

# The Culture-Oriented Bias of African Philosophical Inquiry

by

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## Abstract

Some African philosophers with minimal Levy Bruhlian disposition like Appiah, Masolo, More, Wiredu, Biko, Gyekye, Hountondji, etc, assert that African philosophy confronts a certain difficulty; the nature of this difficulty is that African philosophy is culture-bias. Some other African philosophers like Nkrumah, Senghor, Hallen, Segun Oladipo, Moses Oke, etc, have emphasized the need for historical retrospection in re-making Africa, and that African philosophy should not be perceived as culture dependent. The views of the latter philosophers rest on the following; one, Africa's precolonial indigenous culture is ahistorical (has no relevant significance to contemporary discourse in African philosophy, and thus, patently false); and, two, the training of professional African philosophers would aid a new modality and method of doing African philosophy. These schools both emphasize different ways to understand the culture-oriented bias of African philosophical inquiry. However, the views of these two schools undermines two things; one, the distinctive Africanisms in the way African philosophy has chosen to divulge itself; and two, the objectivity that is peculiar to African philosophy. Nevertheless, this study concedes that if the implication of what these schools is saying is that African philosophy will have to sink because it is culture-bias, then, this study insists that any other philosophy like the European philosophy would have to also sink. Precisely, there is no difference between any of the philosophies (African and European) with respect to the interests of what the European philosopher determines in he/she selection for investigation, just like what an African philosopher chooses to investigate.

**Key Words:** African philosophy, European philosophy, Culture, Investigator, Inquiry

## **Introduction**

It is pertinent that we turn to the difficulty that can be said to be confronting African philosophy because the culture or tradition to which we can say that the philosophers in African philosophy are committed not only color the contents of their findings but also control the assessment of the evidence on which they base their conclusion. Since African philosophers generally differ in their culture/tradition orientations, the “tradition or culture neutrality” that appears to be so pervasive in the European analytic and Continental philosophy is therefore often held to be impossible in African philosophy. In the judgment of many European anthropologists or some European trained professional African philosophers, it is accordingly absurd to expect African philosophy to exhibit the unanimity so common among philosophers in European philosophical cultural history concerning what ought to constitute the problematic issues to be discussed in philosophy, the analytic methodology to be used and the satisfactory explanations that are best expected for them. Let us examine some of the grounds that have been put forward for this contention. It will be easy to distinguish four groups of such reasons, so that our discussion will deal in turn with the asserted role of culture or tradition in (a) the selection of difficulties, (b) the ascertainment of the profundity of their outcomes, (c) the approval of cultural/traditional facts, and (d) in the appraisal of evidence.

## **The Selection of Difficulties**

The reason is perhaps that most of the things an African philosopher selects for study or investigation are determined by his/her own conception of what are culturally or traditionally important values. According to one influential view, for instance, an African philosopher deals with materials to which he attributes “cultural importance, consequence, or meaning,” so that a “tradition-orientation or cultural values” is inherent in his choice of material for investigation. Although Hallen (2002) was a vigorous proponent of the view that “philosophy in any cultural context is not likely to be the easiest subject in the world, however, its presentation can make it seem excessively technical and obscure in nature, and can frustrate or deter understanding unnecessarily” (Hallen, 2002: 1). This suggests that both philosophies (African and European – Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition and Continental philosophy) are situated in the tradition/culture which colors the contents of any of the findings, submissions and evidence on which their adherents base the conclusions of their different works.

The implication of Hallen’s view can be said to be based on the cultural or contextual view of how philosophy in Africa has come to be distinctively different, and the way that it can be differently understood which may make the meaning of the terms used and the analysis to be technically obscure. African philosophy, therefore, cannot be understood in the way the influential Anglo-Saxon trained African professional philosophers like Appiah, Masolo, Eze, Serequeberhan, Outlaw, Cesaire, Senghor, and so forth, have asserted that African culture/tradition-laden discourse differs from its Western counterparts.

Their view is that African philosophy should transcend this culture/tradition-laden discourse to develop analytic, critical, and rigorous tendencies to compete meaningfully in the global philosophical discourse.

However, Hallen (2002) has painted the notion that philosophy does not necessarily have to be analytic, rigorous and critical – he nevertheless argued that “the explanation I can offer is that African philosophy should pay particular attention to a select or limited numbers of themes in Africa, so that they are deliberately isolated, and that they are extracted from their broader contexts, in order to facilitate relevant comparisons”. Thus, the perception of the meaningfulness of culture or tradition to us is the presupposition of its becoming an object of investigation for an African philosopher or African investigator.

