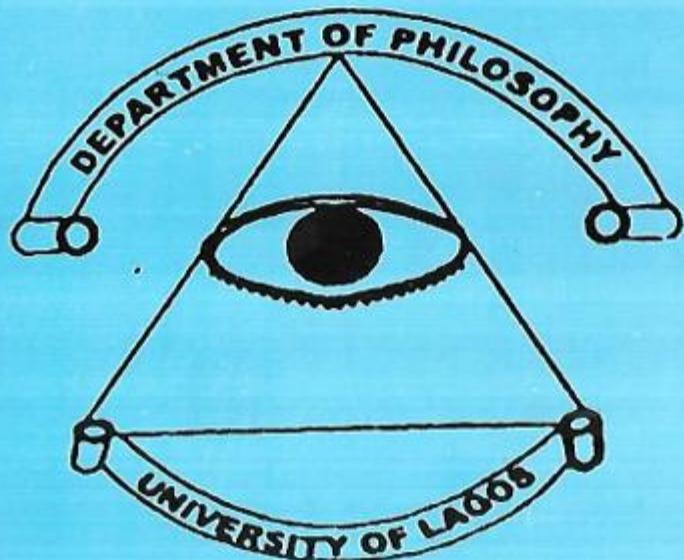


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¹J.I. Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research & Publishers Ltd., 1999), p. 30.

²Benjamin B. Olshin, "The I-Ching or 'Book of Changes': A Chinese Space-Time Model and a Philosophy of Divination," *Journal of Philosophy and Culture*, Vol.2, (July 2005),pp.17-21.

³J.I. Omoregbe, op.cit., p.50.

⁴Willam Hare, "Open-Minded Inquiry: A Glossary of Key Concepts", available at <http://www.criticalthinking.org/articles/open-minded-inquiry.cf>. Last visit: June 04, 2008

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Editorial: Interrogating Sophie Abosede Oluwole's Intellectual Contributions to African Philosophy

Recognizing the importance of intellectual legacy, archiving original philosophical ideas and expanding scholarship horizons, this volume 28 of *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* is a special issue dedicated to the memory and celebration of Professor Abosede Sophie Olúwolé who passed on December 23, 2018. The theme of this special issue is "Interrogating Sophie Abosede Olúwolé's Intellectual Contributions to African Philosophy." Professor Olúwolé's works in African philosophy are few of the iconic contributions of women in the discipline. In consonance with the philosophical supposition that one of the best tributes to a scholar is to criticize her ideas and works, this special issue is an intellectual celebration of Professor Olúwolé. Consequently, the contributions in this volume reflect, expand, and offer fresh perspectives on some topical issues in African philosophy (and in Olúwolé's scholarship) including: the existence of witchcraft and mystical powers, binary complementarity as an African ontology, orality and decoloniality, virtues of omoluabi in intra-African and transcontinental contexts, foundations of morality in African culture, gender relations, science and African myths, cultural enslavement and intellectual rape of African minds, and epistemic restoration through classical African philosophy.

This volume features eight articles and a book review. Beginning with Oladele Abiodun Balogun's "Conceptual Decolonisation as a Foundational Theme in Sophie Olúwolé's Conception of African Philosophy," this article argues that conceptual decolonisation runs through Sophie Olúwolé's philosophical discourses on African thought. It shows how the idea of conceptual decolonisation is central to Olúwolé's writings on indigenous conceptual schemes and ideas on African epistemology, gender, religion, and spirituality. In the second article, "A Critical Appraisal of Sophie Olúwolé's Afrocentric Conceptual Decolonization," Abimbola Oluwafemi Emmanuel discusses the major claims of Olúwolé's approach to conceptual decolonization and calls it 'Afrocentric conceptual decolonization'. The author argues that Olúwolé's decolonization approach is not cogently viable.

The third article by Mohammed Akinola Akomolafe, "Binary Complementarity in Sophie Olúwolé's African Ontology: A Critical Appraisal," examines the notion of "Binary Complementarity" as an Afro-metaphysical scheme. While making a distinction between binary opposition and binary complementarity, the author interrogates the originality of Olúwolé's ontological posture of binary complementarity. By drawing some comparative insights from Olúwolé and Asouzu's works on complementary ontology, Akomolafe argues that the ontological discourse on binary complementarity is neither original to each of these scholars but to Alfred N. Whitehead. Emmanuel Ofuasia in the fourth article "Sophie Olúwolé, "Quantum Mechanics" and the Ethnoscientific Practices of Traditional Africa: The Yorùbá Example" provides a further reflection on one of Olúwolé's unpublished works on the possibility of science in traditional Africa. Ofuasia aims to take Olúwolé's ideas on the subject to its ethnoscientific conclusion by hermeneutically unpacking some assertions of the traditional African (Yorùbá) sage, Ọrúnmilà (and his disciples), that can be found in the Ifáritual archive and which are suggestive of a version of African ethnoscience. He argues that such ethnoscientific thoughts and practices antedate the contemporary findings of systemic memory process and quantum mechanics.

In the fifth article, "Omolúàbí as the Foundation of Sustainable Moral Development," Olumide Oyewole Oyebade revisits the concept of Omolúàbí with a view to reposition indigenous virtue-ethics as the foundation of sustainable moral development in the fourth industrial age. Oyebade argues that by properly situating the character of Omolúàbí within the indigenous African orientation, with emphasis on binary complementarity, the concept is most adequate to harmonise intellect and moral virtues for collective well-being in modern and multicultural societies. The sixth article, Benson Peter Irabor's "Rethinking Sophie Olúwolé's Rational Basis of Yoruba Religious Ethic" provides further reflections on Olúwolé's scholarship in African ethics. Though Olúwolé is renowned as a defender of the rationalist foundation of morality in African ethical discourses, a position often seen as oppositional to supernaturalist thesis that affirms religion as the foundation of morality, Irabor locates Olúwolé's position as reconciliatory of the contentions between ethical supernaturalism and non-supernaturalism. He contends that there is a 'soft' version of the

Divine Command Theory (DCT) in Yoruba ethic, which is implicit in Olúwolé's defense of the rational basis of Yoruba ethic.

Away from moral debate, the seventh article by Ibukunoluwa Komolafe is entitled "Equality or Partnership? A Critical Appraisal of Sophie Olúwolé's Notion of Gender Relations." This paper critically appraises Olúwolé's conception of gender relations in Yoruba culture. Komolafe argues that Olúwolé's scholarship on feminism and gender resonates a contested space of the indigenous African conception of women, their social roles, obligations, and aspirations. The author exposes the contradictions in Olúwolé's conception of gender relations in the understanding of subjectivity, social recognition, hierarchy, and political organization.

The eight article by Moses Debo Gbadebo "Addressing the Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind: The Pedagogical Imperative" discusses how Olúwolé challenges the historical legacy of Eurocentrism, European colonialism, and how both have led to the mental manipulation and the cultural enslavement of the contemporary African minds. The author explores the pedagogical imperative of indigenous knowledges in addressing the challenges of cultural alienation, blurred identities and development in contemporary Africa, while also promoting epistemic freedom of African mindsets and value-reorientation.

The concluding article, "Òrúnmìlà and Epistemic Restoration," by Renate Schepenis are view of the Dutch edition of Olúwolé's magnum opus, *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà*, translated and edited by Saskia van der Werff. Schepen underscores the importance of Olúwolé's book to African epistemic restoration and highly revealing of epistemic injustice caused to Òrúnmìlà in Yoruba intellectual tradition.

While I invite the reader's critical lens to each of the articles featured in this volume, I look forward to welcoming critical reactions to these articles (and others in previous volumes of *NJP*) in future editions of the journal.

Prof. D.I.O. Anele
Editor-in-Chief

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Conceptual Decolonisation as a Foundational Theme in Sophie Olúwolé's Conception of African Philosophy

Prof. Abiodun Oladele Balogun

Abstract

Conceptual decolonisation, which aims at ensuring that African meanings and values reflect the original ideas, without being unduly influenced by modernity and westernisation, has been a defining feature of contemporary African Philosophy. This paper argues that conceptual decolonisation runs through Sophie Olúwolé's philosophical discourses on African thought. It shows how the idea of conceptual decolonisation, which not only frowns at the superimposition of foreign categories of thoughts on African mind but establishes African concepts and ideas in its pristine forms, is central to Olúwolé's scholarship. This paper underscores Olúwolé's efforts in exploring indigenous conceptual schemes and ideas on African epistemology, gender, religion, and spirituality to support her radical submissions on Yoruba thought. This paper recommends further research on Olúwolé's idea on decolonisation of knowledges in twenty first century Africa.

Keywords: Conceptual decolonisation, oral traditions, Sophie Olúwolé, foundational theme.

Introduction

The task of conceptual decolonisation has gained the attention of African scholars across different fields. African philosophers have taken up this task vigorously since the inception of the debates on the existence of rational thought in African tradition. Underpinning most African scholarly works are efforts to liberate the African mind from foreign superimpositions, alien accretions and undue influences of Western ideas and ideals on African *Weltanschauung*. In attempts to decolonise the African mind and develop an identity that is succinctly "African" in its pristine form, many African scholars have over the years engaged in decolonising the conceptual framework and distorted

African beliefs in different areas such as education, person, language, religion, politics, etc.

A major way of carrying out such decolonisation effort is through the exploration and utilisation of African languages, religions, cultures, proverbs, myths, and folklores, etc., for the purpose of showing and promoting the intellectual heritage of traditional African thought. Other ways as demonstrated by some African scholars include the analysis of comparative research between western or eastern and African concepts to understand better the perspective of both traditions and to further “decolonise” the African thought from uncritical inheritance of alien conceptual categories. Instructive in this regard, are works of scholars including P.O. Dopamu, J.O Awolalu, J.S. Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, J.A.I. Bewaji, O.A. Balogun, Ebunoluwa Oduwole, Ifeanyi Menkiti, A.K. Fayemi, and Jonathan Chimakonam.

Moreover, it is important to note that there are African scholars who did not explicitly mention their attempt to engage in the task of conceptual decolonisation, but a thorough analysis of their works especially those on African philosophy, would reveal elements of conscious, critical and reflective efforts to philosophise specific topics using the indigenous African conceptual scheme and worldviews as the foundation. Sophie Olúwolé is one such scholar.

This paper analyses some of the works of Olúwolé with a view to showing that there are elements of conceptual decolonisation in most of her philosophical discourses on African ethics, gender, epistemology, and metaphysics. Consequently, the first section of this paper focuses on the introduction and the meaning of conceptual decolonisation and its implication for contemporary Africa. The second section discusses Olúwolé’s work in African philosophy to show conceptual decolonisation as an intrinsic foundational theme. The last section provides a reflection on her scholarship with concluding remarks containing some directions for future African philosophy.

The Idea of Conceptual Decolonisation

The idea of decolonisation presupposes the deconstruction of institutionalised colonial structures and removal of undue influences of western power that exist in post political independence of African states. Decolonisation is the reversal of the psychological, cultural, religious, and physical effects of colonialism on a particular society. It entails deliberate and conscious efforts in tackling the superimposition of western superiority in Africa and restoration of African cultural identity.

Conceptual decolonisation is the systematic, critical and deliberate attempts to utilise different African “languages in philosophical thinking, with a view to guarding against the uncritical assimilation of conceptual schemes embedded in foreign languages and cultures while, at the same time, promoting an adequate understanding of the intellectual foundations of African culture. It is a systematic and reflective attempt to liberate African conceptual schemes.”¹

According to Kwasi Wiredu, “to define conceptual decolonisation is easy enough. It is the elimination from our thoughts, the modes of conceptualisation that came to us through colonisation that remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices.”² Conceptual decolonisation implies the critical evaluation of African conceptual schemes in contrast to traditions and their other modes of thought. As an explorative exercise involving critical and comparative reflections on ideas and concepts in indigenous languages, conceptual decolonisation has some recipes.

¹ As cited in Oladele Abiodun Balogun, “Conceptual Decolonization as a Postmodern Resistance,” in *Ka Osi So Onye: African Philosophy in the Postmodern Era*, edited by Edwin E. Eteyibo and Jonathan O. Chimakonam (Wilmington: Vernon press, 2018), 273-290.

² Kwasi Wiredu, “Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy: Some Personal Reflections”, *Dans Rue Descartes* 2, no.36 (2020), 53-64.

Wiredu explains the recipe of conceptual decolonisation thus:

Try to think them through in your own African language and, on the basis of the results, review the intelligibility of the associated problems or the fallibility of the apparent solutions that have tempted you when you have pondered them in some metropolitan language. The propositions in question may be about topics that have no special involvement with Africa, but they may well be about the internalities of an African thought system.³

Wiredu states further that the superimposition that necessitated the engagement of conceptual decolonisation has come to us (Africans) through three principal avenues:-the first is the avenue of language, that is the language of the colonisers which is a medium of study and mode of communication in western education; secondly through the influence of western and foreign religions and thirdly through politics. By giving serious attention to these avenues, conceptual decolonisation is the attempt to free the African mind from undue western influences and alien accretions and western conceptual scheme necessitated the need for conceptual decolonisation.

As shall be shown in the next section, a substantive part of Oluwole's scholarship is directed at unveiling vital indigenous concepts of philosophical relevance in their original forms as embedded in traditional African thought.

³ Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy: Four Essays*, ed. Olusegun Oladipo (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995), 24.

Conceptual Decolonisation as a Bedrock of Olúwolé's Conception of African Philosophy

Olúwolé was the first female to receive a doctorate degree in Nigeria. She was born in Igbara-Oke Ondo state, Nigeria, in 1935, the eighth child of Anglican parents who were traders of the Edo people. She was given the name Sofia by the headmaster of her school, who considered her exceptionally brilliant, when she was baptised at around the age of eight. She was vocal about the role of women in philosophy, and the disproportionate representation of African thinkers in education.⁴

According to Gail Presbey, she devoted her career to studying Yoruba philosophy, translating the ancient Yoruba *Ifá* corpus, which embodies the teachings of Orunmila, a philosopher revered as an *Órísá* (a divinity) in the *Ifá* pantheon.⁵ Olúwolé argued that songs, proverbs, liturgies, and stories are important sources of African responses to perennial philosophical questions as well as to contemporary issues, including feminism.⁶ In her book entitled *Culture, Gender and Developmental Theories in Africa*, Olúwolé tackled the topical issue of gender inequality and sexism. She analysed the origin of sexism and posited the role of gender as a tool in formulating developmental theories for the enhancement of contemporary African society, by comparing the role of women in two traditions (Western and African). Olúwolé used Yoruba indigenous proverbs to express the idea that the Yoruba culture emphasises the equal place of men and women in gender relations.

⁴ Christine Manby and Peyvand Khorsandi, "Sophie Oluwole: Nigerian Philosopher who Put Nigeria on the Map", *Independent*, 10th January 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/sophie-oluwole-dead-obituary-african-philosopher-nigeria-yoruba-mamalawo-a8720696.html>

⁵ Gail Presbey, "Sophie Olúwolé's Major Contributions to African Philosophy," *Hypatia* 35, (2020): 231–242, doi:10.1017/hyp.2020.6.

⁶ Ibid.

Olúwolé asserts that the gender inequality ravaging African societies came as a result of Africans' interactions with the West and the imposition of western philosophical traditions on Africans. She argues that Aristotle's definition of justice as "treating equals equally and unequals unequally" sets the pace for the social norm of disparity among the male and female gender in western tradition and later transferred to Africa. Although as noted by Olúwolé, it is not a general rule that there was no form of patriarchy in the Yoruba tradition, citing instances of some Yoruba proverbs to support her arguments, some of such proverbs include:

Okol'olôri Aya

(The husband is the head of the wife

Obinrin s'owà nù, o ni ohun k'ô lori oko

(A woman who lacks good character, always blames her marital problems on ill luck).⁷

In spite of some obvious forms of patriarchy in the Yoruba culture, Olúwolé established that for the Yoruba there is relatedness between both sexes and that the Yoruba believe in equality among genders, this can be confirmed through some of the following *Ifa* aphorisms:

Bi'okunrin r'ejo ti obinrin pa â,

Ki ejo o ma sa a ti lo

If a man sights a snake and a woman kills it, it's well so long as the snake does not escape.

Erù ku n 'ilé, won lo sin s'oko

⁷ Sophie B. Oluwole, Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa, *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement* 22, No. 1, Gender Revisited/Le genre revisité (CODESIRA, 1997): 95-121, 19-12-2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24482785>.

Omo kù l'òko, won wà sin s. 'ilé

Ibi ô ju ibi,

Biase b'éru L 'ase b 'omo.

Eru ni baba, Onà là jin.

Màfiyàjemi Nitorí mo jé àléjo

Bi iwo na à bâ dé ibo miràn

Alejà ni wo nâ àyi à

When a slave dies at home, she is buried at the farmstead

When the true born dies in the farm, she is brought home for burial

Yet one birth is not greater than the other

The way the slave's child is born, is the same as the master's child is born,

The slave has a father. Only he is far away.

Do not oppress me, because I am a stranger,

If you get to another country, you too will be a stranger.⁸

Da gike, da gike

Aakekanko le e da gike

Da' gi la, Da' gi la

Eelekan o le ledagi la;

B' o s'erelu

Osugbo o le e da awo se

⁸ Sophie B. Oluwole, Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa, 106-107

Cutting alone, cutting alone,
The axe cannot cut alone,
Splitting alone, splitting alone;
The wedge cannot split alone;

The above excerpts from *Ifa Corpus* show that there was partnership between both the female and male gender, a partnership that gave room for mutual cooperation and not gender oppression in Yoruba Society. Without the Erelu (the female member), the cult of Osugbo cannot operate.⁹

To Olúwolé, unlike in the western tradition where inequality between the male and female gender is prevalent and systemic, it is noted that in the African tradition, the Yoruba recognises the importance and significance of women in different social groups and as such allows for women to hold certain positions of power in both economic and political spheres. The above claim was justified with her arguments that “perhaps the most intriguing aspect of ancient Yoruba thought is their recognition of the male and female as partners in progress. This male-female principle is seen as so fundamental that it is not denied or ignored in the organisation of the society.”¹⁰

Moreover, Olúwolé argues that on the issue of gender and sexism in traditional Yoruba thought, there exists a form of complementarity between the male and female gender in the society which “guarantees women’s rights, and status, and preserves an important role for women, youths and foreigners in politics.”¹¹ For her, “This is beautifully recorded in a riddle among the Yoruba speaking community of Poro in

⁹ Ibid. 110

¹⁰ Ibid. 106

¹¹ Gail Presbey, “Sophie Oluwole’s Major Contribution to African Philosophy”, 231

Northern Ivory Coast. When asked how many people are in the village, the answer was: 'Two, man and woman'."¹²

The analysis of Olúwolé on gender relationship and equality among the Yoruba, reveals the application of the method of conceptual decolonisation in its implicit forms because most of her examples were drawn from indigenous conceptual scheme to support her submissions. In the area of African metaphysics, Oluwole explores the existence of witchcraft practices in many African cultures by providing justification that support the reality of such practices in Africa. According to her, the traditional Yoruba hold strong views on the existence of witches and the idea of reincarnation due to "overwhelming empirical evidence."¹³

Witchcraft is usually regarded as a peculiar power by virtue of which some people perform actions which the ordinary man cannot normally perform.¹⁴ Olúwolé analysed the nature and status of witchcraft. While it is true that some scholars have argued against the reality of the existence of witchcraft and the evil nature of such phenomena, Olúwolé argues that the belief in witchcraft is a reality among the Yoruba and such phenomena is not necessarily evil at all times but may become evil depending on the person and the purpose/intent of such powers.

The occurrence of witchcraft as such for Oluwole is not a phenomenon that is distinct or strange to Africans but the practice is received with more open-mindedness especially backed up with cultural evidence and sometimes personal experience. The African justification for the belief in witchcraft is based on empirical evidence rather than scientific,

¹² Sophie Oluwole, "Culture, Gender and Developmental Theories ", 106

¹³ Sophie Bo'se'dé Olúwolé, *Witchcraft, reincarnation, and the god-head*. (Ikeja: Excel Publishers, 1992b)

¹⁴ Sophie Olúwolé, "On the Existence of Witchcraft", *Second Order*, Vol. VII, (1978, 20)

which explains why such phenomenon cannot be justified via scientific modes as the westerners tried to do.

Furthermore, Olúwolé in her book, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-head*, stated that the work of a philosopher is to give a full representation of the different available perspectives on a particular subject in order to expose the students to the opposing views. Following this path, Olúwolé examines the nature of reincarnation in African thought as well as in other traditions and at the end pitched her tent with the position of traditional Yoruba on witchcraft and reincarnation.

In her own view, the natural phenomenon known as witchcraft should not be understood from a scientific standpoint, hence it will be discarded because it does not correspond to any scientific explanation or rational justification. Perhaps if the practice of witchcraft as a metaphysical phenomenon had been empirically accepted as a part of human existence, the westerners would not have the problem of searching for a more scientific justification.

It is pertinent to note in agreement with Olúwolé that there exist some events such as witchcraft and reincarnation that are not yet fully understood or comprehended by the human mind but hold the possibility of future explanations, which is nevertheless accepted and accommodated within the African tradition. Some of these mysteries are phenomena which are not yet understood and explained, however, this does not foreclose the possibility of being understood; since there is still the possibility of an explanation in the future.¹⁵ She argues that the concept and belief in reincarnation like witchcraft is not distinctively African. “Reincarnation is conventionally defined as the

¹⁵ Kazeem, A. Fayemi, “Obituary: Oluwole, the Scholar who Abandoned English for Philosophy for Fear of Soyinka”, December 24, 2018, <https://www.thecable.ng/obituary-oluwole-the-scholar-who-abandoned-english-for-philosophy-for-the-fear-of-soyinka>

rebirth of a dead individual. However, details of such rebirth and its relationship to its earlier parenthood vary from society to society (and even within the same society).¹⁶

In an attempt to justify the African belief in reincarnation, Olúwolé examines three preconditions as provided within the Yoruba tradition. First is family resemblance which is supported by the Yoruba proverb: *Eni bi ni la njo* (a man always takes after his progenitor). The Yoruba believe that the first precondition of reincarnation is the birth of a reincarnated person; where the newly born carries similar striking traits from any of the dead family member and such child often bear marks or certain deformities from the dead ancestors or grandparents.

The second justification for the belief in reincarnation is predicated on the *Abiku* or *Ogbanje* syndrome. To the Yoruba, there are children who are “born to die”, putting their parents through endless agony and in order to stop the continuous rebirth of such children, the parents place marks on them to recognise them when next they are reborn.

The third justification is based on memory transfer. Olúwolé recounts the stories told of children who had identical memories about specific events that occurred during the lifetime of a dead ancestor, using stories and observation of children from other parts of the world (India and Philadelphia).¹⁷

Olúwolé maintains that even though the *abiku* syndrome is not a popular occurrence among Africans and has been subjected to various criticisms, there is a need to unravel and explain how the conspicuous marks placed on the corpse of a dead child come to reappear on a new baby. The fact is that the *abiku* or *ogbanje* syndrome as explained by Africans based on their metaphysical explanations of the universe, defy western scientific understanding.

¹⁶ Ibid. 42

¹⁷ Sophie Oluwole, "Witchcraft, Reincarnation, and the godhead", 42-44

A proper examination of traditional Yoruba beliefs reveal that the Yoruba cultural beliefs support the existence of reincarnation and witchcraft with a clear evidence which can be gleaned in some Yoruba names such as Durotimi (abide with me), Kokumo (die no more), Babatunde (Father has returned), Iyabo/Yetunde (Mother has come back), and so on.

The traditional Yoruba justification of reincarnation stems from the idea that there are some phenomena which cannot be explained rationally. In other words, the traditional Yoruba believed that the explanation of some occurrences cannot be captured by Hume's Fork: Matters of fact and relations of ideas and yet the reality of their existence cannot be doubted. Olúwolé further argues that just because an event does not conform to the immutable theories and laws of science based on their empirical nature does not negate the possibility of the occurrence of such event. Reincarnation is a natural event, and it becomes the task of the "scientific philosopher" to analyse and understand this event and formulate principles of physics to explain the metaphysical occurrence of reincarnation as a natural event.

A deep reflection on Olúwolé's analysis of the concepts of Witchcraft and reincarnation shows the adoption of conceptual decolonisation as a substructure upon which the superstructure of her philosophical discourses was built. Olúwolé embarked on critical evaluation of contemporary African conceptual scheme and was able to decolonise some distorted concepts within the African conceptual scheme using the Yoruba oral tradition, proverbs and aphorisms as tools. It can be argued that Olúwolé explored the usage of oral tradition and indigenous language of the Yoruba people in carrying out the task of conceptual decolonisation.

In her analysis, Olúwolé used the traditional Yoruba scheme that is the indigenous belief on witchcraft, to provide a justification despite the fact that witches and their activities cannot be subjected to empirical verification. She believed that in traditional Yoruba culture, witches

are spirits which are not visible to the physical eyes but could be seen and identified by those who have put incision on their faces or have eaten one concoction or the other which may grant them access to the world of spirits or the supernatural. In this case Olúwolé implicitly opted for moderate notion of conceptual decolonisation by putting forward an argument that African indigenous scheme should co-exist with the Western Indigenous scheme without necessarily using one as world standard or yardstick of judging others. This kind of argument is also reflected in her discussion on the justification of reincarnation in traditional Yoruba culture where she based the premises of her justification on family resemblance, memory transfer and the *abiku* syndrome which were purely indigenous beliefs, in an attempt to demonstrate that it is distinct and different from Western conception. In this case one may need to be familiar with the rudiments of traditional Yoruba culture and language in its pristine form in order to comprehend the belief and rid it from any Western distortion.

In her major work, *Socrates and Orunmila*, Olúwolé carried out comparative research between the Greek philosopher Socrates and Orunmila, an *Orisa*(a divinity) in Yoruba thought. For her, Orunmila, contrary to popular myths and folklore did not descend from heaven; he is not a god or a mythological creature like in Greek mythology but a man because of the existence of known parents and traceable origin.

According to Oluwole, Socrates when mentioned is often referred to as the father of Western Philosophy and Orunmila in the Yoruba culture as *baba Ifa* (father of *Ifa*) which happens to be an embodiment of knowledge, as if there is no difference between them. For her, there are various similarities that exist between Socrates and Orunmila, even though there are obvious dissimilarities.

If *Ifa* is interpreted as a computerized compendium of the people's views on different aspects of nature and human existence, as most scholars of philosophy now do, then *Ifa* means Yoruba

Classical Philosophy' in the pristine Greek conception of the discipline. The correct English translation of the appellation, Orunmila Baba Ifa would be Orunmila Father of Yoruba Philosophy' in exactly the same sense in which we say: 'Socrates, Father of Greek Philosophy.¹⁸

The similarity between both individuals exists in that both sages lived around the same time and were referenced as a source of acquiring true knowledge. In addition, they both lacked a written tradition; Socrates did not write down any thought likewise Orunmila, hence, both had a history of oral literature. The writings of Plato about Socrates' dialogues in ancient Greek philosophy did not come into existence until thirty years after Socrates' death.

The question is: if Orunmila wrote nothing, where did the ideas credited to Orunmila come from? The truth is that those ideas came to the Yoruba society through the help of oral tradition, that is, his original disciples transmitted these ideas from one generation to the other. Olúwolé pointed out that according to history, Orunmila had about 16 disciples and his mandate to them was to memorize several *Ifa* verses which had to be repeated before such disciples known as *babalawos* were inducted, just as Plato memorized the works of Socrates'. The works of both sages were written by their disciples and their literary works share the same literary styles. She highlights that based on the work of William Durant, it has been noted that the language of Socrates, as recorded by Plato, contains poems, metaphors, parables, stories and myths, while drawing from the work of Wande Abimbola and Abosede Emmanuel, it was noted that the basic forms of expression in the literature containing the views of Orunmila are poetry, prose, chant, litany and song.¹⁹

¹⁸Sophie Bosede Oluwole, *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*, (Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2014), 14

¹⁹Sophie Bosede Oluwole, *Socrates and Orunmila*, 224

The fundamental difference as Olúwolé noted was that Socrates believed in epistemological absolutism that is seeking eternal knowledge. Socrates was on a quest to find absolute and unchanging truth as regards knowledge claim, while knowledge for Orunmila cannot be eternal, he regarded knowledge as changing and never permanent; for him only Olódùmarè knew absolute truth.

In her comparative analysis, Olúwolé asserts:

Socrates: But the highest truth is that which is eternal and unchangeable. And reason and wisdom are concerned with the eternal. Philebu5:14

Orunmila: Wisdom is like a road that goes in different directions. Therefore, nobody can be the custodian of absolute Truth. For just as children are wise, so also are adults too. This was the basic principle of organizing and managing state affairs in Yoruba pristine society. *Obara-Meji*²⁰

The above claim was supported with Plato's dialogues such as *Apology*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *The Republic*, etc. while aphorisms and *odu ifa* such as *Ose Itura*, *Obara Meji*, *Eji-Ogbe*, *Ownrin Meji*, *Irete'sa*, etc. studied from the Yoruba Literary Corpus by *babalawos* usually show the similarities and dissimilarities in their thoughts. Better still, quotations from Yoruba indigenous thought are also used to show the intellectual exercise of Orunmila as well.²¹

It is necessary to point out that Olúwolé's discussions on epistemological issue by comparing Orunmila with Socrates shows that

²⁰ Ibid. 54-55

²¹ Sophie Olúwolé, "Orunmila and Socrates: What do they have in common? - 'Oro Isiti' with Prof. Sophie Oluwole #5", Tunde Kilani Tv—YouTube, February 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nrrpo4mxFkI>

there are alternative methods of acquiring knowledge, which must be allowed to co-exist with Western paradigm. Rather than joining the band wagon of extolling epistemological absolutism of the West, she looked inward into the method of epistemological relativism by digging deep into traditional Yoruba culture, through the help of the study of Orunmila and *Ifa* Literary Corpus to fast track the task of decolonising knowledge which harps on exploring the indigenous scheme of the Yoruba to support the argument that knowledge is changing and relative. This is achievable through a thorough exercise of studying the traditional beliefs on knowledge.

Based on evidence gathered by Olúwolé, due to the scientific and mathematical system of the *Ifa* Literary Corpus, she rejects the claim that Western-European idea of knowledge is superior and therefore should not be imposed on all other cultures. As Olúwolé rightly observed, when the indigenous African thought and the *Ifa* Literary corpus are studied, one would find a rich and complex philosophical heritage than any in the West. For her, a “critical study of *Ifa* corpus, shows that many of the verses contain critical, rational, and scientific expressions on several aspects of nature and human experience including ideas, beliefs and principles entertained by Yoruba thinkers before, during and after the life of Orunmila down to recent times.²²

On the debate concerning the foundation of African ethics and morality, Olúwolé in her article “Rationality as the Basis for Yoruba Ethical Thinking,” argues that these western ethical principles do not fit into the Yoruba conceptual framework, unlike some African scholars who try to fit in African ethics in view of western ethical theories such as Divine Command theory, Egoism, Kantian Imperative etc.²³ To her,

²² Sophie Oluwole, *Socrates and Orunmila*, 112

²³ Sophie, B. Oluwole, “The Rational Basis of Yoruba Ethical Thinking” *The Nigerian Journal Philosophy* 4, Nos.1&2, (1984: 14-25)

such attempt is to further support the superimposition of alien accretions on African thought system and therefore inappropriate.

Although some African scholars like Bolaji Idowu had earlier posited that the basis of morality in traditional African thought stems from a religious worldview, Oluwole argues contrary to such claims stating that despite the link between religion and morality, the religious nature of the Yoruba people does not justify religion as the basis of African ethical thought. An action is not morally good or bad because it is a divine law or commanded by gods. It is only when some actions are intrinsically good or bad, right or wrong that they can be sanctioned by the gods as moral standards and norms.

