

**AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AS AN ONTOLOGICO-EXISTENTIAL  
HERMENEUTICS**

By

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**Abstract**

*One of the recurring ideas in the criticism of the Universalistic School of African philosophy against ethno-philosophy is the emphasis on culture and collective thought. Very recently, African philosophers of the hermeneutic school, have argued that African philosophy must be hermeneutical, that is, an individual interpretation of one's cultural symbols, mediated by one's understanding and self-understanding. This makes the thoughts of philosophers like Placid Tempels, Alexis Kagame and Leopold Senghor valid thoughts for inclusion into the corpus of African philosophy. This piece, further argues that African philosophy is an ontologico-existential hermeneutics. The hermeneutical method that is described as ontological and existential is based on the universal character of philosophy and the African context as the locus for philosophical reflection. Using the historical and analytical methods of inquiry, it argues that hermeneutics is the instrument for analyzing the African experience.*

**Keywords:** African, Philosophy, Ontologico, Exstential, Hermeneutics.

**Introduction**

In the history of African philosophy, in terms of ideological impact, Tempels (1959) occupies a fundamental place. He can be regarded as the father of modern African philosophy and this is based on his analysis of the Bantu thought system in which the notion of Being or 'Vital force' is easily noticed. He was the first to attribute a developed philosophy to the African people. Thus, Oguejiofor (2009) avers that at a time when the concept 'African philosophy' evoked a cacophony of perspectives about the nature of the philosophy described by the adjective 'African', the work of Tempels became the lightning rod of this debate. In his work, we find a dialogue between philosophy and culture through hermeneutics. A cursory glance at the historical evolution of African philosophy reveals that Tempels bequeathed to the future generation of African philosophers a conceptual framework for a distinctive African mode of thought. Kagame (1951) in his work followed up and verified the work of Tempels. The African negritude of Senghor (1975 and 1993) had also followed the same pattern; the pattern being the strong connection of philosophy with culture. This notwithstanding, with the

advent of Hountondji (1995) on the historical plane of African philosophy, a negative eye was cast on the culturally-based philosophical perspectives of Tempels, Kagame and Senghor. He coined the word 'ethno-philosophy' to describe their thought, a word that shows his disdain for the method employed. He further described their thoughts in derogatory terms as cultural philosophy, collective philosophy, philosophy by exhumation- that is, to search a culture and discover a philosophy that has sedimented. He described the consequence of Tempels ethno-philosophy thus:

The consequence was unanimism- the illusion that all men and women in all societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues. This implies the rejection of pluralism, the sweeping away of all internal contradictions and tensions, the denial of the intense intellectual life, and the extreme cultural richness associated with these societies. (p. xviii).

From Tempels, Hountondji turned the eye of his criticism on Alexis Kagame. He wrote:

Indeed, Kagame, in spite of the very attractive qualities of his analysis and relative accuracy of some of his sequences, has remained on the whole the prisoner of an ideological myth, that of a collective African 'philosophy' which is nothing but a revamped version of Levy-Bruhl's primitive mentality, the imaginary subject of a scholarly discourse which one may regret Kagame did not apply to something else. (p. 43).

Reacting further on Senghor's thought on Negritude, Hountondji avers that:

Senghor's theory of Negritude rests upon a theory of culture which postulates a reciprocity between the collective character of each race, as conditioned by an original formulative environment, and the different cultural forms and civilizations to be found in the world. This point of view fits properly into the perspective of cultural pluralism, which is a development of modern anthropology. It is not for nothing that Senghor's formulation of negritude takes the form of largely of elaborate explications of African life and values, of what one might call a synthetic anthropology of African world. (p. 18).

From the foregoing, the concern of Hountondji is evident in the recurring words in his criticism of these philosophers: the emphasis on culture and collective thought. Reacting to the position taken by Hountondji, African philosophers such as Okere (1983), Madu (1992) and Serequeberhan (1994 and 2000) among others argue that African philosophy must be hermeneutical, that is, an individual interpretation of one's cultural symbols, mediated by one's

understanding and self-understanding. Thus, the thoughts of philosophers like Placid Tempels, Alexis Kagame and Leopold Senghor are regarded as hermeneutical and as such, their categorization as myth by Hountondji is understood as been based on the ignorance of the true complexities involved in the development of their philosophies. This piece, therefore, argues that African philosophy is an ontologico-existential hermeneutics. It is ontological because of the universal character of philosophy, however, it is existential because of the African context which provides the *locus* for philosophical reflection.