It is well-nigh self-evident to say that African philosophers, like philosophers in Europe or America, do not investigate everything, but direct their attention to certain selected portions of the inexhaustible content of concrete African reality. Moreover, let us accept the thesis, if only for the sake of the argument, that an African philosopher addresses exclusively to matters which he/she believes are important because of their relevance to his/her cultural or tradition-based values. It is not clear, in a way, why an investigator selects the materials he/she studies in the light of problems of interests which seems to bear on matters regarded as important, is of greater moment about the logic of African inquiry than it is for the other branches of inquiry outside Africa. The things that an African philosopher selects for study in determining the conditions or consequences of existence may indeed be dependent on the indisputable fact of him/her being a cultural or traditional being.

In short, there is no difference between any of the philosophical dispositions (be it African or European) with respect to the interests of an African philosopher determining what he/she selects for investigation. But this by itself doesn't represent an obstacle to the successful pursuit of objectively controlled inquiry in any branch of study or within each branch of study. For example, an African social and political philosopher may be interested in the nature of election rigging, or an African philosopher may be interested in the spiritual bond between twins and the effects it has on the immediate family and environment, while an American philosopher may be interested in the reason why the food that young people eat causes obesity. This does not presuppose any means of relativity or relative culturally or traditionally, but it presupposes the view that there exist in each disposition iota of objectivity which do not or may not need to overlap or be found synonymous.

## **The Ascertainment of the Profundity of their Outcomes**

A more substantial reason commonly given for the culture/tradition-oriented character of African philosophy is that since an African philosopher is affected by considerations of right and wrong in the particular African culture or in the African subject being investigated, his/her notions of what constitutes a satisfactory African order and standards of personal and African form of philosophical disposition enter into an analyses of African phenomena or condition. In this respect, the veracity of the truth of African philosophy must be judged by admittedly relative standards, i.e., in terms of the ends sought or the standards employed by the African society or philosopher concerned, rather than in terms of the European or American philosopher's own criteria.

Ernest Nagel's description which states that "yet, the history of human thought has led not to one philosophy but to several" (1968: 100) implies the following: the cultural/traditional attitudes implicit in the African ways of thinking will differ from that of its European counterpart and sometimes conflict. The reason why there may be conflict between African and European dispositions of what should constitute a philosophical objectivity rests on the presupposition that there exist differences in what they portend and potentate. There is an implication here that what the African philosopher selects for investigation will remain relative to his/her culture or tradition. The same is applicable for European or American philosophers. Secondly, they (African and European philosophers) sought to achieve the 'end' by the means possible or through different criteria, and thus, there are basic judgments which cannot be done without in African philosophy and which clearly do not express a purely personal philosophy of the enquirer or African values arbitrarily assumed. Rather, what African philosophers select for investigation grow out of the history of African human thought, from which anthropologist or ethnologist of European descent can seclude as little as anyone else.

It has often been noted, moreover, that the study of African phenomena receives much of its impetus from a strong moral, cultural and reforming zeal, so that many ostensibly "objective" analysis in African philosophy are disguised recommendations of African first-order system. Hence, I contend that the African philosopher cannot wholly detach the unifying cultural cum traditional structure that as an analytic methodologist or cultural person guides detailed investigations of African problems from the unifying structure of an African ideal, he/she thinks ought to prevail in African affairs and hopes may sometimes be more fully realized. Hence, African theory in philosophy is essentially a program of action along two lines which are kept in some measure of a harmony with each other by an African problem such as of assimilating African facts for purposes of systematic understanding that aim for a progressively molding of distinct African patterns, so the African philosopher can influence the process into what he/she thinks it ought to be.

To a great extent, it appears that it is beyond serious dispute that African philosophers often import their own culture/tradition into their analyses of African phenomena or condition. It is also undoubtedly true that even thinkers who believe human condition can be studied with the culture/tradition neutrality characterizing in every inquiry into objective activities and who often pride themselves on the absence of culture/tradition orientation from their own analyses in African philosophy sometimes make judgments from their own analyses of the African condition. Even if culture/tradition predications are assumed to be inherently capable of proof or disproof by European continental or analytic tradition, at least some of the differences between African philosophers involving culture/tradition-orientation are not resolved by the procedures of controlled inquiry.

