

# **Hermeneutics in Africana Philosophy: Is it Worth the Trouble?**

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## **A. Versions of Hermeneutics in Africana Philosophy**

Within African philosophy, several thinkers<sup>1</sup> have proposed that hermeneutics could provide a useful tool for the analysis of Africana experience. I would like to discuss and critique three such attempts in this paper, and then suggest ways in which hermeneutics can, despite the trouble, be a useful approach within Africana philosophy.

What do I mean when I use the term “hermeneutics”? Well, that’s part of the issue here. To define this term now in the abstract is to undermine my argument. I want to argue that our definitions (and our philosophical methods) are rooted in a place, which means that they are responses to particular questions. Sometimes these questions are forgotten, and we start to think that methods are universal, unrelated to the circumstances of their production. Recognizing that philosophy comes from a place does not mean that we undermine the idea of the universal, but rather that we make it a task rather than an assumption.

But we can give a provisional starting point for hermeneutics. Hermeneutics recognizes that questions of truth in philosophy are not addressed through the analysis of propositions, but by making forms of life and thought accessible to reflection. Of course, put this way philosophy could be mistaken for anthropology, sociology, and a host of other disciplines, and indeed I would argue that some forms of those disciplines are very close to philosophy in spirit. Hermeneutics, though, is not a method that guarantees truth (and therefore cannot be mistaken for a social science in the American sense), but is a

mode of inquiry that allows truth to be manifest. This can be done through symbolic analysis, but more importantly it can be done through dialogical reasoning. The goal is the creation of concepts and the expansion of these forms of life through their encounter with other forms.

As I say, this description is very much provisional, and it obscures a central problem, which I want to talk about in the next section.

### **What's the Trouble With Hermeneutics?**

1. It seems like a Western philosophical method is being imposed. Isn't hermeneutics just a product of Biblical exegesis, broadened by Schleiermacher, applied to culture by Dilthey, made existential by Heidegger, and rooted in history and tradition by Gadamer? Haven't we just named a method that has its roots in German thought, and is thus alien to African?

I would argue that this is a misunderstanding of hermeneutics. And it is not a misunderstanding simply because Gadamer declared hermeneutics to be universal. It is a misunderstanding because it takes hermeneutics to be a method. It is important to recognize the source and roots of all theory, especially Western theory. And if we trace this path, we realize that Western hermeneutics develops as a response to several important challenges:

- a. the challenge of technocratic society and the reduction of reason to technique.
- b. the alienation of the self from the social world.
- c. the rise of positivistic versions of social science.

Now, these problems may not be the same as those which emerge within an African context. Or, there may be elements of these problems (certainly, positivist social science is as much an issue in

an African context as it is anywhere else), but they are manifest in a different way. We might say that Western hermeneutics is useful in Africa to the extent that European problems have become African ones. But on the other hand, we may also recognize that there are other issues at stake in the explication of lived existence in Africa. An African hermeneutic is not a whole new method, but it could be the recognition that existence manifests itself locally, not universally, and so any philosophical method that claims to represent that existence must respond to local issues rather than universal method.

The problem with supposing that we are just applying a method to a new setting (and thus smuggling in Western assumptions) is that method is not the core of philosophy. Africana philosophy is caught in a paradox, if we decide that its identity lies in its method. Either it uses a method that has been used elsewhere, and risks being seen as derivative, or it tries to create a new method, which is almost impossible, and seems like an unfair requirement to make of Africana thought. The answer, I think, is to not see philosophy as defined by method. To go further, I want to argue that it also isn't defined by its object of investigation, its concept set, its specific tradition (this one will be controversial), or its practitioners. If any of these are seen as the guarantee of the Africanness of philosophy or its essence, it will inevitably be insufficient to its task. None of them will guarantee anything, nor will they be ultimately satisfying when it comes to characterizing Africana life.

This is the reason that I want to argue for hermeneutics as a viable solution to the problem. Hermeneutics need not be a method (in fact, Gadamer thought that hermeneutic theory started where method ended). We can imagine it developing out of a cultural context that is not Western, and therefore is not tied to the Western concerns and questions that produced it in the first place. And, hermeneutics is concerned with cultural distance and difference, which is key to Africana philosophy.

2. It seems as if Africana philosophy yet again has to justify its existence. We are thrown back on the question of the nature of African philosophy, and that has always in the past been the dismissive challenge of Western thought. The default belief is that Africa has had no philosophy, and so the challenge is to prove that it does.

