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Methodological Issues in African Philosophy: Prioritizing Eclecticism

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Abstract

Philosophy is a mother blessed with adorable children. It discriminates against no child, irrespective of age. That some children muster the audacity to question their sibling's legitimacy so surely courtesy of politico-economic circumstances preceding its birth reeks of prejudice. African Philosophy, over the years, has confronted Western philosophy's skepticisms about its validity with significant success. Another prominent challenge is uncertainty about a methodology for optimally exploring African philosophy. Hence, divergence among African philosophers on methodology ideal for philosophizing in African contexts—akin it is to Western philosophy's medieval period contest on whether reason as the handmaid of faith or vice-versa is the path to reliable philosophy. Though this exudes a philosophical spirit, it may confuse and constrain debutants in African philosophy. Different schools of thought have emerged with persuasive postulations on how best to profess African philosophy so proficiently. This paper exposes these existing methodological positions. How thoroughly comprehensive an approach examines African worldviews and rigorously logical they are communicated, consistent with philosophic tenets, inform recommendation of eclectic methodology. The paper provides those unsure of how to navigate African Philosophy waters with a compass for a successful voyage. It stays faithful to expositions on African Philosophy study approaches from past to present. Undertaking this research with analytical and dialectical methods is crucial. The paper concludes methodological diversity in African philosophy is a double-edged sword; it can perplex researchers without and prosper the sphere within.

Keywords: African Philosophy, Worldview, African, Eclectic Methodology.

Introduction

Philosophy's rise millennia ago rejigged human knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and prioritization. It advanced when we know, where we know, how we know, what we know and consequent utilization so profusely. Developments we continue to enjoy in different facets of our existence owe gratitude to the philosophical spirit's sustenance irrespective of continental practice. The widespread narrative that philosophy originated from Greece in the West, marking the pre-Socratic epoch, seems to either dismiss the existence of other

continental philosophies with a hand wave or condescendingly subordinate them to Western philosophy. This impinges on African philosophy and underscores how African philosophers' vehement and consistent efforts to repudiate such supposition.

The conception of Africa with its Saharan part's exclusion is somewhat mischievous. Thus, "In modern times the primary document concerning the "question" of the ancient Egyptian connection with the rest of Black Africa was, until the Cairo symposium, Hegel's *Philosophy of History*... Philosophy in the ancient times of Pharaonic Egypt was, then, a kind of pedagogy fielding the wise teachings (sebayit) of the old sages, who were scholars, priests, and officials or statesmen at the same time" (Obenga, 2004, p.33). This confronts two biases still welcomed by many Westerners and some Africans. There is no African philosophy and if peradventure there is, it is preceded by and inferior to Western philosophy. Unsuccessful efforts to distance Egypt from Africa were partly intended to preserve this spurious narrative. Ancient Egyptian African philosophy yielded intellectual, socio-political, architectural and economic exploits that inspired the ancient world, cascading to us today.

Nevertheless, African philosophy craves an approach addressing contemporary African realities with precision; one that takes cognizance of various channels, regardless of remoteness, from which indigenous ideas are sourced, comprehended, communicated, and philosophically refined. Typical of philosophy, the research torch would illuminate the path to truth pursuit with relevance that may transcend Africa. Concerted attempts have been made by philosophers to table workable methodologies but the puzzle remains partly unsolved. African philosophy grappling with attaining a methodology consensus has lingered.

Conscious this cannot be resolved by compulsion, I'm upbeat about contention. A case is made for the adoption of eclectic methodology underpinned by varieties of African ideas, exploration modes and propensities of African *weltanschauung* (worldview). Izu Marcel Onyeocha (1997) argues, "African view of reality is inclusivistic with nothing left out. As such it aims at synthesis" (p.143). Africans understand simple or complex objects of knowledge in our *lebenswelt* (world of given facts) from interconnected standpoints similar to a spider's webs. This *status-quo* then requires a methodology compatible in spirit and practice.

Indeed, different schools of thought have emerged with persuasive postulations on how best to profess African philosophy so proficiently. This paper exposes these existing methodological positions. How thoroughly comprehensive an approach examines African worldviews and rigorously logical they are communicated, consistent with philosophic tenets, inform recommendation of eclectic methodology. The paper provides those uncertain of how to navigate African Philosophy waters with a compass for a successful voyage. It stays faithful to expositions on African Philosophy study approaches from past to present. Undertaking this research with analytical and dialectical methods is indispensable to this inquiry's success. The paper concludes methodological diversity in African philosophy is a double-edged sword; it can perplex researchers without and prosper the sphere within.

