

Introduction

Stephen Okello*

At the same time, I am well aware that I could not do justice to the subject without offending those “professional friends of the African” who are prepared to maintain their friendship for eternity as a sacred duty, provided only that the African will continue to play the part of an ignorant savage so that they can monopolize the office of interpreting his mind and speaking for him.¹

There has been tremendous evolution in systematized human knowledge since its beginning in early philosophical speculation about the nature of being. Philosophy gradually became the foundation of diverse theoretical and applied disciplines, including human, natural and physical science, mathematics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Subsequent specialization of philosophy has facilitated not only more precise definitions and understanding of nature, but also the search for ideals for human existence. In addition, Philosophy remains the watchdog of both theoretical and applied sciences today. In the twentieth century, philosophy was considered to be the tool for clarification of misunderstandings of the world through the analysis and systemization of language.

The following questions about philosophy in Africa still linger: What is the role and value of philosophy in contemporary Africa? What is the relationship between philosophy and understanding within African culture? Answers to these questions albeit unsatisfactory have been attempted. A vital aspect of the discourse on philosophy in Africa, however, entails the ten-

* Stephen Okello is a Senior Lecturer at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa where he has taught since 1994. He has also been the Rector of Consolata Institute of Philosophy. Both institutions are in Nairobi, Kenya. He holds both a Licentiate and PhD from Gregorian University, Rome. His area of interest and specialization includes Metaphysics, Philosophical Anthropology, Phenomenology and Existentialism. His publications include: *Intersubjective Communication in the Phenomenology of Husserl*, (2000); *African Philosophy: A Definition, Evaluation and New Prospects*, (2009), and *Ubuntu in Dialogue with Western Humanism for the Greater Good*, (2012).
Email: okello.stephen.imc@gmail.com

¹ J. KENYATTA, *Preface to Facing Mount Kenya, The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, Mercury Books, London, UK 1965³, xviii.

dency to attribute the title “Philosopher” to people trained in Philosophy while ignoring other rational and critical thinkers. Such African philosophers have been left with nothing to do but be critics of the highest brow. Perceived inapplicability of philosophy is further underpinned by a resounding public “stink eye.” While philosophy has been condemned many times in the past, the discipline has always found a role to play. What will be its role in Africa in the 21st Century?

The rationale of another look at philosophy in Africa

Africa is undergoing rapid social and political transformations that require philosophical reflection, yet philosophy is frequently relegated. Education systems in Africa are geared towards employability and advancing technology. Education in Africa does not adequately incorporate methods and content that would work for young minds to reason and solve complex human problems. Partly this situation is caused by a general suspicion that philosophical formation generates independent minds which many within the status quo find difficult to control, perceiving it as a source of future trouble. Many governments are thus averse to encouraging the development of philosophy both as a discipline of study and social practice.

Secondly, politics in much of Africa since independence is driven by the desire to get power. Power, in turn, is based on personal or even regional agenda disguised as development (*maendeleo*, in Swahili) with practically no attempt to grounding this on any ideological traditions, preferences and the vision of a better future. Often the drivers of politics in Africa are raw power, wealth and tribal dominance in the guise of development. This attitude leaves most of the continent without issues, vision or direction to debate and make an informed choice.

The aggressively growing media sector, both print and electronic, is dominated with insufficient investigative capacity and common-sense reportage and analyses. This shortcoming has made it difficult for commentators on African politics to engage and analyze events and facts. This critical aspect could have gone a long way in helping the African voter evaluate the basis of ethico-political judgment on what is useful or otherwise. Thus, ideological preferences and commitment have been sacrificed.

A notable problem facing philosophy in Africa is that of context and practice. The nature of philosophy programs offered at institutions of higher learning, public, religious as well as private, have tended to combine philosophy and religious studies. Whereas this is understandable given the difficult economic times experienced globally, this has had a negative effect on the development of philosophy at both theoretical and practical levels. This limitation has also sacrificed professionalism in the discipline. The simpli-

fied method adopted has been the approach where ideas and thoughts of ancient, modern and contemporary schools are faithfully reproduced without any evidence of their relevance to the current situation of the people. This method leaves Philosophy departments at institutions of higher learning in Africa, to a great extent, irrelevant and out of place with no demonstrable contribution to the greater society.

As if this is not bad enough, the role of language in philosophy is critical. In most of the continent, formal education was introduced and continued to be conducted in the three languages left behind by the colonizers, among these are: English, French and Portuguese. On the other hand, the majority of the learners' first language is the one spoken within their local area. Thus, philosophical concepts and theories have not found their proper translations in these African languages, a situation that makes it difficult for African thinkers to develop and express philosophical thoughts formulated in foreign languages into these local languages.