But this trouble is also an illusion, if we recognize that the fundamental move of philosophy is a return to its roots, no matter where it is found. That return happens differently in different places, and in fact is forgotten in some manifestation (in which case, philosophy has become technique rather than inquiry). We need to be able to continually ask the question of the nature of African philosophy, not as a response to a challenge, but rather because that's what philosophers do.

So, I would like to argue that hermeneutics is indeed worth the trouble in the context of Africana philosophy. And, several African thinkers have taken up this challenge. I want to survey a few of these, and suggest ways in which each has identified a key component in an Africana hermeneutic. I would also like to identify the limits of their respective approaches, and suggest ways to retain their insights in a more sophisticated version of Africana hermeneutics.

## **B. Hermeneutics as Cultural Archaeology: Theophilus Okere**

In *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility*<sup>2</sup>, Theophilus Okere appropriates hermeneutics by arguing that all philosophies must spring from and deal with non-philosophy. Hermeneutic philosophy is both the interpretive tool and the result of mediating and rationalizing lived experience. Most of his work is an overview of the Western tradition of hermeneutics; it is only in the final chapter and conclusion that Okere explicates what he

thinks is the hermeneutic nature of philosophy in general, and African philosophy in particular. It is this: philosophy must always deal with the non-philosophical features of lived experience and its expression, whether that be religion, culture, or even the irrationality of certain presuppositions.<sup>3</sup>

Okere is somewhat unclear about the nature of non-philosophy; sometimes, it is the irrational, sometimes the prerational, sometimes the transcendent. His definition is his interpretation of Gadamer's *Vorurteile*, or prejudgments: "non-philosophy must stand for the non-reflected, that unreflected baggage of cultural background. . ."<sup>4</sup> This definition, however, leaves open the question of the status of non-philosophy. Is it a necessary evil (he calls it "baggage", after all)? Is it the ur-thought, the inchoate beginning of Hegel's dialectic? Is he suggesting that ethnophilosophy simply requires another step, that of reflection and rationalization? Or, is it simply the Enlightenment hope made African, that the irrationality of religion or culture will finally be overcome by the rationality of philosophy?

For Okere, at any rate, the philosophical and hermeneutic moment is the appropriation or repetition of these non-philosophical roots without negating them. But why should Okere appeal to hermeneutics at all? The most likely explanation is that he wants to ensure that African philosophy has a unique starting point, since it is rooted in a particular tradition of non-philosophy. This means that African philosophy can be unique, not reducible to other philosophical systems, and at the same time make use of all the rational tools that any other philosophical tradition assumes as essential. In other words, hermeneutics allows the ontological moment of self-understanding to emerge through repetition for African philosophy.

But the essential problem that Okere does not come to terms with is that he assumes that hermeneutics is nothing more than a method for uncovering meanings that are latent within the patterns

of objectification a culture employs. As such, two questions are not answered: 1. How does one find a method that can reflect on itself, so as to foreground its own prejudices?; and 2. How does one deal with meanings that are not simply there to be uncovered, but are the result of some violence that does not want itself to be named?

Of course, hermeneutic theory is well aware of the necessity of foregrounding its own prejudices, but in fact in Okere's case that theory has been worked out in a relatively limited context. The bulk of his work is taken up giving an account of the history of hermeneutics, with the barest of allusions to its applicability to the African situation.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned, the applicability only becomes evident in the argument that hermeneutics is the bridge between culture (non-philosophy) and philosophy. But what culture? Does he suggest that we can intuit this pure culture (and it must be pure, or it would not be an African philosophy that emerged), and that it can somehow provide the basis of a truly African philosophy? Or is the philosophy nothing more than the covert articulation of (neo)colonialism? Okere's problematic category of non-philosophy renders the possibility of philosophy into little more than the sketch of existing conditions, with no theoretical apparatus for their critique, for the conceptualization of the possibility of alternate conditions, or for proposing a philosophy of action that both affirms what is important in the life world while working for change.

And yet, Okere recognizes that for philosophy to be African, it must have some expression of the African life-world. His attempt to characterize African philosophy as hermeneutic comes shortly after Hountondji's seminal essay critiquing ethnophilosophy,<sup>6</sup> and he works toward a similar conclusion: that African philosophy will not be constructed out of nothing more than customs -- it requires some apparatus for reflection. In fact, Okere takes a step beyond Hountondji, in that he also recognizes that

universal method is as problematic a starting point as particular experience. One wishes that he would have followed that insight further, and actually questioned hermeneutics itself, instead of just imposing it on an African life-world, as well as providing the possibility for critical reflection, rather than just explication.