Particularistic Methodology

This approach towards African philosophy is abundantly contextual. It excavates, examines, and expounds African beliefs, tenets, systems or worldviews peculiar to diverse African societies. Ontological, religious, cultural, economic, political, ethical and epistemological

conceptions are intertwined in day-to-day interactions with other beings. These interpretations of realities are collated so fastidiously by philosophers to constitute a thought system earning regard as philosophy. Bearing John Mbiti, Placid Tempels, and Leopold Senghor as key exponents in mind:

They hold that the different African worldviews properly constitute what could be regarded as African philosophy. They would define African philosophy as the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas. It places little or no emphasis on scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation and makes more emphases on local relevance or context. This does not in any way mean that this trend undermines the significance of scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation. This particularist perspective is evident in Placid Tempel's *La Philosophie Bantou* and John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (Kanu, 2015, p.49).

Put differently, particularistic methodology argues African philosophy studies through investigation, appreciation and maximization of indigenous perspectives in Africa—ethnophilosophy. It clamours for originality in philosophizing that spotlights Africans as they are unadulterated by socio-cultural or politico-economic influences. Also, worthy of emphasis is this methodology isn't disinclined to logic. It accommodates logical workings but insists on juxtaposition with traditional African views of reality. Crucial is this to conserving uniqueness that distinguishes African philosophy from other continental philosophies. This position doesn't lack dissidents.

Universalistic Methodology

As the term suggests, this approach towards African philosophy underscores recourse to the conventional rational evaluative-speculative method of philosophy as the most dependable. It contends a full infusion of philosophy's critical tendencies to distil enduring African truths and as a precondition for African philosophy designation. Any continental studies that appropriate philosophy ought to simulate general philosophy's investigative methodology to the letter or risk reckon as an impostor. Thus:

The universalist or professional school of African philosophy was promoted by scholars such as Peter Bodunrin, Kwesi Wiredu, Odera Oruka and Paul Hountondji. Their thought is grouped into a school because they share fundamental positions and assumptions. They argue that philosophy is the same everywhere and uses the same methodology and thus African philosophy should be critical and not a descriptive record of African beliefs (Kanu, 2015, p.47).

Universalism advocates research method uniformity across philosophical engagements regardless of place, continent or peculiarities. Selective conformity jeopardizes the fallibilistic atmosphere essential to gaining unprecedented philosophic insight.

Furthermore, A. G. A. Bello (2004) argues, "What the particularists lose sight of is that the universalist agenda is more inclusive than their own... The universalist case, in my view, has greater merit, in that, first, the insistence on criticism and reconstruction is to make the efforts of contemporary African philosophers truly philosophical" (p.264). He appraises

particularism as too parochial to succeed in bearing edible African philosophical fruits and advertises universalism as so inclusive to acknowledge or accommodate fruitful external ideas. Whether universalism can withstand reservations would be interesting to see.

Eclectic Methodology

This approach towards African philosophy is broadest in purview. It epitomizes eighteenth century Copernican revolution championed by Immanuel Kant to conflate empiricism and rationalism. Eclectic methodology denotes the mixture of particularistic and universalistic methods to overcome extreme indigenization and alienation constraints. Of great interest is to preserve perennial African worldviews, beliefs, systems in pristine conditions as much as possible and philosophy's rational evaluative-speculative eyes without prejudice simultaneously. The method intervenes in a Kant-*esque* manner to attempt to settle the lingering dispute between particularism and universalism. That is:

The Ecclectic school of African philosophy would define African Philosophy as the combination of the universalist and particularist approaches to African philosophy. This would involve sifting the philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc, and reflecting on them by professionally trained African philosophers. They believe that at the point of this romance between the professional and unprofessional, authentic African philosophy is realized. It argues that different schools are already doing African philosophy, but that they will do better if they join heads together (Kanu, 2015, p.51).

This methodology prefers a collaborative instead of combative disposition towards unearthing and optimizing Africa's epistemic resources. Particularism's concerns about the dilution of African ideas and universalism's concerns about the trivialization of philosophy's critical inputs are addressed. Again, so reflective is sensitivity to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's observation (1999) that "The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity"(p.1). Maximum focus on African viewpoints minimizes or eliminates imperialistic vestiges in African Philosophy studies yields.