She maintains that rationality is the underlying foundation of morality in Africa, and this is what differentiates the Yoruba ethics from the various western ethical theories. Olúwolé established this argument by using indigenous conceptual schemes embedded in proverbs, folklore and folktales. One of such folktales is the story of the toothless queen which Olúwolé used to buttress her arguments.

In the story of the toothless queen, where the society demanded that the existence of a toothless person be reported so that he or she would be killed since it was a taboo for such a person to exist, it happened that one of the King's wives discovered that one of her mates was toothless. She brought it to the notice of the people and a date was fixed for the revelation. On hearing this, the toothless queen became restless about her impending death. On a day she went roaming, she met her dead mother's spirit who gave her some herbs for her mouth and she had a set of teeth. She did not tell anyone until the exhibition and was therefore not found toothless. The reporter was consequently labelled a liar and executed for the falsehood.

It shows that it is not in every case that we speak of the things we see, now this is not a moral norm from the "gods" or "deities" but as a result of reasoning, that sometimes even the truth may put one in danger

hence it is better to keep what you know or what you see to yourself. The story illustrates the belief of the Yoruba in the existence of spirits and that there may be an interaction between the spiritual and the physical worlds from time to time. It also reveals that in Yoruba ethics, the motive of the actor plays a crucial role in determining whether the action is morally good or bad, thus the Yoruba will not regard any action that seems to be morally good but done with a bad motive, as acceptable within the society.

Morality for the Yoruba is secular and rational; it aims to formulate ideals that are instrumental to the development of social relationships in the community.

Thus, the Yoruba will say:

Ika ko ye omo eniyan

Wickedness is abominable in man

K'a s'otito ka ku, o san ju ka s'ebi ka wa laa ye

It is more honourable to die for the truth than to live in fraud.

S'o otito se ree

S'otito se rere

Eni s'otito

N' imale egbe

Be kind, be honest

Be kind, be honest

He who is honest receives the blessings of the gods.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid.

For her, the religious nature of the Yoruba comes into play as an instrument to ensure that these moral norms are adhered to, so as to take care of human limitations in a situation where they are incapacitated to access the motives behind an action: hence, the Yoruba will always invoke a religious belief or saying at the end of their moral dilemma or norm.

Amookun sole, bi oju oba aye ko ri o y'oba oke nwo o

He who steals under cover, if the eyes of the earthly king cannot see you, those of the heavenly one does.²⁵

Bi a ba b'egi ni igbo, a fi oran to ara eni wo

One must, whenever one acts, imagine oneself in the position of the receiver of that action.²⁶

The Yoruba moral system is a secular system; the Yoruba "only leaves what is beyond his human capabilities in the hands of the gods, that is, their religion starts where their philosophy ends."²⁷ He pushes moral reasoning to the end of a rational process and exclaims at the dead end of a moral dispute *Olorun a da* or "*Oju Olorun to o* (God will dispense justice).

The rationality of the actions of the Yoruba can further be demonstrated with the following proverb:

Orisa bi o le gbemi, se mi bi o se ba mi

If the gods cannot help me, leave me as you met me.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sophie Olúwolé, "Rational basis of Yoruba Ethical thinking", 25

Olúwolé avers that “the assumption of the existence of gods in Yoruba morality is not a premise from which a moral system is logically derived or the axis in terms of which a moral theory is rationally justified.”²⁸ To support the claim that Yoruba ethical thinking is fundamentally religious, is to subscribe to the belief that all their actions of moral rightness or wrongness are basically taboos.²⁹ Drawing from the Yoruba proverbs, an action is therefore either right or wrong if it is acceptable or otherwise to a rational mind. Stealing is bad not because it is forbidden by the gods but it is condemned by the entire society. Thus, she concludes that rationality lies at the foundation of morality in African thought which is distinct, incomparable and less inferior to any western ethical theory.

Reflections on Olúwolé’s Scholarship

Conceptual decolonisation is the reversal of undue and distorted colonial concepts by carrying out analytical examinations of indigenous and foreign concepts that will enable Africans promote their identity and worldview that is distinctively African. It also connotes the acceptance of alternative worldviews based on indigenous cultural schemes, with the adoption of oral traditions, proverbs, folklores etc, as tools. It is the argument of this paper that underpinning Olúwolé’s philosophical endeavours lies the foundational theme of conceptual decolonisation.

Ademola Fayemi also observed in his article “Oral Tradition in African Philosophical Discourse: A Critique of Sophie Oluwole’s account” that “Olúwolé defends the thesis that oral tradition almost invariably contains criticisms, analysis, and rational justifications. As a consequence, she argues that one of the most acceptable ways of

²⁸ Ibid. 14

²⁹ Ibid.

actually showering ancient African philosophy is direct dependence on the actual oral texts and tradition of the people."³⁰

In *Culture, Gender and Developmental Theories in Africa* she noted that:

This paper is an attempt to incorporate Mudimbe's proposal that we go back to actual 'texts' of oral tradition instead of relying entirely on the 'inventions' of social scientists. Indeed, one of the trends in the search for an authentic African philosophy of development is the view that we must pay special attention to the African context rather than blindly copy the tradition of Western Philosophy....The call therefore is for an African Renaissance, in a critical examination of African oral literature so as to discover and promote a reliable African intellectual atmosphere based on 'narratives presented in the truth of their language and authenticity' rather than a reality distorted in the modalities of non-African languages or 'results of theoretical manipulations'!.³¹

At the backdrop of Olúwolé's conception of African philosophy lies the thesis that traditional African thought contains a rich array of rational and critical evaluation of universal truths along with the people's worldview across various areas of their life such as religion, ethics, politics, knowledge, education, etc. She maintains that African scholars need to return to their indigenous languages and engage themselves in

³⁰ Kazeem, A. Fayemi, "Oral Tradition in African Philosophical Discourse: a Critique of Sophie Oluwole's account", *Sophia: an African Journal of Philosophy* 15, No.1, (2014), <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sophia/article/view/115089>

³¹ Sophie B. Oluwole, Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa, 96

the method of comparative research to arrive at universal truths. In her words, she asserts:

My personal conviction is that it is only through the comparative examination of Western and African ideas, beliefs and principles, such as the two sets of literature.... that fundamental similarities and profound differences in Western and African philosophy, can be established and demonstrated in objective terms. But then, some scholars hold a different view about this research method.³²

On this note, she aligns with Mudimbe's imperative that scholars of African thought and philosophy need to pay obedience to texts expressed in African languages.

Using the oral tradition of the Yoruba people, Olúwolé attempted to analyse concepts and philosophies in their original ideas within the African tradition via the model of the Yoruba oral tradition. Olúwolé is of the position that a detailed evaluation and analysis of a people's oral tradition is a precondition for arriving at authentic philosophical scheme. It is believed that this informs Olúwolé's attempts to interpret and philosophise on concepts using the Yoruba proverbs, aphorisms, and extract from the *Ifa* corpus which clearly portrays a consciousness of the conceptual decolonisation exercise within her scholarship.

As the idea of conceptual decolonisation aims to establish African concepts and ideas in its pristine forms while promoting an adequate understanding of the intellectual foundations of African culture, it is believed that Olúwolé has been able to substantially carry out the task

³² Sophie Oluwole, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation, and the godhead*, 96

of conceptual decolonisation in many of her works in African philosophy.

From the following analysis of some of Olúwolé's works, one can see the deliberate and conscious attempts to philosophise different conceptual frameworks in indigenous African language (Yoruba) while comparing them with the western philosophical traditions so as to find similarities or differences and provide justifications for such beliefs. This is in tandem with the proposal brought forward by the founding fathers of conceptual decolonisation in African Philosophy.

While Olúwolé exemplifies her works with the use of the Yoruba indigenous language, it is opined that contemporary African scholars while engaging in this decolonisation exercise should endeavour to research more on the indigenous schemes of other African cultures and languages within the African philosophical tradition, as this will provide additional evidence in the justification of a particular concept or idea to avoid unnecessary sentiments or drawing analysis and conclusion from a particular point of view.

While this paper is not opposed to a critical reflection on Olúwolé's discourses on African Philosophy, it has resisted the temptation of doing so, as the focus of this paper is to prove that the method of conceptual decolonisation implicitly underlies her works. However, a critical analysis of her approach will be a welcome development in order to produce authentic and accurate African Philosophy.

Furthermore, it is the belief that an accurate, extensive study as well as critical examination of Olúwolé's conception of African philosophy will open the mind and encourage contemporary African scholars to engage in the decolonisation themes. This will serve as a paradigm to their research in an effort to provide solutions that will cater to the

specific needs of the African people, towards development in their socio-economic and political spheres.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper recommends further research on Olúwolé's idea of decolonisation of knowledge using it as a foundation upon which authentic African world views devoid of alien accretions and distortions can be based in twenty first century Africa. The research on Olúwolé's idea of African philosophy can help encourage young female philosophers to be trail blazers in African philosophical discipline, despite the social and academic challenges.

A Critical Appraisal of Sophie Olúwolé's Afrocentric Conceptual Decolonization

Abimbola Oluwafemi Emmanuel

Abstract

The Nigerian philosopher, Sophie Olúwolé is an excellent example of one who dedicates her life and career to the decolonization of African philosophy without necessarily labelling her work "conceptual decolonization." In this essay, the major claims of Olúwolé's approach to conceptual decolonization are highlighted and termed "Afrocentric" conceptual decolonization. This is because her approach takes a departure from Kwasi Wiredu's program of conceptual decolonization, by insisting on and emphasizing fundamental differences between African paradigm of thought and other (especially Western) paradigms of thought. This is evident in Olúwolé's attempt to deconstruct predominant narratives surrounding the Yoruba concepts of Orisa, Babalawo, Ifa and Orunmila. This essay takes a critical look at Olúwolé's decolonization approach but ultimately concludes that it is not a viable model for conducting contemporary African philosophical reflection and scholarship.

Keywords: Afrocentricity, Conceptual decolonization, *Orisa*, Sophie Olúwolé, *Ifa*, *Orunmila*

Introduction

A critical appraisal is an attempt at carrying out one of the most sacred functions of philosophy, which is to subject claims and submissions to critical and rigorous scrutiny. In *Socrates and Orunmila*, the Nigerian philosopher Sophie Olúwolé makes certain inroads into the territory of conceptual decolonization. Her approach, which may be dubbed *Afrocentric*, leads to a number of contestable submissions. This essay critically examines those submissions but ultimately concludes that Olúwolé's approach is not a viable model for conducting contemporary African philosophical reflection and scholarship.

The theory of conceptual decolonization, as originally championed by the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, is an attempt to lay the foundation of a contemporary tradition of African philosophy that is universalistic in outlook but African in content.¹ Wiredu's approach is informed by practical and theoretical concerns, namely, the search for African identity in the midst of a cultural transition from traditional to modern society in Africa. In the end, Wiredu proposes a synthesis of the best part of traditional African philosophical thought with the most progressive aspects of other (especially Western) traditions of philosophical thought.²

Already presupposed in Wiredu's approach is the idea that the African philosopher must maintain an equally critical attitude towards African and other traditions of thought. Yet, his proposal faces two major kinds of criticism, namely feasibility and utopian criticisms. While feasibility criticism tries to show that the theory or certain important aspects of it are not feasible, utopian criticism tends to hold that the theory, at least as championed by Wiredu, is not far reaching enough.³ As far as criticisms go, both criticisms have important things to say about conceptual decolonization. However, permission is sought here to concentrate only on utopian criticism.

¹ Kwasi Wiredu, "Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy: Some Personal Reflections" in *Revue Rue Descartes*, 2002, Vol. 2, No 36,55.

² Kwasi Wiredu, "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy" in Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996)136.

³ For feasibility criticism, see Emmanuel Eze, "Democracy or Consensus? A Response to Wiredu," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Emmanuel Eze, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 313-323; Ademola K. Fayemi, "Towards an African Theory of Democracy," in *Thought and Practice*, Premier Issue, New Series, Vol. 1 No. 1, June 2009, 117; Ademola K. Fayemi, "A Critique of Consensual Democracy and Human Rights in Kwasi Wiredu's Philosophy," in *LUMINA*, Vol. 21, No.1, (2010), 8; Olufemi Taiwo, "Rethinking the Decolonization Trope in Philosophy," in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 57, (2019),146.

As already mentioned, utopian criticism is motivated by the belief that the sort of decolonization program that Wiredu proposes is not far reaching enough. The problem with Wiredu's program, according to the utopian critic, is that it remains situated within a Western philosophical framework, even as it attempts to address the crisis of African identity.⁴ This approach might be apt, academically speaking, but it is ill-equipped to grapple with the entire gamut of African reality, especially beyond academia.⁵ Hence, in order to bridge the gap between academic philosophy and everyday life in Africa, African philosophy must extricate itself from its self-imposed detention within a Western canon of rationality. In other words, methodological concession must be made, whereby a Western model of rationality is replaced with an African model of rationality.

This, in summary, is the argument of the utopian critic.⁶ But rather than respond directly to this argument, the preferred approach in this essay is to examine what the utopian critic would rather have instead of Wiredu's brand of conceptual decolonization. To this end, Sophie Olúwolé's argument in *Socrates and Orunmila* becomes the focus of attention. The aim of this effort is to underline the implications of the methodological concession that is considered imperative to grapple with the totality of African reality.

That being said, a very important caveat is needed. And this is that Olúwolé never explicitly tagged her program an exercise in conceptual decolonization. Rather her work has been labelled here as "Afrocentric" conceptual decolonization because: (a) her work represents the kind of methodological concession that is championed by the utopian critic,

⁴ Sanya Osha, "Conceptual Decolonization: Wiredu's Disruption of Philosophy" *The Elephant*, retrieved from <https://www.theelephant.info/ideas/2019/04/25/conceptual-decolonisation-kwasi-wiredus-disruption-of-philosophy/?print=pdf> on 10/03/2020

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See also Sanya Osha, *Kwasi Wiredu and Beyond: The Text, Writing and Thought in Africa* (Dakar: Codesria, 2005); Sanya Osha, "Kwasi Wiredu," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 10-03-2021 at <https://iep.utm.edu/wiredu/>

and (b) her work in *Socrates and Orunmila* overlaps with Wiredu's program in certain important respects. In view of this clarification, the remainder of this essay will be divided into two sections. Section one focuses on the idea of *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization, while section two discusses the problems associated with *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization.

Afrocentric Conceptual Decolonization

Afrocentric conceptual decolonization is an approach to decolonization that emphasizes fundamental differences between African paradigm of thought and other (especially Western) paradigms of thought. As an approach, *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization is sympathetic to the particularistic view of African philosophy. Hence, it emphasizes the centrality of African modes of being, knowing and conduct. Consequently, it maintains a cynical posture towards philosophical projects that attempt to establish a contemporary tradition of African philosophy using so-called universal canons of rationality.

Although Sophie Olúwolé endorses an *Afrocentric* view of African philosophy, she is no *Afrocentric* thinker in the popular and often implied sense of the word. Hence, it is pertinent to note that *Afrocentricity* is a view that evinces more than one approach. Indeed, the Kenyan philosopher D. A. Masolo notes that:

It is pertinent to distinguish between two projections of *Afrocentricity*. One is that which restricts itself to the definition of the basic premises which (should) inform African discursive formations by drawing from African conceptual and perceptual realities. This projection of *Afrocentricity* deconstructs the politics of Eurocentric power/knowledge which has created images of Africa as its marginal Other, but this projection remains cogent and noncombative. Its ideology is unpronounced. The other projection,

however, is one which openly declares its anti-Eurocentric war through its theory of Western conspiracy to replace Africa as the genesis of modern civilizations.⁷

To the latter projection of *Afrocentricity* belong Cheikh Anta Diop, Henry Olela, Martin Bernal, Theophile Obenga, Innocent Onyewuenyi, among others.⁸ These writers are motivated by one ultimate objective, namely recovering for Africans what they have purportedly lost through their engagement with a hegemonic West – their dignity, cultural and intellectual contributions to the development of human civilization as a whole. It is believed by these scholars that contrary to the claims of many established figures within the canon of Western thought, the Hume, Kant and Hegel of this world, the perception of modern-day Black Africans can be elevated through a vigorous study of the autochthonous cultural and intellectual achievements of their forebears. But such is the difficulty of the project undertaken by these scholars that their theses have come to be associated with peddling alternative facts and the struggle to win converts outside of a core group of like-minded intellectuals.

Meanwhile, Olúwolé seems to confirm her preference for the former, moderately-inclined, projection of *Afrocentricity* when she writes that:

Ironically, no known scholar of Socrates has suggested that the man could have been from Mediterranean Africa, despite the fact that his facial features are some of the basic ones conventionally used to identify members of the black race. This point is not vigorously pursued here for some obvious reasons. First, there is no mention of any

⁷ D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994)23.

⁸Ibid.,18-23

such history in the extant literature on Socrates. Second, it sounds too much like the zealous claim that black Egyptians initiated the Greeks into philosophy.⁹

In the above excerpt, Olúwolé entertains the idea that Socrates might, after all, be a person of African descent. Going by some descriptions of his facial features, that is.¹⁰ However, she quickly rebuffs this idea because it lacks historical credibility and because it is quite similar to the kind of views associated with the *Afrocentric* position of Cheik Diop and other writers mentioned earlier. In other words, her aim is to contest the predominant Eurocentric discourse surrounding Socrates, not replace it with another discourse based on alternative facts *a la* Diop and others. And this forms the heart of her discussion throughout *Socrates and Orunmila*.

She is eager to contest the basis of what has already been said about African philosophy. She, to borrow Masolo's expression, wants to deconstruct the politics of Eurocentric power/knowledge which has created images of Africa as its marginal other.¹¹ Hence, her ploy in this regard is to portray *Orunmila* as a totemic figure in Yoruba classical philosophy comparable to Socrates in ancient Greek philosophy and Western philosophy in general. But before the ultimate conclusion of her work is reached, she makes certain demands on her readers. She asks them to accept, for the validity of her argument, a few contestable submissions.

⁹ Sophie Olúwolé, *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2017)34.

¹⁰ Olúwolé may be considered to be toeing a similar line here as Friedrich Nietzsche when he asks, on account of his "ugly" (i.e. unusual) appearance: "Was Socrates actually really a Greek?" See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* translated by Duncan Large (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 12.

¹¹ D. A. Masolo, *op.cit.*,23.

First, she asks them to accept that *Orunmila* is not a god. Contrary to what may be considered popular opinion, Olúwolé is of the view that a well-known mythical figure among the Yoruba is not a god. Olúwolé contends that the Yoruba concept of *orisa* does not correspond with the idea of god in Western thought. She suggests that the closest thing to the Yoruba concept of *orisa* in Western thought is the idea of canonization as practiced in Roman Catholicism.¹² In other words, to say that *Orunmila* is an *orisa* is to say that he is greatly venerated by the Yoruba for his contributions to the advancement of their civilization. On this view, *Orunmila* is closer to Confucius and Socrates than to Jesus Christ and Mohammed. And the implication of this view, if correct, is far reaching. By denying that *Orunmila* is a god, Olúwolé creates an avenue to deconstruct what she regards as a Eurocentric narrative about *Orunmila*.

By her narrative, *Orunmila* becomes a living, breathing person. One, who lived in a particular socio-political and cultural milieu, socialized like every other member of society and left his footprints on the sand of time. But even this *Orunmila* has more than one side to his personality. According to Olúwolé, there are three characterizations of *Orunmila*. There is the Mythical *Orunmila*, the Corporate *Orunmila* and the Historical *Orunmila*.

1. The Mythical *Orunmila* is “a member of the group of celestial beings sent by Olodumare (Almighty) with specific assignments... *Orunmila* was mandated by Olodumare to use his wisdom to organize and manage the affairs of the society.”¹³ This

¹² One way of interpreting Olúwolé’s distinction between the Yoruba concept of *orisa* and the idea of god in Western thought is to regard it as involving an implicit distinction between primordial divinities and deified entities, in which case her distinction might be valid. But Olúwolé never makes an explicit case to be understood in this way and this way only, thus making less charitable interpretations of her claim a possibility. See Sophie Olúwolé, op.cit., 14.

¹³Ibid.,43.

Orunmila is said to have created a consulting oracle that later became known as *Ifa*.

2. **The Corporate *Orunmila*** “is a corporate representation of the predominant axiom of the people's intellectual world-view at a particular point in the development of their tradition of thought.”¹⁴ In this sense, the expression *Orunmila* is used largely in a figurative sense to refer to Yoruba folk philosophy. It is also in this sense that *Orunmila* can be used as a metonym for Yoruba oral tradition: *Ifa*.
3. **The Historical *Orunmila*** is considered to have an earthly origin, even though the exact location of his origin is the subject of much speculation. This *Orunmila*, which may be considered mortal, has biological parents, is physically unattractive, exceedingly sagacious and given to much promiscuity. This *Orunmila* is viewed as “one of the major formulators of the texts contained in the over 400,000 verses that make up *Ifa* Literary Corpus.”¹⁵

Yet interestingly enough, at least based on Olúwolé's reading, these three versions of *Orunmila* do not contradict each other. Instead, they complement each other and offer a more robust view of *Orunmila*'s personality.

Second, she asks her readers to accept that *Ifa* is Yoruba classical philosophy. Olúwolé is aware that much of the debate over the nature of African philosophy revolves around the question of how to define philosophy itself. She is also aware that many African philosophers, especially the universalists, favour a quasi-scientific conception of philosophy. Not only this, they also seem to believe that anything that falls short of this quasi-scientific requirement cannot belong to

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 47.

philosophy, properly called. Hence, they tend to claim that African philosophy is still in the making.

Olúwolé is aware of this, but she is having none of it. As far as she is concerned, this is a prescriptive approach to defining philosophy. Worse still, it seems to impose a Eurocentric narrative about how philosophy ought to be done. And therefore, she favours a descriptive approach instead. According to her, the descriptive approach “says little or nothing about how philosophy ought to be done, even though it says much about why philosophy is done.”¹⁶ Armed with the descriptive approach, Olúwolé is primed to reject any attempt to define philosophy according to such and such standard. All that is needed is to describe the subject matter of philosophy (i.e. matter and mind/idea) and their relation to each other.

Based on the foregoing argument, Olúwolé contends that ‘If *Ifa* is interpreted as a computerized compendium of the people’s views on different aspects of nature and human existence, as most scholars of philosophy now do, then *Ifa* means Yoruba Classical Philosophy in the pristine conception of the discipline.’¹⁷ Furthermore, Olúwolé claims that *Ifa* is the Yoruba equivalent of Western philosophical classics like Plato’s *Republic*. This is because both are outcomes of the earliest attempts to “discover knowledge and wisdom, useful for understanding and the management of every aspect of nature, human life and existence.”¹⁸ To buttress her point, Olúwolé alludes to the broad scope of discourse covered in both *Ifa* and Plato’s *Republic*.

Third, Olúwolé asks her readers to accept that a *Babalawo* is a professor of Yoruba Classical philosophy. Olúwolé is aware of how *babalawos* are generally perceived, but she wants to show that the popular perception is not based on sound evidence. She does this

¹⁶Ibid., 6.

¹⁷Ibid., 14.

¹⁸Ibid.

primarily by drawing attention to the hermeneutical meaning of the expression “*babalawo*” itself. This expression literally translates into English as “father of esoteric knowledge.”¹⁹ The esoteric knowledge of the *Babalawo* is based on “a system of 256 geomantic figures to which thousands of texts are attached.”²⁰ Hence, Olúwolé concludes that “the appropriate translation of the Yoruba word *Babalawo* in contemporary understanding is: Professor of [Yoruba] Classical Philosophy.”²¹

Fourth, Olúwolé asks her readers to accept that rationality is relative. Actually, this is not a new claim. Several African philosophers have attempted to defend this view.²² But Olúwolé’s approach to defending it in *Socrates and Orunmila* is novel in certain respects. She approaches it by problematizing the various ways that scholars have hitherto attempted to distinguish between Western and African philosophy. To this end, she identifies six postulates that are commonly employed to distinguish African philosophy from Western philosophy thus:

1. Race/Evolution Postulate: emphasizes that African thinking is emotive, non-rational and unscientific.
2. Social/Anthropology Postulate: emphasizes that African thinking is based on action, not words.

¹⁹Ibid., 23.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²² One of the leading exponents of the relativistic model of rationality/logicality in African philosophy today is Jonathan Chimakonam, his system of Ezumezu (i.e. three-valued) logic draws on the notion of complementarity in a broadly similar way to Olúwolé, but with more technical detail. However, it must be said that Chimakonam’s project excels more as a critique of Eurocentrism than as an actual methodological contribution to the field of logic. In other words, the originality of Ezumezu logic is to be found in its innovative use of traditional Igbo concepts, and not in a technical or methodological sense. See Jonathan Chimakonam, *Ezumezu: A System of African Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*, (Springer International Publishing, 2019)8.

3. Oral/Written Postulate: emphasizes that African thinking is expressed in oral form, which gives no room for critical analysis and argumentation.
4. Traditional/Modernist Postulate: emphasizes the difference between traditional way of thinking and modern way of thinking.
5. Ethnologic/Analytical Postulate: emphasizes the need to unravel African thinking from the thoughts of individuals who are untouched by Western influence; and
6. Metaphysical Distinctions Postulate: emphasizes that African thinking is deeply religious because it is based on a dualistic conception of reality.²³

Olúwolé rejects these postulates for their inability to distinguish between African and Western thought without implying that African thought is inferior to Western thought one way or another. Instead, she proposes a distinction based on identifying the basic assumptions underlying African and Western conceptual frameworks.²⁴ And a conceptual framework, for her, is a cognitive apparatus that houses the way people think about and understand reality. It is not an idea, but it unconsciously influences how ideas are interpreted and understood. It is responsible for unthought thoughts and shapes overall understanding of reality.²⁵

Under Olúwolé's proposed model, the rationality of beliefs is determined by how they fit with other beliefs within the same conceptual framework.²⁶ Attempting to do otherwise inevitably leads to claims like the six rejected postulates. So in order to avoid further injudicious ways of distinguishing African thought from Western thought, Olúwolé thinks it is important to identify the basic assumptions underlying the conceptual frameworks of both traditions.

²³ Sophie Olúwolé, op.cit., 83-89.

²⁴Ibid., 122.

²⁵Ibid., 133.

²⁶Ibid.

For her, the basic assumption of African conceptual framework is "binary complementarity," while that of Western conceptual framework is "binary opposition."²⁷

It will be recalled that for Olúwolé, a descriptive approach is to be preferred than a prescriptive approach when defining philosophy. And that the difference between the two approaches is that one simply describes the relationship between matter and idea, while the other attempts to prescribe how philosophy ought to be done. Olúwolé makes use of this distinction in her analysis of the difference between African and Western conceptual frameworks. While binary complementarity holds that matter and mind, the two basic features of reality, are inseparably complementary in nature and function.²⁸ Binary opposition on the other hand, holds that matter and mind, the two basic features of reality, exist independently in opposition to each other.²⁹

According to Olúwolé, understanding binary complementarity and binary opposition – the two predominant logical, ontological, epistemological and ethical perspectives domiciled within African and Western paradigms of thought respectively – makes a proper distinction between both traditions possible without the usual attendant implication that African thought is illogical, uncritical or unscientific. But most importantly, her aim is to provide the basis for a more equitable relationship between African and Western thought, where both can be appreciated as distinctly critical, rational and scientific provided their basic assumptions are properly understood and not trivialized.³⁰ To Olúwolé, avoiding the superimposition of Western perspectives (i.e. basic assumptions) upon African ideas is an absolute imperative if the levelling of the global philosophical playing field is to be achieved. For this reason, she insists that the logicality of African ideas must be

²⁷Ibid., 133-155.

²⁸Ibid., 139.

²⁹Ibid., 128.

³⁰Ibid., 12.

assessed (for validity, logicality et al) within the conceptual framework that underpins them. That is, they are not to be assessed outside an African conceptual framework lest they be dismissed as illogical, uncritical or unscientific. This is what Olúwolé means by assessing African ideas through “African eyes.” To her, the notion of African eyes refers figuratively to African “intuition or inner perception of reality and its knowledge.”³¹

Some Objections to Olúwolé’s Afrocentric Conceptual Decolonization

As earlier mentioned in the previous section, *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization emphasizes fundamental differences between African and Western paradigms of thought. It was also mentioned that this approach to decolonization is motivated by the need to deconstruct Eurocentric narratives about Africa, her peoples, their cultural and intellectual heritage. Narratives that were originally deployed to justify colonial imposition of one civilization’s cultural system upon others, and which persist still (albeit unknowingly) in the works of contemporary African philosophers who claim that African philosophy should embrace the methods of Western (read Analytic) philosophy. Olúwolé’s aim in *Socrates and Orunmila* and her other major publications is to show that African philosophy does not have to embrace the methods of Western philosophy to count as genuine philosophy.³² But considering the arguments she put forward to justify this position in *Socrates* and *Orunmila*, it is important to interrogate the viability of African philosophy based on her approach in contemporary times. In tandem with this effort, an attempt will be made in this section to scrutinize Olúwolé’s submissions on the phenomenon of “African eyes,” the definition of philosophy, *Ifa*, among others.

³¹Ibid., 121

³² See Sophie Olúwolé, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God Head – Issues in African Philosophy* (Ikeja: Excel Publications, 1991); Sophie Olúwolé, *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (Ikeja: Ark Publications, 1999)

Beginning with the claim that the rationality of African ideas can only be determined by looking at them through African eyes, Olúwolé portrays this as a precondition for determining the rationality of African ideas. This is why she postulates that traditions of thought are based on basic assumptions about reality (conceptual frameworks) rather than the historical experiences of a people.³³ To be sure, Olúwolé is not simply repeating Kwasi Wiredu's line of argument here. She is not simply saying, like Wiredu did, that African philosophers should think about basic philosophical concepts in their African languages in order to avoid uncritical assimilation of foreign conceptual frameworks in their thinking.³⁴ No, her claim goes further than that. She is saying that for African ideas to be rational, they have to be understood within an African conceptual framework.

In other words, assessing the rationality of African ideas requires an understanding of the African world of meaning and the basic assumptions prevalent within it. But, can this be a helpful tactic for carrying out philosophical reflection in Africa today? Could an assessment of African ideas through "African eyes" really be enough to determine the logicality or not of African idea? To Olúwolé, an appeal to "African eyes" is apparently enough to an understanding of African ideas. But to another Nigerian philosopher Olusegun Oladipo, it is not.

In an essay entitled "Towards a Philosophical Study of African Culture: A Critique of Traditionalism" Oladipo considers the question: "what should the attitude of the African philosopher be to the cultural heritage of his people?"³⁵ Oladipo defines traditionalism as the school of thought that holds that "the African philosopher should be engaged in a combination of two tasks."³⁶ First, the African philosopher must defend African cultures

³³ Sophie Olúwolé, (2017) op.cit., 123.

³⁴ Kwasi Wiredu, "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy," 137

³⁵ Olusegun Oladipo, "Towards a Philosophical Study of African Culture: A Critique of Traditionalism" in *Quest* Vol III. No. 2 (1989), 31

³⁶Ibid.

against false narratives emanating from Western scholarship about Africa. Second, the African philosopher must describe African cultures as they really are, thereby providing a better understanding of African belief systems, their logical structure and fundamental assumptions.³⁷

Oladipo agrees that African cultures should be defended against false ideas, yet he objects to traditionalism for three reasons. First, traditionalism assumes "that Africans have a worldview that is unequally (sic) their own and which can be contrasted with the scientific worldview believed to be characteristically Western..."³⁸ Second, traditionalism "leads to the absurd conclusion that every belief or social practice is rational. This is because it assumes that all that is required of a belief for it to be rational, is that it is comprehensible by fitting into a given cultural matrix."³⁹ Third, traditionalism does not "seem to recognise the close connection between collective world-outlooks and their socio-economic basis, nor do they take account of the changing nature of these world-outlooks themselves, in connection with the changes occurring in the society as a whole."⁴⁰ Oladipo argues, with particular emphasis on the second objection, that the fact that something is understandable within a particular context, whether individual or social is not enough to make it rational.