### **C. Hermeneutics as Emancipatory Method: Tsenay Serequeberhan**

Tsenay Serequeberhan's two most recent books, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*<sup>7</sup>, and *Our Heritage: The Past in the Present of African -American and African Experience*<sup>8</sup>, both work out a version of African hermeneutics that is more sophisticated and more pointed than Okere's. His work appropriates key insights from Heidegger and Gadamer to fashion a philosophy "born of struggle" that can lay bare patterns of oppression and de-centring, without resorting to the cynicism of a Foucauldian critique of power or a Lacanian archaeology of desire. This is an approach that has a chance of bearing positive fruit as Africa tries to rethink the meanings that have accrued to it over the past several hundred years.

I want to detail just where I think Serequeberhan has made an important contribution, and examine his conception of hermeneutics. I also want to show where there is room for manoeuvre, where his appropriation of hermeneutics remains an appropriation rather than an examination of the particular tradition out of which theory grows. My conclusion will be that his analysis is limited, and there is room for a much wider hermeneutic than he allows.

Serequeberhan has grasped a central fact that Okere overlooked – that hermeneutics itself has, to use Gadamer's term, an effective-history. While Okere gives an overview of the development of

hermeneutics in the West, Serequeberhan recognizes that that history is relevant to the nature of hermeneutics itself. The fact that hermeneutics has a history, however, does not rule it out as a useful way of interrogating a particular kind of being, as Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba seems to think. (*HAP* 16-17, and also note 15, p. 130). Rather, it means that we need to take the history of the kinds of questions that hermeneutics has been designed to address seriously. After discussing the 16<sup>th</sup> century Abyssinian philosopher Zar'a Ya'aqob, Serequeberhan points out that

In our case, on the other hand, it is neither the theoretical exigencies of modern science, nor the crisis of faith in confrontation with a foreign and aggressive piety that provokes thought. Rather, it is the politico-existential crisis interior to the horizon of post-colonial Africa which brings forth the concerns and originates the theoretic space for the discourse of contemporary African philosophy. (*HAP* 18)

In other words, hermeneutics itself has grown out of a set of questions. In the West, those questions have revolved around science's claim to universal knowledge, and the resultant limitation of all human meaning to that which is examinable in scientific categories. In African history, at least in Ethiopia, the hermeneutic was one built on an encounter with a "foreign and aggressive piety". These are not the questions that need to be addressed now. The salient issue is the crisis resulting from the colonial project of Europe.

Serequeberhan follows both Heidegger and Gadamer here, in seeing hermeneutics as occurring in a failure of some sort. For Heidegger, understanding can only be reflective when there is a breach or disruption that focusses attention. For Gadamer, understanding begins in misunderstanding, not (as for Schleiermacher) in lack of understanding. It is not that we simply have to fill a void, but rather that there are already pre-understandings which come to reflective consciousness as they encounter an Other which challenges them and shows their limitations.



Putting this together, it suggests that the questions we had formerly asked, and which formed the basis of past analysis and understanding, must come to critical scrutiny as various failures in the putative answers are seen. Under a modernist project, the failure of an answer tends to be seen methodologically. If we find the right method, the answer will not fail anymore. Under a hermeneutic critical of modernist approaches to understanding, the failure of an answer requires us to reflect on the nature of the question being asked, as well as on the nature, explicit agenda, and suppressed desires of the asker, as well as on the person understanding an answer as a failure at all.

Serequeberhan also recognizes that failures of understanding must be defined in encounter, not in some essentialized manner. It is not, for example, that Africa does not “work”, that there is slow economic or technological progress, that brings us to reflective thought. While Heidegger does spend a great deal of time talking about the way technology “enframes” (a word Serequeberhan picks up) the world and produces a certain kind of non-critical, derivative understanding, he is mostly concerned with a product of European rationality and the kinds of questions it poses. It is an encounter, for him, between ourselves and our interaction with the milieu around us.

So, the failure at stake here is one which has enframed discourse about Africa, both by Africans and by the rest of the world, and has led to certain kinds of metaphysical assertions being made. The encounter has set the stage for a certain kind of alienated self-understanding; this is interpreted metaphysically by some, as a statement about “the way Africans are”. Serequeberhan wants to define the issue as one of understanding, not essence, and he wants to see that as emerging from encounter.