With this panoramic view of issues affecting philosophy in Africa, we need to focus on some specifics.

An in-depth look at the fundamentals

Once in a nursery school, a teacher gave an assignment to the children to write a composition on a pet of their choice. The following day, when the teacher finished marking the assignment, she noted that Tom and Harry, the twin brothers had written an identical composition, and so enquired who between the two had copied from the other. The twins explained that they did not copy from each other, but rather, they wrote about the same dog in their home. In the same regard, human knowledge in one way or the other has to have some similarities in terms of the questions asked, the problems faced, the preferred methodologies, as it is always related to three major objects: God, man, and the cosmos.

On the other hand, one would note that similar problems have been continuously addressed by philosophers in the African continent, just because the continent has a similar historical, cultural and economic background and situation. While reading the articles presented in this book, it will not escape the attention of the reader that specific issues keep coming up, with varied intensity. This variety in itself makes the book comprehensive in approach to philosophy in Africa. Many different starting points, but often leading to some convergence in terms of solutions.

The book has the honor of presenting some seasoned African philosophers such as Masolo, Wanjohi, and Mbae whose expertise and long experiences in research and reflection is put to good use in their presentations. It has been providential that Prof. Masolo opens up this exposé of African

thought. His article does not only set the agenda in terms of content but also the tone in terms of some profound soul-searching, mainly addressing himself to the African upcoming scholars: their role within the African context – political, economic, cultural and especially philosophical.

However, the reader is as well treated to young, vibrant upcoming African minds to whom only the sky is the limit in terms of a speculative search for truth. This new generation of presenters has set a new tone by replacing the old pessimistic, and problematic face of Africa with a jovial enthusiastic one full of prospects and dreams for the future. No problem is too big for the younger generations to tackle and to hope for a solution. They thus admit the existence of instability, underdevelopment, corruption and many other problematic cases often attached to the profile of the continent. Several of these problems have been extensively examined here, in their complexity. However, all this is presented with an air of serenity and optimism. This time round philosophy is presented to us in a new key, as an indispensable tool, necessary for confronting the existential situation of Africa. It is a whole new mouthful of fresh air!

There is a new phenomenon of an attempt at addressing the problems of Africa to find rational, logical and critical solutions, an attempt which is putting philosophy to good use as the young philosophers fight the infamous objection that “philosophy does not put food on the table.”

In summary, any philosophy, in a broad sense, should present its ideas in a logical form based on a theory of knowledge, for every philosophy has as its first objective, to know. Its knowledge, logically presented should be about some being, some existence, and some action; which means a metaphysics of some sorts. The human person is both the thinker and to a great deal, the thought, in terms of improving his/her life and increasing in virtues, therefore a kind of anthropology, strictly linked to an ethics; finally, an appropriate methodology always accompanies a philosophy, whether it is empiricist, rationalist, idealist, positivist, pragmatist, or phenomenologist. This volume bears all these hallmarks in its entirety.

This book has made a fascinating contribution to various areas of philosophy. Much effort has been put into presenting African philosophy in a new key, with new sets of questions and problems, tending to move from the traditional tones and arguments. We would like, however, to point out one interesting theme that has been addressed by several contributors, the one on ontology in the African philosophy. The entry point most accessible to the thinkers is the path of myths and magic. This seems to be where the heart of African philosophy resides and any reader will feel the need to pay more attention to this area. However, as we have pointed out earlier, there are hanging questions that still need to be bravely faced and clarified by the African scholar if we want to create a more stable and robust African ontology.

Let us take some time to give serious consideration to an aspect of the

African ontology. This ontology is based on and excavated from the African myths. However, what are these myths? There are times when we have an impression that the African scholar is in difficulty justifying or founding such an essential aspect of philosophy on "myths." Again, developing further what we had started with, in the last two hundred years, as positive sciences have taken control of human knowledge, myths have been given a different connotation. Myths are unscientific. They cannot be proven or scientifically demonstrated. Generally, modern society, urged by modern sciences dismiss myth as untrue and unreliable. Just think of the many titles of various works, starting: "Myth and Reality," where myth is considered to be unreal and untrue. However, just a minute, myth tells positive science, you just came here the other day, you are still too young to understand these things; we, on the other hand, have been around for thousands of years, and we have seen it all; we have diligently led humanity through the worst of its history. There is nothing under the sun for which we lack an explanation, not like you who barely have a handful of information, and still continuously change your mind about what you already established as true.