Oladipo demonstrates the absurdity of the claim that an idea is rational once it has been interpreted within the conceptual framework that underpins it by highlighting a few examples. Looking at the astronomical amount of money spent on arms build-up by the United States and the USSR during the Cold War, Oladipo observes that the two opposing power blocs can be said to have a point in amassing such great military fortifications because both sides were able to keep the other in check, thereby maintaining a delicate balance of power

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 32.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

between them. That being said, Oladipo denies that the behaviour of the two opposing power blocs is rational just because of this. For one thing, the arms race has the potential to aggravate existing tensions between countries. And this is without factoring in the fact that the resources allocated to building armaments could have been put to more judicious use.⁴¹ Oladipo applies the same reasoning to another scenario; that of a man who derives pleasure from amassing cars. While there may be a clear rationale for the car-loving fellow's behaviour, Oladipo does not think such behaviour is rational when his means could have been put to more judicious use like helping the needy around him.⁴²

Simply put, Oladipo's argument is that an idea is not rational simply because it has a rationale or is understandable within a given context/conceptual framework. That is, more is needed to make an idea rational apart from situating it within a given socio-cultural context. It is true, of course, that ideas cannot be divorced from the socio-cultural realities that inform them, however assessing their rationality requires more than an appeal to African, Asian or Western eyes. In other words, ascertaining the rationality of African ideas cannot be limited by context, even if an understanding of that context is needed for an informed perspective when assessing those ideas. Unfortunately, it has been a standard practice among African philosophers to pretend as if context offered objective validation to ideas. In this sense, by insisting upon the assessment of African ideas through African eyes, Olúwolé is only lending credence to an already popular tendency among African philosophers.

Olúwolé's response to the question "what is philosophy?" is also problematic in light of what has been said above. Her "descriptive" approach to defining philosophy is problematic not only because it is prescriptive in its implication, it also misconceives what philosophy is

⁴¹Ibid., 41.

⁴²Ibid.

about as a human activity and as a discipline. Under the pretext of eschewing a prescriptive approaching to defining philosophy, Olúwolé defines philosophy as follows:

...the realm of study in which attempts are made to characterize Matter and Idea each of the two apparently opposing features of reality, give explanations as to whether or not they are related in existence and function; identify the nature of such relationship and how all these determine Truth, Rationality and the type of Knowledge philosophers seek and can communicate through religious, scientific, social, critical and rational expressions. The inclusion of religion is not an anomaly. The important distinction to be made is between critical and dogmatic presentation of religious views.⁴³

As intimated earlier, Olúwolé’s “description” of philosophy as shown in the foregoing excerpt is teeming with normative (i.e. prescriptive) bias. That is, even her attempt to simply describe philosophy is an expression of preference for a certain approach to philosophy. This is prescriptive in its implication because it indicates how she thinks philosophy should be defined and conceived, as opposed to how it should not be defined and conceived. But this is not the only problem with her definition of philosophy, for even if Olúwolé’s descriptive approach is accepted for the sake of argument it would still be unsatisfactory because the picture of philosophy that emerges from her description is oddly idiosyncratic.

Her definition of philosophy as “the realm of study in which attempts are made to characterize Matter and Idea...” suggests that she holds a fundamentally metaphysical conception of philosophy. The problem

⁴³ Sophie Olúwolé, (2017), op.cit., 8.

with this definition is that it leaves out too much to be considered representative because matter and idea are but two of the diverse topics that metaphysicians investigate. Moreover, the possibility of accepting it depends on whether one is a dualist, a pluralist or a monist. Beyond this, there is the implicit agenda that Olúwolé's definition of philosophy seeks to achieve. By insisting upon a descriptive approach to defining philosophy, Olúwolé could be said to be laying the groundwork for her comparative exercise between, not just *Orunmila* and Socrates, but also the intellectual traditions they purportedly represent. Olúwolé seems to be expressing the hope that by taking the descriptive route, she can point contemporary philosophy in a more pluralistic direction, one where the methods/basic assumptions of one tradition are not viewed as universal and setting the standard for other traditions. This is a noble aspiration, for it seeks to give philosophy a vast pool of conceptual resources drawn from the intellectual wells of different traditions, including religious and scientific traditions. In Olúwolé's vision of intercultural philosophy, then, modern analytic philosophy becomes one of the many ways of doing philosophy and it has no power to veto what counts as philosophy or not. Her disdain for the logical and scientific rigour that analytic philosophy brings is the reason why she goes on the offensive to point out that "Philosophy is not the study of scientifically established claims..."⁴⁴ The point, however, is not that Olúwolé is anti-science; the point is that she abhors the deflationary posture of analytic philosophy in relation to indigenous African belief systems owing to its thorough-going scientific outlook. Specifically, Olúwolé abhors the way certain African philosophers trained in the analytic tradition have insisted that indigenous myths and oral traditions do not pass muster on their own as philosophy because they lack logical and scientific rigour. In opposition to such errant African philosophers,⁴⁵ Olúwolé is convinced that the only way to evade

⁴⁴Ibid.9.

⁴⁵ In this group would belong advocates of the universalist approach in African philosophy like Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountundji, Peter Bodunrin, Marcien Towa, Olusegun Oladipo, et al.

the sledgehammer of analytic philosophy and preserve African philosophy as embodied in oral tradition is to adopt a descriptive approach to defining philosophy.

Apart from being practically impossible to do, no philosopher has actually approached philosophy this way before.⁴⁶ No philosopher, past or present, can claim with all seriousness that their conception of philosopher is based on a mere description of its subject matter, however that may be conceived. Every philosopher approaches philosophy with normative bias informed by their social, cultural and historical circumstances, a great bulk of what they do and why they often disagree arises from the need to provide rational justification for why they think philosophy or a particular philosophical problem should be conceived one way and not another. But with Olúwolé, there is an impoverished conception of philosophy in which pedigree matters more than providing rational grounds for accepting or rejecting beliefs.

Myths are powerful. And in the history of Western philosophy, no myth is more powerful than the Socratic myth. But in *Socrates and Orunmila*, Olúwolé presents Socrates as a literal historical figure in the history of Western philosophy when it is probably more accurate to characterize him as one of the foundational myths of that philosophical tradition; a powerful myth that exemplifies philosophy as an undying commitment to self-examination.⁴⁷ Olúwolé fails to show that she has a

⁴⁶ Certain philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein have contended that "we must do away with all explanation and description alone must take place," but it is instructive that Wittgenstein does not leave this postulation unargued for. The true test of whether philosophy can ever be merely descriptive or not might have been him leaving his postulation unargued for, therefore leaving his fellow philosophers to be convinced by the sheer power of his "description." See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958)

⁴⁷ Bertrand Russell is known to harbour doubts as to the historicity of Socrates owing to the way he is presented, especially by Plato. Russell writes "It is the excellence of Plato as a writer of fiction that throws doubt on him as a historian. His Socrates is a consistent and extraordinarily interesting character, far beyond the power of most

firm grasp of this, or if she does, it is not treated as important. What is important is showing why *Orunmila* must be considered as having the same pedigree as Socrates based on attributes that they purportedly have in common. So rather than showing how *Orunmila* exemplifies the critical spirit of philosophy in a manner comparable to Socrates, Olúwolé embarks upon a biographical goose chase hoping to reconcile conflicting and unsubstantiated accounts of their lives. As if showing that *Orunmila* is a replica of Socrates would make *Orunmila* a philosopher. But being an identical twin of a great philosopher never makes one a philosopher. The same way being an identical of a great artist, writer, musician, never makes one an artist, writer or musician. Nevertheless, in *Socrates and Orunmila* Olúwolé portrays the discourse as if pedigree alone qualified one to be a philosopher. For this reason, it must be said that, philosophically speaking, the project Olúwolé embarks upon in *Socrates and Orunmila* is nothing but a misuse of myths – both the Socratic one and the Orunmilian one. The point being made is that Olúwolé should have simply concentrated on showing how *Orunmila* exemplifies the critical spirit of philosophy, as Plato does with Socrates. The question of whether or not they actually existed is totally irrelevant to this because the lack of consensus as to the historical character of Socrates has never prevented him from being regarded as a paradigmatic philosophical figure. Any African philosopher, following Olúwolé, who wants to demonstrate the existence of individual philosophical genius in Africa prior to the advent of European colonialism, must showcase the critical spirit of

men to invent; but I think Plato *could* have invented him." See Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (UK: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1946) 104. In any case, whether one agrees with Russell or not, the point being made here is that the historical relevance of Socrates in the canon of Western philosophy is largely mythical. Understanding this point might have had positive implications for the focus and direction of Olúwolé's analysis in *Socrates and Orunmila*.

philosophy through their favourite mythical figure whether *Orunmila*, Amadioha or Sango!⁴⁸

It follows from the foregoing analysis that the hallmark of philosophy is its undying commitment to the examined life, as opposed to the unexamined one. It also follows that the quintessence of philosophy is not to be identified with any given subject matter; however, that may be conceived by any philosopher. The scope of philosophy is literally boundless; it extends into every sphere of human experience, but the nature of its activity, its job description, is always well defined no matter the sphere of human experience it happens to be interrogating. But looking at the reason Olúwolé gives for characterizing *Ifa* as Yoruba Classical philosophy, there is an unmistakable impression that *Ifa* is philosophy specifically because of its broad, encyclopaedic nature.⁴⁹ Here, just as with Socrates, Olúwolé misuses another popular foundational myth of Western philosophy – the myth of philosophy as the queen of all sciences. Not only is this myth inaccurate, but its point is also often misconstrued by philosophers to inflate the historical significance of their discipline. In Olúwolé's case, she invokes it to draw parallels between *Ifa* and Plato's *Republic*. But this is not enough! For any piece of work to qualify as philosophy, whether *Ifa* or not, there has to be clear, unmistakable evidence of its intent to rationally interrogate the sphere(s) of human experience within its focus. Unfortunately, this is nothing short of a heresy among African philosophers and intellectuals in general who have characterized *Ifa* as philosophy for various reasons, including the desire to show the world that Africa has philosophical traditions predating the advent of European colonialism. There is nothing wrong, in principle, with this aspiration; however, it cannot be a justifiable ground for placing pedigree ahead of rational discourse. Contemporary African philosophers,

⁴⁸ It follows from this that Olúwolé's attempt to humanize and make a philosopher out of *Orunmila* is perfectly in order but her effort leaves much to be desired, philosophically speaking.

⁴⁹ Sophie Olúwolé, *Socrates and Orunmila*, 16

Yoruba and non-Yoruba alike, may salvage what they can from *Ifa* for the enrichment of their philosophical output, as Olúwolé has brilliantly done with *Orunmila*, but they must refrain from characterizing *Ifa* as philosophy without providing clear, unmistakable evidence of its intent to rationally interrogate its subject matter. If *Ifa* is not philosophy, no amount of proclamation to the contrary will make it so.

Conclusion

Afrocentric conceptual decolonization remains a cogent theoretical option for those persuaded by it. Some scholars may sneer at the idea that *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization is considered merely an “option” not deserving a serious attention. Yet, some others may portray *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization as the only legitimate way to approach decolonization in African philosophy. Regardless of the side of the divide that one takes, the crux of the current discussion is a critique of *Afrocentric* conceptual decolonization as embedded in Olúwolé’s work, *Socrates and Orunmila*. Of particular importance is Olúwolé’s argument that to ascertain the rationality of African ideas, they must be assessed through “African eyes.” The paper faults this and other claims made by Olúwolé in defence of an *Afrocentric* approach to decolonization in African philosophy for exaggerating the peculiarity of African ideas. But most importantly, for misconceiving what philosophy is about as a human activity and as a field of study.

Binary Complementarity in Sophie Olúwolé's African Ontology: A Critical Appraisal

Dr. Mohammed Akinola Akomolafe

Abstract

Towards the end of her academic career, Sophie Olúwolé seems to be engrossed with ontology as she proposes the notion of "Binary Complementarity" as an Afro-metaphysical scheme. This scheme argues that the strict distinction between seemingly opposed aspects of the world as dictated by "Binary Opposition" of matter and non-matter does not apply to the African conception of reality. Olúwolé critiques the law of excluded middle as the logic that undergirds the sustenance of this outlook in the mainstream tradition of philosophy. Drawing on Innocent Asouzu's rigorous defense of complementary ontology, this paper interrogates the originality of Oluwolé's ontological posture of binary complementarity. For Asouzu, all aspects of reality are so inter-related and inter-woven such that to be is not to be alone. Through critical and comparative analysis, this article examines the originality of Olúwolé's notion of binary complementarity as a defining scheme for unlocking other philosophical views within an African context. Whereas Asouzu is a renowned ontologist who had published his "Complementary Ontology" several years before Olúwolé's "Binary Complementarity," this paper raises the originality question in the African ontological discourse especially as the former does not appear in the writing of the latter. Despite their individual efforts, this paper argues that the ontological discourse on binary complementarity is neither original to each of these scholars but to Alfred N. Whitehead. Potential objections to this position are explored with counter responses to the originality question in African ontological discourse.

Keywords: *African Philosophy, Alfred N. Whitehead, Innocent Asouzu, Ontology, Sophie Olúwolé.*

Introduction

In contemporary African philosophy, there is a new wave of ontological analyses that underscore the idea that there is an African

way of perceiving the actual world in a way that is unique and likely not to be comprehended by non-Africans. This is the underlying thrust in the submissions of scholars such as Innocent Asouzu and Sophie Olúwolé especially. Both insist that the African worldview is dynamic and inter-related and that seemingly opposed realities are not oppositional but complementary. By invoking the method of critical analysis, this research foregrounds that the proposals of each of Olúwolé's ("Binary Complementarity") and Asouzu's ("Complementary Ontology") are neither original nor totally unheard of in non-African cultures. In other words, the emphasis by these scholars that for the African, the actual world is dynamic, and all beings have a primordial connection even when they appear disconnected phenomenally, is not entirely an original idea from them. While (in)advertently failing to acknowledge each other in their writings, Asouzu is renowned for his "Complementary Ontology," whereas Olúwolé's "Binary Complementarity" is an idea that surfaced in her later years. Granted they both desisted from admitting the process-under girding their systems, one could riposte that the influence of Western philosophy and the need to show the radical departure of African ontology is primary for each of them. It is on this note that they failed to grasp the not too popular ontology expounded by Alfred Whitehead which speaks to all ontological traditions.

To make the above lucid, the next section considers the idea of "Binary Complementarity" in Olúwolé's scholarship. It shows how she argues for a unique African ontology, but which had hitherto been given more detail by Asouzu. The reason why the former could not have read the latter remains an intellectual enigma. Nevertheless, this research contrasts Olúwolé's ontological scheme with Asouzu's in order to infer that the similarities are too easy to avoid being noticed. The rest of the discourse then argues that the ontological scheme branded by these scholars as distinctively African is a global affair. Hence, the ideas of Whitehead on the subject will be compared and contrasted with Olúwolé and Asouzu's to reinforce this proposition.

Sophie Olúwolé and “Binary Complementarity”

In her last book publication, *Socrates and Ọrúnmìlà: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*, Olúwolé seems to maintain that the two sages, *Socrates* and *Ọrúnmìlà*, share some fundamental similarities and wonders why the idea of the one is considered philosophical in the strict sense, where the latter is regarded as a “abolt from the blues, an obscure intellectual figure, who is conventionally depicted as a mythical personality in *YorùbáIfá* divination system. He strikes no intellectual recognition in African philosophy, and he is not included in the curriculum of ancient African philosophy whether within the interstice of African universities or outside. His thought is considered not qualified as knowledge.”¹ Whereas the overall aim of the book is to present the idea of an ancient African sage that passes muster as philosophy, Olúwolé, in the fifth and sixth chapters of the book soon provides her ontological scheme called “Binary Complementarity.” The aim is to disclose “an African Conceptual Framework within which African ideas, beliefs, principles, and views hang together in a rational and intellectually sound continuum.”²

Olúwolé maintains that, altogether there are four conceptual schemes for explaining reality. In her words: “The first two Conceptual Frameworks/Schemes are graphically set under Monism, the third is Binary Opposition while the fourth is Binary Complementarity.”³ In spite of failing to provide a historical justification for these schemes, she is also cautious to add that “although these different conceptual frameworks can, and do exist in the same socio-cultural environment,

¹ Kazeeim Ademola Fayemi. “Socrates and Orunmila in Intellectual History: An Exercise in Intercultural Philosophy.” *LASU Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 1 (1), 9.

² Sophie Olúwolé. *Socrates and Ọrúnmìlà: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*. (Lagos: Ark Publishers 2015), 128.

³ Ibid, 128.

some are found to dominate while some often surreptitiously lie behind other views of reality.”⁴

Beginning with the first, monism, she says each of the monistic positions that reality is composed of matter (materialism) and the other that reality is composed of ideas (idealism). Afterward, she deduces the uncharitable implications of each for epistemology and inferred social metaphors.⁵ What this means, in her words, is that “fundamental differences among the four conceptual frameworks analysed above show the sense in which particular traditions of philosophy differ from one another. It also shows how religion, philosophy, science, and principles of the social science, as well as knowledge and logic are defined and accommodated within different conceptual schemes.”⁶ Attempts to allow one override the other continue to delude the mind from a proper grasp of reality. Whereas materialism may be a basis for scientific materialism, idealism accounts for the religious and moral sphere. To therefore maintain one aspect and relegate the other is a clear instance of failing to understand that the two undeniable aspects of reality and how the universe works. It is for this reason that dualism, the third option, enters the scheme. In her words, “The thrust of the monistic conceptual framework is that “although matter and idea appear as two distinctive features of reality, only one of them is fundamental, the other, at worst, does not exist, or at best, it is a phenomenon of the only real feature in terms of which all existences can be established, known and rationally explained.”⁷

Dualism is binary opposition since the “theory” states that “reality is made up of two features, namely mind and matter.”⁸ She seems to find the idea flawed since the Cartesian attempt failed to explain the nature

⁴ Ibid, 128.

⁵ Ibid, 129-30.

⁶ Ibid, 134.

⁷ Ibid, 128.

⁸ Ibid, 131.

of the relationship between them. While critiquing Descartes, Olúwolé maintains that, "He [Descartes] explains that the qualities of one feature are direct opposites of the qualities of the other. The unresolved difficulty of this theory is how to explain the exclusiveness of mind and matter, despite their apparent inter-relatedness in human experience."⁹ After disclosing these conceptual schemes or frameworks, Olúwolé proceeds to argue:

One universal phenomenon is that every aspect of nature and human experience exists in binary form. One of the greatest perplexities of thinkers in all cultures of the world is how to identify and define, in rational terms, the relationship between these two apparently conflicting features of reality.¹⁰

A list of instances of such binaries is matter/mind, light/darkness, good/bad, joy/sorrow etc. It is for this reason that John Dewey insists: "Mankind likes to think of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating beliefs in terms of Either-Or, between which it recognises no intermediate possibilities. When forced to recognise that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise."¹¹ The sin of Western philosophy, for Olúwolé is the insistence that one aspect of reality is more fundamental or real than the other. She seems convinced that the concept of pitching one of the binary *against* the other "has its roots in Greek philosophy from which Western anthropology and sociology derive their conceptual stimuli."¹² It is this strand of dualism that has gained prominence in the mainstream tradition of philosophy. This kind of

⁹ Ibid, 131.

¹⁰ Ibid, 138.

¹¹ John Dewey. *Education and Experience*. (New York: Collier Books 1963), 17.

¹² AnguluOnwuejeogwu. *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*. (Benin City: Ethiope 1997), 74-5.

dualism is what had been termed as ‘Oppositional Dualism.’¹³ The influence of this framework becomes ever stronger especially when gleaned from the orient of the law of excluded middle. It wields influence in the mainstream Western tradition where reflection in extreme opposites is dominant.

The special bias in the mainstream Western-styled orientation, to thinking in binaries as oppositional, as hinted hitherto is under girded by the law of excluded middle which states that: “Of two contradictory judgments, one is true, the other is false, and a middle value does not exist.”¹⁴ This has also been rendered by Dismar Masolo in the following manner: “...A and –A cannot be both true of the same thing, at the same time, and under the same situation.”¹⁵ When applied to the nature of reality, this principle indicates it is not possible for both matter and idea to simultaneously dictate the basic explanation of reality.¹⁶ Even when this law of thought may be argued to fare better for a monistic conceptual scheme, a critical evaluation relays that it girds oppositional dualism too, for Olúwolé. To make her case, she invokes Dewey once more: “When forced to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise.”¹⁷ The concession that emanates is the attempt to explain one aspect of reality with a bias for the other. Even as Dewey admits the undeniable place of mind and matter in the operation of the world and humans, Rene Descartes concedes to mind over matter. With Kant, the search for something transcendental beyond the world of appearance resulted. The emphasis

¹³ Ibid, 132.

¹⁴ Princewill Alozie. *Philosophy of Physics*. (Calabar: University of Calabar Press 2004), 58-9.

¹⁵ Dismar Masolo. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994), 249.

¹⁶ See Olúwolé, op. cit., 140.

¹⁷ Dewey, op. cit., 17.

on the *noumena* over the *phenomena* gained more support. This is the realm where absolute knowledge and certainty is but not here in the *phenomena*.

There is however, another strand of dualism that upholds the notion that mind and matter are interdependent but not independent, for Olúwolé. This, she christens 'Binary Complementarity' or 'Complementary Dualism.'¹⁸ It is at this juncture that one would have expected Olúwolé to mention African ontologists such as Asouzu who had been a champion of 'Complementary Ontology,' which not only antedates but is more comprehensive than Olúwolé's exposition. Another African scholar, who seems to share this position is Chidozie Okoro who explains that "the African metaphysical system is integrative on the ground that its dualistic nature allows for a plurality of views.... Traditional Africans also conceived phenomenon in a cosmological double of "spirit force" and a "material essence"¹⁹ The consequence is that the seemingly divergent aspect of reality, deep within are actually interdependent and in tandem, contrary to the dominant outlook in the Western tradition that is both dialectical and oppositional. Olúwolé argues that such does not surface in Yoruba conception of reality where the principle of Binary Complementarity is ubiquitous. She invokes the submission of Michael Titlestad to strengthen her case that:

There is no intrinsic need in Yoruba ideology to fixate on the Either/Or mode of European thought that would make it exclusively one or the other... This idea that something can mean difference and changing things simultaneously, is the foundation of much contemporary philosophy which addresses the question of meaning...The capacity of the

¹⁸ Olúwolé, op. cit., 133.

¹⁹ Chidozie Okoro. "Problems of Metaphysical Philosophy." *African Nebula*3: (2011), 125.

Yoruba to improvise new possibilities in existing themes, as they seem to have always done, is one of the greatest contributions by any culture to intellectual and artistic history.²⁰

Olúwolé is however confident that all aspects of reality are connected and complement one another. She makes her point clearer when she reflects:

The intellectual snag is that it is possible to think of a 'Head' and a 'Tail' separately. It is also possible to cut a head from a tail just as one can talk of a hill without anything about the adjacent valley. It is also conceivable that a particular person may experience only "Ups" and no "Downs" through life. The argument however, is that these are not how things are in real life.²¹

Despite the great efforts that Olúwolé puts in to show that the African conceptual scheme is "Binary Complementarity," it is perplexing to discover that throughout her work, she did not mention any scholar, African or non-African that has made significant contribution in this region of research. Asouzu, specifically has made stronger and more detailed arguments several years before Olúwolé would come to her own analysis. In the next section, I unclad Asouzu's idea of "Complementary Ontology" to be sure how and where their ideas are similar and divergent.

²⁰ Michael. Titlestad. "The Stories We Tell: Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*," in D. Levy (Ed). *African Encounters*. (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press 2000), 44.

²¹. Olúwolé. op. cit., 166.

An Exposition of Innocent Asouzu's "Complementary Ontology"

Asouzu is a renowned African ontologist whose contribution to the field is copious and staggering. He is popular for this theory – 'Complementary Ontology.' For Asouzu:

Anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality, one may be inclined to conclude that all missing links of reality are unequivocally mutually complementing and reinforcing...This is why it is important to address all matters of logic and logical reasoning bearing in mind these constraints. Cognizant of this fact, *ibuanyidanda* logical reasoning is very much aware of those things that serve a missing link in a negative way; and which impede our efforts to steer a complementary course.²²

Asouzu not only articulates a unique African ontology to express the reality of the African, but he is also motivated to disclose the logic that lays claim to this thought-system as well. Asouzu's "Complementary Ontology" is known popularly as *Ibuanyidanda* ontology as well.²³ This latter term indicates the source of his inspiration.

From its Igbo origin, the word, *Ibuanyidanda* is an accumulation of three Igbo words: "ibu (load or task), *anyi* (not insurmountable), and *danda* (a species of ants). Brought together, the three words, *ibuanyidanda*, are common Igbo aphorism that can be literally translated to mean that no load or task is insurmountable for the ant

²² Innocent Asouzu. "Complementary Logic." In J. Chimakonam (ed.), *Logic and African Philosophy: Seminal Essays on African Systems of Thought*. (Delaware: Vernon Press 2020), 273.

²³ See Victor C. Nweke & Lucky U. Ogbonnaya. "To Be is not to be Alone: Interrogating Exclusivism from an African Context." In E. Imafidon (ed.), *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference*. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer 2020), 277.

(*danda*).²⁴ Asouzu is persuaded to discern that for this type of ants, via their harmonizing exertions, can engage and successfully attain difficult tasks that seemimpossible. It is for this reason that the maxim literally means that “no load is insurmountable for ‘*danda*’, the ant.”²⁵

Two main principles can be deciphered from Asouzu’s ontology: integration and transformation. According to Asouzu, the former which he also calls the ‘principle of harmonious complementation’ indicates that “anything that exists serves a missing link of reality.”²⁶ The onus of this principle is that “Being is a conglomeration of existents.”²⁷ The implication of this line of thinking is that “to be is not to be alone. To be is to be with others as a missing link of reality; all that exist serve each other in a mutual complementary sense.”²⁸ Asouzu is convinced that nearly all aspects of reality appear as contrasting opposites. Like Oluwolé after him, Asouzu does not find these opposites to be odds. While elucidating on this point, Michael Enyeo reveals: “Everything; whether in its matter or in its form is naturally composed of these two natures, which can be interpreted as good and bad, positive and negative, right and wrong or physical and metaphysical. However, these opposites are not embodiments of conflict and war, but as a means through which a whole body of existent can complementarily serve as missing link to each other (using Asouzu’s terms).”²⁹ He continues further that: “The general and overriding notion of Asouzu’s philosophy is that; every existent is important and necessary and that,

²⁴ Innocent Asouzu. *Ibuanyidanda: New Complementary Ontology, Beyond World-Immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Imposition*. (London: Transaction 2007a), 11.

²⁵ Ibid, 11.

²⁶ Innocent Asouzu. *IkwaOgwe: Essential Readings in Complementary Reflection (A Systematic Methodological Approach)*. (Calabar: Saesprint 2007b), 110.

²⁷ MesembeEdet. “Being as Missing-Links.” *Journal of Contemporary Reflection: Studies in Asouzu* 1(1): 28-32.

²⁸ Nweke&Ogbonnaya, op. cit., 279.

²⁹ Michael B. Enyeo. *Philosophy of Fear: A Move to Overcoming Negative Fear*. (Milton Keynes: Xlibris 2018), xxxiii.

none of the existents is useless. A method he extensively explained in his missing-links principle.³⁰ Victor Nweke and Lucky Ogbonnaya too, while discussing the significance of Asouzu's ontological perspective view, expatiate that for Asouzu: "the existence of every entity is intricately interconnected and interrelated with the existence of another reality; the entities in the world affirm and make possible the being of each other. Thus, to be is not to be alone."³¹ The principle of integration is reinforced via the principle of transformation which states that "all human actions are geared towards the joy of being."³² This principle reveals the tendency in all human endeavors to maximize the joy over sorrow in well calculated or purposeful manner.

Even when he believes that he is not the first African to underscore that the African way of perceiving reality is dynamic and interconnected Asouzu disagrees with top-notched scholars on the subject from Placid Tempels and Alexis Kagame to Mogobe Ramose. The divergence between him and these scholars is that even when they affirm a complementary view of the African world-view, they, as Nweke and Ogbonnaya deduce, "often end up reducing reality to a specific entity that is fixed. They also tend to absolutise and impose their preferred views as the view of an entire community thereby supporting the myth of unanimity in a community that had individuals that subscribe to a different view."³³

The implication of this intellectual commitment on the part of these scholars, for Asouzu, is that the reduction of all reality to a single fixed entity both underscores the academic influence of Aristotle as well as exclusion of other entities as complements. Aristotle's distinction between substance and accidents continues to receive support from other scholars working on African ontology and Asouzu maintains that

³⁰ Ibid, 40.

³¹ Nweke&Ogbonnaya. op. cit., 279.

³² Asouzu, op. cit. 2007a, 306.

³³ Nweke&Ogbonnaya, op. cit., 380.

there is no way one aspect of reality can be excluded from others. It is on this note that Asouzu comes close to Alfred North Whitehead who insists that, "It is true to say that God creates the World as that the World creates God."³⁴ In another passage, Whitehead makes the point more lucid when he writes: "Opposed elements stand to each other in mutual requirement. In their unity, they inhibit or contrast. God and the World stand to each other in this opposed requirement. God is the infinite ground of all mentality, the unity of vision seeking physical multiplicity. The World is the multiplicity existence."³⁵ On Asouzu's terms, this may mean that the world and God are missing-links of reality where both need each other for the balance and novelty experienced in the actual world. Interestingly, Asouzu fails to acknowledge or explore the ideas of Whitehead, in the same manner which Olúwolé fails to acknowledge both. What then is the core idea of Whitehead that makes him more original and to even antedate these African scholars on the subject? This is the crucial question that will be engaged only after drawing the parallels between Olúwolé and Asouzu – the task of the next section.

The Parallels and Departures between Olúwolé and Asouzu on African Ontology

Thus far, this discourse has concerned with the ontological reflections of each of Olúwolé and Asouzu. In this section, the methodology of comparative analysis will be invoked to draw the similarities and departures of the proposals of these scholars with the intent of disclosing who is more original than the other. This is keeping in line with the admission of Archie Bahm that "broadly conceived, nothing in philosophy, is older than comparative philosophy...all philosophy is comparative...as soon as one is confronted with two or more

³⁴ Alfred N. Whitehead. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. D.R. Griffin & D.W. Sherburne (eds). (New York: The Free Press 1978), 349.

³⁵ Ibid., 350.

alternative solutions...relative to the same problem."³⁶ The present 'problem' in question is connected to the nature of African ontology and the proposal of each of Olúwolé and Asouzu have confronted each in the essay. This 'confrontation' yields some similarities and departures which will now be the focus herein.