Perhaps the problem is that he does not take this far enough. Just as one cannot boil “the

problem” of European modernity down to the domination of science (while it cannot be ignored, either), one also cannot boil the problem of African modernity down to one type of encounter, however important it is. While there may be a systematic distortion of understanding, and the language used to frame it, that distortion must be more nuanced than simply to say that it is colonialism.

One might argue that the situation of neo-colonialism is an all-pervading horizon which colours every other attempt at reflection on meaning, and as such is a necessary part of any African hermeneutic. This would, in fact, be correct to say, as long as one did not limit the horizon to being described only by neo-colonialism, or regard it as an uninterpreted given that determines meanings. There is a tension in hermeneutics, between the plenitude of interpretations that can be given to any situation and the factual conditions that limit the free-play of those interpretations. Existentialism took phenomenological hermeneutics in the direction of plenitude, at the cost of our ability to describe the factual conditions of our choices. Serequeberhan tends to take the factual conditions under which meaning is produced as determinative, at the cost of the free-play of interpretive possibilities. If the only horizon that is worth considering is the one handed down by the colonial past, then Africa will never be anything but a recovering victim. This is not to say, of course, that the horizon should not be taken seriously, but that it should be taken seriously as interpreted, not as an uninterpreted given.

Perhaps the most problematic part of Serequeberhan’s work is not in his limitation of the horizon, but rather in his relatively unreflective use of hermeneutics. Gadamer and Heidegger are invoked when useful, and several key phrases are used, but at times they seem to be a means to an end. One might object that the imperative of emancipation takes precedence over the integrity of theory, but it is not, in fact, integrity of theory that is the concern here. The problem is not that this

deviates from “pure” Heidegger or Gadamer, whatever that is, but rather that there are theoretical subtleties in the work of both, and other theorists as well, that challenges what Serequeberhan is doing. The issue is not one of remaining true to some European theorist, but of theorizing a new hermeneutic that is aware of its conversations and debts, but at the same time aware of its responsibilities toward lived experience. Objecting that neo-colonialism is lived experience, and this hermeneutic takes that as its starting place, merely puts a place-holder in for a group of concrete realities, which include such diverse things as political structures, economic arrangements, social institutions, armed conflicts, corruption and graft, and a host of other phenomena.

The response given for this explication of lived experience is that the only way out is violence. It is cast as a gloss on Fanon, but it is clear that in fact this is the writer’s position as well. But what is violence? The immediate image is that of bloodshed, but in *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* it seems that any act of resistance to the established order counts as violence. If that is true, then any change is necessarily violent change, and Fanon’s strong words are left with little force. The issue remains – what kind of violence makes sense in the context of the horizon of the institutionalized violence of neo-colonialism?

*Our Heritage* continues the project of imagining what a hermeneutic theory of violence and emancipation might look like. In this brief work Serequeberhan works out the emancipatory possibilities of hermeneutics, but in a more sophisticated manner. The central question (as is also the case for Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony*) is that of how existence might be exercised in the face of pervasive violence. The crucial element in answering this question is the notion of heritage, a concept that has its lineage, for Serequeberhan, in Gadamer’s effective-history. Early in the book he even puts it

in platial terms:

This (non)identity, this in-between, is the ambiguity of our heritage. For we are the ones – in one way or another – who live and have experienced this “ambiguous adventure” and feel, in the very depth of our being, the unnerving experience of being two in one, Europe and non-Europe. (2)

It is an “in-between”, specifically in-between two places which themselves have coherence and identity, but this is not simply an alienated space. It is a place in its own right. Existence happens here, and it does not owe its integrity to the oppression which produced the in-between in the first place (17). African culture does not owe its integrity to the racism which hems it in.

Earlier, Serequeberhan suggests that:

The heritage of the struggle beyond the defeat of colonialism, this “new humanity” ... this is what Fanon calls us to. It is an Other-directed openness, not “an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world.” it is an open-ended project of a humanity, in process, that finds itself in joint struggles. (12)

What I find interesting is the question of the subjectivity that the heritage makes possible. Is it something that already exists in the in-between, or is it “beyond the defeat of colonialism”? Where is it located? Where is the place that the African stands – it is truly part of the heritage, or is it ahead, the result of the overthrow of pervasive violence? This is an ambiguity I see in both of Serequeberhan’s books. They both recognize that violence is a barrier to subjectivity, but it is never very clear what kind of barrier. For Fanon, things were clearer – counter-violence was a necessary step in the emancipation and building of the subject.