Sage Philosophy Methodology

This approach towards African philosophy places premium on wisdom. It draws inspiration from wisdom's profound possibilities spanning from its deposits in qualities of some Africans to resultant realities that enhance human existence. This manifests in proverbs, riddles, folklore, anecdotes, aphorisms, etc. The methodology presupposes insightful African worldviews are domiciled in sages—persons regarded wise in African communities—that emerge through observations, personal experiences and/or lessons from forebears. Pioneered by Henry Odera Oruka as "philosophic sagacity," it explores tenable African ideas through eyes of elders acclaimed to demonstrate good judgment across diverse matters. That is:

Sage philosophy was developed by a Kenyan philosopher, Henry Odera Oruka (1944-1995). Through interviews with sages from traditional groups, he identified philosophical sages in different cultures who were more of the repositories of cultural wisdom. He divided them into two groups; the first he called Folk sages, who embodied community wisdom; the second he called

Philosophical sages, who held a critical stand towards that wisdom (Kanu, 2015, p.53).

Oruka's Folk and Philosophical sages' distinction confronts any accusation sages herein are entirely crude bereft of philosophy's critical properties. Researching African philosophy by consulting community perspectives through Folk sages facilitates access to undiluted African systems so significantly. It decreases distance (likely covered by imperialistic inputs) between the enquirer and the knowledge object, ensuring accurate understanding. Proneness of Philosophical sages to reevaluate norms in African climes is helpful a trail to African philosophy acquaintance. Additionally, Fayemi Ademola Kazeem (2012) elaborates "philosophic sagacity is a kind of individualized approach, characterized by the conviction that the actual sources and agents of knowledge and values in a given society are its sages and not the entire community" (p.188). This underlines the consequential epistemological and ethical contributions of sages in Africa.

Hermeneutic Methodology

This approach towards African philosophy makes interpretative possibilities associated with various African viewpoints a focal interest. Driven by an unspoken conviction about how so enormous meanings attached to African concepts shape comprehension and action, this methodology aims to magnify nuances of African ideas. Misinterpretations or lopsided interpretations are hurdles to jump over with resounding success. Captivated by Tsenay Serequeberhan's hermeneutics of "effective-historical consciousness", Justin Sands (2023) writes:

In short, an 'effective-historical consciousness' is self-awareness of one's own historicity and thus their own finite perspective on the world. This allows them to recognize that they not only hold prejudices (which are essential to their own self-understanding) but that they can learn and appreciate others' perspectives and others' own historicity. Prejudice and historical consciousness thus provide an opening for future possibilities, which Serequeberhan will eventually employ to craft a concept of a lived existence which can pass through the conditions of the historical present whilst crafting a more open, more liberated historical future (p.34-35).

Values of interpretative authenticity and inclusivity are stressed in exploring African worldviews. The quest to unravel undiluted viewpoints that conceptualize Africans aptly is laudable but needn't override the consideration of other viewpoints.

Also, L. D. B. Komo (2017) posits "Through the exploration of meaning and symbols relying on African languages and cultures - myths, proverbs, rituals, etc. -, it was quite simple to demonstrate that African people reason and therefore philosophize" (p.82). Underscored are interpretative efforts *vis-à-vis* reality's multi-facets in Africa are knowhow cues on researching African philosophy. But from the foregoing African philosophy methodologies, which can commute curious enquirers of either African or foreign descent to the Promised Land?

Tenability of Eclectic Methodology

The array of African philosophy methodologies available elicits uncertainty about which best to adopt. Although they present vehement arguments worthy of attention, as shown in the preceding pages, one stands out among the many. I understand the enormity of this assertion and would attempt to adduce reasons so tenable that they can withstand

criticisms considerably and warrant subscription by any researcher interested in African philosophy. This doesn't suggest eclectic methodology is perfect, but it is thoroughly comprehensive and rigorously logical enough to enable investigation and maximization of African philosophy.

First, eclectic methodology prioritizes African contexts. The label African philosophy connotes a philosophic tradition peculiar to the African continent that showcases indigenous thought trajectories examining African existence's multi-facets—any philosophy less can elicit doubts about terminology aptness. Hence, it is logical to adopt a methodology that seeks African thought-provoking perspectives minimally adulterated by European colonial inputs; our irritation today towards centuries-old colonialism in most parts of Africa cannot erase the unintended colonial past and consequences on African worldviews. This colours arguments about an unblemished African worldview as a whole, from remote *cum* recent past to present, idealistic rather than realistic.