One important point to understand is that both scholars are committed to providing an ontological scheme capable of mediating the African view of reality. More so, they are also committed to the place or role of logic in the exercise. What Asouzu calls disjunctive logical reasoning is reinforced by the law of excluded middle which Olúwolé believes underpins binary opposition. For Asouzu, "it is due to this character that disjunctive logical reasoning can easily focus more on relative historical conditions; and can lead to elevating world-immanence and fragmentation to absolute categories. This is why approaching reality from a disjunctive perspective has the capacity to blur our vision and perspectives concerning the true nature of reality; and most especially with regard to all the options at our disposal."³⁷ What Asouzu calls disjunctive logical reasoning is similar to Olúwolé's insistence that "the principle is that matter and idea cannot both be the basic features of reality."³⁸ She furthers: "The thesis which states that each aspect of every paired phenomenon exists independently of the other contradicts the reality of nature and human experience."³⁹ This is because of the law of excluded middle term. It is therefore clear that for the two scholars, logic is important in assessing ontology.

Despite these similarities, the differences are also present. Firstly, Asouzu, had been writing on his *Ibuanyidandaor* "Complementary Ontology" many years before Olúwolé. His thoughts on the subject

³⁶ Archie J. Bahm. *Comparative Philosophy: Western, Indian and Chinese Philosophies*, Albuquerque: World Books 1977), 3-4.

³⁷ Asouzu, op. cit. 2020, 276.

³⁸ Olúwolé, op. cit., 2015, 140.

³⁹ Ibid., 166.

have gone through series of revision and criticisms from scholars who have engaged him intellectually. On the other hand, Olúwolé, does not have the opportunity of revising and responding to criticisms shortly after writing her last book. Even when this is the case, it is not clear why Olúwolé refuses to mention Asouzu on the subject. Could it be that Olúwolé is assuming she is the first to arrive at this ontological scheme? Obviously, this is not true. This, however, is a lesson for contemporary scholars to make the effort to check the originality of their ideas and acknowledge those who have made commendable efforts on the subject and show how one's proposal differs from theirs. It is in this sense that Asouzu rises above Olúwolé. He engages Aristotle and even some notable African scholars such a Pantaleon Iroegbu, Alexis Kagame, Mogobe Ramosé whose ideas he thinks imply complementary reflection yet short of his own originality and uniqueness.

Even as Asouzu criticises these scholars, does this mean that he is the first to arrive at this ontological revelation? Some scholars think that he is. Specifically, John Obi Oguejiofor is of the conviction that Asouzu has "unleashed an incredible barrage of steady and original works at an almost superhuman rate and always intends to go beyond the normative sense of African philosophy."⁴⁰ For Oguejiofor, 'Ibuanyidanda' philosophy is "the most promising emerging philosophical system in African philosophy."⁴¹ The implications of Oguejiofor's assertion are: (1) The idea is only limited to African philosophy and studies; and (2) The idea is so original that Asouzu could have been the first to arrive at such. In the section that follows, the task is to show that these implications cannot be possible especially when the idea of Whitehead,

⁴⁰ John Obi Oguejiofor. *In Praise of African Philosophy*. (Enugu: Victojo Production Services 2010a), xv.

⁴¹ John Obi Oguejiofor. "Beyond Contextual Determinism in Our Philosophy." In M.F. Asiegbu & J.C. Chuwuokola (eds). *Personhood and Personal Identity: A Philosophical Study*, xii-xvi. (Enugu: Snaap Press 2010b), 21.

a non-African scholar, is examined and found applicable for comprehending Africa ontology.

On Olúwolé’s “Binary Complementarity,” Asouzu’s Complementary Ontology and Whitehead’s “Philosophy of Organism”

Process ontology has imposed itself in countless philosophical traditions even when it has not paraded itself as the mainstream and dominant of scheme in the Western tradition of philosophy. This admonition finds strength in the words of the process scholar, Adrian Ivakhiv who explains that “process-relational themes can be found scattered across a wide historical swath and this background is relevant to the resurgence of the tradition today.”⁴² Hence, it does not come as a surprise to find its almost perfect semblance with the ideas or reflections of most of the Asian sages such as Lao Tzu, Siddhartha Gautama, Zoroaster; few notable Western scholars such as Heraclitus, Cratylus, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Henry Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead; the African sage Orunmila and in recent times, Mogobe Ramose, Innocent Asouzu and Sophie Olúwolé. It is however important to point out that in the history of process thought, Whitehead is credited for being the first to extensively codify, the system, which has become applicable in all traditions irrespective of climes.⁴³

Process ontology, in the simplest sense, is a kind of thought system which argues that “the world is composed of events and processes.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere, it is stated that this strand of ontological scheme gives emphasis to “dynamism by which things are perpetually moving forward, interacting, and creating new conditions in the world...Process-relational thought rejects the Cartesian idea that there are minds, or things that think, and bodies, or matter that acts according

⁴² Adrian Ivakhiv. *Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times*. (California: Punctum Books 2018), 232.

⁴³ Robert Mesle. *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*. (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press 2008), 5.

⁴⁴ Mesle, op. cit., 8.

to strict causal laws. Rather, the two are considered one and the same, or two aspects of an interactive and dynamically evolving reality.⁴⁵ With these excerpts, it is therefore clear that the notion of binary complementarity is not original to Olúwolé and Asouzu and neither is it limited to the African place alone. When Olúwolé calls her scheme “Binary Complementarity” and Asouzu terms his “Complementary Ontology,” Whitehead calls his system, “Philosophy of Organism.”⁴⁶ On his terms, Whitehead adds that “the philosophy of organism is an inversion of Kant’s philosophy... For Kant, the world emerges from the subject. For the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world – ‘superject’ rather than a ‘subject.’”⁴⁷ It is on this note that Emmanuel Ofuasia adds that:

The novel outlook of philosophy of organism has to do with the replacement of traditional substance by events or process. In traditional metaphysics, every substance is defined according to its ‘necessary’ properties, which allow it to be distinguished from others and retain its self-identity. It may change in its contingent aspects, but in order to remain the thing it is, it must retain its necessary properties; to lose those properties is to cease being the substance that it is.⁴⁸

As a result, Whitehead too is convinced that all things in the universe are interdependent upon one another. Much as the world depends on

⁴⁵ Ivakhiv, op. cit., 234.

⁴⁶ Alfred N. Whitehead. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. D.R. Griffin & D.W. Sherburne (eds). (New York: The Free Press 1978), v.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 88.

⁴⁸ Emmanuel Ofuasia. “Unveiling Ezumezu Logic as a Framework for Process Ontology and Yorùbá Ontology.” *FilosofiaTheoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture, and Religions* 8(2), 65; Emmanuel Ofuasia. *Alfred N. Whitehead on the Relation between Religion and Science*. (Saarbrücken: LAP Publishers 2015), 34.

God, God also depends on the world.”⁴⁹ In his own words, Whitehead explains that “God and the World stand over against each other, expressing the final metaphysical truth that appetitive vision and physical enjoyment have equal claim to priority in creation. But no two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus, each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God.”⁵⁰ Whitehead is here hinting at the contrast but not anti-thesis between the actual world and God.⁵¹ In order to be more explicit, Whitehead expatiates further thus:

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent. It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many. It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently. It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World. It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God. God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ofuasia, op. cit., 2019, 66.

⁵⁰ Whitehead, op. cit., 348.

⁵¹ David Farr. “A Critical Examination of A.N. Whitehead’s Metaphysics in the Light of Martin Heidegger’s Critique of Onto-theology.” Unpublished PhD McMaster University, 80.

⁵² Whitehead, op. cit., 348.

A similar standpoint has been articulated by Ada Agada who opines that “God is contemporaneous with the universe.”⁵³ Even when the passages above seek to illustrate the complementary nature between the actual world and God, it is the case that for Whitehead, such complementary nature dilutes down to the simplest of existents. Hence, “in a nutshell, every existing reality complements one another. The rock, the water, and even the unseen interact persistently to make the world what it is.”⁵⁴ On this note, process ontology has come to be understood as an “urgency in coming to see the world as a web of inter-related processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us.”⁵⁵

For Asouzu, the world and all the events in it are not isolated and this is true for Whitehead. Even when Olúwolé is not as elaborate in her scheme, it can still be argued that if her ideas are followed to the logical conclusion, she would have also arrived at this claim too. Incidentally, neither of Olúwolé nor Asouzu had come to this realisation before Whitehead.

One other important point to note is that even when Asouzu is critical of Aristotle and the ideas of those (e.g. Mbiti, Kagame, Ramose) who are captivated by his ‘spell’ to bifurcate reality into two, and rank one aspect over the other, Asouzu disagrees. It is on this note that he comes close to Whitehead. It is true that “Asouzu argues that this tendency to bifurcate, reduce, absolutize and project a given aspect of reality that one considers to be the essential or ultimate constituent of reality was canonized in Western philosophy by Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and transported into African philosophy by Tempels’ *Bantou Philosophy*. He maintains that many of the academic practitioners of African

⁵³ Ada Agada. *Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis and Values in African Philosophy*. (St Paul, MN: Paragon House 2015), 132.

⁵⁴ Ofuasia, op. cit., 2019, 66.

⁵⁵ Mesle, op. cit., 9.

philosophy still pay allegiance to 'Tempels' bifurcative, reductive, and absolutist approach to ontology."⁵⁶

For Whitehead and other process scholars such as the Japanese KeijiNishitani, this tendency to divide the world into two and vie for one over the other is needless. This is the case since "reality is complementary in process metaphysics. Attempts to divide the world into two independent aspects: mind and matter have been perceived as a serious flaw by Whitehead."⁵⁷ Such attempts as they are dominant in most of the non-Western metaphysical traditions are responsible for Whitehead's verdict: "the bifurcation of nature."⁵⁸ This, in the words of Nishitani is nothing but the depersonalization of the human person and the denaturalization of nature.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The task thus far has been to disclose the place of originality in an ontological scheme that has been perceived as the most dominant locus within the African philosophic place. The onus here is that Olúwolé's "Binary Complementarity" is less original than Asouzu's "Complementary Ontology." As efforts have been made in this paper, the latter has engaged on the subject several years before the former. In addition to this, the former has had his ideas criticised, revised and put in proper perspectives in the light of the objections raised against it. However, a further interrogation of Olúwolé's African ontology is still in the making. Even when Asouzu's system seems more original than Olúwolé's, it is also true that this way of thinking is not unique to the

⁵⁶ Nweke&Ogbonnaya, op. cit., 280; Innocent Asouzu. *Ibuaru: The Heavy Burden of Philosophy Beyond African Philosophy*. (London: Transaction 2007c).

⁵⁷ Ofuasia, op. cit., 2019, 67.

⁵⁸ Alfred N. Whitehead. *The Concept of Nature*. (New York: Prometheus Books 2004), 26-48.

⁵⁹ KeijiNishitani. *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. (New York: State University of New York Press 1990)

traditional African alone but applicable in other non-African climes. It is on this showing that the process ontology of Whitehead enters the discursive fray. As Olúwolé's African ontology gains further attention, more research is needed in unpacking the place of process ontology in the philosophic reflections of Olúwolé and in ancient African philosophy in general.

Sophie Olúwolé, “Quantum Mechanics” and the Ethnoscientific Practices of Traditional Africa: The Yorùbá Example

Emmanuel Ofuasia

Abstract

In this research, my principal occupation is to address the possibility of science in traditional Africa as Sophie Olúwolé maintains in one of her numerous unpublished drafts. Specifically, this research ponders over Olúwolé's conviction in the face of the dilemma within the academia, whether or not ancient African sages have ever reflected in ways that could have implications for modern science. Consequent of her engagement with traditional Yorùbá Ifáorature, Sophie Olúwolé affirms this possibility in one of her unpublished drafts but does not pursue the discourse further. More so, her exploration of this possibility, to my mind, is too superficial for not disclosing portions of the corpus that may be comprehended in the light of modern science. My research aim, therefore, is to carry her ideas on the subject to its ethnoscientific conclusion. Relying on the methods of conversationalism and hermeneutical interpretation, I disclose some more assertions of the traditional African (Yorùbá) sage, Ọrúnmilà (and his disciples), latent within the Ifáritual archivethat are suggestive that there could have been a version of African ethnoscience which seems to antedate the contemporary findings of systemic memory process and quantum mechanics.

Keywords: Ethnoscience, Ifá Literary Corpus, Quantum Mechanics, Ọrúnmilà, Sophie Olúwolé.

Introduction

In the pages ahead, four sections will be encountered, including this introduction. In the first, I give a brief outline of the discourse on African science from the perspective of Olúwolé and her conjecture that some reflections, synonymous with quantum mechanics may have been expended over by ancient Yorùbá peoples before it (Quantum mechanics) became popular in the preceding century. I show some reservations against Olúwolé as I initiate the urgency to unearthing more excerpts from the Yorùbá Ifá corpus to validate the possibility of

scientific cultures in colonial Africa. This is the theme of the first section. In the second section, I consider a very serious problem in contemporary African scholarship – the dilemma(s) regarding the meta-philosophical conundrum generated by the question of African science. Whereas I concede to Olúwolé that there may have been ways ancient Africans engaged in science as understood by them, it is pertinent to make more heuristic studies via *Ifáto* justify the veracity of African ethnoscience, using the *Yorùbá* sage *Órúnmilà*, as cue. This is the concerns of the third part of this research. Through this analysis, I would have taken Olúwolé's reflection on African science a bit further to corroborate her legacy and contributions to the African intellect. The fourth part concludes this discourse.

The Possibility of Quantum Mechanics among Ancient Africans in Sophie Olúwolé's Reflections

In an unpublished seminar paper¹ presented at the Lagos State University, one finds Olúwolé's insistence that what has come to be termed quantum mechanics, could have been considered by ancient African thinkers. She began with jettisoning the outlook that ancient Africans can only grasp the non-material aspect of nature. She maintains that for ancient Africans, "ignoring the non-material (spiritual) force of nature makes every knowledge and explanation incomplete, sometimes fraudulent."² She goes on to contest the disingenuous submissions of some African scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu who had concluded that the attention given to the non-physical aspect of reality by ancient Africans is one of the responsible conditions for the features of African thought being termed as mythological and/or unscientific.³

¹ Sophie Olúwolé. "Science in Yoruba Oral Tradition." A Seminar Paper Presented in the Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University (LASU), February, 2007.

²Ibid, 6

³Ibid, 6

A paragraph after the foregoing, one finds, in her handwriting: “Add Quantum Physics” in this unpublished draft. Whatever she had reflected to make her include this in her handwriting in a typed essay needs to be explored and this is the onus of the present study. She seems to conjecture obviously that there are elements of ancient African reflections that could have ‘crude’ deliberations for quantum mechanics. For this reason, the printed paragraph that follows her handwriting discloses: “the thrust of my argument is that coping with the various aspects of human experience that cannot be captured in purely materialistic terms is a universal difficulty not unique to African thinkers.”⁴

In spite of the confidence and strength of this unpublished draft, the late Olúwolé does not explore aspects of *Orúnmildá*’s ideas for quantum physics. The remainder of her draft is committed to drawing parallels and departures between “African science and Contemporary Western science.”⁵ She invokes some verses of the *Ifá* corpus to support her claims on the originality of African science.

Consequent of the foregoing, I aim to take Olúwolé’s ideas further by showing some elements in *Yorùbá* ethnoscience with implications for modern science. Much as I refuse to conclude that this makes African science possible, I offer that it is pertinent for the various ethnoscience cultures in Africa to converse, compare and contrast one another and arrive at a logical equilibrium which will engender an original method and feature of African science. Before this however, it is important to concern briefly with the pertinent dilemma concerning the possibility of African science.

Revisiting the Hard Question of African Science

In recent times, some proposals⁶ following the illuminating exertions of Ivan van Sertima,⁷ have arrived toward the establishment of what they

⁴ Ibid, 6

⁵ Ibid, 7-14

⁶ See Oseni Taiwo Afisi. “Is African Science True Science? Reflections on the Methods of African Science.” *FilosofiaTheoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture*

term African science. These, I call the apologists. The common denominator among them is the effort at refuting another arm of research⁸ that not only derogates the intellect of ancient Africans but deny they have had any contribution to world civilization scientifically speaking. These are the polemicists!

On the one hand, the polemicists, having mitigated the rational capacity of traditional Africans, by extension denied the possibility of any form of scientific inquiry. The one scholar that usually comes to mind is Lucien Levy Bruhl who had concluded that ancient Africans are "primitive, barbaric, irrational, uncivilized and most importantly people without capacity for critical and rational thinking – qualities that are natural to doing philosophy."⁹ Previously, Friedrich Hegel had relayed: "The African is an example of animal in all his savagery and lawlessness."¹⁰ David Hume had hinted concerning the intellect of

and Religions. 2016. Vol. 5(1): 59-75. Jonathan Chimakonam. "Towards a Theory of African Science: Methods and Justification." *IOSR Journal of Pharmacy and Biological Sciences.* 2012. Vol. 3 (1): 33-41; Oseni Taiwo Afisi. "The Value of Cross-Cultural Polygogue in Science." *European Scientific Journal.* 2012. Vol. 8(23): 103-15 Christian Emedolu. "From Magic to African Experimental science: Toward A New Paradigm." *FilosofiaTheoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions.* 2015. Vol. 4 (2): 68-88; Jonathan Chimakonam. *Introducing African Science: Systematic and Philosophical Approach.* (Bloomington: Authorhouse 2012); Chris Akpan. "The Method of African Science: A Philosophical Evaluation." *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences.* 2010. Vol. 2 (12): 11-20

⁷ Ivan Van Sertima (Ed.). *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern.* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books 1984)

⁸ See David Hume. "Of National Characters". *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary.* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1985); George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *The Philosophy of History.* (New York: Dover 1956); Lucien Levy-Bruhl "How Natives Think." In A. Mosley(Eds). *African Philosophy: Selected Readings.* (New York: Prentice Hall 1949); George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History.* Translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975) as instances.

⁹ Lucien Levy-Bruhl. "How Natives Think." In A. Mosley(Eds). *African Philosophy: Selected Readings.* (New York: Prentice Hall 1995), 43

¹⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm George Hegel. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History.* Translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975), 177

ancient Africans as low grade and inferior to Europeans. The assertion of David Hume is necessary for the sake of clarity:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.¹¹

The problem with these prominent Western scholars is that failure to comprehend the works of ancient Egyptians as African intellectual exertions, but deny outstanding African personae such as Anton Wilhelm Amo, a centurion contemporary of Immanuel Kant and David Hume.

I may infer considerably well that the inferior nature of traditional Africans as portrayed by European literatures is a ploy to justifying colonization and civilization. Premeditated forces were put in place to deprecate the intellect of ancient Africans thereby obscuring their scientific contributions to world intellectual bank. Hence, I do not agree with the polemicists that there could not have been any possibility that a scientific culture may have thrived in ancient Africa. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. This only invites the disposition to revert from dogmatic certainties as to the finality of statements. In some cases, evidence may even be subjected to prejudice, depreciated and casted as subaltern or inferior. I now turn to the proposal of the apologists on African science.

Attempts at salvaging the African pride and intellect from denigration have led most of the apologists to admit the definition of Western science (which places emphasis on methodology) in their deliberations

¹¹ David Hume. "Of National Characters". In E. Miller (Ed.). *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1985), 319

on African science albeit with the underlying admission that the African method to codifying reality is different. These scholars admit the general reading that science is "knowledge acquired by careful observation, by deduction of the laws which govern changes and conditions, and by testing these deductions by experience."¹² This is a definition sustained by Edward Wilson too as he sees science as: "an organized, systematic enterprise that gathers knowledge about the world and condenses knowledge into testable laws and principles."¹³ An important point to be gleaned from these definitions is that premium placed on method. This is made more manifest by Isaiah Negedu when he chronicles: "Science is not a field of study like mathematics, chemistry and economics, but a method which should be applied to other branches if they must gain relevance in the modern world."¹⁴ This emphasis on method in the definitions of science indicates how the concept has evolved from its humble Latin etymology, *scientia*, which stands for knowledge.¹⁵

An apologist, Oseni Taiwo Afisi is however correct to have hinted that Western science and its methodic approach have both been taken for granted as the yardstick for what will be deemed as scientific in non-Western societies.¹⁶ He continues that there are other scientific cultures, non-Western with their own method that are deserving of attention. These are the efforts to excuse the possibility of an African science, Afisi seems to offer. Even when his view may be applauded in other regards, he does not show explicitly, throughout his treatise, what kind

¹² Bernard S. Cayne (Ed.). *The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*. (New York: Lexicon 1992), 895

¹³ Edward Wilson. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. (New York: Knopf 1998), 58

¹⁴ Isaiah Negedu. "Metaphysical Implications of Scientific Naturalism." In M. Asiegbu, J.D., Chukwuokolo (Eds.) *Frontiers of Knowledge in Philosophy: Cutting Edge Issues*. (Enugu: Jones Communication Publishers 2014), 245

¹⁵ Princewill Alozie. *Philosophy of Physics*. (Calabar: University of Calabar Press 2004), 4

¹⁶ Oseni Taiwo Afisi. "Is African Science True Science? Reflections on the Methods of African Science." *FilosofiaTheoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*. 2016. Vol. 5(1), 16

of scientific ideas and methods present themselves among ancient Africans that are original to them and relevant for understanding the world in modern times.

The emphasis on methodology rears head in the work of Chris Akpan who makes a distinction between activities of the traditional African scientists and the modernized African scientists. Whereas the former is interested mainly in comprehending the *modus operandi* of the actual world, "The modernized African scientist incorporates the techniques of Western science, like using scientific instruments - such as microscope, telescope, stethoscope, etc., in his experimentations. He may even have traditional laboratories; the products may be standardized."¹⁷ The problem with Akpan's proposal is the general assumption that there was a method that is original to traditional African scientists which is not only available in recent times but replicable too. This method is not explicit enough in his treatise.

Basing his analysis that there is a methodological disposition to African science from his *Igbo* background, Jonathan Chimakonam argues that there is a science that is African and not in any way inferior to Western science. In his distinction between Western science and what he imagines to be African science, Chimakonam states:

Western science is a body of organized knowledge whose pursuit is tied to the principle of empirical, testable and demonstrable protocol. African science is a body of organized knowledge concerned with enquiries into all shades of reality in African world view supported with rational explanations. The difference is that in the former, scientific enterprise is restricted to a segment of reality namely, the

¹⁷ Chris Akpan. "The Method of African Science: A Philosophical Evaluation." *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences*. 2010. Vol. 2 (12), 17

empirical, while in the latter, there is no such restriction.¹⁸

Elsewhere, Chimakonam seems to establish that African (*Igbo*) science is systematized and experimental.¹⁹ In which ancient available *Igbo* text, a critic may pose, is the science systematized and demonstrated as experimental? Granted, writing is not a precondition for scientific research, Chimakonam ought to have recommended some traditional African ritual archives from whence these may be gleaned. Unfortunately, there is no mention or exposition of such. Another problem with Chimakonam's proposal is the fallacy of "equating a genus with one of its species."²⁰ It is erroneous, to establish African science from the perspective of *Igbo science* alone since Africa is not a homogenous place. Chimakonam's effort on the subject, to my mind, is indicative of reading 'methodology' into the activities of his *Igbo* progenitors. Whither originality and authenticity from the *Igbo* progenitors themselves? Originality is further obscured when one considers the submission of Christian Emedolu who wishes to establish African science using Western science as his paradigmatic base.

Since "European science itself emerged out of its own magical tradition,"²¹ Emedolu contests that African science too may emerge from a similar background – a proposal which Karl Raimund Popper²²

¹⁸ Jonathan Chimakonam. *Introducing African Science: Systematic and Philosophical Approach*. (Bloomington: Authorhouse 2012), 7

¹⁹ Jonathan Chimakonam. "Towards a Theory of African Science: Methods and Justification." *IOSR Journal of Pharmacy and Biological Sciences*. 2012. Vol. 3 (1), 36

²⁰ David Ray Griffin. *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy: An Argument for its Contemporary Relevance*. (New York: State University of New York Press 2007), vii

²¹ Christian Emedolu. "From Magic to African Experimental science: Toward A New Paradigm." *FilosofiaTheoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*. 2015. Vol. 4 (2), 83

²² Karl Popper. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1963). For Popper (p. 36) "...historically

upholds. I however disagree with this move since it vitiates the claim to originality on the part of African science as it will be accused of “transliteration/copycatism and imitation/commentating”²³ – the charges already leveled against African philosophy in this century. Perhaps it is due to these questions of originality and evidence that led to the assertion that “there is science in Africa but there is no African science,”²⁴ which I agree with on two grounds.

Firstly, I concede that there are traits or traces of science in several indigenous cultures in Africa. In this sense, we can talk about Acholi ethnoscience, Shona ethnoscience, Yorùbá ethnoscience, Akan ethnoscience, Wolof ethnoscience, Hausa ethnoscience, Igbo ethnoscience, ancient Egyptian ethnoscience,²⁵ Swahili ethnoscience, Berber ethnoscience.

Secondly, there are ethnoscienctific cultures in the Orientals, popular ones being Indian and Chinese. These are not addressed as Asian Science²⁶ but Chinese Science and Indian Science. Is it not the case that attempts to have African science is modeled after Western science, just as African philosophy after Western philosophy? Regardless of how this question impresses on any one, it is my thrust in this disquisition to underscore how modern science and related ideas may have been

speaking all – or very nearly all scientific theories originate from myths and that a myth may contain important anticipations of scientific theories.”

²³ Heinz Kimmerle. “The Stranger between Oppression and Superiority.” *Intercultural Communication*. 2002. www.galerie-inter.de/kimmerle. Last Assessed 27th December, 2019. & JurgenHengelbrock. “You cannot free yourself from Hegel: An Encounter with Heinz Kimmerle.” *Intercultural Communication*. 2002. www.galerie-inter.de/kimmerle Last Assessed 27th December, 2019

²⁴ Samuel TundeBajah. “African Science: Fact or Fiction A Multidimensional Approach with Bias Towards Science Education.” In *Committee Monograph Number One*. (California: Dominguez Hills State University 1980), 25

²⁵ Since it defies the explanatory powers of Western science, it was dubbed: ‘Egyptian Mysteries.’

²⁶ Just like the ancient Egyptian case, a derogatory way to class ideas that fail to conform to Western ideals surfaces for the Orientals too. Their ethnoscience is called ‘Eastern Mysticism.’

anticipated in traditional *Yorùbá* philosophy, as Sophie Olúwolé maintains. In the section that follows, I consider how the connection between modern science and the ethnoscience of an African culture, using *Orùnmilà* of the ancient *Yorùbá* as paradigm.

Ethnoscience in Pre-Colonial African (*Yorùbá*) Culture

At this juncture, it is important to state that ethnoscience connotes the inquiry into what the members of any culture know about the actual world, its *modus operandi* and the interactions among the parts, components, or features of their knowledge of the world. Marc Augé shares this outlook too as he perceives ethnoscience as the effort “to reconstitute what serves as science for others, their practices of looking after themselves and their bodies, their botanical knowledge, but also their forms of classification of making connections, etc.”²⁷ It is that area of research that is gradually becoming replete in intellectual research culture of global south as a result of the revelation that “the global north is intellectually exhausted and fatigued.”²⁸ A similar finding had come from Bonaventura de Sousa Santos who hinted that this ‘stagnation’ emanated from the fact that “after five centuries of ‘teaching’ the world, the global north seems to have lost the capacity to learn from the experiences of the world. In other words, it looks as if colonialism has disabled the global north “from learning in non-colonial terms, that is, in terms that allow for the existence of histories other than the ‘universal’ history of the West.”²⁹

The foregoing subtle realization has informed the trust in ethnoscience which seeks alliance between the social sciences and the humanities (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology and philosophy) with natural

²⁷ Marc Augé. *The War of Dreams: Exercises in Ethno-Fiction*. (London: Pluto Press 1999), 118

²⁸ Jonathan O. Chimakonam. *Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*. (Cham: Springer 2019), 11

²⁹ Bonaventura de Sousa. “Epistemologies of the South and the Future.” *European South*. 2016, Vol. 1, 19

sciences such as biology, medicine, ecology from a trans disciplinary stance.³⁰ No one captures the idea better than Scott Atran who passes ethnoscience as the effort that looks at culture with a scientific perspective.³¹ Personally, I tinker that ethnoscience concerns with the scientific mentality that displays itself in various indigenous cultures all over the world. In this sense, the revered modern science has its humble beginnings in ancient Greek ethnophilosophy. With the parallels from Eastern ethnoscience, it is clear that modern science and its Western origin is not an absolute monolithic standard for understanding the actual world – one of the strong points of Olúwolé.

Furthermore, it needs to be hinted however that ethnoscience as a research framework is neither new to the world nor Africa. It has however suffered from unfair criticisms and comparison vis-à-vis Western science and its method. This is evident in the verdict of the anthropologist Robin Horton who taught for several years in Nigeria. Whereas he admits that traditional thought provides a theoretical form which “places things in a causal order wider than that provided by commonsense,”³² he was in a hurry to draw the comparison with Western science stressing that when indigenous knowledge is characterized by “an absolute acceptance of the established theoretical tenets,”³³ modern science does not. What Horton’s works and similar anthropological efforts concerning Africa have done is an unfair and derogatory exposition of African ethnoscience, thereby giving the erroneous impression that traditional African way of perceiving reality is inferior or subaltern. They fail to understand that the ethnoscience of these peoples “refers to the system of knowledge and cognition typical

³⁰ Tim Ingold. *The Perception of Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. (London: Routledge 2000), 406-7

³¹ Scott Atran. “Social Science Information.” *Ethnoscience Today*. 1991, Vol. 30 (4), 650

³² Robin Horton. “African Traditional Thought and Western Science.” *Africa*. 1967, Vol. 37, 53

³³ Ibid, 155-6

of a given culture...the sum of a given society's folk classifications...its particular way of classifying its material and social universe."³⁴ Just like the Orientals, whose ethnoscience explored other arrays of consciousness to codify reality and arrived at conclusions that Western (modern) science is coming to confirm within the last century, Africa too has its unique way of explaining reality, which is valid on its own right even if this may look unintelligible to the Western mind who is alien to the logic that girds thought and theory in Africa. For instance, the ethnomathematician, Ron Eglash who studied indigenous African fractals mathematics relays that when Europeans first came to Africa, they considered the architecture disorganised and primitive. It never occurred to them that the Africans might have been using a form of mathematics that they had not discovered yet.³⁵ The outlook that the form of mathematics explored and applied to codify reality by traditional Africans may be obscure to the present generation is endorsed by Albert McGee concerning the *Ifá* literary corpus in the following words:

I do not believe that it is a coincidence that the *Ifá* system is characterised by even numbers. In the meantime, one can only speculate that the originators of the system may have been using a more refined or different mathematics than what we know today.³⁶

The foregoing is a call to action to reunite with the ethnoscience that informs how traditional Africans conceived the world in such a manner

³⁴ William C. Sturtevant. "Studies in Ethnoscience." *American Anthropologist*. 1964 Vol. 66 (3), 99-100

³⁵ Ron Eglash. *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1999), 19-40

³⁶ Albert McGee. "Some Mathematical Observations of the *Ifá* Belief System Practice by the Yoruba People of Nigeria." *Journal of Culture and Ideas*. 1983, Vol. 1 (1), 100

that allowed them to carry out brain surgeries with 96% success rate,³⁷ a feat contemporary Western surgery has yet to surpass.

It is possible that the ancient cultures of Africa could have developed theories that may pass as science. This is the case for the traditional *Yorùbá* sage, *Orúnmilà*. Unfortunately, however, the impact of Western education, civilization, foreign religions have not only eroded African ethnoscience but condemned them as diabolical and esoteric. Western science then enters the global philosophical space to present itself as the absolute measure or yardstick for other scientific cultures to emulate. This is both disingenuous and arrogant. It is for this reason that I invoke Paul Feyerabend's injunction that what the West passes as "non-scientific cultures, procedures and assumptions can also stand on their own feet and should be allowed to do so, if this is the wish of their representatives."³⁸ At this juncture, I now employ some propositions from *Orúnmilà* to reinforce my insistence that an African ethnoscience could have as well developed to the point where reality was encoded in similar ways that quantum mechanics and systemic memory process implores us to see world.