Serequeberhan contributes something crucial to understanding how hermeneutics might be an African means of recognizing and constructing identity. He recognizes that identity is earned, not simply presumed. One might think that a hermeneutics of place cannot take struggle into account. After all,

struggle seems like a spatial concept – it occurs under dissatisfaction, it often is connected with living space, in both the literal and metaphorical sense. A person struggles when she has been hemmed in. Hemming in means taking away choice, but it also means an attempt to externally determine identity.

Serequeberhan's insight, drawn from Fanon, Du Bois, and others, is that thinking in place means thinking about the struggle of existence. The struggle is the response to a call (like the call of the muezzin, 7-8), one which is ambiguous in the sense that its meaning draws on different histories, but which does not mean nothing. While the call might be understood simply as the form of life to which one resonates, Serequeberhan sees more than that. It is a call out of the non-place, the between place which nevertheless has a sort of integrity. His examples of Booker T. Washington, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X illustrate this nicely (21-2). Each of these three demonstrated *phronesis*. Each individual understood his or her situation, and had the insight on existence to recognize the right thing to do at the right time. Parks said, "It was a matter of dignity; I could not have faced myself and my people if I had moved." Her action exhibited practical understanding of herself as an actor, and agent, as well as the situation in which her actions had meaning. Serequeberhan is correct to see Gadamer as a useful interpretive figure, for this kind of practical action is at the core of his hermeneutics.

Serequeberhan also correctly resists the tendency to relativize African identity. His target is Appiah, who speaks of a "usable [African] identity" (42), which Serequeberhan seems to take to mean an arbitrary identity, or one which we "use and put away" (43). He is right to recognize the rootedness of identity in culture and, to use his term, heritage. Identities are not arbitrarily adopted, nor are they unrelated to the conditions of existence. But is that really what Appiah meant by "usable?" It is possible that a usable identity is not an arbitrary one, but rather one that recognizes the range of expressions of

self we may have, depending on the circumstances. Rosa Parks was not always a crusader, although that was never a false role for her. I understand the notion of a usable identity not as inauthenticity, but rather as another example of *phronesis*. And, it is this notion of the range of interpretation that Serequeberhan's hermeneutics is not well equipped to reflect. In *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* the limit of interpretation are set by specifying a specific kind of conversation as the fundamental or real one for African. In *Our Heritage* the limit is set by an overreaction to Appiah's "usable identity." Both of these limits come from an understandable, and correct impulse, the first to recognize a particular kind of conversation as useful for overcoming violence, and in the second case the need to limit arbitrariness in African identity. But those legitimate needs are not addressed by imposing arbitrary limits in the interpretive process. There are other ways (as I will argue later) to accomplish this task.

The strength of *Our Heritage* is that it recognizes that hermeneutics is not a foreign methodology imposed from the outside, but can be way of theorizing expressions of life within Africa. But the question that still remains is the place of hermeneutics itself. It is invoked at significant times, to contribute ideas such as "effective-historical consciousness" and "tradition", but it sometimes seems like Serequeberhan's appropriation is just that – the use of a tool. There is, for instance, no hermeneutics of suspicion, no attempt to raise the method of inquiry itself to question.

#### **D. Hermeneutics as Linguistic Method: Raphael Okechukwu Madu**

In *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths: The Hermeneutics of Destiny*<sup>9</sup>, Raphael Okechukwu Madu treats hermeneutics as a tool of knowledge, following some texts of Ricoeur's, as

opposed to a tool for explicating or exercising being, following Heidegger or Gadamer. Hermeneutics is an analytic strategy that gives access to the symbolic structure, and hence the life-world, of African culture.

Stating Madu's project in these terms already raises questions. Accessing culture through symbolic structures is exactly what structuralism and functionalism have done for decades. And, applying an analytic method to cultural products such as proverbs and myths is hardly new. What can hermeneutics add to this? And, can hermeneutics avoid some of the problems that have been levelled against structuralism and functionalism, problems such as their relative inability to take subjectivity and individuality seriously?

Madu says this about his use of hermeneutics (particularly, Paul Ricoeur's work):

The choice of the hermeneutic principles of Paul Ricoeur as philosophical method is based on the "new" relevance it gives to culture by providing a very profound yardstick of interpreting religious symbols and mythical languages that characterize most cultures... Previously archaic and oriental symbolism was regarded as important only as a datum in the development of human consciousness. Such was the disdain philosophers felt about symbolic thought, that symbols were regarded as "primitive and lacking the cogency of reasoning." (xxxi-xxxii)

This may seem surprising outside of philosophy, as anthropology at least has always taken symbolic thought seriously, even if that thought was only seen as pointing to the rules of society rather than any philosophically rigorous system. However, Madu is clearly interested in the relative disdain that philosophers have had for symbols, the belief that symbols were pre-rational and thus not worthy of philosophical attention. He wants to rehabilitate symbolic, proverbial, and mythological thought as relevant to philosophy by showing that it need not merely lead to anonymously held world-views, or deep structures. The goal, then, is to establish that symbols are philosophically relevant, not simply

culturally relevant, and that hermeneutics is the best method for extracting the philosophical content.