It does not appear so easy in African philosophy to prevent, in any event, aversions, hopes and fears from coloring the conclusions that philosophers will arrive at. It has taken countless years of efforts to develop habits and techniques of investigation which help safeguard philosophical dispositions and inquiries in European continental and analytic traditions against the intrusion of irrelevant personal factors; and even in this case, the protection received has not created an infallible or conclusive framework. Thus, the difficulties it creates for achieving objective analyticity or rigor in African philosophy must be admitted.

Admittedly, steps must be taken to identify a culture bias when it occurs at the maximum, and to minimize if not to eliminate it completely of its perturbing effects. Second in this analyzing is that it would be no less absurd to conclude that reliable knowledge of human affairs is unattainable merely because inquiry in African philosophy is frequently culture-oriented. What this means is that relative standards by different investigators are used (ends sought, standards employed), whereas there are no absolute standards (we only have evaluation of the end result, only in different continents where different investigators carry out their study).

### **The Approval of Cultural/Traditional Facts**

There is a more argument for the view that African philosophy cannot be culture-free that maintains that the distinction between fact, tradition and culture assumed in the preceding discussion is untenable when purposive African culture is being analyzed, since in this context culture enters inextricably into what appear to be purely analytic (or factual) statements. Accordingly, those who subscribe to this thesis claim that a culture-neutral African philosophy is in principle impossible, and not simply that it is difficult to attain. For if value and culture are indeed so fused that they cannot even be distinguished, cultural or holistic judgments cannot be eliminated from African philosophy, unless all predications are also eliminated from them, and therefore, unless other philosophies that are not of Africa completely disappear.

For example, it has been argued that the African philosopher must distinguish between traditional and undesirable forms of African system in his/her duty to present the African condition truthfully and faithfully. The prohibition against culture-judgments in African philosophy would lead to the consequence that we are permitted to give a strictly factual description or an analytic description of philosophical issues that can be seen in European philosophy, and thus, we would not be permitted to speak of the cruelty that has happened to Africa during colonialism and the neocolonial mental effects of Western friendship with Africa. Yet, a political scientist is allowed to see things from his/her perspective, while a philosopher historian is permitted to see things from the perspective of analyticity and to do a critique of how imagination can be used to take a look at the historical event. Thus, what may be claimed to be a straightforward view in European philosophy may be different in African philosophy.

Moreover, the assumption implicit in the recommendation discussed above for achieving culture-neutrality in European analytic and Anglo-Saxon philosophy is often rejected as hopelessly naïve – that is the assumption, that it will be recalled, and that relations of means to ends can be established without commitments to these ends, so that the conclusions of African philosophical inquiry concerning culture are objective views or ways of life which make conditional rather than categorical assertions about culture. This is because the choice people make between alternative means of obtaining a given end and therefore, depends on the cultural view they ascribe to those alternatives.

If there is any proposition made that African philosophy is culture-laden, it does not entail the conclusion that in a manner unique to the study of African philosophy, value, tradition and culture are fused beyond the possibility of being distinguished. However, the claim that there is such a fusion and that a culture-free African philosophy is inherently absurd confounds two quite different senses of the term “culture judgment”: the sense in which a culture judgment expresses approval or disapproval either of some religious, moral or social ideal, or of some cultural view, of or some cultural action (or cultural institution) because of a commitment to such an ideal; and the sense in which a culture judgment expresses an estimate of the degree to which some commonly recognized (and more or less clearly defined) type of cultural action, object, or institution is embodied in a given stance.

Furthermore, to make any decision, an investigator, whether an African or European analytic or Anglo-Saxon, must judge whether the evidence warrants the conclusion set to be made or made whether in African philosophy or European philosophical tradition. Nonetheless, when an investigator reaches a conclusion within the cultural framework in doing an investigation, he/she can therefore be said to be making a specific “cultural value-judgment”, in the sense that he/she has in mind some standardized type of cultural condition designated in what he/she knows and calls the object or act in view and that he/she assesses what he/she knows about the specimen with the measure provided by this assumed standard.