Specifically, within the *Ifácorpus*, the anthology of the intellectual interplay among *Orúnmilà* and his disciples which have implications for literary theory³⁹ one may find how reality was conceived in ways that have potentials for quantum mechanics. Specifically, in *Oyekú Okànràn*, *Orúnmilà* and his disciples offer an indigenous explanation that implies the reasons why black holes persists in space. Black holes, Stephen Hawkins reflects could be the deaths of stars which end up of

³⁷ Please refer to See "Traditional Brain Surgeries." <https://oddafrica.com/category/healing/> Last Assessed December 28, 2019

³⁸ Paul Feyerabend. *Against Method*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992), iii

³⁹ Emmanuel Ofuasia. "IfáDivination as an Exercise in Deconstructionism." *South African Journal of Philosophy*. 2019 38(3), 337

forming white dwarfs.⁴⁰ In an *esè* within *Odù Òyekú Okànràn*, it is revealed thus:

*On the day that Olódùmarè would think
That a star was being arrogant,
We would see that star suddenly fall and
disappear into darkness*

The place of religion in the explanation of physical phenomena is evident in that *esè* as *Olódùmarè*, the Higher God was invoked as the causal explanation for a dead star, which modern science maintains to have used up its fuel.⁴¹ They were also forecasts concerning the ability of humans to orbit space and fly in what is known to the present age airplanes. This is explicit in an *esè* in *Odù Òwónrin-Fú* thus:

*Ifá divination was performed for the people of Ife-Ooye
They said a time is coming when the people of the earth
Will travel thought the air of earth and heaven like a bird
They said the people of Ife-Ooye practice sacrifice
So that they may not suffer much losses by that time
It would not begin at Ife, but would go around the world.
The people heard but they did not practice sacrifice
They said they had sacrificed to walk on earth
They would not walk on the air.*

At this juncture, a critic may interject: most cultures endorse myths and allegories to justify their conception of the world and express their

⁴⁰ Stephen Hawkins. *A Brief History of Time*. (New York: Bantam Books 1988)

⁴¹ Princewill Alozie. 2004. op cit., 81-4

reflections. Why should all these be taken seriously as Olúwolé is wont to suggest? On first showing, this may seem a very potent objection especially if one considers how much of derogatory utterance raised against the traditional Africa was among the Eurocentric scholars as well as how the seeming dearth in originality and the popular held belief that primitive Africans are mythical and diabolic, hence there is no way science could have evolved among these peoples. When one considers these lines of thought vis-à-vis some very popular Western philosophers of science, it becomes clear how trivial they are. This is the case because “nearly all of what passes as scientific theories and employed for codifying reality by the global north emerged from myths.”⁴² Karl Popper validates this locus when he submits: “I realize that such myths may be developed, and become testable; that historically speaking all – or very nearly all scientific theories originate from myths and that a myth may contain important anticipations of scientific theories.”⁴³ In a related fashion Paul Feyerabend explains:

Scientific education as we know it today has precisely this aim. It simplifies ‘science’ by simplifying its participants: first, a domain of research is defined. The domain is separated from the rest of history (physics, for example, is separated from metaphysics and from theology) and given a ‘logic’ of its own. A thorough training in such a ‘logic’ then conditions those working in the domain; it makes their actions more uniform and it

⁴² Sunday L. Oladipupo & Emmanuel Ofuasia. “The Religious Foundation of Violence against Homosexuals: Proposing a Relief from African Local Epistemologies.” In E.G. Konyana & D.O. Laguda (Eds.), *Religious Violence and Conflict Management in Africa: Phenomenological and Epistemological Engagements*. (pp. 185-201.). (Harare: Africa Institute for Culture, Peace, Dialogue & Tolerance Studies), 194.

⁴³ Karl Popper 1963 Op. Cit., 36

freezes large parts of the historical process as well.⁴⁴

These points attest that what demarcates the local epistemologies of the global south from the global north is logic. It is the failure to appreciate the kind of logic that drives the African conception of the universe and its *modus operandi* that has served as the chief reason for the denigration of the African intellect.

Conclusion

So far, I have argued forcefully, the tandem between ancient *Yorùbá* and modern science, relying on the extant submissions of *Orùnmilà* and his disciples. I have reasons to conjecture that similar ideas are not foreign or alien to the ethnoscience of other ancient scientific cultures across Africa. As a result, I make bold to say that it is pertinent to admit the urgency for philosophical reason to transpire among the indigenous ethnoscientific cultures of Africa to further deepen the understanding of the African progenitors in matters connected to the ones I have explored within *Yorùbá* ethnoscience. I submit that when these intentions receive proper intellectual rigour and discernment, the African intellect will have stamped its map on world intellectual history and her science will no longer be in doubt.

⁴⁴ Paul Feyerabend. 1992 Op. Cit., 11

Omoluàbí as the Foundation of Sustainable Moral Development

Dr. Olumide Oyewole Oyebade

Abstract

A philosophical inquiry into the dearth of desirable virtues in the modern world and solution is most imperative to ethics. For Sophie Olúwolé, this problem is rooted in the dualism of traditional Western metaphysics and the attendant dichotomy between the intellect and morality in the analysis of the human soul. To reinstate traditional core values in the digital age, this essay revisits the concept of Omoluàbí with a view to reposition indigenous virtue-ethics as the foundation of sustainable moral development in the fourth industrial age. Omoluàbí is a threshold of character (ìwà) formation among the Yorùbá people of the West African region. Olúwolé draws from the rationalistic interpretations of Ifá literary corpus to establish the philosophy in oral traditions and advance a principle of binary complementarity as a better alternative to Western dualism. By properly situating the character of Omoluàbí within the indigenous African orientation, with emphasis on binary complementarity, the concept is most adequate to harmonise intellect and moral virtues for collective well-being in modern and multicultural societies. Thus, our inquiry formalises the indigenous moral orientation for universal usage though not without acknowledging inherent challenges. That way, our indigenous philosophical background and Olúwolé's in-road, still find core relevance in modern character-ethics and scholarship.

Keywords: Character, Dualism, Olúwolé's Binary Complementarity, *Omoluàbí*, Virtues

Introduction

Renowned scholar of African philosophy, Sophie Olúwolé, emerged in African scholarship at a time when the indigenous tradition of philosophy faced crisis of legitimacy. The primary question then was the likelihood of an African philosophy in traditional Africa society, in the manner of Western and oriental philosophies. The interrogation was against the backdrop of differences in cultural orientations and criteria

that formed the basis of foreign philosophies that were then not readily found in African tradition of thought. For instance, the Western orientation has a written as against oral tradition in Africa. We read of the works of Western pioneering figures like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and so on but hardly any individual in Africa where thoughts and ideas are largely communal in nature. There is also the method of sciences in the order of the academic and empiricist Western philosophers as against speculative approach in African thought system, to mention a few divergences.

Granted that there is a line of thought that could be called African philosophy, in what direction is this regional philosophy to be channeled? Can there be original sub-divisions like African metaphysics, African epistemology, African logic and African ethics? The inquiry is tantamount to asking if there could be an African critical intervention to the socio-political problems of global relevance. And to bring the matter closer home, can there be a regional and scholarly contribution to discussion in morality and character development in the manner of Classical Western philosophers? Contemporary scholars of philosophy can today take these questions for granted. But not in the early days of Olúwolé and some of her contributions, among others, made in-roads into a murky uncharted territory in scholarship, to create a modern super highway now largely accepted as authentic African philosophy.

Specifically, Olúwolé not only answered the foregoing questions in the affirmative, but she also presented relevant discourses in African tradition of philosophy as foundational basis of modern thoughts, particularly leveraging on *Ifá* oral tradition as having sufficient rational basis for modern and comparative philosophy. To reinforce that assumption, she argued that it is not that African traditional societies lack men and women that are capable of critical and rational thoughts, rather, it is because the thinkers and their thoughts were mainly part of a traditional community that rarely ascribes by-lines to ideas like the West. For instance, there is a sense in which *Ifá* literary corpus,

especially popular among the Yorùbá, can be credited to *Orunmila* as an individual¹. But it is important to also note that each of the 256 *Odu* (i.e. chapters) in *Ifá* corpus are named after individuals, who qualify as 256 ancient Yorùbá didactic legends, sages, philosophers and intellectuals². The point is whether *Orunmila* is recognised as the author or the editor of 256 other thinkers behind *Ifá* oral literature, all of them are intellectuals in the custody of collectively-owned ideas, knowledge and wisdom of their people and culture.

It is, therefore, in that sense that African tradition of thought is not only legitimate and at par with other regional bodies of knowledge, differences in approach are also insufficient to deny Africa its philosophy. To take it a step further, rather than engage in empty tirade for and against indigenous thoughts, a modern African philosophy is upon us when we dissect, critically and rationally analyse original African thoughts and their comparative variant wherever they can be found.

One of the test-cases for the foregoing framework of advancing the course of African philosophy is in the area of ethics, especially character or virtue-ethics. By casting our philosophical fishing net into the indigenous thought system of the Yorùbá, the moral concept of *Omolúàbí* serves the purpose of authentic African philosophy as demonstrated by Olúwolé. An earlier work broadly compares and contrasts Yorùbá's *Omolúàbí* with Aristotle's Magnanimous man within regional ontological and epistemological bases³. By extension, this essay re-aligns the indigenous concept within Olúwolé's epistemological and ontological descriptions, as well as show

¹ Sophie B. Olúwolé, "African Philosophy as Illustrated in Ifá Corpus." *Imodoye: A Journal of African Philosophy*. 2 (2) (1996), 13.

² Ibid.

³ Oyewole O. Oyebade. *A Comparative Analysis of the Concepts of Omolúàbí in Yoruba Moral Theory and Aristotle's Magnanimous Man in Nicomachean Ethics*. Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Lagos, 2018).

conceptual similarities and dissimilarities with Western classical character ethics as championed by Aristotle. The Western model was anchored on the metaphysics of dualism and a delimiting factor for the character of the Magnanimous man in industrial society of today. Conversely, the notion of Olúwolé's binary complementarity finds a better appeal for a new character ethics of development in industrial and multicultural society.

To achieve the foregoing, this essay has been divided into five sections. They are: conceptual clarification of terms; an outline of character-ethics in the West and the problem of dualism; Olúwolé's grounding of *Omoluàbí* in an African indigenous orientation; towards sustainable moral development in contemporary world, and some concluding remarks in line with the idea already established.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Whereas social beings make moral judgments on daily basis, the aggregate of their right choices and less of the wrong ones is what promotes fundamental happiness or well-being in the society. Therefore, the question of morality is always germane to both human well-being and cumulative national development. Ethics, otherwise known as moral philosophy, is a core branch of philosophy that tries to make sense of the moral dimensions in our lives. Moral philosophy examines why some actions are virtuous, right and good, and are encouraged, while others are adjudged vicious, wrong, bad, discouraged and condemned by convention⁴. It is in this direction that moral philosophers and ethical discussions have been primarily focused in philosophy.

Historically, moral philosophers since Ancient Greek period have approached the central question of morality from the stance of

⁴ Joseph I. Omorogbe. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*. (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1993): ix

character, with two broad perspectives of: (i) words and thought and (ii) actions of moral agents. Some philosophers, particularly in the classical period of Western philosophy and ancient African thought system, have modified ‘what is it to be moral’ question to: ‘how should I live or what sort of person should I be?’ This approach is tailored towards virtue and technically called virtue-ethics, focusing on the character of moral agents.

Indeed, character or intrinsic goodness emphasises the nature of human being. This is because *being* is the foundation of goodness or character and without *being* there is no character⁵. For clarity, *being* is synonymous with the soul in Aristotle, *chi* in Igbo, and essentially the *èmí* in Yorùbá thought system. According to Anyanwu, “It is the soul of man, the inner man or the little man that determines the character, personality and the moral power of a man”⁶. It is in this sense that our study of morality, especially character, will be incomplete without its backgrounding metaphysics.

Therefore, character is the sum-total of all virtues of the *being* towards the pursuit of moral purpose. As Omoregbe puts it, morality is ultimately the enhancement of one’s *being* towards the full actualisation and realisation of the self to attain happiness (i.e. development)⁷. Inherent in the developmental process is character; exhibiting those guiding virtues like honesty, diligence, courage, justice and so on, to project the self from the state of potentiality to actuality. And by extension, it is the collective projection that enhances happiness of individuals, collective well-being and peaceful coexistence in the society.

⁵ Joseph I. Omoregbe. “Being and Goodness: The Metaphysical Foundations of Ethics.” *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (2) (Lagos: University of Lagos, 1986), 46

⁶ Kane C. Anyanwu. “Presuppositions of African Socialism.” *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*. 3 (1 & 2) (Lagos: University of Lagos, 1983), 51

⁷ Joseph I. Omoregbe. “Being and Goodness: The Metaphysical Foundations of Ethics.” *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (2), Op. Cit., 47

Character Ethics in the West and the Problem of Dualism

Aristotle emerged from the classical Greek tradition that aims to ground morality on human reason or fact of experience in place of mythopoetic and religious basis. Aristotle made human character or virtue-oriented ethics one of the cardinal objectives of philosophy. In his book entitled: *Nicomachean Ethics* (1955), the central focus is how to guide the human soul to attain happiness.⁸ According to Aristotle, happiness is the *summum bonum* i.e. the end goal of all species, activities and lives. Everything in nature is caused or moving towards happiness and God is the Final Cause or the Unmoved Mover. For man, happiness is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtues that are sustained over time for a complete and desirable life that has all necessities⁹. However, the highest and most perfect form of happiness is activity of the soul in accordance with the best virtues for the contemplation of absolute truths (i.e. contemplative life). The latter is akin to the nature of God that is the Prime Mover and Pure Thought, thinking about thinking.¹⁰

Aristotle's metaphysics partitions the human soul into two, namely: the rational (intellect) and the irrational soul (further sub-divided into emotional/moral and the appetitive/vegetative souls)¹¹. Rational soul accounts for intellectual virtues, and irrational soul underscores moral virtues. While intellectual virtues/life predisposes man to contemplative life, the moral virtues/life inclines towards pleasure and pain, emotion and honour in socio-political life¹². Since the intellect is independent and superior to the senses and emotions, so too is the contemplative life greater than life in the polis and sensual pleasure. Aristotle reckons that the highest form of happiness is acquired only by the intellect or reason (with intellectual virtues) and its attendant contemplation of the good.¹³

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translation by J.A.K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle*. (Maryland: Penguin Classics, 1955), 51

⁹ Ibid, 35

¹⁰ Ibid, 307

¹¹ Ibid, 52-54

¹² Ibid, 59, 122 & 303-304

¹³ Ibid, 304

In essence, virtues are polarised along the intellectual and emotion/moral lines, with attendant bifurcation of contemplative life against lives devoted to the polis or sensual pleasure. Moral virtues are governed by the Golden mean doctrine, which is a product of intellectual virtue (i.e. prudence). For clarity, the Golden mean emphasises the imperative of moderation in all actions; to find the middle course (virtue) of two extremes (vices) where one is a deficiency and the other an excess. For instance, courage is the middle course between cowardice and foolhardiness. Respect is the mean between exploitation and deference. And as it applies to ideal character, Magnanimous man is the middle course between the poor-spirited and a vain person. According to Aristotle, the Magnanimous man is the exceptional character and the best of men that has the highest collection of finest virtues possible among all men.¹⁴ Juxtaposed to the polarity and superiority of intellectual virtues over moral, Aristotelian moral exemplar, in person of the Magnanimous man, is repository of intellectual virtues and dedicated to contemplative life in pursuit of self-centred happiness.

The foregoing shows how Aristotle, in lockstep with Plato, laid the foundation of classical Western monistic dualism that polarises the human soul into the rational and irrational, with the former adjudged superior over the latter. Monistic dualism is that attitude of traditional logic to exclude the middle and make contraries irreconcilable¹⁵. Such attitude has the tendency to revert to monism or binary opposition, the logic of either/or technically called reductionism.¹⁶ Because, while an aspect of the opposite is adjudged superior and absolute, the other is inferior and condemned. In effect, Aristotle made the intellect or rational soul independent and absolute. In the aftermath, contemplative

¹⁴ Ibid, 121

¹⁵ Chiedozie B. Okoro. "A Critique of the Polarity in Edmund Husserl's Intersubjectivity Theory." *Analecta Husserliana*. LXXXIV. (Netherlands: Springer, 2005), 129

¹⁶ Sophie B. Olúwolé, *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*. 3rd edition. (Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2017), 159

life of the intellectuals stands in opposition to life in the polis or world of everyday experience. The African worldview interprets reality differently.

Olúwolé's Contextual Clarification of *Omolúàbí*

The African version of the traditional morality, specifically the Yorùbá's concept of *Omolúàbí*, is different from the Western model, exemplified by Aristotle's Magnanimous man. Indeed, there are as many variants of interpretations of *Omolúàbí* as the number of commentators on the subject. However, for the purpose of this work and brevity, there are some areas of convergence that fall within unanimity. Suffice to say that *Omolúàbí* is a moral paradigm that has also survived from the ancient period to date. *Omolúàbí* is sum-total of what it means to be moral and well-rounded good person. It is what it means to be an *eniyán* or human. It connotes character (*ìwà*) or good and gentlemanly¹⁷ character (*ìwàpèlè*), a moral exemplar and ideal person in the society. Idowu called it *Omo-on'-iwa-ibi*, that is "one who behaves as a well-born; while a person of bad character is *Enia-k' enia* 'a mere caricature of a person, or a reprobate'"¹⁸ For many, *Omolúàbí* is the perfection of virtues and the end-goal of traditional education; hence they would say *Omolúàbítan*¹⁹ in commendation of best practices and conducts.

Olúwolé takes a slightly different approach when she interprets the concept in an inquiry format. That is, *Omolúàbí* connotes *omot'i o niwabiitaani?* (A child whose character takes after who?)²⁰ It is like asking: Who is your front-runner character-wise or role model? Or, you are a protégé of who? Interestingly, the principal does not have to be a

¹⁷ R.C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yorùbá*. (London: University of London Press, 1970), 414

¹⁸ Bolaji Idowu. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1962), 155.

¹⁹ R.C. Abrahams, *Dictionary of Modern Yorùbá*. Op. cit., 414.

²⁰ Sophie B. Olúwolé, "Who are (we) the Yoruba?" *A Keynote Paper Delivered at a Pre-World Philosophy Day Conference, June 12*. (Lagos: National Theatre, 2007), 12.

specific personality, as the full rendition suggests. Here it goes: “*Omoluuabi* means *omo to o niiwa bi eniti a ko, to sigbaeko*. (A person who behaves like someone who is nurtured and lives by the precepts of the education he/she has been given”²¹ Implicit in Olúwolé’s account are: (i) the child/person; (ii) desirable or ideal character (*iwà*) and (iii) the education or training acquired. The third ingredient of Olúwolé’s interpretation of *Omolúàbí* is indeed significant. It is a departure from earlier scholars that gave religious rendition to the subject – describing it as *Omo-ti-Olu-Iwa-bi* (An offspring of the Lord of Character i.e. God or Olodumare)²². Again, Olúwolé’s strictly rational interpretation of ethical basis would imply the concept not as a moral perfection, but a work in progress and a developmental stage fraught with fallibility. That is why traditional training is continuous and lifelong ahead of becoming *agbasanko*²³ at adulthood.

Indeed, the concept of *Omolúàbí* is weaved into the system of education that pervaded the traditional system. It is an informal training that begins from childhood from the family and immediate community. It is in this sense that the Yorùbá call some wayward persons *àbiikó* (i.e. one that is not properly brought up) and *àkóogbà* (trained but deviant to instruction). “Nothing mortifies a Yorùbá more than to say that his child is ‘*àbiikó*’ (a child that is born but not taught i.e. a badly brought up child). A child is better *àkóogbà* (a child that is taught but does not learn), where the responsibility is that of the child and not his

²¹ Ibid, 13

²² BolajiIdowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1962), 155.

²³ SegunGbadegesin, “In Search of Agbasanko” *The Nation Newspapers*, (Friday, September 28, 2007).

parents”²⁴. Notwithstanding, both *àbìlikó* and *àkóogbà* are derogatory appellations that as well qualify as *omokomo* (a worthless child).²⁵

Therefore, the preceding discourse implies tutelage that is covert but manifest outwardly by *ìwà* (character) of the individual. It shows that morality is not only taught but also lived in daily transactions of an individual, defining the general mode of relation in the society. Traditionally, where *Ifá* divination, sacrifice and observance of dos and don’ts (i.e. taboos) failed to stimulate a good fortune, then one’s ways of life needs an overhaul.²⁶ This is where the individual, via character, becomes master of his or her destiny and architect of fortune in a world where every moral act or otherwise has its own natural repercussion.²⁷

Epistemological and Ontological Basis of *omot’i o niìwa bii taani?*

In the absence of written tradition, the oral tradition suffices for African intellectual heritage.²⁸ And from it we can glean the “tripartite bearers of a philosophical substratum of a people’s thought”²⁹- *Ifá* literary corpus, proverbs and maxims – to establish the basis of the epistemological and ontological basis of *Omolúàbfí*. In *Ifá* oral literature for instance, *Ogbè-Ègundá* emphasises the centrality of *Ìwà* stating thus: *Ìwà nikàn l’ósòro o, orí kan kí ‘buru l’Otù Ifè, Ìwà nikàn lósòro* (character is all that is difficult, there is no head/destiny to be called

²⁴ Taiwo A. Awoniyi, “Omolúàbfí: The Fundamental Basis of Yorùbá Traditional Education.” WandeAbimbola (Ed.) *Yorùbá Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance and Drama*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975), 375.

²⁵A. K. Fayemi, and O.C. Macaulay-Adeyelure. “A Philosophical Examination of the Traditional Yoruba Notion of Education and its Relevance to the Contemporary African Quest for Development.” *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*, 1 (2), 2009a, 45.

²⁶ Sophie B. Olúwolé, “African Philosophy as Illustrated in Ifá Corpus.” Op. cit., 1-20.

²⁷ Ibid, 9

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Sophie B. Olúwolé, “The Rational Basis of Yoruba Ethical Thinking.” *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1&2) (1984), 15

unhappy in pristine Ife city, character is all that is requisite)³⁰. Closely tied to that is the proverb: “*Eni l’ori rere ti ko ni iwa rere, aini iwani yoo ba ori-rere oun je*” (No matter how great a person’s destiny, it amounts to nothing if the person lacks good character). *Iwa l’esin* (character is the ultimate religion). *Iwà l’éwa* (character is beauty). The foregoing line drawn from *Ifá* and its corresponding proverb were subject on two key terms: *Ori* or head (of a person) and *Iwà* (character).

It is not by coincidence that these two concepts are paired in Yorùbá’s general belief. As a matter of fact, they are interdependent, technically called binary complementarity of Olúwolé’s conception.³¹ The concept is inherent in *Ifá* literary corpus and the sayings of *Orunmila*.³² It is the African intellectual identity that recognises the primacy of duality in reality, though inseparable and complementary in nature and function.³³ For clarity, the Yorùbá moral framework is a paradigm of the larger African socio-cultural experience. That is, the general consciousness of a supernatural or spirit-dominated world and attendant socio-structure controlled by a hierarchy of authorities. At the background of the African beliefs, the totality of their experience, customs, practices, taboos and behaviour, among others, are the dominant orientation of spiritual primacy and spirits in their categories. Therefore, the African reality is incomplete without the mystical and magical account of experience, ideas with religious undertone, communal and participatory socio-structure and culture of emotional commitment to powers that be.

In that context, reality in Yorùbá thought system showcases opposite intelligent forces coexisting and interpenetrating one another amid law

³⁰ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1962), 155

³¹ Sophie Olúwolé, *Socrates and Orumnila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*, Op. cit., 157.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 139.

of reciprocal action³⁴. Man, who is a force among the multiplicity of forces, is at the middle of power hierarchy. In their analysis of man, the *ori* (*ori-inu*) is the seat of personhood and the god-head or spirit of a person among others (higher and lower in powers) that populate existence. With his good character, man can promote harmony and enjoy the goodwill of even higher forces. Or, he could be exploitative, exhibit bad character for selfish gains, cause disharmony and crisis both the cosmic and social space.³⁵ That is, within the existential order, man can aggressively pursue selfish interest to create a muddle in the ontological balance, with attendant crisis. Or, he could temper his ambition to harmonise various interests for collective well-being and happiness of all.

It is, therefore, in this light that character equals destiny for the Yorùbá, i.e. the sum-total of potentiality and actuality of a being. This is because character manifests in all human and non-human activities. For man, character is the key ingredient of life and it is at par with religion, beauty, all forms of human achievements and even the best mystical protection for the *ori-inu* (spiritual head) against *ajogun* (malevolent forces) in the cosmic reality.³⁶ No matter how good the *ori-inu* is – the sum-total of human destiny (*ayanmo*) – it amounts to nothing without good character. The corollary is that a bad *ori* and *ayanmo* (as our *Ifá* verse attested) can be altered by good character or behaviour of *Omoluàbí*. That is, by *Iwà pèlé* (i.e. gentleness, non-aggressive character) he or she manifests virtues of empathy, patience, temperance, honesty, right words, humility, diligence, wisdom/understanding and so on to promote harmony. These, in turn,

³⁴ Wande Abimbola, "Iwàpèlé: The Concept of Good Character in Ifá Literary Corpus." *Yorùbá Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance and Drama*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975), 395.

³⁵ Olusegun Oladipo, "Rethinking Yorùbá World-view and Ideals of Life." *The Third Way in African Philosophy*. (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 2002): 158

³⁶ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1962), 156

traditionally enhance the communal spirit, collective happiness and peaceful co-existence. So, it is an aggregate and consistent blend of these virtues in human daily transactions, impacting the society positively, that elevate a human being to human personality in the Yoruba socio-cultural milieu.³⁷

Therefore, Olúwolé is of the position that the Yorùbá moral orientation of *Omolúàbí* abhors polarity of mind and matter, reason and emotions, intellect and moral souls, I and others, private ambition and collective interest, the individual and society. By the epistemological and ontological principle of binary complementarity, the two seemingly division courtesy of the western mind, should be complementary as two sides of the same coin. Olúwolé argues that the problem of dualism and attendant monistic dualism emerged in Classical philosophy with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, "contrary to the position held by Socrates, his teacher's teacher".³⁸

The thesis which states that each aspect of every paired phenomenon exists independently of the other, contradicts the reality of nature and human experience...The fact that each aspect of these paired existence appears as the opposite of the other, does not justify the belief in their independent existence or the correlated functioning of two irreconcilable existence... The argument, however, is that these are not how things are in real life.³⁹

³⁷ A.K.Fayemi, "Human Personality and the Yoruba Worldview: An Ethico-Sociological Interpretation." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2(9), 2009b, 170.

³⁸ Sophie B. Olúwolé, *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*, Op. cit., 157.

³⁹ Ibid,160

Unfortunately, the monistic-dualistic tendency or “the logic of Either/Or” became a tradition among western thinkers up to the modern period with an interplay of primacy and superiority contest between reason and emotion or intellect and morality in the spheres of ethics.⁴⁰

Towards Sustainable Moral Development in Contemporary World

We can posit from the foregoing that the two traditional orientations have a nexus with the modern world of everyday experience. The question that is germane here is shall we aim to be an *Omolùàbí* that puts collective interest ahead of the self or a Magnanimous man that is more focused on the self in modern society? What moral partner can we adopt for the development of a sustainable human society? Asking and attempting answers to such questions fulfill an aspect of Olúwolé’s agenda in African philosophy, which is pragmatic response to human social problems instead of bland argument for or against the existence of a philosophy. A clear understanding of the time we live in should be a good starting point.

Indeed, the contemporary period of today has been classified as the fourth industrial age of modern development. It is largely different from organic and monolithic communal settings of the olden days. Today, we live in a technology-driven cosmopolitan and multicultural setting that is as complex as it is dynamic. Most central is the medium of social interface and degree of dominance over nature. Recall that the first industrial revolution began in Britain in the 18th Century with the birth of mills and factories. The second industrial revolution followed in the early 20th Century with the age of mass production of goods via the moving assembly lines. The third industrial revolution saw manufacturing, and its service to customers confined to computers and the internet services. The third was quickly supplanted with the fourth through highly sophisticated Information Communication Technology

⁴⁰ Ibid, 157-158.

(ICT) at the centre of everything we do and how we interface – man to man, man to (smart) objects, and objects to objects.

Until recently, to create a small piece of furniture, wares or any item whatsoever requires a whole junk yard and man-hour of nailing or welding. But now, such products, with few mouse clicks could as well be designed on a computer and “printed” on a three-dimensional (3D) printer that creates customised solid objects of all kinds, by building successive layers of material⁴¹. Consequently, man has not only conquered nature, he has also assumed total control over others through the mastery of technology of his innovation. In the socio-political space, to possess the new means of production (i.e. ICT) is to dominate and conquer others. Today, the control of the digital and gadgetry space – characterised by Apps, software, social media, the 4G & 5G internet connectivity, artificial intelligence, The Internet of Things, smart robotics, energy storage, nanotechnology and biotechnology inventions and so on – is the fault line of polarity between the haves and the have-nots, rich and poor countries, first and the third world countries, of which African countries belong to the latter.

The African region and its new States are not only behind technologically, they are also retrogressive in social cohesion. By new states, we mean those countries that gained independence from colonial masters beginning from the 1950s. Most of these States, among them Nigeria, are currently ravaged by challenges of ethnic conflicts, socio-political unrests, economic stagflation, religious tensions, sickness and disease of epidemic proportion, science and technological backwardness, gross infrastructural deficit and clueless leadership, among others. While the causal factors of these myriad of problems have been dimensioned in many ways, we make bold to say that the challenges are not unconnected with the prevailing social order. In

⁴¹ The Economist, *The Third Industrial Revolution*, (Special Publication of The Economists of London, April 21th-27th2012), 403(8781), 13, 27-29.

broad sense, social order entails the coordination of commonly shared structure, institutions, relations, customs, values and practices of a society, which in turn determine or preserve modes of behavior among the citizenry. In other words, it is inclusive of the arrangement of state of things in the society; the proper functioning of its institutions and political stability.⁴² Specifically, there is social order, peace and sustainable development when the social apparatus is properly harmonised. The corollary is that there is social disorder, tension, and retrogression where the shared structure, institutions, relations, customs, values and practices are polarised or in conflict. And it is in this light of social disorder and attendant social crisis that we see the contemporary African society and the urgency of revaluation of its educational basis and framework of development.⁴³

In line with our earlier discussion, the Magnanimous man model and his contemplative abilities are germane to our industrial age and prospects of its development. An age that requires all, especially the youths, to think without the box and create new-normal, needs much more of the intellect, sciences, sound reasoning and creativity. This is particularly true of the African continent in the bid to develop and catch-up with the rest of the world, especially in the area of technology. But we must not forget that besides the technological needs, there is also a developmental moral crisis to avert too. This is because moral crisis and lack of traditional virtues as well as core values have made social harmony impossible in many parts of modern African society.⁴⁴

⁴² Olatunji A. Oyesihile, "Morality and Social Order in Contemporary Africa". *Vihara: Journal of Philosophy and Religion*. 7(1). (Bangkok: Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion, Assumption University of Thailand, 2006), 63.

⁴³ A. K. Fayemi, and O.C. Macaulay-Adeyelure. "A Philosophical Examination of the Traditional Yoruba Notion of Education and its Relevance to the Contemporary African Quest for Development." 42.