Madu begins as Okere did with an overview of the history of Western hermeneutics. But while Okere's overview does not seem to advance his project in any substantial way, Madu's deals with a significant question - what kind of hermeneutics is appropriate for African philosophy? It must be recognized that this question is crucial, and overlooked by most thinkers who make use of hermeneutic theory. Madu sets up the question as a choice between existential hermeneutics, represented by Heidegger and Gadamer, and methodological hermeneutics, represented by Ricoeur. He characterizes Ricoeur as having two stages - the earlier phenomenological (which is subjective) and the later hermeneutical (which deals with symbols, myths, and texts) (35). It seems clear that Heidegger and Gadamer, in Madu's account, must also still be considered to be phenomenological. They do not have a clear method (and indeed, Gadamer seems to resist method, in his magnum opus). Ricoeur, Madu argues, moves to reliance on symbols precisely because phenomenology does not suggest a method.

It is worth noting that Madu's version of Ricoeur is correct in certain aspects, but does not address the scope of his thought. Even allowing for the fact that Madu's book was published in 1992, the same year as Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*<sup>10</sup>, it would have been worth recognizing that he published *Time and Narrative* since the 1970s, a work that does not emphasize the interpretation of symbols to the same degree. Perhaps more importantly, Madu omits a key work from the 1970s that sheds light on Ricoeur's "method." *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*<sup>11</sup> was a lecture series delivered in 1973 at Texas Christian University, and published in 1976. In that work, Ricoeur addresses the symbolic directly, but does so in a way that does not "move past" phenomenology, but incorporates it. He recognizes the limitations of an interpretation theory that relies



solely on “romanticist” hermeneutics, and also one that relies solely on versions of structuralism.

Drawing on, among other things, analytic linguistic theory, Ricoeur constructs a dialectic which moves from understanding to explanation to comprehension:

I propose to describe this dialectic first as a move from understanding to explaining and then as a move from explanation to comprehension. The first time, understanding will be a naive grasping of the meaning of the text as a whole. The second time, comprehension will be a sophisticated mode of understanding, supported by explanatory procedures. In the beginning, understanding is a guess. At the end, it satisfies the concept of appropriation, which was described ... as the rejoinder to the kind of distancing linked to the full objectification of the text. Explanation, then, will appear as the mediation between two stages of understanding. If isolated from this concrete process, it is a mere abstraction, an artifact of methodology. (74-75)

This is significant because what Madu calls phenomenology is not overcome or transcended in favour of method, but rather forms the framework within which the analysis of symbols can take place.

Ricoeur is clear that hermeneutics must involve the ontological and the existential, or it is just abstraction.

This is important to establish as we consider Madu’s analysis, because he seems to want to use hermeneutics as a tool for the excavation of philosophical thought within culture. In itself this may not be a problem, but it is not clear that it is something which can be found in Ricoeur. However, what can be drawn from Ricoeur is the commitment to symbols and metaphors, and the need to connect this with human existence, rather than simply an abstract structure or set of functions. The key, for Madu, is in the use he makes of hermeneutics. And the key to understanding that is term “destiny.”

The subtitle of the book, “The Hermeneutics of Destiny,” is significant but not immediately clear. As with the term “hermeneutics”, Madu gives an overview of Western thought on the matter. He interprets destiny as fate, and as the issue of one’s state after death, and then briefly outlines the various

metaphysical options in Western thought. And, as with the outline of Western hermeneutics, this is not just done for the intellectual exercise. Although he does not explicitly say so, it seems clear that the list of options amounts to a set of beliefs and arguments about the afterlife. As beliefs and arguments, these are metaphysical. In contrast, Madu delves into Igbo cultural life for another way of understanding destiny. While he sketches a very different set of beliefs to those offered by Western thought, what really matters is not the difference in the beliefs but the fact that hermeneutics allows access to meaning or significance in Igbo culture.