While we are on matters positive science, it is not only myth that could be identified as science's casualty. In modern times, to a great extent, positive science has proposed herself as the only source of reliable and tested knowledge. Religion and its content have more often than not been dismissed, discredited and bundled together with myths as being uncertain and unreliable. Philosophy as such, notwithstanding that it is the mother of all sciences (historically speaking), has been vigorously fought by positive science. The offshoots from a philosophy that was sympathetic to positive science, such as empiricism and positivism have themselves been very sceptic about religion and metaphysics.

So, it is unfair for anybody to blame the negative connotation bequeathed to myths on colonialism or Western scholarship as such. Even the West has had its share of battles with the new sciences to correct their excesses and monopoly of human knowledge. African philosophers have the duty and obligation to rehabilitate myths without giving anybody any apologies. It is only when we do this, that we will have a solid foundation on which to build an African ontology.

In its origins, myth comes from the Greek word "*mythos*" which means a story or speech. Given that the Greeks initially were oral people, like many others, they narrated their thoughts in stories and music, and it plays both as a means of communication and conservation of the knowledge. Among many other classics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are parts of Greek mythology have been taught over the years in literature classes in Europe without any prejudice, and generations of students have learned many things from them. From the Red Indians of the Americas in the west, to the Japanese, Chinese, and Indian people in the east, just as Jews and the Arabs, without forgetting

the peoples of Africa, there have always existed varied forms of stories about the origin of the earth, of mankind and of all sorts of creatures within the earth. There are stories about why people behave in certain ways or construct habitations in a particular manner. These stories indeed are the first most significant indicator that humans are rational. They are an attempt by humans to give explanations regarding all that surround them, all that happen to them and all that they are. There was never at any time, during the development of these myths, any intention by the authors or originators of these stories to mislead people or to give an inaccurate account of things. Apart from a tiny section of what some creation stories have, the vast majority of their content is still to be disapproved by positive science. No adequate tools have been invented to check the truthfulness or falsity of the ancient narratives, for example about the origin of life or that of man. We would be foolish to throw away all this vast wealth of knowledge just because positive science tells us that they have no means of proving the facts contained in the creation stories. The intent and the value each of these narratives has on the political, social, religious and economic life of a people is indispensable. In the contemporary world, it is fashionable to live a life free of myths. However, myths are the human way; it schools man to face life and death; it gives grounds for being moral and ethical. Myths give man good reasons why he/she should respect creation and give nature time to deliver its goodies to us and the other creatures. Doing away with myths requires that we do away with religion, taboos, social order, our origins and all the other critical ingredients that make man, human. Therefore, myths, as they are called, are an indispensable source of knowledge, especially where science is unable to supply. Furthermore, these myths provide the only reliable starting point for the philosophy of nature, anthropology, and ontology.

As mentioned earlier, every Philosophy has to have a methodology. Unfortunately, we are still facing many challenges in this area. We need to take a general look at the system of education extensively followed in the African continent. In many universities within the continent, in addition to what was stated earlier, the two major and dominant disciplines have always been the positive sciences, such as medicine, engineering, architecture and others in the one hand and the social sciences such as sociology, commerce and political science on the other. There is always the faculty of law also present. These disciplines are majorly pragmatic, and they were created to solve the existential and survival challenging issues. The majority of the students and faculty in these universities belong to these disciplines.

Apart from the already mentioned shortcomings as regards teaching method and content, the research methodology that has been in most cases proposed for philosophy students has often been empirical and sociological in nature and orientation. The structure requirement for every postgraduate thesis, as a rule, has to include *background of the study, the statement of the prob-*

lem, objectives of the study, hypothesis, research questions, justification and significance of the study, scope of the study, limitations of the study, ethical issues, theoretical framework, literature review and others. These are standard procedures that are part of social science methodology, which, while guaranteeing the formation of competent professionals and experts in their respective fields, help do an in-depth study for a greater understanding of the African situation and context. A philosophy student, on the other hand, is put at a disadvantage because this format and the methodology is ill-suited for speculation and deductive processes. This approach has resulted in philosophy works that are bordering with social anthropology, whereby the authors tend to be more descriptive and looking for applicability and contemporary relevance of the philosophical questions rather than philosophical questions from contemporary issues. Until and unless we separate philosophy from social sciences, with its interests, objectives, and methodology, our people will never come to experience what abstract, logical and critical process of the human mind is all about.