⁴⁴ Olusegun Oladipo, "Rethinking Yorùbá World-view and Ideals of Life." Op.cit., 162.

However, the agenda of Aristotle's Magnanimous man, akin to Plato's Philosopher King, Machiavelli's The Prince and Nietzsche's Superman among others, is to raise noble men that are independent of social conventions and morality of the *hoi polloi*. They are men that are laws unto themselves operating at the level of pure contemplation (to see reality in its ideal or pure form) – the realm of the Absolute i.e. God. But unfortunately, the history of human experience has shown how flawed if not utopian such agenda is in practice. A modern world that is already populated by one-too-many fault lines and self-centredness cannot be entrusted into the hands of individuals that are not susceptible to social norms and moral codes. Of what use is the mastery of scientific knowledge and development that do not respect social values, but rather driven by selfish interest and for its own sake? Such developments, however positive, will only create more crisis than it hopes to resolve for mankind.

The foregoing analysis that vividly reveals the inadequacy in a Western orientation shouldn't give *carte blanche* credence or leeway to wholesale adoption of its African alternative. Indeed, the *Omolúàbí* paradigm, *prima facie*, suggests moral conformism that was more practicable within the homogenous traditional communities. However, the underlining philosophy that justifies the concept (i.e. Olúwolé's binary complementarity, among others) still finds relevance in cosmopolitan setting that is hungry for social harmony, technological development and virtues that enhance them. Unlike the Western model, the African orientation readily factors in both the individual and society, just as the person and character are symbiotic in sustainable moral development.

Given this necessary symbiosis, it is incumbent on the modern society to train, educate and provide moral direction for its people – its most valuable asset. The corollary is that the individuals and the aggregate of their private interests *cum* ambitions at adulthood are incomplete until they align with the general goals and interest of their nurturing society.

That is, indeed, the high point of traditional moral-educational model, as here recaptured by Awoniyi:

Traditional education embraces character-building as well as the development of physical aptitudes, the acquisition of those moral qualities felt to be an integral part of manhood, and the acquisition of the knowledge and techniques needed by all men if they are to take an active part in social life in its various forms.⁴⁵

The indigenous approach places the family at the epicentre of moral (informal) and life-long education of wards. The (formal) school system and the society at large will continue in that moral line in concomitance with modern day science-based education. With proper cooperation, the family, community and schools will produce individuals imbued with intellect, morality, knowledge, wisdom, and a sense of nationhood, to respond and make contribution to collective needs. It is the misunderstanding of this unique model of education that is "integrative and (has) formative effect on the mind, character, skills, physical and spiritual abilities of the individual to enable him/her live effectively and responsibly in the society" that made foreign anthropologists and colonial interlopers alike to describe ancient African societies as uneducated and illogical.⁴⁶ Special emphasis must, however, be placed on this integrative model for relevance in the contemporary period, yet devoid of the African identity.

It is important to add that the moral *cum* educational paradigm is incomplete until it is functional and productive in contemporary sense – contributing to the needs and solutions to problems of the day. The

⁴⁵ T.A. Awoniyi, "Omolùàbí: The Fundamental Basis of Yorùbá Traditional Education.", 365

⁴⁶ A. K.Fayemi, and O.C. Macaulay-Adeyelure. "A Philosophical Examination of the Traditional Yoruba Notion of Education and its Relevance to the Contemporary African Quest for Development." 44.

traditional notion of *Omolúàbí* readily satisfies (i) *Omoti a ko* (trained child) and (ii) *ti ogbaeko* (that aligns and radiate virtues). But contemporary needs demand more. Hence, a third requisite: (iii) *T'ootun ara re ko* (that retrained self for relevance). That is, an ideal character or *Omolúàbí* of the contemporary period should be capable (especially at adulthood) of continuous education or retraining self – that is, to learn, unlearn and relearn – to extend and update the frontier of knowledge-based without deviating from moral and humanistic foundation that were acquired during the formative years. Such orientation encourages the human creativity and intelligence in the manner of Aristotle's Magnanimous Man, though with measures of wisdom and virtues of traditional *Omolúàbí*.

Aristotle's Magnanimous man has taught us the imperative of being contemplative, intelligent, different and ahead of the pack. It is a valuable character in highly competitive technology-savvy industrial age. While our ideal character should be 'disruptive' in thought and innovation, yet the imperative of being moderate or humane in ambition is most valuable. Therefore, our *Omolúàbí* must reckon that knowledge itself is a bullet but when combined with creativity, it is a bomb. To put it differently, knowledge is little without imagination, yet grossly incomplete or unsustainable without wisdom. So, our education and ambitions are inadequate until they promote social cohesion and collective happiness. It is in this sense that *Iwà pèlé* or the traditional virtues of empathy, patience, temperance, honesty, humility, moderation, diligence, and commitment to nationhood, among others, are most germane in contemporary character molding. They are virtues for sustainable development that arbor their opposite vices and attendant exploitation of other, nature and humanity.

Conclusion

The goal of this essay is neither to articulate a cultural contest nor to imply the superiority of a primordial culture over the other. It is more inclined to show that indigenous thoughts are valuable across the board.

They can be complementary within a dynamic framework and made relevant in accordance with contemporary needs. Clearly, Olúwolé identifies with and explore the African oral tradition, through contemporary mode of philosophising, to make contributions and relive character or virtue ethics (erstwhile popular in antiquity) within the body of contemporary African philosophy. Limitations of the oral tradition⁴⁷ notwithstanding, her critical, rational, and written appraisal of the oral past demonstrated modern relevance of the much vilified and so-called “uncritical African past”. Most instructive here, as Olúwolé has advanced, is that sustainable development of any people must derive its foundational basis from indigenous socio-cultural heritage. The conceptual paradigm of *Omoluàbí* supports that position. Not only that, but the African conceptual framework of binary complementarity also erased unnecessary polarities in thoughts and practical execution of ideas.

Indeed, Olúwolé has made a valuable contribution to development of modern African philosophy by rallying African scholars to explore indigenous tradition of thought as the pedestal of genuine contribution to solving social and moral human problems particularly in Africa and the world at large, with African humanism as our guide. In the 21st Century reality, it is a clarion call that will not be easy in practical demonstration. This is because a set of post-colonial Africans that have been schooled in Western education, language, religion and way of life, thought how to reason, dependent on foreign intellectual guidance, dictates of the social media, and foreign media, cannot overnight be lured to the long abandoned traditional way of life and virtues of *Omoluàbí*. However, Africans cannot give up on its own authenticity and the need to develop itself by its own self. Only that way can we be truly African, make a fine blend of sustainable social and technological development in evolving industrial age, and as well lead the global community on the path of social and international harmony and viable development.

⁴⁷ A.K. Fayemi, “Oral tradition in African philosophical discourse: a critique of Sophie Olúwolé’s account” *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy* 15(1), 2014.

Rethinking Sophie Olúwolé's Rational Basis of Yoruba Religious Ethic

Benson Peter Irabor

Abstract

Focusing on Sophie Olúwolé's scholarship, this article revisits the discourse on the connection between morality and religion from the purview of the traditional Yoruba ethic. Through the method of critical analysis and interpretation, this paper discusses Olúwolé's perspective which concedes that the gods are the enforcers of morality but not the author of moral rules in Yoruba thought system. For her, morality is defined through human reason for the benefit or good of the community. The question of moral foundation in African ethic is a highly controversial one among African scholars. Whereas some defend ethical supernaturalism, a view that affirms religion as the foundation of morality, others endorse ethical non-supernaturalism, which denies any religious foundation of morality. This article locates Olúwolé's position as reconciliatory of the contentions between ethical supernaturalism and non-supernaturalism. As a way of disclosing the commendable and universal appeal of Olúwolé's contribution on the subject, this article draws parallels between her submission and the Divine Command Theory, a popular doctrine in the Western tradition of philosophy. This article contends that there is a 'soft' version of the Divine Command Theory (DCT) in Yoruba ethic, which is implicit in Olúwolé's defense of the rational basis of Yoruba ethic.

Keywords: Ethical supernaturalism, Ethical non-supernaturalism, Morality, Sophie Olúwolé, Yoruba ethic.

Introduction

Morality plays a very important role in every human society; in that there is no human society that morality is not mentioned. Etymologically, the word 'moral' derives from a Latin root (*mos, moris*) and means the code or customs of a people, the social glue that defines 'how individuals should live together'.¹ Morality is a word,

¹C. Nicolar, *Indiscipline and Moral Education*, (Umuahia: Allen Publishers, 2001), 7.

which traces its roots from ‘mos’ (custom) and ‘mores’ (practice), both of Latin derivative – to such other connotations as ‘custom’ and ‘practice.’ It is a regular and accepted mode of behaviour among a people. It also means the conventionally approved rules of behaviour in the society. For this reason, the issue of morality has to do with the very essence of man and with that which has been commonly accepted as best for the common good.²

Often, moral codes are enshrined in or rather, perpetrated by means of norms, or rules, or commandments (moral codes/ customary laws) to which every member of a given society is expected to observe. Accordingly, Anthony Echekwube states: “Morality bases its judgment on the rational nature of man and his final destiny which make his actions morally right or wrong. That morality applies to all rational persons makes clear that sense of “morality” being defined as that which guides to conduct that applies to all rational persons.”³ For Ditto Nicolar, morality is a complex system of general principles and particular judgments based on cultural, religious, and philosophical concepts and beliefs.⁴ In this case, to define morality, a person will use the rules or habits with regard to right and wrong that he or she follows. Thus, morality affirms the consciousness of the predicaments of man, his or her capacity to choose to act in a number of ways which may be right or wrong.

It is also true to say that morality frames the value systems and behavioural patterns of conduct specific to a group of people who identify themselves as citizens of a said society. It is from this general perception that we infer that there is a high moral value that we find in African cultures, such as respect for human dignity and sacredness of life. This is the case when one recalls how the divinities, who are usually intermediaries for the Supreme Being in several indigenous

²B.E. Nwigwe, “Why should a Human Being be Moral? Perspectives in Ethics and Ethical Theories” in *Foundations of Philosophy and Logic*. Udoidem S.I (ed.), (Lagos: African Heritage Research and Publications, 2002), 78.

³A. Echekube, “What is Ethics? Definitions, Principles, Theories and Relationship to Other Disciplines” in P. Iroegbu and A. Echekube, *Kpim of Morality*, (eds.), (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2005), 32.

⁴C. Nicolar, *op. cit.*, 30.

religious cultures in Africa, serve to enforce moral discipline and uprightness. In other words, Traditional Africans and to a large extent the Contemporary Africans have a very strong sense of morality. It is not a place where 'anything goes' as there is a high moral standard and sense of morality. This explains why virtues are praised and rewarded; crimes are frowned at and punished accordingly. Thus, there is emphasis on good moral conduct in the African culture. John Aruleba writes: Morals keep society healthy and alive as faithfulness to right conduct and socially accepted morals, for traditional Africans is a guarantee to a happy and good afterlife.⁵ Therefore, morality is not an inalienable part of the African identity.

Be that as it may, the questions this study is set to combat are: what is the role of gods or divinities in traditional African ethic? Is it the gods that enact ethical morality or they play a colossal role in the sanction of morality? These questions have divided a group of scholars into what may be termed: ethical supernaturalism and ethical non-supernaturalism – the focus of the next section. Afterward, the research will attempt to locate the place of Sophie Olúwolé's reflections within this dilemma and try to highlight how her submission inadvertently discloses a Divine Command Theory (DCT) within the African place. It is from this orient that an appreciation of Olúwolé's contribution to African ethic may be better appreciated, this article argues.

Morality and the Gods in Africa: On Ethical Supernaturalism and Ethical non-Supernaturalism

It has become commonplace to say that Africans are deeply religious people. They are notoriously religious. For the African, life is religion and religion is life. The attachment to and worship of God, forms a dominating part of their worldview. All they do, say and permit are impregnated with a vision of the divine, and nearly all manifestations of reality are explainable in function of the supernatural reality. Expressions of this pervading religiosity abound in African languages,

⁵ John Aruleba, "African Heritage in Promotion of the Christian Faith" in A. Echekwube and A. Ojei, (eds.), *Issele-Uku Diocese at 40 Towards Reconciliation of Catholic Faith and Culture*, (Ekpmoma: KREATIVZONE, 2013) 163.

arts, proverbs, myths, legends stories, songs, habits, environment, and relationships. They embrace the divine element in their daily occupation, play, sleep, and rest. In fact, everything about the African has the expression of the God-phenomenon, at times to the excess of living a combination of elements from two or more different religions. "They do not know how to exist without Religion."⁶ According to John Mbiti:

Africans generally believe in God. It is at the centre of the African life. The amazing discoveries of the magnificence of the universe, the realization of the limitation of human knowledge and ability, as well as the observance of natural forces give Africans enough reasons to believe in the existence of a supernatural and omnipotent God. This is reflected in the kinds of names that Africans call God. Africans are very rich in their notions about God. God is seen as the ultimate creator, even in instances when he made use of spiritual or human instruments. He is also believed to be the sustainer of creation, and the ruler of the universe. He is good, merciful, holy, powerful and omnipresent, he is limitless and all-knowing, he is omnipotent and immutable.⁷

Thus, Africans recognize God as the source and summit, basis, and goal of their lives. All their actions and inactions were compasses with which they continue in the search of their creator. At any occurrence especially unusual is given a religious connotation. Indeed, in Africa, there is widespread belief in a Supreme Being, with a profound sense of the sacred and mysterious. Thus, it is difficult to separate the life of the African from his/her personal inclinations to the divine. It is in this regard that he/she

⁶ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and philosophy*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), 2.

⁷ J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd Edition, (Kenya: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1991), 45-53.

does everything with the consciousness of God.⁸ According to Pantaleon Iroegbu, the acceptance, both rational and creedal of the reality of God pervades the entire continent of Africa. In African Traditional Religion, there were neither atheists nor agnostics.⁹ One would think that along this line traditional African thought is merely first order. However, the lack of atheism and agnostics do not underscore a first order affair since there are other aspects on the people's cultures that have been critically engaged and may be passed as second order. For instance, verses of the *Ifa* corpus show dialogic engagements where criticality and revisions are employed. The reason why there is no atheist is due to the general *ab initio* understanding that God is, among traditional Africans. On this note, John S. Mbiti writes:

In all (African societies) without a single exception, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being...Such ideas are expressed in their proverbs, stories, myths, religious rites etc. For no one shows a child the Supreme Being (Ashanti proverb)...Everybody knows God's existence almost by instinct, and even children know him.¹⁰

African religiosity has in its bosom the belief that God is; that He¹¹ is a transcendent Being; and that He is the all-powerful creator of all that there is, including other supernatural spirits, gods, ancestors as well as human beings and entire material and cosmic creation. In this creative quality, He is the creator. God as transcendent high God is revered and

⁸ I.A. Kanu and T.H. Paul, "Ethical and Religious Values in African Traditional Religion with Christian Analogies" in *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition*, Vol.3, (2011) 199-212.

⁹ P. Iroegbu, *Kpim of Theodicy Proving the Existence of God Via Hermeholiontica*, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002) 151.

¹⁰ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and philosophy*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), 49.

¹¹ The idea that the Supreme Being is given masculine representation is an aftermath of the encounter with the West. There is no way God's sexuality would have been known to mortal humans. In the course of this research however, the dominant masculine perspective will be used.

worshipped though distantly and often via the minor deities who are his intermediaries in the governance of the universe.

The depth of religiosity in the African personality and the centrality of religion in people's personal and communal lives are common denominators among Africans (traditional or modern?). His vision of life is structured by the divine. It is a deeply spiritual one. This stems from the fact than man is understood to be a humano-divine being. In that the African knows that God is in charge of everything, his whole life included. Elucidating further on this, Mbiti states:

Whenever, the Africans is, there is a religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes his religion with him to the examination room, at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.¹²

As a way of amplifying the foregoing, Eni Njoku insists that:

The African man had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform, either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was 'free' with men, he was not free with nature or his environment. Suppose community and environment allow him to live his life with fewer burdens, he would still have to pay the debts owed by his past ancestors.¹³

¹² Ibid. 2.

¹³ F.O.C. Njoku, *Development and African philosophy: A Theoretical Reconstruction of African Socio-Political Economy*, (New England: Universe, 2004) 57.

Much as there are publications insisting that traditional Africans have pantheon of gods, the outlook that they are monotheistic because they recognized one (that is God) as the God of other gods is misleading. In a recent research, Emmanuel Ofuasia demonstrates that whereas traditional Africans recognize one God, the idea is actually akin to pantheism and not monotheism.¹⁴ He argues for the process metaphysical outlook that makes this possible and chides that it is the monotheistic interpretation given to African theology that presents an uncharitable understanding of same and its modeling after the Abrahamic monotheisms. It is from this understanding that one may recall Aristotle's doctrine of the Unmoved Mover, the one that moves movers but itself does not move.¹⁵

The African God goes with different names. This paper employs the *Yorùbá* ingenuous to the ethnic group occupying the South-West region of Nigeria to buttress this fact. The *Yorùbás* have different names alluded to the Supreme Being. In the words of Bolaji Idowu:

In *Yorùbá* culture, for instance, *Olódùmarè* (the Supreme Being), who stands at the apex of the theoretical entities in terms of which the *Yorùbá* explain human experience, is regarded as the creator (*Eleda a*) and maker (*Ase da*) and the origin and giver of life (*Eleme i'*). He is also conceived as the undying king (*Oba Aì ku*), whose habitation is in the heavens above (*Oba Orun*) and who is above all divinities and humans; a being whose work is done in perfection (*Ase-kan-maku*); a supreme judge who judges in silence (*Ada ke da jo*); and the controller of humankind's destiny.¹⁶

¹⁴ E. Ofuasia, "Monotheism and Metaphysics in the *Yorùbá* Thought System: A Process Alternative," *Journal of Contemporary African Philosophy (JOCAP)*, Vol. 1(1) URL: <https://journal.domuni.eu:443/jocap/index.php?id=176>

¹⁵ O.E. Egelonu, "Towards the Emancipation of Africa" in *NAPSSEC Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.2, 2004, 85-98.

¹⁶ B. Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1962), 39-42.

The above signifies the different linguistic concepts employed by the Yorùbá toward explaining the nature of their Supreme Being. Just like in any other human society, traditional Africans have their idea of morality with many taboos, rituals and so. But then, the crucial question is this: is God involved in moral enactment and sanction of morality and ethics in Africa? Is there a relationship between African traditional ethics and African Religious Ethics? The answers giving to these questions can be classified into two schools of thought; those who affirm and those who negate – the former we call ethical supernaturalists whereas the former we call ethical non-supernaturalists. This article commences with the proposal of the former.

On the one hand, there are those, such as John Mbiti who affirm that there is a connection between the G/gods (religion) and morality within the African thought system. This is the theory that makes ethics depend on God. Their hold of this view is obviously rooted in the Christian orientation that perceives a creator god who is responsible for the establishment of a religious and moral order. Mbiti claims that there exists a religious order of the universe and that the creator god is considered responsible for this. Similarly, he claims that "God gave the moral order to people so that they might live happily and in harmony with one another" (Mbiti 1977:36). According to Mbiti, one should view morality as an authoritative code of conduct directly sanctioned by god. The moral code is therefore not autonomous, but its autonomy is derived from the creator god. Any breach of the moral code would accordingly be an offence against god and his instruction.¹⁷ Thus, for Mbiti, religion is the source and foundation of morality.

Accordingly, Motsamia Molefe defines, ethical supernaturalism is the claim that morality is essentially spiritual or religious.¹⁸ He further states that by "Supernatural", he means moral properties are spiritual

¹⁷J. Mbiti (1977:36) as cited by Philip Nel, "Morality and Religion in African Thought" in *Acta Theologica*, Vol.28, No.2, 2009, 33-47.

¹⁸M. Molefe, "African Metaphysics and Religious Ethics" in *Filosofia Theologica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, Vol.7. No.3., 2018, 19-37.

and as such cannot be accessed by appeal to scientific methods.¹⁹ Ethical Supernaturalism rests on the following tenets:

Firstly, that God is the only source of moral rules. In other words, God is the legislator of moral laws. It is line with that the Roman lawyer Marcus Tullius Cicero asserts: "True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting... It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and impossible to abolish it entirely...God is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge."²⁰ Secondly, that something is considered to be good because God says it; and thirdly, the way to lead a good life is to do what God wants.

If the foregoing propositions are correct, then it is inferable that it is the Judeo-Christian or Islamic God that is the moral law giver for all peoples of the world. Are we to take the God of the Muslims more seriously than that of the Hindu? In a related development, Phillip Walubengo highlights that "from whom would this moral filter emanate? If it would come from a higher power, which higher power would it be? The Christian God? The Muslim God? Hindu or Buddhist? When the law is moral, it is moral according to whom?"²¹

This is why John Mbiti states, it is believed in many African societies that their morals were given to them by God. This provides an unchallenged authority from the very beginning.²² The crucial questions then are: Is God involved in moral enactment and sanction of

¹⁹M. Molefe, "African Metaphysics and Religious Ethics" in *Filosofia Theologica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, Vol.7. No.3., 2018, 19-37.

²⁰Raymond Wacks, *Philosophy of Law: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

²¹Philip Walubengo, "Jurisprudence: Natural Vs Legal Positivism" Culled from <http://walubengoden.wordpress.com/2012/04/06/jurisprudence-natural-law-vs-legal-positivism/> posted April 6 2012. Last Assessed April 5, 2017.

²²J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Heinemann: Educational Books, 1975), p.175. cited by M. Molefe, "African Metaphysics and Religious Ethics" in *Filosofia Theologica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, Vol.7. No.3., 2018, 19-37.

morality and ethics in Africa? Is there a relationship between African traditional ethics and African religious ethics? This school of thought is of the affirmative that African morality and ethics originated from God and there is a correlation between African traditional ethics and African religious ethics.

It is on the basis of these perspectives that Kofi Asare Opoku avers that "It may be said without fear of exaggeration that life in the Akan world is religion and religion is life."²³ Kofi Asare Opoku connecting the interpenetration of religion to morality writes that "Generally, morality originates from religious considerations, and so pervasive is religion in African cultures that ethics and religion cannot be separated from each other."²⁴ Sarpong states that "Ethics here emerges with religion and religious practices."²⁵; Kofi Abrefa Busia also writes that "Religion defined moral duties for the members of the group or the tribe."²⁶ Agreeing with these perspectives, Joseph Boakye Danguah posits that "Everything has value only in relation to the idea of the great ancestor."²⁷ Pantaleon Iroegbu seems to affirm this when he writes:

The commands of God; the taboos of the gods and all the religious laws that build up man in dignity and mutuality are meant to assist man so to develop as to maintain an equilibrium in all things. This is practicalized via a proper religious attitude, moral discipline, communal-individual equilibrium and personal happiness that results from the above.²⁸

²³K.A. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship" in I.A. Kanu, *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*, (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2015), 173.

²⁴K.A. Opoku, "West African Traditional Religion" in I.A. Kanu, *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*, (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2015).

²⁵P.A. Sarpong, "Aspects of Akan Ethics", in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 1972, 41.

²⁶K.A. Busia, *African in Search of Democracy*, (New York: Praeger, 1967), 16.

²⁷J.B. Danguah, *The Doctrine of God: A Fraction of Gold Coast Ethics*, (London: Lutterworth, 1944), 3.

²⁸P. Iroegbu, *Enwisdomization & African Philosophy, Two Selected Essays*, (Owerri: International Universities Press, 2004), 90.

On the other hand, there are the ethical nonsupernaturalists – those such as Philip Nel who contest the validations of the foregoing scholars, writes:

The assumption that faith or religion is the foundation of African morality can only be partially endorsed when one grants space for hybrid moral constructions between Christianity and indigenous religion. However, African morality is not necessarily based on religion or faith, but the beneficiary values of collective family and community well-being, without dissolving the individual's character.²⁹

Reacting in this vein, professor Joseph Omoregbe rejects the link established by these scholars between religion and morality as mistaken. He writes:

There is a general impression that African Traditional ethics is a religious ethics, that is, that it is dependent on religion or even part of African Traditional Religion. This view is held mostly by those who claim that morality is intrinsically dependent on religion. This view is generally held by religious men. But... this view is false, that quite a number of people who profess no religion and have no religious beliefs have very strong moral convictions and live moral lives. The view that African Traditional ethics is a religious ethics has recently been challenged by scholars and shown to be mistaken.³⁰

²⁹P.J. Nel, "Morality and Religion in African Thought" in *Acta Theologica*, Vol.28, No.2, 2009, 3-47.

³⁰J.I. Omoregbe, *Ethics A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1993), 135.

Similarly, Kwame Gyekye reveals that these scholars speak of morality only in terms of moral rules or norms, while forgetting that morality involves the conduct of people or the pattern of behaviour. It is, therefore, not clear if these perspectives are of the view that morality is bound up with religion or if it is religious beliefs that influence human actions, or if both is meant.³¹ The reason for Gyekye distancing religion from morality is based on his research among the Akan of Ghana wherein he discovers that the concepts of good and evil are used not because the divine has sanctioned them, but because it helps humanity. He thus, prefers to talk of a humanistic or non-supernaturalistic origin of morality rather than a religious origin of morality which emphasizes the wellbeing or welfare of the community.³²

In a related development, Kwasi Wiredu argues that among the Akan people of Ghana, morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection as to what is conducive to human welfare. If you ask the average Akan why it is wrong to have sex relation with another man's wife, he will not tell you that it is wrong because God or the gods have said it should not be done. Rather "he would almost certainly reply, 'would you like the same if it were done to you?'" Again, if you ask the average Akan why we should help those in distress he would not say we should help them because God or the gods want us to help them. Nor would he say that we should help the distressed because religion teaches us to do so. Rather, "the characteristic Akan reply would be aphoristic: Mortals need help', or 'The plight of your fellow man is your plight', or 'It is somebody's turn today; it will be another's tomorrow.'³³ Morality among the Akans is thus not founded on religion but on human consideration for human welfare.³⁴

³¹K. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), 210.

³²I.A. Kanu, *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*, (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2015), 173-174.

³³K. Wiredu, "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought" in H.O. Odera and D.A. Wasola, (ed.), *Philosophy and Cultures*, (Kenya: Bookwise Ltd., 1983), 7.

³⁴J.I. Omorogbe, *Op. cit.*, 135-136.

The implication of this is that among the Traditional Akan, there is no such thing as a divine revelation, that is, no system of doctrines believed to have been handed down by God through a prophet, the Akans never had a body of moral doctrines believed to have been sent to mankind by God. Hence, there is no such thing as revealed morality or religious morality among the Akan people. The Akans define morality not in terms of the will of God or the command of God, but in terms of the conditions of human welfare. What promotes human welfare is considered as good while whatever is detrimental to human welfare is considered as evil. "The conclusion is clear: If, for the Akan, goodness is to be defined in terms of human well-being... then it is logically independent of God; so that even if there were no belief in God, there still would be rules of good conduct. It follows also and a fortiori that morality, as a set of rules of conduct, is for the Akan, logically independent of the minor deities."³⁵

It is a result of this split among African thinkers whether or not deity has a role to play in the formulation and ratification of morality that informs the need to entertain the submissions of Olúwolé on the subject.

Sophie Olúwolé on the Rational Basis of Morality and the Divine Command Theory

The aim here of this section is to critically consider the position of Olúwolé, following the face-off between the ethical supernaturalist and the ethical non-supernaturalist on the foundation question of traditional African ethic. Basing her inquiry on a rational foundation, Sophie Olúwolé argues that Yoruba morality is not a religious morality, contrary to the general belief. It is on the contrary, a secular morality with a rational basis. This does not mean that the gods do not play any role in Yoruba morality. They do, but their role is not that of legislators of moral laws. For the Yoruba do not believe that the moral laws were made by the gods for men. Their role is to ensure absolute justice by enforcing sanctions where human beings are unable to do so due to the

³⁵K. Wiredu, "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought" Op. cit., 7.

limitation of human perception and knowledge. It is possible for example for a person to violate moral laws in secret and no human being would know about it. The gods come in here to ensure justice by punishing the evil doer. Human being is not able to ensure absolute justice due to human limitation. But the Yoruba do not give up at this point and admit that injustice could in the end triumph, due to man's inability to ensure absolute justice. Hence: they bring in the gods (they as it were postulate the existence of the gods) to bridge the gap between man's ability and absolute justice. Their role therefore, is not to make moral laws, but to apply the sanctions in cases where men are unable to do so.

According to Olúwolé, "For the Yoruba, the gods are agents of moral sanction rather than authorities whose moral prescriptions man must obey."³⁶ The fact that the gods play this role in Yoruba morality does not make this morality a religious one, nor would it be right to say that it is based on religion. She furthers: "My contention is that the acceptance of the gods is not enough justification for regarding their thought system as a religious one."³⁷ This opinion of Olúwolé is also shared by Anthony Kanu, when he writes:

It is true that morality is not religion, but to argue that morality has no relationship with religion sounds plausible but not real. It is not so much about that God has given the moral law, but that these laws when broken offends him and the ancestors who upheld them. God is part of the ontological order; and to do anything that harms the human person is to distort the ontological order and, thus, would attract divine wrath.³⁸

³⁶S.B. Olúwolé, "The Rational Basis of Yoruba Ethical Thinking" in *The Nigeria Journal of Philosophy*, vol.4, 1984, 4-5.

³⁷Ibid., 22.

³⁸I.A. Kanu, *Op. cit.*, 165.

Yoruba morality, Olúwolé argues, is based on the Golden Rule and Utilitarian considerations, not on God or the gods. The Golden Rule says: *do unto others what you would like them do to you*. It is found in the Bible, but it is not exclusively biblical. Olúwolé uncovers some portions of the Ifa corpus in her book, *Socrates and Orunmila*, to show that the idea of the Golden Rule is not unknown to Africans. It is inscribed in human nature, in African life, thought and praxis. Hence, generally, it is what one wishes that one should have or to be treated that determines what morality to inflict or not. Added to this are utilitarian considerations, that is to say, the effects and consequences of such laws on individuals and on society. Fundamentally they are based on God or the gods.³⁹ Thus, Joseph Omorgebe writes that the essence of goodness in African traditional ethics consists in doing good to others. Morality in African traditional thought is essentially interpersonal and social, with a basis in human well-being. For the African is, traditionally, his brother's keeper and is concerned about his well-being. Individualism is abhorrent to the traditional African mentality.⁴⁰

Like Wiredu, Olúwolé also distinguishes between three kinds of rules of behaviour among the Yoruba, namely, rules of etiquette, taboos and moral rules. They should not be confused. Rules of etiquette are customary rules which express formalism in action. For example, rules of etiquette demand that males prostrate while greeting elders, while women kneel down. This is simply a matter of etiquette, not of morality. Taboos are attributed to the gods. They are believed to be things demanded by the gods. For example, the worshippers of certain gods are forbidden (by the gods they worship) to do certain things or to eat certain things. Thus, for example, the worshippers of *Sango* are forbidden to eat a particular species of beans, while the worshippers of *Obatala* are forbidden to drink palm wine.⁴¹ Taboos (which are ascribed to the gods) should be clearly differentiated from morality.

³⁹J.I. Omoregbe, "Ethics in Traditional African Society" in, P. Iroegbu and A. Echekube (eds.), *Kpim of Morality General, Special and Professional*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books), 38.

⁴⁰J.I. Omoregbe, *Ethics A Systematic and Historical Study*, op. cit., 140-150.

⁴¹S.B. Olúwolé, op. cit., 24.