Madu's typical pattern in the second half of the book is to analyze an aspect of Igbo culture in "metaphysical" manner, by trying to isolate and define a concept. Then, he applies his hermeneutic method in order to overcome contradictions or paradoxes that arose in the metaphysical analysis. For instance, in his discussion of Chi ("Igbo Symbolic Forms on the Human Destiny as Language-Bound", chapter 8), he points out that the term is ambiguous. It can refer both to destiny, and the "dispenser of destiny", both one's fate and the divine spark within that directs that fate (180). Madu's way of reconciling the ambiguity is to consider the language used to express the concept. It is possible, he says, that the language used when speaking of Chi is metonymical, in that effect and cause can stand in for each other. As well, the religious aspect has to be remembered. Chi may also be understood as an intermediary between the divine and the human, that which determines or describes the relationship between God(s) and the human. And thirdly, it is possible that the seeming ambiguity in the understanding of Chi really points to the many ways in which people's lives find expression. The "Chi" points to the truth of a person's life, which may not be the same as another's truth, but nevertheless has an integrity.

It is important to recognize what Madu contributes in his specific analysis here. In moving beyond the metaphysical, that is, the notion that our words are about things and it is our task to get those things right, he has recognized that there are forms of life that can be explicated in their own terms. Understanding Chi does not require a structuralist/functionalist analysis; that account could not matter to those who hold Chi as significant. It only fits into the discourse of a distant academy, and only answers foreign questions.

The theme of destiny, it turns out, is a good choice on Madu's part, for it allows him to raise and then move past the metaphysical questions. Destiny plays a real part in people's lives. It matters to them, and the strength of hermeneutics is to give access to what matters, to those for whom it matters, and hopefully others who might be willing to listen.

It is ironic, then, that Madu should feel the need to resist the "phenomenological" version of Ricoeur, as he puts it. At the end of his analysis of Chi, he says:

If our understanding of Chi has succeeded in transcending the first naivete, thus allowing us to see it as pointing indirectly to existential and ontological possibilities or even limits of life, to that extent it can mean both destiny and dispenser of destiny. Perhaps the best way to sum up the Chi analysis is to suppose that Chi is a paradoxical concept that explains the paradoxes of life. (184)

His method has led beyond method here, as perhaps is inevitable. Has anything been "explained" here? Not, ultimately, in any sense that would satisfy most social scientists. But something certainly has been understood. Ricoeur, of course, resisted the Diltheyan division of interpretation theory into explanation and understanding. In the end Madu has followed the Ricoeur of *Interpretation Theory* by beginning with the realization that Chi is a notion that fits into people's meaning-structure and not just their set of concepts, then moving to an explanation which ultimately cannot be complete but

which does give shape to our understanding, and finally ending up with the recognition that the paradoxicality of Chi actually reflects human existence.

If there is anything that one might wish for, it is that he would continue a chapter like this for another few paragraphs. In those paragraphs, he might tell us a little of how this newly understood idea might allow someone in the Igbo community to re-frame his or her life. What practical value does this new understanding have? By “practical”, I mean in what way might this open up new ways of being Igbo? An example: watching a great athlete allows a new way of understanding the game. That person shows a new way of understanding, which in this case means living, the game, one which does not require a change of the rules (although it might mean an evolution of the rules). One watches a great football player, and that player does something which I could not have anticipated, but once it is done, I think to myself, “that was the right thing to do at that time.” That football player shows a new way of being a football player. And, the more I know about football, the more impressed I am with the anticipation, the timing, the experience shown in a particular moment.

Practicality, then, does not mean simple use-value, but it means the ability to show forth a new set of possibilities within an already existing form of life. And, the question I wish Madu would take up is, what new forms of life become possible with our new understanding of Chi, or other concepts that become available? The Igbo community is a living, vibrant one. The next step past outlining a hermeneutics of specific concepts is to ask, what is it to live creatively in that milieu, and how might a philosopher contribute to that?

## **E. Towards an Africana Hermeneutics**

What do these three versions of hermeneutics offer us? Okere recognizes that philosophy must find ways of articulating non-philosophy. Serequeberhan recognizes that hermeneutics must deal with praxis, and attend to emancipatory possibilities. Madu recognizes that hermeneutics must articulate and interpret symbolic structures.

What's the problem with attempts so far?