Nonetheless, eclectic methodology possesses great prospects to guide enquirers to significantly original ideas across Africa that broach metaphysical, ethical, epistemological and logical subjects. Though sometimes garbed in crude outfits, characteristic of products of the intellect that undergo evolution, it underscores genuine human attempts to distil meanings in different existential compartments for humanity's maximization. That is, "In African myths of creation, the human being is always placed at the center of the universe. Humans therefore tend to see the universe from that perspective and consider the universe, and indeed everything, in terms of its usefulness or otherwise to humans (Onyeocha, 2007, p.118). This methodology is bound to mirror how perennial truths that feature so uniquely in African societies shape understanding of being's origin/nature, the acceptable or unacceptable, formation and constitution of knowledge, and what passes as reasonably consistent or not. Eclectic methodology ensures realization that:

The African conceives of reality in terms of a universe of forces that are linked together, and that are in constant interplay with one another... The individual in African societies cannot however be considered apart from the organismic theory of society. The individual has no personality and no role unless as a community person, like a part of an engine. Society takes precedence over the individual who nevertheless considers his or her expected culture-bound relations within the context of a scheme of social security and interdependence (Onyeocha, 2007, p.99-118).

Revelations of this calibre provide foundational take-off points for enquirers as they proceed to particular interest areas. It assists in decoding conceptual proclivities encountered that can bemuse at first sight. There is preference to see Africa through eyes of Africans instead of foreigners whose preconceptions cannot be guaranteed restriction.

Second, eclectic methodology prioritizes philosophy's enquiry protocol. Emphasis on profound attention to age-old African worldviews doesn't override systematic operations that distinguish philosophy and immortalize its contributions throughout history. It would be delusional to regard African philosophy as so without conspicuous features of rational-evaluative-speculative activities. The temptation to overemphasize indigenous perspectives solely is herein resisted. Thus, independent of continental trappings, philosophy is ushered in to systematize and publicize reigning African ideas. This systematization ensures expedience of the appellation African philosophy.

In other words, African worldviews are the crude oil, philosophy, the refinery, and African philosophy, the refined product. Without refinement, the latent potential of crude oil to emerge as more useful, yielding petroleum motor spirit, diesel, or kerosene would remain untapped. African ideas could share the same fate. This necessitates the deployment of rational-evaluative-speculative protocol constituting machinery of Philosophy refinery—eclectic methodology's persuasiveness is so irresistible to behold. Philosophical traits like curiosity and open-endedness mark interrogations of African beliefs, traditions, verities, midwifing African philosophy. In *A Discourse on the Method*, Rene Descartes (1637/2006) provides us insight into the quadpod on which philosophy's machinery stands:

The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not incontrovertibly know to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid both prejudice and premature conclusions; and to include nothing in my judgements other than that which presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly, that I would have no occasion to doubt it. The second was to divide all the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as many as were required to solve them in the best way. The third was to conduct my thoughts in a given order, beginning with the simplest and most easily understood objects, and gradually ascending, as it were step by step, to the knowledge of the most complex; and positing an order even on those which do not have a natural order of precedence. The last was to undertake such complete enumerations and such general surveys that I would be sure to have left nothing out. (p.17)

This corroborates eclectic methodology as it underlines a critical attitude towards supposed African ideas sullied by either personal or neo-colonial biases; encourages deconstruction in deciphering African ideas; urges orderliness in procession from known to unknown dimensions of African ideas; and recommends research efforts undergo review so painstakingly. These are crucial to African philosophy's sustainability with import for the subject-area and researchers.

Apparently, eclectic methodology in a dialectical fashion synthesizes authenticity and objectivity so considerably in facing African philosophy. It pursues preserving the most original African worldviews—sidestepping mischievous misinterpretations or concoctions—and invites philosophy's rational-evaluative-speculative microscope to examine them. Given this clear rare inclination, as opposed to ones in other methodologies, it would be no error to regard eclectic methodology *primus inter pares*.

Conclusion

Besides ambivalence towards the existence of African philosophy, the challenge of no consensus on methodology to rely on in its research confronts African philosophers to this day. Arising discourses on particularistic, universalistic, eclectic, sage philosophy and hermeneutic methodologies demonstrate concerted efforts over the years to resolve this controversy. Nevertheless, it festers. Envisaging this can clog present and future African philosophy researchers' wheels, this paper intervenes with renewed vigour to table eclectic methodology as the most viable option. The methodology prioritizes authentic African contexts and philosophy's *modus operandi*, best positioning it to bring a formidable African philosophy that stands tall alongside other continental philosophies. Though optimistic about eclectic methodology's prospects, I do not imply its perfection—an attribute that so often eludes our human intellectualizations.

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