The former is based on religion and is explained in terms of the demands of the gods while the latter is based on reasoning and is explained in terms of the Golden Rule and Utilitarian considerations.⁴²

Thus, for Olúwolé Yoruba ethics, arguing that African morality is founded on rational reflection, that is, as to what is conducive to human welfare and not on the authorities of the gods. It is from this line of reasoning that we deduce a ‘soft’ version of the Divine Command Theory (DCT) from her analysis. To understand this connection, it is pertinent to first, have a clear perception, what DCT entails.

The general Western character of the DCT states that the theory is “one in which the ultimate foundation for morality is the revealed will of God, namely, the command of God.”⁴³ Similarly, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines it as an ethical theory according to which part or all morality depends on God as promulgated by divine commands.⁴⁴ The divine command theories are typically offered as accounts of deontological part of morality, which consists of moral requirements (obligation), permissions (rightness), and prohibition (wrongness). On a divine command conception, actions forbidden by God are morally wrong because they are thus forbidden, actions not forbidden by God are morally right because they are not thus forbidden, and actions commanded by God are morally obligatory because they are thus commanded.⁴⁵ To argue that something is wrong is to claim that God prohibits it. On this view, moral duties receive their binding character from the agency of the creator and, in the absence of God, morality would lose its objective authority.⁴⁶ Therefore, there is an essential identity of morality via divine command or instruction.

⁴²J.I. Omoregbe, *Ethics A Systematic and Historical Study*, *Op. cit.*, 137-138.

⁴³S.B. Rae, *Moral Choices An Introduction Ethics*, (USA: Zondervan, 1960), 47.

⁴⁴R. Audi, (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 240-241.

⁴⁵R. Audi, (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 241.

⁴⁶C. Taliaferro, *Philosophy of Religion, Beginners Guides*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), p.173.

On first showing, the DCT seems to bear close semblance with ethical supernaturalism. However, what makes the DCT implied in Olúwolé's rational basis is that though deity is not the source of morals, deity is offended when the moral laws are transgressed. In her words, "For the Yoruba, the gods are agents of moral sanction rather than authorities whose moral prescriptions man must obey."⁴⁷ The fact that the gods play this role in Yoruba morality does not make this morality a religious one, nor would it be right to say that it is based on religion. She makes the point more clear as she insists: "My contention is that the acceptance of the gods is not enough justification for regarding their thought system as a religious one."⁴⁸ Two crucial points are important to be deduced from her utterances that have implication of the soft version of DCT that are implied in her rational basis of morality among the Yoruba.

Firstly, Olúwolé does not deny the existence of G/gods. Her contention is that morality does not evolve from them. Secondly, and following from the first, assuming morality does not evolve from them, it is safe to infer, as Olúwolé does that deity merely serve as agents of sanctions and enforcers of morality in a way related to how deity in the DCT is transgressed. It is on this reading of Olúwolé's rational basis of morality that we then deduce a soft DCT principle that operates in her analysis of the Yoruba version of morality.

Conclusion

It is true that morality is not religion, but to argue that morality has no relationship with religion may be theoretically plausible but practically inappropriate. The Divine Command Theory (DCT) is one such doctrine in the mainstream and dominant Western tradition of philosophy. It was not so much about that God has given the moral law, but that these laws, when broken offends Him and the ancestors and divinities who uphold them. One lesson from Olúwolé's analysis is that

⁴⁷S.B. Olúwolé, "The Rational Basis of Yoruba Ethical Thinking" in *The Nigeria Journal of Philosophy*, vol.4, 1984, 4-5.

⁴⁸Ibid., 22.

God and the divinities are part of the ontological order,⁴⁹ and to do anything that harms the human person is to distort the ontological order and, thus, would attract divine wrath. In African traditional societies there was the fear of the ancestors and divinities. The idea of the relation of morality to the divine gave morality a strong value in African traditional societies and further affected behaviour, that is, the response of men and women to the law. This is the ground upon which the analysis of Olúwolé may be interpreted as an eclectic affair between the two extremes of the affirmative and non-affirmative orientations that had been briefly considered in an earlier part of this research. From this orient, African ethics, therefore, has both a religious and humanistic basis, Olúwolé insists. It is religious and humanistic and the same time because in African ontology, the human person occupies the central place.⁵⁰ This, interestingly, will count as one of the admirable contributions of Olúwolé to the understanding of moral philosophy within the African place in general and the Yoruba in particular.

⁴⁹E. Ofuafo. "Unveiling Ezumezu Logic as a framework for Process Ontology and Yorùbá Ontology." *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, Vol. 8 (2) 63-84 DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ftr.v8i2.6>

⁵⁰I.A. Kanu, *Op. cit.*, 175-176.

Equality or Partnership? A Critical Appraisal of Sophie Olúwolé's Notion of Gender Relations

Ibukunoluwa Komolafe

Abstract

Globally, there are increasing agitations against historical marginalisation of women by feminist movements with more serious attention on the articulation of the indispensable relevance of women to societal advancement. In the African socio-cultural and political space, feminism is gaining currency amidst much acrimony regarding whether feminism is another instance of epistemic and ideological category unquestionably accepted from the West. Sophie Olúwolé's scholarship on feminism and gender resonates a contested space of the indigenous African conception of women, their social roles, obligations, and aspirations. This paper critically appraises Olúwolé's conception of gender relations in Yoruba culture. Opposing the historical and conceptual worldview of feminism in Western context, Oluwolé contends that there is a difference between the Western and African notions of gender relations. Rather than seeking equality and unhindered freedom, women in Yoruba culture hold as much relevance space as her male counterpart in a partnership relational model. This paper provides some further reflections on the views of Oluwolé while challenging aspects of her position. Contrary to Oluwolé's submission, this paper argues that the Yoruba culture promotes submission rather than partnership or equality of women. This paper exposes the contradictions in Oluwolé's conception of gender relations in the understanding of subjectivity, social recognition, hierarchy, and political organization.

Keywords: Gender, Equality, Partnership, Liberation, Sophie Olúwolé

Introduction

Over the years, the struggles for human rights and emancipation have taken centre stage at global discourses. One of such struggles is the fight for equality between male and female irrespective of their roles and biological attributes. Until recently, gender roles are mainly based on sex and attributes of the sex. For example, women are sometimes regarded as being physically weak and incapable of attaining the same

level of intelligence and integrity as her male counterpart. However, women are fast becoming aware of their relevance to society and how much they have been relegated in the past. Feminism as a controversial gender issue amongst all other contemporary debates, raises the question of who a woman is and her role in society. Though a global conception, there are diverse theoretical and ideological persuasions of feminism informed by different socio-economic, religious, and cultural milieu and experiences.

Sophie Olúwolé's scholarship on feminism and gender resonates a contested space of the indigenous African conception of women, their social roles, obligations, and aspirations. Based on Yoruba cultural context, Olúwolé contends that the independence and individualistic nature of Western feminism does not represent the African woman experience, culture, and ideology. She equivocally avers that in Yoruba culture, the woman holds as much credence in partnership with her male counterpart, however as a wife and mother she is subservient to her husband.

The aim of this paper is to provide some further reflections on the views of Olúwolé while challenging aspects of her position by exposing the contradictions and subjectivity in her conception of the hierarchy inherent in the husband-and-wife relationship. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part attempts a brief comparative study of the Western and African conceptions of gender relations. It gives an overview of the recent history of feminism in the West and how it contends with the traditional African worldview of feminism and gender relations. The second part explains the inextricable link between Yoruba culture and religion. It further outlines the conception of gender in Yoruba cultural belief and society. The third part examines Olúwolé's conception of Yoruba culture and religion and her notion of gender relations. Finally, this paper appraises Olúwolé's stance while arguing that Yoruba culture promotes submission rather than partnership or equality of women.

Western and African Conceptions of Gender Relations

Patriarchy is a dominant system in Western political thought and history. For example, the earliest Greek philosophical thought elevates men as the archetypes of wisdom and strength while the women are hardly acknowledged but portrayed as slaves who must live in silence.¹ In fact, Plato in the early portions in *Republic* portrayed women as weak, weepy and unequal to men who must tend to their husbands and children. They are not afforded any political participation in society "much less equal participation."² This began to change in Book V where Plato emphasises that the human soul is immutable and sexless, hence one's role in the society cannot be determined by one's sex. He suggests that the role of the guardian should be performed by both male and female alike though one is weaker and the other is stronger. Nevertheless, women should have equal right to education and politics.

On the other hand, Aristotle in *Politics* believes by nature "the male is more expert at leading than the female...the relation of male and female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled."³ This establishes male dominance over female since women were considered *shameless and false*.

Often times, feminism focuses on the systematic economic injustices that women experience owing to their sex.⁴ It seeks to eradicate the injustice and inequality existing in gender relations as a result of sex's roles and capabilities. Ann Oakley suggests that feminism is about putting women first, prioritising their interests and representing those

¹ Plato cited in K. Olugbade, "Women in Plato's Republic", in *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No.4, 1989, 503.

² *Ibid.*, 505.

³ Aristotle cited in N. Smith, "Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol.21, No.4, 1983, 475.

⁴ R. Gaidzanwa, "African Feminism" in Building Vibrant and Tolerant Democracies, *A Journal on African Women's Experiences: Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa*, Issue 1, (April 2015), 2.

interests in every sphere of life.⁵ In other words, feminism is the political theory and practice that addresses the freedom of women of all colours, classes, abilities, sexual orientations and ages from all forms of oppression.⁶ Feminism serves as a socio-economic and political pedestal which influences, shapes and exercises a degree of power over events in order to further the interests of different types of women. Despite the diverse perceptions of feminism, its main characteristics are evident in the fight against discrimination and inferior stance of women in the society as well as the aim to change the social, political and cultural order of society to accommodate the competencies of women.

To assume that all feminist's theories advocate for all women irrespective of their race, class, age, ethnic identity, sexual orientation amongst others may be misleading. On one hand, the Western conception of gender relations is individualistic, independent and radical in nature. It advocates for gender, social and political equality irrespective of biological and social differences. It believes that these differences should not be tantamount to discrimination especially against women. The central issue for many feminists is the argument about women's role in reproduction. It has been argued that women's oppression originates from the meaning conferred on the identity 'woman' in all aspects of cultural life rather than the political, economic or even biological objective structures in the society.⁷ A significant element of this argument is not the biological fact that women are reproducing children but the cultural construction of mothering and sexuality that defines women's status.⁸

⁵A. Oakley, *Subject Women*, (London: Fontana Books, 1980), 1.

⁶B. Smith, "Racism and Woman's Studies", in G. Hull, P. Scott, B. Smith *All the Women are White, All Blacks are Men but some of Us are Brave*, (Totowa: Rowman and Allan-held, 1983), 1.

⁷S. Hekman, "Feminism" in S. Malpas and P. Wake, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 92.

⁸*Ibid.*, 93-94.

On the contrary, the traditional African conception of gender relations promotes a woman as a mother, a wife and at the same time a public figure fully involved with her career. This conception is heterogeneous, pro-natal and concerned with different cultural issues unlike Western feminism that is individualistic and concerned with the female body and essentialism.⁹ The fundamental discourse of African feminism centres around the interconnectedness between the male and the female as it encourages male participation and companionship but stands against the mainstream of patriarchal power and oppression of women. Although, the concept of gender relations in Africa is arguably different from the West due to her multifaceted cultural and social expectations, feminism is gaining more credence as African women despite their cultural positions believe they are regarded as a second fiddle to their male counterpart.

Besides its contrast to the West, gender relations in Africa have been a discourse of several heterogeneous experiences and conceptions. For instance, Rudo Gaidzanwa argues that the fight for gender equality for women is the same irrespective of race or cultures. It is simply a reaction of women to the burdens and insubordination that has been meted on them over time. Whereas Oyeronke Oyewumi maintains that contrary to the Western progenitors of feminism, the issues of gender is not universal rather particular and depends on socio-cultural and economic milieu of any given group of people. She states: "gender is first and foremost a social-cultural construct."¹⁰ Although little is mentioned of the relationship of husband and wife in a family, Oyewumi further emphasises that the socio-cultural construct of the

⁹J. Ahikire, "African Feminism in Context: Reflections on the Legitimation Battles, Victories and Rehearsals", in *African Feminist, Pan Africanism and Feminism*, (African Gender Institute, Issue 19, 2014), 8-9.

¹⁰O. Oyewumi, "Conceptualising Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concept and the Challenge of African Epistemologies", in *AfriRep-Feminist Studies* (African Women's Development Fund, 2002), 1.

Yoruba belief system is not gender specific just as the concept of family organisation is different from the Western conception of family. The Yoruba organising principle of family “is seniority based on relative age and not gender; kinship categories encode seniority not gender.”¹¹

The Western conception of gender relations is individualistic and independent which originates from her socio-economic and cultural experience. In her book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*,¹² Carol Gilligan expresses the difference between men and women as regards ethical judgement and moral reasoning. Difference does not equate deficiency or inequality since individual uniqueness is evident and each must be accorded the same respect and recognition. She suggests that women have a certain way of reasoning that is quite different from men, nevertheless not unequal to men's sense of reasoning.¹³ Women generally explore ethical judgement from a relational and contextual perspective while men appeal to universal principles while detaching themselves from the concrete situation.¹⁴ In other words, both men and women approach moral reasoning from divergent standpoint which does not render one superior than the other. However, Gilligan has been criticised by radical feminist as promoting gender inequality and inferiority while emphasising the difference between the two genders.

Another feminist and proponent of individualism, Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher and existentialist opines women should not be treated as the “other sex” but be regarded as simply a human being, just as capable as a man in all ramifications. Beauvoir began her classic

¹¹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹² C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 10 -12.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.12

¹⁴E. Stumpf, *Elements of Philosophy: An Introduction*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), p.96

analysis of women in *The Second Sex* with a statement that sets the tone for contemporary feminism: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.¹⁵ She also proposes that a woman should not be defined by her biological differences or physiological attributes; "it is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life."¹⁶ In defining woman, Beauvoir says:

She is the good medatrix between propitious Nature and man; and she is the temptation of unconquered Nature, counter all goodness. She incarnates all moral values from good to evil, and their opposites; she is the substance of action and whatever the obstacle to it, she is man's grasp on the world and his frustration; as such she is the source and origin of all man's reflection on his existence and of whatever expression he is able to give to it; and yet she works to divert him from himself, to make him sink down in silence and in death.¹⁷

In the same vein, Shulamith Firestone¹⁸ argues that the role of a woman as a mother and caregiver makes her more susceptible to subordination. This emphasises the reproductive attributes of women; even if legal, economic and political barriers to women's equality are removed, women's status may not change as they may remain subservient to their male counterpart. Nonetheless, this is not applicable in all climes, for example, the world has seen female monarchs and leaders even in the era of 'strict' subjugation to men. Does this mean women seeming subjugation only affects some social class or region?

¹⁵S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), translated by H M Parshley, (New York: Penguin 1972) p.

¹⁶Stumpf., p.153

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 160

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 100

The treatment of women in Africa has undergone various phases. For instance, it could be argued that in the pre-colonial era, the woman is the daughter, wife, and mother. The woman assumes these intricate roles upon being born a woman though it does not diminish the fact that some women take up the role of a father when the need arises. However, these responsibilities are secondary, even if she is the monarch or leader of a group. The question to ask is whether her primary roles as a mother, daughters, and wife, make her subservient to their male counterpart or they are simply second nature.

To buttress this, Josephine Ahikire argues that the African conception of gender relations is ingrained in the African experience which is both philosophical and practical.¹⁹ It emphasises the communal relationship between male and female where the man is not considered a primary enemy or a rival but a collaborator and partner. Therefore, the woman's roles as stated above has nothing to do with her status in society because she is equally as important as her counterpart. Clare Hudsons further opines that the African concept of gender relations is family-centred, accommodating and welcomes male presence and participation.²⁰ Hence, it does not abhor the male gender even if it advocates for equality. Inasmuch as the African woman fights for equality in both her public and private lives, she also keeps her innate characteristics: as a daughter who is the source of kindness, tenderness, beauty and adores her parents; as a wife who builds her home and creates a decent relationship with her husband and finally as a mother who nurtures her children.²¹ In other words, the African woman can maintain balance in her private life of mothering and fostering with her ambitions in society.

¹⁹Ahikire, 8-9.

²⁰C. Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, (Troy: Bedford Publishing, 1998), 25.

²¹K. Dader, *Woman As a Wife, Daughter, Sister, and Mother: Many reasons to Pay Respect to Women*, <https://orrec.com/woman-as-a-wife-daughter-sister-and-mother-many-reasons-to> (retrieved: 30th June, 2021)

Gender in Yoruba Culture and Society

The Yoruba worldview embraces harmony in diversity in which different components are interconnected and interdependent. It calls for mediation and accommodation among the parties involved without which there will be disunity and disharmony. In the Yoruba hierarchy of being, *Olodumare* (who is without gender), the divinities, spirits and ancestors constitute both genders and they have duties and capabilities which are not superior or inferior to another since each one's duties are relevant to the harmonic administration of the universe. Therefore, the Yoruba socio-cultural and religious experience is rooted in the principle of kinship which is *sine qua non* of the people's reality.²²

Yoruba conception of gender is complementary and sometimes assigns certain characteristics to one gender or the other, which does not in any case ascribe any form of superiority. In fact, they exhibit a symbiotic relationship where both genders are interconnected, interdependent and augment each other. For example, the male principles in Yoruba culture signify toughness (*lile*) but not necessarily strength, while the female principles represent softness or gentleness (*ero*)²³ which is nonetheless devoid of strength. Both the male and female principles demonstrate strength in their unique skills and diversity. Olúwolé affirms that "the Yoruba view of life does not consist of classifying objects or human experiences into permanent classes meant to symbolise specific values. For example, the woman is mother, daughter, wife, merchant, priestess, amongst others."²⁴ This belief informs the Yoruba notion of gender relations which is not rigid or cast in concrete but liquefied and tempered by other components such as seniority in age, wealth, knowledge, and responsibilities. Although both genders have different roles and attributes, they complement each other in a form of

²²Z. Sofola cited in O. Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), 2.

²³*Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴S. Olúwolé, "Madonna and the Whore in African Traditional Thought," *Journal of Philosophy and Development* Vol. 1, 1995, 18.

partnership. Olúwolé affirms that according to some Yoruba aphorisms, there is no strict disparity and superiority between male and female, but they are mere partners in upholding values and traditions. For example:

làbo ni Olôrun dà gbogbo nnkan.

T'ibi t'ire l'djânrin

Eye à lè efi apa kanfö

Àjèjé owô kan à gb'erùd'ori

(Every natural existence occurs in male-female anti-thesis.

The good and the bad are bound inseparably together.

The bird cannot fly with a single wing.

One hand does not lift a load to the head).²⁵

Meanwhile, the complementary dynamics of traditional Yoruba conception of gender have been greatly influenced by the advent of Christianity and Islam which is quite noticeable in the recent conceptualisation of African culture and religion. In the pre-colonial Africa, the relationship between male and female was not shaded with oppression and subordination but "it is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations which is rooted in the people's cosmic experience."²⁶ This relationship does not advocate for oppression nor equality but partnership and cooperation. Olúwolé argues that with the influence of other religions, women were gradually dominated and oppressed by men which are odd in Yoruba culture.²⁷ This argument could be valid but not totally true because it can also be argued that Yoruba culture gives prominence and preference to male than female

²⁵ S. Olúwolé, "Culture, Gender and Development Theories in Africa" *African Development/Afrique et Développement*, VOL. 22, No. 1, (1997), 100.

²⁶ Olajubu, 10.

²⁷ Olúwolé, "Culture, Gender and Development Theories in Africa," 103.

though one is not independent of another. For example, the male is regarded as *arole* and heir to the inheritance of the family while the female is sometimes at his mercy. Yoruba culture may not directly inculcate submission or inequality but may be implied from some of her practices and beliefs which will be discussed later in this paper.

Sophie Olúwolé's Conception of Gender Relations in Yoruba Culture.

Sophie Olúwolé argues notably in her article *Madonna and the Whore in African Traditions* that discrimination is natural to humans; however, to treat people unjustly because they are different is unacceptable. She states: "to call X a man and Y a woman is to be involved in purely classificatory discrimination. But to treat Y differently in all things just because Y does not belong to the class of X is to be involved in unjustifiable absolutism"²⁸ Until recently, womanhood in many Western literature stands for values which are inimical to the natural qualities of a woman. It is unacceptable to believe women are physically and intellectually weak or have no mental toughness to create or make certain daring decisions. However, this is abnormal to African philosophic conception of womanhood where "the Yoruba traditionally regarded motherhood as an important social responsibility which is evaluated higher than that of fatherhood."²⁹ Womanhood in Africa, Yoruba culture, is respected and celebrated. For instance, a famous Yoruba saying endorses a mother as a deity that is worthy of praise: *Orisa bi iya ko si, iya la ba ma bo o.*

Olúwolé maintains that Yoruba cultural belief system does not support any form of absolutism but favours and recognises the natural dualism in the category of things. Just as the natural order of things where there are differences and inequalities this also applies to gender relations in Yoruba culture and religion. Therefore, Western feminism that seeks to expunge the natural discrimination or distinction of individuals has no place in African philosophical thought. The traditional African

²⁸Olúwolé, "Madonna and the Whore in African Traditional Thought," 20.

²⁹ Olúwolé, "Culture, Gender and Development Theories in Africa," 106.

philosophical conception of gender relations recognises the different roles played by both male and female, yet one role is not superior to the other. The Yoruba conception of gender relations, unlike the Western conception does not ask the question of supremacy or equality but of reputation. Olúwqlé argues that both male and female share a level of importance in their individual roles and characteristics. Historically, women in ancient Yoruba kingdoms, play important roles such as *Iyalode*, *Erelu* and many more. In fact, as Olúwqlé avers:

There are oral records of female rulers in many of the towns and villages and the phenomenon of female chiefs is still very much around. Women held some powerful positions in the palace of Alaafin — the ancient ruler of the old Oyo Empire. For example, the Alaafin's official mother was the feudal head of Basorun, the Oyo Generalissimo, while the Iya Kere (the junior official mother) was the King's treasurer. She was also in charge of the royal insignia and all the paraphernalia used on state occasions.³⁰

There is indeed no basis for the female to alienate herself from her biological or sexual differences, and other roles because it does not automatically make her male. Though one gender enjoys more prominence, both genders are essential in the natural order of things, and they are inexplicably intertwined in a form of partnership in order to achieve a purposeful life. Olúwqlé further buttresses that the ancient Yoruba thought recognises male and the female as partners in progress. She states: "This male-female principle is seen as so fundamental that it is nowhere denied in the organisation of society. The inseparableness of the male-female compendium forms the first axiom of understanding and of theories of society."³¹

³⁰*Ibid.*, 109.

³¹*Ibid.*, 106

Olúwolé also acknowledges that although the equality of human beings is clearly stated in Yoruba culture, this is quite different when it comes to the principle that defines the relationship between husband and wife. This disparity is more explicit in the roles and relationship between husband and wife where the husband has the social responsibility as the head of the family and the wife's role is subservient to that of the husband.³² It can be argued that aside from her acquiescent role and responsibility to her husband, the wife may also have non-negotiable and *demeaning* duties to her in-laws. This opposing principle indicate one of many disparities that exist in Yoruba culture and traditions. However, to promote a synergetic relationship between husband and wife, the woman [must] become the friend and not the humble dependent of her husband."³³

Equality or Partnership? A Critique of Olúwolé on Gender Relations

Most often than not, gender roles affect gender relations. Over the years some jobs were considered feminine while some were attributed to the male gender. For instance, a woman is either a seamstress, a nurse or a teacher. The woman enjoys economic security from her husband as she tends to her husband and children or (*serves them*) which she was content with. But as the socio-economic structures of the society began to change especially during the industrial revolution, many women were forced to seek jobs to assist their family hence their interests and capabilities began to grow. As this phenomenal change occurred, women began to solicit for social and economic equality since their roles and responsibilities have been altered. A woman can no longer be seen as the economic property of the man for she brings to the table as much as the man, sometimes more. This change in responsibilities promoted the change in gender roles and relations where women will no longer be subservient to men and wives subservient to their husbands.

³²*Ibid.*, 108

³³ M. Wollstonecraft cited in C. Krookke and A. Sorensen, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance*, (United Kingdom: Sage Publication, 2005), 9.

As aforementioned, some scholars have argued that gender was not a determining factor in Africa, however, the essence of gender relations cannot be overlooked especially in Yoruba culture and religion. There was no cause for power tussle between male and female for each person performs their duties according to their roles and positions. Nevertheless, the inferiority or oppression of women might have gone unnoticed because some women are or were content with their roles and responsibilities so long as men were performing their duties. In the event that these duties are reversed, for instance, the woman as the breadwinner of the home, the status of the woman should also change. Often than not, the male ego and natural sense of superiority may not accommodate this phenomenal change. One may argue that the call for gender equality without bias became a reality when both genders assumed new roles, hence having conflicting responsibilities.

Olúwolé recognises that women play a significant role in the religious systems in Yoruba culture and tradition. In fact, "the *Osugbo* society, which was the legal arm of government among the *Egba* and *Ijebu* Yoruba, had only one female representative. But she was vested with great powers."³⁴ These great powers, however, does not extend to females seeing the *Oro* in Yoruba culture where it is still a taboo. Equally, *Ifa* priestesses use a different (sometimes considered inferior) instrument compared to her male counterpart. This further strengthens the discrimination between male and female. Although, the importance given to male and female cannot be overlooked, the Yoruba still "expresses preference for male children and sometimes make derogatory remarks about women".³⁵ These inconsistencies in Yoruba conception of gender relations is further revealed in the relationship between husband and wife.

It is also noteworthy that there exists a natural dichotomy between husband and wife as with nature, nevertheless, the husband is regarded as the head or leader of the wife which by extension means male is

³⁴Olúwolé, "Madonna and the Whore in African Traditional Thought," 23.

³⁵Olúwolé, "Culture, Gender and Development Theories in Africa," 104.

superior to female. Olúwolé points out that the man's superiority is established when he is acting as a leader and not as 'oppressors of women' but this does not obliterate the idea that "society still gives an edge to the husband over the wife, nor that men did not in actual practice see themselves as masters; or that women explicitly refused to accept their role which in many ways was sometimes close to slavery."³⁶ This suggests that gender may be insignificant in ancient Africa because the woman recognises her place and does not interfere with the position and duties of her male counterpart. The woman is obligated to understand and perform her roles, functions and responsibility and is required to play her part in the order of things. The male by right seems to demand (sometimes not maliciously) a certain level of respect from the woman which is most times not reciprocated. Contrary to Olúwolé's notion, this indicates the man automatically assumes the role of the head and most superior in the organisation of nature and the woman must be submissive to the man.

From the foregoing, the relationship especially between husband and wife or male and female exhibits the principle of submission rather than partnership which is contrary to the belief that Yoruba conception of gender relations is complementary. When two people are partners, there should be at least have equal rights and responsibilities except it is a case of senior-junior partnership. For instance, the Yoruba woman is advised to play the second fiddle; remain quiet and patient in her matrimonial home even when she is unsatisfied with the husband's behaviour. Often time, the wife endures a myriad of ill-treatment from her husband because she has been trained to respect him as her superior.

This conception is beginning to change since women are becoming more aware of their importance as a human being. Even though women are naturally disposed to tend homes and children, this is not enough reason to remain subservient. A woman need not seek non-family-based existence and alienation from men to be respected. No

³⁶Olúwolé, "Culture, Gender and Development Theories in Africa," 114.

matter the culture, race or sexual orientation, a woman should not be discriminated for her social and biological differences but be acknowledged as equally strong and competent.

Conclusion

Thus far, this paper has given a comparative analysis between the Western and African conceptions of gender relations stating that race and traditional beliefs play a big role in the relationship between male and female. It also examined Olúwolé's notion of gender relations in light of Yoruba conception of gender relations imbedded in her socio-cultural and religious systems.

To conclude, as the battle for gender equality or balancing progresses, it is paramount to understand that to be different is not equated to inferiority or weakness. Women should embrace both their biological and sexual differences as nature itself is multifaceted. A woman does not necessarily have to succumb to an individualistic, independence, alienated and non-family existence because the world, now is male defined. This seems to reduce the main attributes of women which revolve around sensitivity and empathy. Focusing on the difference between men and women was a useful strategy at the beginning of the feminist movements. But most feminists now agree that treating 'woman' as a monumental group does more harm than good because they are unique and different in their own way. Feminists must find a common ground that does not presuppose a homogeneous concept of 'woman'. They must begin to understand and examine the differences among women, in order to create a possible feminist theory and practice that will incorporate all experiences, cultures, and beliefs. Women must continue to fight to eradicate subservience without erasing their natural dichotomy from men.

Addressing the Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind: The Pedagogical Imperative

Dr. Moses Debo Gbadebo

Abstract

In her article, "The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind," Sophie Oluwole exposes and challenges the historical legacy of Eurocentrism, European colonialism, and how both have led to the mental manipulation and the cultural enslavement of the contemporary African minds. Oluwole contests the epistemic and ontological frameworks of western intellectual culture as foundational to knowledge production in Africa. This paper aims to extend the frontiers of some salient positions in Oluwole's scholarship by exploring the pedagogical imperative of her defense of indigenous knowledge in addressing the challenges of cultural alienation, blurred identities and self-development confronting African youths. There is less attention on the subtle philosophy of education in Oluwole's scholarship. In bridging this gap, this paper argues that unpacking the indigenous Yoruba philosophy of education should be taken seriously in addressing the existential impediments to self-actualization, posed by cultural enslavement of the African mind. This paper explores the plausible pedagogical framework for restructuring the education system in Africa, in ways that would promote cultural rejuvenation, epistemic freedom of African mindsets and value-reorientation.

Keywords: African Identity, Cultural Enslavement, Indigenous Knowledge, Sophie Oluwole, Pedagogy.

Introduction

The African dilemma, in Oluwole's view, is rooted in the crisis of what she dubs the 'cultural enslavement of the mind'. This, to a large extent, has brought about a psychological manipulation of the African mind and hence enslavement of her cultural heritage. Some Africans today, whether educated elites or not displayed a confused sense of values simply because of their blind adherence to western traditions. While every human being requires a sense of self-awareness and conscious thought liberation from imposed cultural recluse so as to live fully in present and then be able to confidently predict and chart the course for

their future, cultural enslavement of the African mind is a fundamental challenge in 21st century as it entails an existential impediment to self-actualization and growth.

Following the challenge of mental enslavement, a cautious defense of indigenous knowledge production with pedagogical pathways becomes imperative. For the problem of cultural enslavement of the African mind the suggestion here is a kind of reorientation. This can best be achieved through a redefined, restructured and reorganized system of education in African history and culture. Thus, this paper argues on a note of optimism that the future of the continent, to a large extent, rests on a dynamic indigenous Yoruba philosophy of education which will bring about a reorientation for cultural rejuvenation.

S.B. Oluwole's Main Thesis

Oluwole's "The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind" which first appeared in *Essentials of African Study*, and later republished in *Introduction to Social Political Philosophy*.¹ She commenced with an ancient Egyptian proverb "Man know thyself" which is also attributed to Socrates of ancient Greece. Oluwole started with unconventional and narrow questions: "Who am I"? and "Who are we"? The history of Africa according to her, revealed the constant struggle to know who the Africans are and the record of proffered answers.