On the other hand, the African philosopher may also make a quite different sort of cultural or traditional judgment which asserts that, since a cultural object under consideration has diminished powers of remaining under continuous examination, it is an undesirable condition. An African philosopher with specific interest in Yoruba traditional thought may be interested in how some events are tagged traditional and metaphysical at the same time. For instance, a person's *iwa* (character), which makes an individual meaningful or meaningless in the human society is what allows people to have a good memory of the individual after his/her demise. Thus, how has the concept of *iwa* as character become existential? The response may lie in the notion that the concept of *iwa* has two attributes: the character aspect where it makes an individual to relate with other individuals in the moral community, and the existence (existential) aspect which creates a good or bad memory and which allows judgment to take place. And like any African philosopher (the Yoruba for example), an European philosopher (Continental or British) may be interested in characterizing certain objects in his/her field of research as philosophical psychologist or naturalist; but, also like the African philosopher, he/she is also expressing cultural approval or disapproval of the characteristics being ascribed in the research process. Hence, the difficulty that African philosophers have with their European counterparts therefore provides no compelling reasons for the claim that a culturally neutral African philosophy is inherently impossible.

## **The Appraisal of Evidence**

There remains for consideration the claim that the culture-free European analytic and Anglo-Saxon philosophy is impossible because culture commitments enter into the very assessment of evidence by European philosophers and not simply into the contents of the conclusions they advance, a thesis typical of Senghor's *Negritude: The Basis of African Socialism*. Similarly, some African thinkers tend to believe in this form of framework, precisely, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Obáfẹmi Awólówò, Nelson Mandela, etc.

In his work *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*, Moses Akin Makinde pose that the analytic school's view of philosophy is just one of many views and that their conception of the nature and subject matter of philosophy is *personal* to members of that school (2010: 23). He says, "African traditional thought hold positions quite similar to many ancient and recent European philosophers" (Makinde, 24). This assertion helps to understand the notion that culture commitments enter into the very assessment of evidence by European philosophers, and not simply into the contents of the conclusions they advance. Could the latter part of this assertion also be true? If culture commitments do not enter into the contents of the conclusions that European philosophers advance, then, the least radical form of the claim maintains that the conceptions of the culture held by an African philosopher of what constitute cogent evidence or sound intellectual workmanship are the products of professional or cultural education and place in the society and are affected by the social cultural values transmitted by training and associated with cultural position.

And accordingly, the cultural or traditional tenets or values to which an African philosopher is thereby committed determine which statements he/she accepts as well-grounded conclusions about African cultural affairs. Thus, the differences between African philosophers in respect to what they accept as credible can sometimes be attributed to the influence of national, religious, cultural, and other kinds of bias.

No matter how investigations are conducted in the African and European context, the culture oriented bias of each continent or cultural understanding would help where the evidence will be taken and situated in an outcome as each culture would help in giving reliable instances or knowledge about the world, in a situation wherein different cultural environments, knowing that inquiry is not meant to be conducted in the same way using the same methodology. African lifestyle differs from the European lifestyle, and if childless marriages are to be examined using the European condition on the African condition, different results will be arrived at because the societies and belief-systems are different. Hence, a relational form of objectivity between the African perception of a childless marriage and the European perception of a childless marriage is a relationship. Yet, in any way that we may want to analyze the issue at hand, it suffices to say that the cultural conclusion that an African philosopher would reach is marked by 'objectivity' because of the peculiarity of his/her cultural environment, where the same is applicable to the European investigator given the European condition. And in brief, the various reasons we have examined for the endemic impossibility of securing global objectivity where each culture has its own standard of objectifying issues and conclusions do not establish what many European philosophers purport to establish, even though in some instances, the trained professional African philosophers directs attention to undoubtedly important practical difficulties frequently encountered in African philosophical or cultural discourse.

For as much as this presentation has examined some of the grounds that have been put forward for the contention that African philosophy is culture-prejudiced, it was quite easy to distinguish the groups of such reasons, and thus, it has helped in dealing with the asserted role of cultures or traditions in: the choice of problems, determination of the contents of conclusions, the acceptance of cultural/traditional facts, and the appraisal of evidence between what African and European investigators do.

Arising from the above expatiation, in his work, *Categories of Cross-cultural Cognition and the African Condition*, Emevwo Biakolo asserts that it is in unity with the pattern of growth and development of the new science of anthropology which replaced the old science of subject-object relations (epistemology), that the determining factor that become the issue of race (1998: 1). Race, in this context is discussed based on the particularity of Africa as distinct from Europe. Thus, the issue of objectivity, as Biakolo has helped us to discover, paves the way for the easiness in the choice of problems, the determination of the contents of conclusions, the acceptance or perception of cultural/traditional facts, and the appraisal of evidence that makes an African investigator easily distinguished from an European counterpart when it comes to choice of what is investigated.