If ontology in African Philosophy has to have as its starting point the African myths, then the methodology has to be hermeneutic in nature. Preference for hermeneutics as a methodology in our context is informed by what it has delivered over the years, of its implementation in various disciplines. hermeneutics as a method has undergone the necessary development, thus over time revealed its potentiality as a tool to be used to reach being. Starting from Schleiermacher, where the tool was mainly used to interpret text, (especially in exegesis of sacred and profane literature); moving on to Dilthey who turned hermeneutics into a tool of mediating an understanding of historical events; and finally, Heidegger and Gadamer who define hermeneutic as a tool meant to excavate being itself from human condition. This method of doing philosophy will help find the sources of philosophy in the African settings: sources of ethics, of epistemology, of metaphysics, as well as those of language, art, and signs as privileged areas to excavate being as such.

Although we consider myth as a starting point for the study of African ontology, these myths are generally not exposed out there for the enquirer to see. They only come as a provoked explanation of some other more visible phenomenon. Such phenomena would be encountered in the form of a dance, or a song, or a ritual, or a name or an artwork. The phenomenologist is not interested here in unearthing something long extinct. The philosopher spends the effort because, behind the acts, there is a force that is still present and active in the life of the people. The phenomenologist does not follow a methodology in some manner of a historian narrating an event whose effects are no longer felt, if not only some remote memory. When the philosopher lacks the proper tool, a significant experience will pass him by without notice. Hermeneutics as a method can bring back past experiences to the present. It turns remote none-primordial events into immediate primordial expe-

riences. Both Jomo Kenyatta in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya* and Chinua Achebe in his book *Things Fall Apart* present originary myths and oracles that are indispensable for one to understand the social structure and conduct of the Kikuyus of Kenya and the Ibos of Nigeria respectively. The narratives in both books, in themselves, are at best stories about people, especially those who lived in the past whose life has no immediate influence on us today. It is the element of interpretation (hermeneutic) that will bring out the continuous thread linking the present activity to the source, the archetype. Paul Ricoeur gives this principle as the basis of a hermeneutic method: "If I can understand worlds which have disappeared, it is because each society has created its instruments for understanding in creating the social and cultural world's in which it understands itself."²

An area that needs urgent attention of African philosophers

As will soon be shown, the book contains a wide variety of topics of great relevance to Africa. Conspicuously, though, there is not much on the area of Ecology and Environment. Yet, along with all those pressing issues discussed, the African continent is deeply affected by environmental issues. As we speak, there are reports of prolonged droughts causing famine and death around the continent; ferocious torrential rains are destroying entire cities within the continent; there are severe issues of air, land and water pollution that are affecting the health conditions of millions in the continent. The African environment is an area that needs an urgent reflection.

It is philosophically viable to tackle the environmental problem because this problem contains in itself several key issues in philosophy: man and his/her nature, the question of God and creation, and the philosophy of nature as such. We could recall what we mentioned elsewhere:

The problem started when man created a strong separation between himself/herself and the rest of creation. Man emerged from nature, cut the umbilical cord and created a new relationship between himself/herself and the rest of nature. He/She became the creator, the conqueror and the ruler, the owner, and the consumer. The rest of nature became the source of man's insatiable gratification. Nature became the obstacle to man's self-realization, an obstacle that man needs to conquer, subdue and dominated. Then man turned the rest of creation into an infinity of resources he can exploit for his needs, food, comfort, and recreation. The way the rest of creation is was not good enough, its speed and capacity to supply were not fast enough for man whose attitude

² P. RICOEUR, *The Task of Hermeneutics*, "Philosophy Today" XVII (1973), 2, 119.

has become, "I want it now, and I want it all." Man has pushed the rest of creation beyond its limits. Man has manipulated nature's mechanisms so that it may give more and give it faster.³

Addressing the environmental issue could clarify many philosophical questions we are raising about the origin, nature, and destiny of man. Just as we do not lack examples of environmental impact on the African man, we do not lack a model of right relationship build on mutuality between man and nature in Africa. The respect for nature is so deep that coexistence and sharing of nature's providence are extravagant in Africa. A philosophical reflection in this area would help integrate technology, economy, and development within the African naturalistic framework.

The structure of the book

The general theme that has inspired all the articles in this book is, "The Role of Philosophy in the African Context," including its culture, challenges, and perspectives. The wealth of the content herein is not to be treated as chapters of a novel. Each article stands alone. However, editing the work, we found it necessary to follow a kind of classification. The first part of the book focuses on African Philosophy as such. In this section, the reader should expect both the old and the new. The debate about the possibility and nature of philosophy in Africa, the definition of African Philosophy; trends in African philosophy, especially as represented in Ethnophilosophy, and such other familiar themes in African Philosophy. However, there are also some pleasantly surprising approaches that show some effort to move African Philosophy beyond its familiar territory.