It all started in the early fifteenth century when the Portuguese, the Dutch and other merchants arrived on the African coast. It must be noted that the firsthand information and knowledge the Europeans at home had about Africa was from these merchants, missionaries that

¹Sophie B. Oluwole, "The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind" in S.B. Oluwole (ed) The *Essentials of African Studies*, Vol. 1. (Lagos: General African Studies, Unilag, 1997); S.B. Oluwole "The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind" in JejeKolawole (ed.) *Introduction to Socio Political Philosophy* (Lagos: Samtech publishers, 2000).

came to Africa with their pre-conceived ethnocentric ideas of what they thought African societies should be. Some of the early writers of African history in Oluwole's view never saw Africans, what they recorded were exotic tales and rumors of travelers and missionaries who could neither speak African languages nor understand African social life and religious ceremonies, Yet, these are people who went back to Europe and spread myth about Africa and African societies. One of the myths was that African societies were less successful than theirs and that Africans would need to be taught how to live. Thus, the zeal to embark on the so called "civilizing mission" in Africa started and the scramble for and partitioning of Africa among European powers became the order of the day. This, according to Oladele Balogun, conferred legitimate ownership and authority on European powers to control and exploit both Africa's human and natural resources for their egoistic ends.² This, in our view is the basis of cultural enslavement of the African mind.

It is indeed amusing to read what these early visitors to Africa wrote about Africa. They seemed to agree and share a common prejudice in their narratives of what they thought Africa is and how to relate to her. S.B. Oluwole carefully selected and analyzed some of these authors; below are some of her comments:

Oluwole cited Friedrich Hegel's comments where he referred to Africa as an historic continent with a geographical location and people that lives in a condition of mindlessness barbarian without laws and morality. Africans, he concluded, must enjoy slavery in the hands of Europeans since for them it is a state of freedom from barbarism.³ Kolawole Owolabi also cited Hegelian analysis of the

²Oladélé Balogun, "Religion, Language, Culture and National Integration: Through the Lens of a Philosopher" *Faculty of Arts Maiden Public Lecture*, (Abuja: National Open University, 2019), 21

³Sophie B. Oluwole, "The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind," op.cit., 140.

Africans; He states that, Africans lack faculties necessary to enable them participate in the dialectical process of the absolute spirit.⁴

She equally cited yet another great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant of the same century and of the same conviction that

humanity is at its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians certainly have less talent, but the Negroes are on the lowest of all – in the same section as the red Indians of America. For Kant, the Negro has no feeling which rises above the foolish. None of them has ever been found who has made an impression, either in the Arts or Science or any other province worth of quality.⁵

In a similar vein, Oluwole cited the comments of J.J. Rousseau and his contemporary, Gobineau on who the Africans are, For Rousseau:

The black people are unable to think in any reflexive manner. Their engagement in Arts, these writers argued is therefore a thoughtless activity which is the antithesis of the intellect. What arts requires is a reflection of sensitivity, while Gobineau conceived Africans as: People who lack the sophisticated linguistic skills, the scientific and political faculties of the Europeans and are best suited to dancing, dressing up and singing.⁶

The contributions of two English authors and philosopher was also brought to bear, in Thomas Hobbes view for example, Africans as more

⁴Kola Owolabi, *Issues and Problems in Philosophy*, (Ibadan: Grovacs (Network) c/o Department of Philosophy University of Ibadan; 2000), 20.

⁵S.B. Oluwole, op. Cit.

⁶Ibid.

inferior than the French presented them. For him, Africa is a timeless place in which there was no art, letters or social organization. But instead only fear and violent death while David Hume sees African as sub-human, savages who deserve pity or contempt.⁷

In a similar vein, one of the leading anthropologists Lucien Levy-Bruhl in his book *Primitive Mentality*, portrays the Africans as “pre-logical people who always ascribed causality to invisible and supernatural forces.⁸ In reaction to this, Oluwole argues that most of the information paraded by the early anthropologist about Africans is nothing but misrepresentations of facts. For example, Oluwole argues that, Placid Tempels, “a Belgium born, Catholic indoctrinated and Western trained may not be right in his assessment of the Bantu people.”⁹ The assessments of Africans, as mentally inferior people who operate with pre-logical tools of analysis and incapable of critical and rigorous reflections are aberration. Hence “Africans are therefore regarded as people who have contributed little or nothing to human civilization.”¹⁰ In some other quarters, African were even said to be superstitious, ignorant, a people of dark continent who would have to be thought how to live.

This, in Muyiwa Falaiye’s assertion, is the “black predicament.”¹¹ The blacks, he argues, have always been made to view their predicament in terms of white assessment. Hence he characterized Africans as “Marginal men that exist in two cultural worlds and in two different societies at the same time, without being totally a part of either.”¹²

⁷Ibid.

⁸Levy-Bruhl, L, *Primitive Mentality*, (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1923), 19.

⁹S.B. Oluwole, (1989). “The Africanness of a Philosophy” in Oluwole S.B (ed) *Readings in African Philosophy* (Lagos: Masatech Publications, 1989), 21.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Muyiwa Falaiye, “Riot, Revolts and Black Nationalism: The African American Experience” in M. Falaiye (ed) *African Spirit and Black Nationalism: A Discourse in Africa and Afro American Studies*, (Lagos; Foresight Press, 2003), 156.

¹²Ibid.

From the above, it is evidenced that the Western folks to a large extent equated all the evils of this world with black race and qualify them with derogative adjectives such as black skin, black sheep of the family, third world countries etc. Even some aspects of the Holy Bible did not help matters, it traced African race to Ham and Canaan his son, the cursed descendants of Noah after the flood, who settled in Africa as recorded in book of Genesis.¹³ Since Africans, are descendants of Ham, and God cursed Ham's descendants, to be enslaved by their brothers, can we then attribute African predicaments to a divine order? Although, another portion of the Holy Bible, especially The New Testament has negated this Old Testament verse, and argues that "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law...¹⁴". If this assertion is true, it then follows that mankind, Africans inclusive are no longer under any curse and must therefore set themselves free from every form of negative and derogative words used to describe African people and their societies.

One fundamental question immediately becomes pertinent, according to Oluwole:

Did any of these scholars visit Africa? Did they ever meet African, speak to them, or try to find out their way of thinking and organizing their societies? There is no doubt that some European – not necessarily the writers- have seen some Africans before. But can the answer to the question "Who are you" be provided through the mere observation of a people's social behaviors? What attempt did western scholars made to collect African evidence in support of their views or to contradict who Africans themselves think they are?¹⁵

¹³Holy Bible, The book of Genesis, 9: 18-28

¹⁴Holy bible, The Book of Galatians, 3:13

¹⁵S.B. Oluwole, op.cit., 141.

From the submission above and after due interrogation of the numerous assertions of these visitors, Oluwole further asked whether these conclusion made by the visitors where drawn from the facts of African life, culture and *intellectual products*? It is too obvious according to her that “most of these characterizations of Africans have no support in African life experience and culture.”¹⁶ The views of other scholars of both African and non-African origin did not escape Oluwole’s critical assessment. For example, she argues that:

Studying the African from the scientific point of view, they came, they observed, they questioned, collected artifacts and as professionals wrote their memoirs and dissertations on the basis of these collected “facts”. The most popular among them is the “anthropologist” who form a substantial group among social scientists. The scholars study society as scientists study nature via matter.

What exactly, however do they study in society? How do they go about this? Does one merely watch people’s behaviour like those of animals in the zoo and try to faithfully document what is observed? Or does one prepare questionnaires to be answered by informants who understand the researcher’s language through a local translator: a research assistant of questionable linguistic competence? Even where the researcher speaks the local language, how much of the actual literary expressions by Africans can he/she critically study, analyze, understand and appreciate.

¹⁶Ibid.

This last point becomes crucially relevant in determining matters of the intellectual competence of Africans, the logic of the acclaims, the cogency of their principles and theories. For, if as most scholars have hitherto done, we continue to infer African intellectual competence and cultural integrity through a study of a people's material culture, we may be observing African material products without understanding the mentality of their producers.¹⁷

The issues of cultural enslavement of the African mind has also been traced to colonialism, to the extent that some scholars are of the view that the most devastating damage of colonialism is that of colonial domination of the African mind, which is in agreement with Oluwole's Cultural enslavement of the African mind. This no doubt has affected Africans creative and imaginative powers. It has in fact, crippled her innate creative potentials, and condemned Africans to passive roles and inferiors jobs on their father land. The African suffered all form of complexes to the extent that some have no confidence in themselves or their culture. All of which were the results of cultural enslavement and derogative remarks made on Africans by early writers on Africa.

In Nkrumah's assessment, the social effects of colonialism are more insidious than the political and economic. This is because they go deep into the minds of the people and therefore take longer to eradicate. The Europeans relegated us to the position of inferiors in every aspect of our everyday life. Many of our people came to accept the view that we were an inferior people¹⁸.

¹⁷Ibid., 42.

¹⁸Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*, (London: Panaf Book, 1974), 32.

The implication of all these narratives is that it has brought about inferiority complex, intellectual slavery and has created the problem of self-worth in the mind of most Africans. This is an enormous epistemic assertion that must be redressed if we must move forward. Even in the Ivory towers, this problem of intellectual slavery may be the reason for foreign publication that is often been required before moving to certain level of academic position, I am not sure that scholars in the West are subjected to having some publication from Africa before he/she could be promoted to higher cadre. What I am saying here is that the greatest obstacle to self-realization of African is partly lack of mental emancipation. True liberation in my view must be rooted in the mind since development itself is a product of the mind.

Those negative comments strongly shape how Africans feel, think and act. The continued use of these words should be discouraged through a process of indigenous education. Africans must attempt to understand their situations and to re-define themselves, their behaviours and activities on their own terms of acceptance not the way the Western folks has defined them.

This can be achieved through a system of indigenous rigorous education on self-identity, self-consciousness, self-worth and self-development. This is an attempt to intellectually decolonized African minds from Western cultural and epistemic imperialism. This will bring about a change of inward characters of the Africans towards themselves, their cultural heritage and values. By this token, African will be able to control her own world and be in tune with her ideals and to be the main realizer of her dreams. This will enable Africans to be responsible, stand on his own feet, hard work and independent in the true meaning of Erich Fromm, that is, independence which is based on man standing on his feet, using his own powers and relating himself to

the world productivity¹⁹. The implication of this is that, the struggle for mental decolonization of African to be human in the African world and to actualize himself through his indigenous knowledge and value system which will enable him to make his model contribution to world civilization is still ongoing.

On the Relevance of Yoruba Philosophy of Education

To understand the relevance of Yoruba Philosophy of education, there is need to have a brief understanding of who the Yorubas are. To this end, we argue that the Yorubas are major tribal and language group in the south-western parts of Nigeria. They occupy Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun, Lagos and part of Edo, Kwara and Kogi states. They are also found in their large numbers in Edo, Kwara and Kogi states. They also extend to Republic of Benin, Ghana, Brazil, Cuba, Togo, Dahomey, in West Africa²⁰. The Yoruba are bounded by strong values of folklore, which embodies their tradition, religion, education, arts, worldview, and philosophy.

Education, for the traditional Yoruba, according Fayemi & Adeyelure 'is a life-long process, it is seen as any act of experience that has an integrative and formative effect on the mind, character, skills, physical and spiritual abilities of the abilities of the individual to enable him/her live effectively and responsibly in the society'²¹. This way, the Yoruba system of education aimed at bringing up younger generations in the way of life of the people. Within such a system, in Ukeje's view, the young acquired skills, knowledge, patterns of thought and attitudes which the communities thought were required for effective life in them

¹⁹Erich Fromm, *Marxi's Concept of Man*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), 61.

²⁰O.A. Balogun, "In Defence of the Living Dead in Traditional African Thought: The Yoruba Example" in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 38, No.1, 10.

²¹A.K.Fayemi&Macauley-Adeyelure 'Traditional Yoruba Notion of Education and the Contemporary African Quest for Development' in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (KAP)* New Series Vol.1, No. 2, 2009, 44.

and for dealing successfully with people belonging to other communities.²² Education in this regards was strictly a purposeful enterprise aimed at the survival of the individual and the society at large.

The notion of education in Yoruba for Fayemi & Adeyelure may be understood thus:

The word "education" in Yoruba is *eko*. The word *eko* has a broader meaning than *imo* (knowledge), *ogbon* (understanding), *iwe* (literacy), *ile-iwe* (schooling) and *oye* (wisdom). Though not unrelated, the word *eko* means the actual display and consistence demonstration of the epistemic features of knowledge, understanding, wisdom and other ethnical values of excellence in character, honesty and modesty in attitude, and self-restraint in action and expression.²³

Education, here, makes the individual African child, committed to the goals of the society and equipped them with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes cherished by that society so as to make them functional and useful members the society. This type of education is guided by definite aims and brings about a high degree of solidarity, unity and a sense of security among members of the society. Education in Yoruba thought system therefore, integrates the individual child into the society through a process of socialization and integration.

Yoruba education, embraces character training, as well as the development of mental and physical aptitudes, which enable one to take active part in social life in its various forms within the society. The purpose of that education in traditional Yoruba society was simple and

²²B.O. Ukeji, *Foundation of Education*, (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Co., 1979), 38.

²³A.K. Fayemi & Macauley-Adeyelure, op. cit.

pragmatic. It was to develop the young persons in such a way that they will understand the norms and nature of the society into which they were born and into which they will live. It also makes children acquire, through experiencing, the knowledge and skills, and also develop the correct attitudes and values that will be needed not for them to live in their local communities but also for them to be able to play their own modest contributions to society at large.

The idea of education in Yoruba thought system is similar to that of Ralph Barton Perry view on education, who posited that:

Through education, men acquire the civilization of the past and enabled both to take part in the civilization of the present, and make the civilization of the future. Because the future is only partially and uncertainly predictable, and because human faculties are inventive and resourceful, education for the future implies education for a future which is man's own (thinking and) making.²⁴

From the above analysis, it is imperative to note that cultural emancipation and rejuvenation can be achieved most quickly through a process of education in traditional African values. The purpose of this education will simply be pragmatic in such a way that it will make the young Africans grow up and understand the norms and nature of the society in which they were born and in which they will live. It will equally enable them to develop a positive mind-set towards themselves and their society. Furthermore, it will help to develop correct attitudes and values that would be needed, not only for them to live in their local communities, but also for them to be able to play their own roles in and make their own modest contributions to the society at large.

²⁴Ralph B. Perry, *The Realms of Value*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 51.

Towards a pedagogic-cultural emancipation of African mind: Some Implications for Development

By pedagogy, we mean the process of how teaching and learning are used to influence the learner, it is the way by which knowledge and skills are impacted to the younger generation through a process of education. In the words of Paulo Freire, pedagogy is for the oppressed to realize that "so long as they live in the duality where "to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor" an education to liberation is useless."²⁵

Pedagogy of the oppressed in Okoro's view is an instrument for the oppressed critical discovery. This critical discovery is that both the oppressed and the oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization. In this process, liberation is painful like a childbirth.²⁶ Thus, the aim of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is to break the oppressor's dehumanization of man as well as not to recreate the oppressors' world, this is in agreement with Oluwole's cultural emancipation of African mind.

By pedagogic cultural emancipation therefore we mean the process by which we make the black people, especially the Africans understand that they are not making much impacts to control or impact the world as they ought to as a result of their experience of cultural enslavement of their minds which has ultimately resulted in cultural alienation and the need to begin to re-define themselves in the way they really are that is in their own term of acceptance and not the way the western world projected them.

The implication of pedagogic cultural emancipation as rooted in Yoruba philosophy of education for African development is rather

²⁵Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by Myra Bergmen Ramos, (London:Penguin Books, 1972), 25.

²⁶ Benjamin c. Okoro, "A Critical Evaluation of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed" in JejeKolawole (ed) *Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy: African and Blacks in the Diaspora*, (Ikeja: Samtech Communications, 2000), 46.

imperative. It is instructive to note that authenticity of being characterizes both the pre- and post-independent struggles of the Africans. This is the basis of our enquiry and can best be achieved through a process of Yoruba philosophy of education which is rooted in the peoples' cultural heritage. A reflection on cultural rejuvenation is a prime value among Africans, especially as it relates to self-actualization which will form the pivot for developmental quest. The invasion of African personality has led to the manipulation of African world which has brought about underdevelopment. The battle cry of modern African therefore is authenticity of being through a pedagogic cultural rejuvenation. It has become parts of her existential struggles to overcome all impediments to self-realization.

Africa history since independence has been the struggle to authenticate and affirm his beingness in the world against the odds of cultural enslavement of her mind and derogative assertions on her person. The point to note is that the real impediments to African development are the European activities which have robbed Africans of their "Africanness", forced African child to disregard his culture and even alienates most African elites from their cultural heritage. This, in my view, represents the first level of African imprisonment.

The second level of African imprisonment is that of African attitude to himself. Most African undermine their sense of worth and dignity, their interpretation of reality on African issues are heavily influenced by foreign ideas. It is instructive to state that whatever prevents black consciousness from self-actualization and independents existence, whether externally or internally induced is a barrier to African development quest. Authentic existence therefore involves ability to free oneself from all forms of obstacles which impede human self-consciousness and transcendence.

Human beings in this regards belongs to what Kant called the kingdom of ends, not means, one who is essentially shaping his world and controlling his destiny as subject. The authenticity of his existence as a

result of his cultural emancipation allows him struggles to get rid of certain constraints in order for him to define and actualize his full potentials through the resources of his culture. This self-knowledge of African cultural experience becomes crucial to the quest for African development. It will enable the African to control and shape his world in turn with his ideals and to be the main realize of his dreams and as subject and not object of history. This is what Erich Fromm called independence which is based on man standing on his feet and using his own powers and relating himself to the world productivity.²⁷ The implication of this is that, it gives one the ability for self-determination and ability to own one existence to oneself.

A pedagogical cultural emancipation of African mind therefore would enable the Africans to define and actualize themselves without constraints from without and within his environment and become a master of himself and his world. African must proof his mastery and domination of his environment in his cultural, economic, political, technological and social aspirations.

This, in my view, is the authenticity of being from an African perspective as well as the promotion of indigenous knowledge and values system in contrast to Western epistemic paradigm which has hitherto enslaved African mind. This will help to reinstate estranged and ostracized Africans to their socio-cultural foundations so that they can contribute meaningfully to the development of the society.

Having examined the pedagogical imperative of Oluwole's cultural enslavement of the African mind, it is instructive to note that Western epistemic paradigm has, hitherto, portrayed Africans in bad light. It has successfully divorce most African from their society and has equally alienated most African elites from their cultural heritage. This

²⁷Erich Fromm,*Marxi's Concept of Man*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), 61.

Western epistemology was designed to strengthen African service to the West and to advance lies, illusions and myth of savagery about Africa. This is what Mudimbe called internalist epistemologies that advance lies, illusion and mystification about Africa.²⁸ The effects of these lies and illusions is that Africans are deluded and fail to see what they are searching for because they have been conditioned to look through borrowed lenses.

To reverse this trend, there is need to dismantle all epistemic structures that culturally enslave African mind and questions her authenticity of being as well as those that promotes African service to the West. African must think independently, that is, to develop the power of critical and independent thought to discover themselves and produce what is needed to build the nation. Our cultural heritage must be given sufficient attention in other for us to develop our total personality, to enable us realize the best in ourselves.

The words of Christopher Zambakari become relevant here; he asserts that:

The absence of conscious efforts to develop a pragmatic science and method of contributing to knowledge that adequately fit African socio-cultural contexts would make us remain prisoners of knowledge and thus trapped by paradigms of knowledge constructed in historical and social realities completely different from those of the African.²⁹

²⁸V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 142.

²⁹C. Zambakari, Africa and the Poverty in Knowledge Production, Available at <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/featuers/77655>, Issue556, 2011, P.1 (retrieved on 10th February 2019).

The foregoing heavily points at the suppression of African culture and heritage.³⁰ What this means, therefore, is that Africans must take complete charge of their own development processes by harnessing the potentialities inherent in human existence in Africa for development purposes.

Conclusion

Thus far, this paper has revisited the recondite issue of entrapment of the African mind in exogenous frameworks in Oluwole's scholarship in African philosophy. In moving beyond the trajectories of Oluwole's thought on mental colonization and its impact on the incapacitation of the potentials of African minds, this paper unpacks the indigenous Yoruba philosophy of education subtly implied in Oluwole's scholarship. Such a philosophy emphasises pedagogical decolonization of education content and methods. This paper defends that such a pedagogical should be taken seriously in addressing the existential impediments to self-actualization, posed by cultural enslavement of the African mind. There is no better viable alternative to such imperative of our time. Human existence in Africa must experience authenticity that is devoid of both internal and external impediments; this is not only crucial but also inevitable. Human existence in Africa must address the issues of self-consciousness; self-actualization all of which are embedded in authentic existence will invariably authenticate human existence in Africa for self-determination and ultimately self-realization and development. A conscious decolonization of education is the valve towards cultural rejuvenation and epistemic freedom in Africa.

³⁰M.D. Gbadebo, "African Philosophy and the Crisis of Cultural Identity" in S. L. Oladipupo (ed) *African Philosophy: Whose Past and Which Modernity*,(Ile-Ife: ObafemiAwolowo University Press, 2021), p. 102.

Book Review

Òrúnmilà and Epistemic Restoration

Dr. Renate Schepen

On the 17th of April 2014, I had the honor to meet Professor Sophie Olúwolé. At that time, I had no idea yet on what journey this would take us. Olúwolé had come to Amsterdam to present her newly released book on *Socrates and Òrúnmilà* at the Dutch 'G8 of Philosophy', among other great thinkers, such as Zygmunt Bauman and Peter Sloterdijk. She was the only female philosopher selected. Moreover, she was the only African philosopher invited. However, the Dutch audience did not seem ready yet to capture the value of her philosophical research on Socrates and Òrúnmilà. In this way, sadly demonstrating exactly what Olúwolé addresses in her book, the challenge to relate to a philosophy different from one's own tradition. A forty-minute presentation during an evening packed with different presentations and discussions was probably not the best setting for this neither. Being her host during the festival, I soon realized this book was of immeasurable value. It is a masterpiece for the restoration of epistemic justice to African philosophies. Even more, she is offering an alternative conceptual frame, binary complementarity, to the dominant Western academic conceptual frame of binary opposition, which could help to avoid such epistemic injustices in the near future.

In her comparative study, Olúwolé draws four conceptual schemes that typify the nature of reality based on the relationship between matter and idea. In a complementary conceptual scheme, matter and idea are interdependent. She argues that this is a dominant feature of African philosophies, whereas Western philosophies, since Plato, are dominantly oppositional. In this book review, I discuss the journey made by *Socrates and Òrúnmilà* since the publication of her book and

the impact for restorative justice on an epistemological level.¹ Olúwolé indicates the similarities of the Ifa system with other binary complementarity ways of thinking, such as can be found with Pythagoras and in Chinese philosophy. Thus, enabling her to construct a new past and an old future based on a solid foundation, which was always there.²

The three versions of her book in my possession coincide with our three encounters. The first edition opened the door for me to get acquainted with her work. After our encounter, I soon realized the importance of her book to extend beyond the African continent. During my visit to Lagos in 2016, we discussed the possibility to publish a Dutch translation, edited and introduced to make it accessible to a non-academic audience.³ In April 2017, Olúwolé visited Amsterdam again. This time, she visited to promote the Dutch edition and the second English edition of the book. Now, she was warmly welcomed by hundreds of dedicated and interested readers in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

In her book, Olúwolé noted that in order for Òrúnmìlà to help us to restore epistemic justice, first he has to be returned to the philosophical realm. This is achieved by Olúwolé in deconstructing the English translations about Òrúnmìlà as a historic figure. Olúwolé demonstrates how Òrúnmìlà was wrongly depicted as a 'God of wisdom', abandoning him to the realm of mythological figures due to a translation error of the Yoruba word *Òrisà* by the English colonizers. In

¹ In 2016 a book review of Heinz Kimmerle was published of Olúwolé's book *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà*. This is a beautiful and comprehensive book review that is a tribute to her work, highlighting what is African to African philosophy. Kimmerle, Heinz. 2016. An Amazing Piece of Comparative Philosophy. In: *Confluence: Journal of World Philosophies*.

² 'Philosophy: a New Past, an Old Future', was the title of Olúwolé's presentation for the G8 of Philosophy in Amsterdam, 17 April 2014.

³ Sophie Bósède Olúwolé, *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà*, translated and edited by Saskia van der Werff. (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2017).

fact, Òrisà are deified human beings. They are “deified” among others because of their special contribution to society.

It might be interesting to add that translation errors also resulted in the removal of important female figures from history. This last topic is addressed by sociologist Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí. She argues that gender was not a category for social organization in traditional Yoruba society and that social organization was determined by relative age. According to Oyéwùmí, gender-categories were a new tradition that European colonialism institutionalized in Yoruba society as well as in other cultures.⁴ Once Òrúnmìlà is acknowledged to belong to the realm of human beings, the emancipatory value of his teachings and life can be explored.

Olúwolé poses the hypothesis that Òrúnmìlà might have received the teachings from his wife. He had many wives. The first was Osun. In some oral tradition it is stated that she taught Òrúnmìlà divination. Other sources say that she learnt the art from her husband. What is not in dispute is that the woman was a practitioner of Eerindinlogun, one form of Ifa divination system.⁵

Not only does Olúwolé address the intellectual capacities of Yoruba women, but she helps us to consider the possibility that Socrates' wife Xantippe had critical argumentation with her husband and engaged in dialogues with Plato.⁶ The conceptual framework of binary complementarity is sometimes criticized by feminist because of its supposed binary distinction between male and female. In contrast to Oyéwùmí, according to Olúwolé gender categories did exist in pre-colonial times, but this did not necessarily imply an inferior position of women in Yoruba society. She gives various examples that show that

⁴Oyéwùmí, Oyèrónke. *The Invention of Women. Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁵S. Olúwolé, op.cit., 46.

⁶Ibid., 35.

women were present in political and military affairs. In her opinion, the lesser representation of women in political affairs does not demonstrate that they had less power as Yoruba people did not see politics as a game of numbers. In most cases, the single female representative had a veto as she was the voice of all women and respected as such.⁷

Furthermore, with the help of Òrúnmìlà, Olúwolé addresses the importance of valuing equally the contribution made by younger people. Four groups of experienced people should run the affairs of state: experienced men, experienced women, experienced youth and experienced non-indigenes.⁸ She even refers to a verse from the Ifa-corpus stating that in some cases it is the students who find solutions to problems when their teacher does not know.⁹ Thus, Olúwolé aims not only for epistemic justice to Òrúnmìlà, but also makes a plea for political rights of women, young people and non-indigenes people.

The second act of epistemic restoration is achieved by demonstrating the inconsistencies of argumentation in referring to Socrates as rational and philosophical and to Òrúnmìlà only as mythological (irrational) and religious. Therefore, she compares the historic Socrates and Òrúnmìlà and addresses their remarkable similarities in their lives, as well as in their philosophical views. Both philosophers were born around 500 BC, they both had 10 -16 disciples and they lived in important intellectual centers of their time. However, most importantly they did not write anything down themselves. This did not impede Socrates to be recognized as a patron saint of Western philosophy. In contrast, the Ifa-system and African philosophy in general was judged to be non-philosophical, based on its oral tradition. By emphasizing this erroneous argumentation, Olúwolé does not only reveal the injustice caused to Òrúnmìlà and the *Ifa*-system, but she addresses how

⁷ Olúwolé, Sophie B. And Sofoluwe, J.O. Akin. *African Myths and Legends of Gender*. (Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2014)..

⁸ Olúwolé, (2017) op.cit., 70, quoted from Owonrin-Obere.

⁹Ibid., 57, quoted from Owonrin Meji.

prejudices and interpretation from one's own conceptual framework has led to disregard African philosophy in the academic world, whereas it is at least just as systematic, rigorous and critical as Western philosophy.

One basic axiom adopted here is that every analysis, every argument, every criticism and conclusion about the nature of [African] philosophy is treated as suspect when based on theories and ideologies which pay little heed to the literary and conceptual features of extant literature, documented in the indigenous language of the people whose ideas and belief are under scrutiny as philosophy.¹⁰

The final blow to the epistemological injustices is given by her in demonstrating that an African intellectual identity that is based on thinking of binary complementarity is probably more beneficial to face global challenges, as mutual independence is recognized. She argues that the fundamental difference between both philosophers has influenced the development of a different intellectual identity in Western and African philosophy. The dominant conceptual framework in Western philosophy being binary opposition and in African philosophy it is binary complementarity.

Olúwolé obviously is aware of how racial biasing has privileged supposedly 'white' people above supposedly 'black' people. To her, it is not the solution, to create a category of 'white' and 'black' people to address this issue. These categories do not exist in her worldview as is documented by Dutch documentary maker Juul van der Laan, who traveled with her to Ife in Nigeria.¹¹

¹⁰Olúwolé, *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹For more information on her soon to be released documentaries *Afuwape* and *Sophie*:
<https://juulvanderlaan.nl>

That is this my colour 'black'? In the way we use language we have to be careful. There is no denying that you are different from me. But colour is just a change of something. It is not permanent. Colour actually is not, is reflection, is not permanent. So white yellow, green... There is no yellow people in the world (laughing) if you call the Japanese yellow. I don't know yellow. We may have different colours, it is not permanent sign of intelligence or science or religion.¹²

Some 'white' people come to Nigeria. For summer holiday. Before they come back their colour is darker, are they African? It is a temporary change, it doesn't effect your brain. No. There are some people in Europe who think like Nigerians and there are some Nigerians who think like... Environment can also effect you. So it is a matter of don't draw a permanent structure and *mark (?) this in the world*. Something thin today can be a fat tomorrow. It can change. It is a question of mind. I think Nature evolved the ability to think. The way you think is not determined is not permanent.¹³

This could also indicate that categories as used in the binary system are not that fixed. Olúwolé addresses that in order to conduct proper philosophy, one needs to go outside the discipline and look with a bird's eye view to one's own discipline.¹⁴ Her comparative research can be read as an invitation to recognize other philosophers and ways of philosophizing that have not been recognized as such. In this way it

¹²Olúwolé in: Van der Laan, #00:31:05-2#

¹³ Please scan enclosed QR Code to hear and see these fragments of Olúwolé. In: *Sophie Olúwolé on Black and White*. Juul van der Laan. 2017, #00:31:44-9#

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

could also sensibilize us for the diversity of philosophies within the African continent and for a plurality of conceptual frameworks, including more fluid varieties.

In her contribution to the Liber Amicorum for Heinz Kimmerle, Olúwolé also addresses the plurality within Western philosophies and the need for a complementary and more dialogical way of thinking.¹⁵ *Socrates and Òrúnmilà* serves as a continuous reminder that there is no absolute knowledge and that only together, coming from different philosophical traditions and backgrounds, we can come closer to a ‘truth’. Olúwolé argues that binary complementarity is a more adequate system for viable sustainable social development of mankind. To me, her work and life are a continuous source of inspiration. Even though not explicitly addressed by her, binary complementarity might extend beyond the human realm to include the larger ecological system. This is something worthwhile to explore in future research.

¹⁵ Olúwolé, Sophie B. ‘De wetenschappelijke en rationele basis van humanisme’, translated by Henk Haenen. In: Oosterling, Henk, and Renate Schepen. 2016. *Doordenken, Doorwerken, intercultureel en ecosociaal denken en oen*. Antwerp: Garant.

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¹J.I. Omorogbe, *Knowing Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research & Publishers Ltd., 1999), p. 30.

²Benjamin B. Olshin, "The I-Ching or 'Book of Changes': A Chinese Space-Time Model and a Philosophy of Divination," *Journal of Philosophy and Culture*, Vol.2, (July 2005),pp.17-21.

³J.I. Omorogbe, op.cit., p.50.

⁴William Hare, "Open-Minded Inquiry: A Glossary of Key Concepts", available at <http://www.criticalthinking.org/articles/open-minded-inquiry.cf>. Last visit: June 04, 2008

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