If we assert that there is no cultural demarcation, difference, what different investigators aspire to carry out, or that races do not exist (as Appiah asserts in *The Illusions of Races*), then, it suffice to heed Biakolo's warning that "an ingenuity will be revealed which will help us to further confirm that there is a political project behind the western construction of the cultural paradigms of the "Other" (Biakolo, 1). This, I think, would be consistent with the notion that African culture, African philosophy or the black race has no objective standing in the universe.

Hence, the nature of this unnecessariness as predicated on Appiah's view that *there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us* (1992: 45), a claim that creates confusion, and thus a derivative of the implication that there is no need of classifying people into few races because classifying books in the library would not help us in reflecting or knowing the deep facts about books (Appiah, 38). This claim may help us in boxing Appiah to a corner. He (Appiah) may not be able to understand the mental ascription of culture or race where people or individuals are so biased or prejudiced about who they are, where they come from, the values that they represent, what they need to say or withhold, and how they must communicate. There is still much say about different but not opposing continents and about what makes Africa distinct as Africa, and not what makes Africa become a collegiate with Europe.

In his work *Old Gods, New Worlds*, Kwame Appiah claims that *for the African intellectual, of course, the problem is whether – and, if so, how – our (African) cultures are to become modern*. He concludes by saying that *neither of us (Africa and Europe) will understand what modernity is until we understand each other* (1992: 107). It is somewhat obvious that despite his initial claim that there are no races, he asserts in another work that Africa and Europe needs to understand each other. What will be the nature and scope of this understanding? Entering into Appiah's mind using his earlier work *The Illusions of Race*, would presuppose a confusing analogy. There are no races, he said, and now, Africa and Europe need to understand each other, which is a presupposition of (i) confusion, and (ii) that races exist. In conclusion, it means an African investigator differs from a European investigator, that Africa differs from Europe, and that an European anthropologist cannot vividly or conclusively understand why Africans choose to carry out a particular thing in their culture. For example, no European philosopher can understand why Africans (Yorubas, for example) choose to erect two effigies to represent twins (ere ibeji) and decide to worship or pay admonition to these effigies, and to arrive at a conclusion that such practice is pre-logical is to be preposterous.

The existence of races, the distinctiveness of African culture or philosophy from European discourse and the cultural understanding of the African condition as different from that of Europe exhibited by Appiah, Tsenay Serequeberhan, W.E.B. DuBois (*The Conservation of Races*), Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Robin Horton, Aime Cesaire, etc, helps in asserting the fundamental difference in the objective status of African and European philosophies.

In his work *African, African American, Africana Philosophy*, Outlaw (1998) opines that “philosophizing is inherently grounded in socially shared practices, not in transcendental rules. When we view philosophical practices historically, sociologically, and comparatively, we are led inescapably to conclude that philosophical practice is inherently pluralistic, and all philosophical ideals are *local* to communities of thinkers. Since African peoples are ethnically – hence culturally – diverse and geographically dispersed, very important aspects of these ethnic and geographical diversities were fueled, in significant part, by the incursions of Europeans and others into Africa” (Outlaw, 1998: 29).

There may be other ways of discussing Appiah’s view that there are no races and DuBois’ counter-claim that there are races. However, Biakolo’s view that it is the Western political project that actually distinguishes the world of the “Other”, Senghor’s claim that “Negroid civilization had flourished in the Upper Palaeolithic Age and that the Neolithic Revolution could not be explained without them is a clear representation of two distinct worlds which we must recognize as not conflicting. This view, to a great extent, “set us on the way to racialism” (Senghor, 1998: 439). Hence, Serequeberhan’s view that “the closing years of the twentieth century are bound to be for Africa and Africans a time of prolonged, deep reflection and self-examination” (1998: 9) and Henry Olela’s position that “the authentic theoretical foundation of African diaspora’s experience is African” (1998: 43) serves as counter-claims or objections to Appiah’s view in the *Illusions of Race*, and a major boost to aid the notions that there is a distinctive Africanisms in the way African philosophy has chosen to divulged and that there is an objectivity that is peculiar to African philosophy.

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