The second part of the book focuses on Philosophy and Peace in Africa. This part reflects the concern with the ethical standards, political activities, the rule of law and particularly the administration of justice. Under this theme, we grouped such issues to do with gender, youth, minorities, violence and radical extremism. There are several attempts to give philosophical solutions to social, political and economic challenges in the continent. This part and the following section are mainly coloured with an optimistic tone, even though the issues addressed are the ones which often keep Africa gloomy and depressed.

³ St. OKELLO, *The Ecology Problem A Missionary Concern with a Christian Perspective*, [https://www.academia.edu/36581778/The_Ecology_Problem_A_Missionary_Concern_with_a_Christian_Perspective; https://web.archive.org/save/https://www.academia.edu/36581778/The_Ecology_Problem_A_Missionary_Concern_with_a_Christian_Perspective].

The third part of the book focuses on development, and it is the most propulsive of all the areas treated in the book. Development is defined, analyzed and questioned. The role of technology in an African context is also discussed. The proper relation between Africa and the donor countries is addressed. The section proposes the need to have an education system that is capable of producing new knowledge and of advancing the economic, social and cultural needs of the continent.

The fourth and final part of the book is dedicated to education. Here again, there is a mixture of the new and old. For years Philosophy of Education has been at the forefront of philosophical reflection in Africa. Some of the contributions have proposed once again similar lines of thought. On the other hand, this section produces as well some very new aspects that will enrich the discussion on education in Africa. There is a blend of Critical Thinking, Pedagogy and Epistemology harmoniously interacted with each other. Notable as well is the almost chorus call to introduce Philosophy into the curriculum so that higher quality of learning may be enhanced in African schools.

All in all, the book appears to have been occasioned by the need to spell out the role of philosophy in Africa and to situate it within the African continent, taking into account the cultures and challenges therein.

Appreciations

The articles that constitute this book are proceedings of an international Philosophy Conference that was held at The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in April 2017. The Conference was primarily the initiative of CMIUCAP, (Conférence Mondiale des Institutions Universitaires Catholiques de Philosophie). We, therefore, first of all, thank COMIUCAP leadership, especially Prof. João J. Vila-Chã, of Gregorian University and the President of the organization; along with him, we sincerely thank Prof. Dr. Joseph C. Agbakoba of the University of Nigeria and assistant president of the organization. They cordially assisted us with technical and financial advice and encouragement as we went through the complicated stages of preparation, up to the realization of the conference itself to its happy ending.

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa graciously accepted to host the conference, incurring most of the expenses that such academic activities entail. The administration willingly owned the initiative, putting to our disposal the university infrastructures, personnel, and funds. CUEA's contribution played a determinant role without which this book would have been a pipe dream. The VC during that time, Prof. Justus Mbae and the DVC Academics, Prof. Kaku Sagary Nokoe, both worked tirelessly and generously to make sure that the conference was a success. We sincerely express our grat-

itude to them. Both the Directorate of Research, Innovation, and Graduate Training (DRIGT), and the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) played a leading role in taking charge of all the details of the organization of the conference, from the formulation of the theme, to the call for papers, elaboration of the program and finally the initial editing of the texts that were shortlisted for publication. We sincerely thank all the members of these two Departments for their vital role in the production of this book. We cannot forget to mention the core team that formulated the concept paper, which effectively stimulated thought and whose outcome is this book. Some of the deliberations contained in the concept paper were so valuable that we could not afford not to include them in this introduction. It is our obligation to mention and thank Dr. Oriare Nyaruath, Dr. Francis Owaka, Dr. George Ndemo and Fr. John Muhenda in this regard.

Maria Brunello, a Consolata benefactor, generously offered to fund all the expenses relating to the publication of this book. We sincerely thank her for her generosity. May the Lord bless her.

The Consolata Missionaries have contributed towards the success of this publication in different ways. In the first place, the Regional Superior of Kenya, Fr. Joseph Waithaka and his Council made a generous contribution to the organization of the Conference. The Consolata Institute of Philosophy in Nairobi provided her facilities and personnel to assist in various occasions of the preparation of the conference. The Superior General Fr. Stefano Camerlengo, together with his council graciously accepted this book to be published within the Consolata editions. We sincerely thank them all for all the different roles they played to enable the publication of this book.

Last but not least, We are pleased to mention here Urbanian University Press, and especially Elena Casadei, who is the English publications editor. We are so grateful to her and the entire Urbaniana University Press for their helpful dedication. We cannot forget as well the strong-willed Prof. Alberto Trevisiol, former Rettore Magnifico, for his push, assistance, and support, without which we would have preferred to postpone this publication. Our gratitude to all.