas we live by. This is consistent with the view that:

> "…part of the main business of philosophy is to inquire and critically examine societies' views about the origin and nature of the universe, the place of gods and values that govern human society… it inquires and critically examines people's reflections on the universe and the place of mankind in the universe … [in order to] reach a better understanding of society and the universe by the application of rational tools of analysis (Gyekye, 2004)."

This insight of a problem-centric African philosophy is built upon a thesis Gyekye has failed to escalate. This is the thesis that it is 'most appropriate for African philosophers to "conceptually respond to the various problems of their society." It leads to the suggestion of a type of philosophy that scholars in African philosophy must pursue after many years of narratives – most topical, methodological, value systems and epistemological – on African philosophy.

3. African Philosophy and Its Problem-Centric Root

Philosophy is not done in a vacuum. It is not an idle business. It is not 'a tale full of sound and fury but signifying nothing.' Philosophy is founded on problems. The problems a genuine philosopher sets out to address must arise from within man and the nature of man, as well as problems that arise from the world confronting` man. In philosophy, it is not identifying the problems alone that matters. Explicitly stating the nature of the problems, and raising the right kind of questions are as important, if not more important, than the answers provided. The answers, as is often the case, may even lead to new questions and further problems. "The field of philosophy," Kant (1781) says, "can be enclosed in the questions: (1) what can I know; (2) what must I do; (3) what can I hope for; (4) what is man?" Consequently, all forms of philosophy must address prevailing problems.

Long ago, Karl Popper (1952:124-127) flagged this nature of philosophy in his incisive paper, "The nature of philosophical problems and their roots in science," when he stated that:

> "For I believe that the function of a scientist or of a philosopher is to solve scientific or philosophical problems, rather than to talk about what he or other philosophers are doing or might do. Even an unsuccessful attempt to solve a scientific or philosophical problem, if it is an honest and devoted attempt, appears to me more significant than any discussion of a question such as "What is science"? Or "What is philosophy"?

Popper (1952) further states that: "We are not students of subject-matter but students of problems and problems may cut right across the borders of any subject-matter or discipline. Popper appeals further that:

> "I wish to reaffirm my conviction that a philosopher should philosophise, that is try to solve philosophic problems, rather than talk about philosophy. (Otherwise) nobody can philosophise. If this were my opinion, I would give up philosophy. But it so happens that I am not only deeply interested in certain philosophical problems (I do not much care whether they are rightly called 'philosophical problems') but possessed by the belief that I may even contribute - if only a little, and only by hard work - to their solution. And my only excuse for talking here about philosophy - instead of philosophising - is in the last resort, my hope that, in carrying out my programme for this address an opportunity will offer itself of doing a little philosophising after all."

4. Conclusion

This Popperian canon provides the theoretical guide for the argument of this paper. We have quoted Popper *in extensio* in order to indicate the most important invitation of philosophy: The African philosopher must churn out thoughts that can proffer solutions to today's African situation! They must 'wonder' on the problems facing the African experience in the areas of economics, socio-polity, science and technology, developmental theories, conflict management, environment, corruption and so on.

Are the African philosophers' theories adequately solving the problems of the African experience that they are proffered to solve? Why and how? What are the better and more viable alternatives? To do philosophy that is problem-centric in nature, basing it on the African experience and prevailing social condition is what we have argued for in this paper. For example, contemporary African philosophers have been quiet on issues such as the African Union's "AGENDA 2063" which, according the African Union (AU), "… is Africa's blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future." Chukwudum Okolo (1987:5) says "African philosophy emerges out of the [African] culture; as the African philosopher critically reflects on the language, religion, history, works of art, folklore, idiom, collective beliefs, etc. of the African people." The AU (2023) states further that:

> "It is the continent's strategic framework that aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development and is a concrete manifestation of the pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance The genesis of Agenda 2063 was the realisation by African leaders that there was a need to refocus and reprioritise Africa's agenda from the struggle against apartheid and the attainment of political independence for the continent which had been the focus of The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the precursor of the African Union; and instead to prioritise inclusive social and economic development, continental and regional integration, democratic governance and peace and security amongst other issues aimed at repositioning Africa to becoming a dominant player in the global arena."

A 'problem-centric' African philosophy is therefore a call for a philosophy of relevance for Africa and the world; one that has its roots in the social foundation of the African people. Kwasi Wiredu (2000:186) sums up our position in the succinct way thus: "Philosophy is in the picture because, as already noted, reflection on our most basic ideas about society is needed for the understanding of our problem in the first place, not to talk of what is required to solve it. But the social sciences, history, economics, anthropology, political science, etc. are all in the picture not only because insights arising from these areas of inquiry are directly relevant and, in anything else, if you push any discipline hard, philosophy will be there to find."

The agenda for a fruitful African philosophy that we here advocate also suggest the essentiality of an interdisciplinary approach to societal problem-solving, one imbued with an intellectual spirit of complementarity among various fields of inquiries. To dig into African culture and experience of the past requires, as it suggests, the collaborative research programmes of experts' scholarship in history, archaeology and sociology. The collaborative research efforts of the social scientist are necessary in the sphere of African socio-political experience. Hence the research reports in sociology, economics and political science, among others, are of dire importance to researchers that are inspired to do problem-centric philosophy that is relevant to contemporary African society. Philosophers must first be educated about their own legacy in order to be inspired to 'think' on how the African heritage can be 'deepened and advanced.' Consequently, no refinement of the African past can be done if the philosopher lacks knowledge – provided by other disciplines in science, social science and the humanities – of the African past and present is lacking.

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