- Okere doesn't actually seem to talk about African hermeneutics at all. That is, there is nothing specific to hermeneutics that makes it African. It is simply a universal method applied to a localized content, that is, the "pre-philosophical".
- Okere and Madu focus on the interpretation of symbols within a cultural context. This doesn't seem to really be hermeneutics.
- Other uses of the term "hermeneutics" (Jay Lampert, Ram Adhar Mall) are mainly interested in cross-cultural interpretation. It is framed as conversation, but it can sometimes seem like a mode of consumption, a way to make cultures available to the West for its use. Even Mall's work, which consistently implies that Indian thought is superior to Western thought (while maintaining the pretense of setting up a conversation), underscores that mode of consumption.
- On the other hand, Serequeberhan, in his first book, limits the range of the hermeneutical conversation so that there is a prescribed outcome.

Why is hermeneutics in an Africana context still worth the trouble?

1. Okere points out that there is a need to mediate between non-philosophy and philosophy. Even though he isn't very clear on how this should work, he is right that this is needed. It is not just that philosophy reflects on the stuff of the world. How can it do this? More importantly, how can it be done in a manner that does not simply abstract away from the particulars of experience? Abstraction is, of course, a necessary aspect of philosophy, but to do African philosophy is to recognize some irreducible level of particularity that must be maintained.
- 2.

### **What might a hermeneutics of Africana philosophy look like?**

So, why might hermeneutics still be worth considering as an approach to Africana philosophy? First, because it allows us to think about and from a place. Second, because it allows us to question. Third, because it allows that philosophy can be a creative act, not simply an analytic act.

#### **A. Thinking About and From a Place**

See earlier work on place...

#### **B. Questioning**

Achille Mbembe, in *On The Postcolony*, gives us an example of questioning within an African context. His questioning is inspired by Heidegger without being reducible to Heidegger. The inspiration is that the question is not simply a challenge set by a self-contained subject to an object of inquiry. His

question recognizes that the interrogator is interrogated.

What is his question, in *On the Postcolony*? Essentially, it is this: “This is how it is to live in Africa. Now, is the hope of existence confined to the struggle to overcome that violence, or can one find one’s subjectivity in a meaningful manner if overcoming violence seems remote?” It is the question of existence given factual conditions, a question that does not give up the struggle against a violent and oppressive society, but which nevertheless recognizes that existence is not simply deferred until the promise has been met.

Asked in this way, it becomes possible to open up new avenues of interpretation and thought. The right question (by which I mean the useful hermeneutic question) opens rather than closes. It makes a place available, and does so uniquely yet philosophically.

This is why I want to argue that the core of philosophy lies not in claims but in questions. Claims are simply answers to questions, and as such exist within the conditions which make those questions meaningful in the first place. None of this suggests that universality is impossible as a goal, but it means that universality must interrogate its ground. To simply adopt a philosophical method of any sort without that is to import the questions which that method is a response to, and thus ignore the place from which questions come.

### **C. Creativity and Philosophy**

The creativity I refer to here is the same that I alluded to in my discussion of Madu. Hermeneutics is not simply about symbolic translation, but it is about the ways in which the understanding of structures of meaning contribute to the creation of meaning. It is about the life-world,

in the broadest sense of the term (i.e., not just Dilthey's sense). It is creativity as Deleuze and Guattari imagine it, in *Introduction to Philosophy*. It is the creation of concepts, by which I mean the enrichment of forms of life in a specific context through rational reflection that truly grapples with the exigencies of that context rather than abstracting out of it.

## ENDNOTES

1. Besides the ones who are the subject of this paper, others include: Lucius Outlaw, "Cultural Hermeneutics and Racialized Life-Worlds." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24:2/3 (1998): 101-111.
2. Theophilus Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983.
3. Okere, *African Philosophy*, p. 82ff.
4. Okere, *African Philosophy*, p. 88.
5. It is only in the conclusion, p. 114-131, that Okere directly addresses the applicability of hermeneutic theory to the African situation. His application seems very close to ethnophilosophy, in that his example of the Igbo culture of Nigeria consists in the philosophical interpretation of symbols from the culture. If this is hermeneutics, it seems to be fraught with all the questions that can be levelled at ethnophilosophy. As mentioned below, however, Okere does provide a mechanism for reflection; it does not seem that this includes critique, though.
6. Paulin Hountondji, "Comments on Contemporary African Philosophy" *Diogenes* 71(Fall 1970): 109-130.
7. Tsenay Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
8. Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Our Heritage: The Past in the Present of African -American and African Experience*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.
9. Raphael Okechukwu Madu, *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths: The Hermeneutics of Destiny*. New York & Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1992. Reprinted by Owerri, Nigeria: Assumpta



Press, 1996.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

11. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.