### **The Import of Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics, a word which became a common language in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is from the Greek word: *hermeneuein*, which means *to interpret*. Folk etymology relates the Greek origin of the word to Hermes, the mythological Greek deity, whose role is that of the messenger of the gods. Ukwamedua (2012) avers that Hermes is the inventor of language, speech, interpreter, a liar, thief and trickster. These multiple roles make Hermes an ideal representative of hermeneutics, for language consist of signs that could lead to truth and falsehood.

According to Inwood (1998), the concept hermeneutics carries the meaning of 'to express', 'to explain', 'to translate' and 'to interpret'. Thus Oguejiofor (2009) avers that:

Hermeneutics involves bringing an inner meaning into the open. It entails making explicit what is implicit. It is thus a quest for meaning, one's own meaning in one's life, society and milieu- in short, in the totality of one's universe, which could be said to be constituted by one's cultural symbols. (p. 80).

As a theory of interpretation, it goes back to ancient Greek philosophy when Plato employed the term to differentiate between religious knowledge, that which has been revealed and *Sophia*, which is knowledge of truth-value of the utterance; during the Medieval and Renaissance ages, it emerged in relation to the scriptures, precisely, its interpretation. During this period, Gadamer (1976), Heidegger (1978) and Dilthey (1996) observed that Saint Augustine introduced the universal claim of hermeneutics and argued that interpretation of Scripture involves a deeper, existential level of self-understanding. The effect of such a perspective is evident in Martin Luther's *sola scriptura*, the starting point of modern hermeneutics. He questioned the authority of traditional interpretation of scripture and emphasized the importance of the individual reader of the Biblical text who must face the challenge of making the particular text his own. Thus, Giambattista (1977 and 1984) argued that understanding and self-

understanding cannot be kept apart. Spinoza (2001) introduced a new taste to hermeneutics by shifting attention to the scriptural text when he argued that to understand the Scriptures one must keep in mind the historical horizon in which the particular text was written, as well as the mind which produced it.

During the modern period, philosophical hermeneutics emerged. Schleiermacher, according to Vial (2009) is the Father of modern hermeneutics. In the contention of Ricoeur (1977), the employment of hermeneutics as a general principle was Schleiermacher's most important contribution to knowledge. Schleiermacher (1984 and 1998) understood hermeneutics as the doctrine of the act of understanding, and had posited that thought is the inside of language and language the outside of thought. And to understand any speech, two things are involved: the language that makes the speech possible and the individual that uses the language to speak. For in the speech, the very personality of the actor is expressed. Thus, you need to know the speaker's language and the speaker in order to understand his or her thought. He further observed that the language available to speakers is an accumulation of previous speech acts, and contain in it the personalities of previous speakers. In Schleiermacher, hermeneutics extended its application beyond Biblical texts.

Following Schleiermacher's expansion of the capacity of hermeneutics, Dilthey (1996) avers that hermeneutics is a core discipline that should be the foundation of all the arts and humanities. He however, emphasized the importance of the historicity of all interpretations. He understands the human person as a being that is made in history, and that the understanding of things occurs through history. While agreeing to the emphasis on historicity, Heidegger (1980) added that there is the need for an understanding and interpretation of the nature of the being in question, the *Dasein*. Thus, in Heidegger, hermeneutics now becomes fundamental ontology, an explanation of the ontological condition of understanding. Commitment to understanding the existential horizon of a person's time or a person's situation is therefore, fundamental to interpretation.

Gadamer (1976), a student of Heidegger, would argue that thinking is tied to the boundaries of language and as such, understanding is language-bound. This explains why people who are brought up in a certain linguistic and cultural tradition see reality differently from those who come from a different tradition. According to Ricoeur (1992), philosophy is the recovery of the self, an overcoming of the separation between the self, which is particular and one's true being, which is universal. This raises a tension between the universal task of philosophy and its anchor in particular contexts from which it must operate, but which it must strive to transcend. Ramose (2005) thus understands philosophy as

a “particularist interpretation with universal appeal” (p. 145). From the foregoing there is an emphasis on history, psychology, context, tradition, culture, language etc., which further shows the tension between particularity and universality in philosophical hermeneutics. In the development of hermeneutics, we see Schleiermacher broaden the concerns of hermeneutics beyond Biblical exegesis; Dilthey applied it to culture, Heidegger made hermeneutics existential, and Gadamer made hermeneutics to be rooted in history and tradition.

In the perspective of Oguejiofor (2009), philosophy as hermeneutic process must be shaped by the particularity of its birth. He wrote that:

In spite of the inherent tendency of the discipline (of philosophy), universal philosophy is an illusion, since the subject which is at the centre of philosophy as hermeneutics is inevitably bedeviled by his/her particularity, his/her specificity, generating an ambivalence since this does not necessarily exclude universality. (p. 83).

If African philosophy is to be understood as hermeneutics, it would mean that it has to be an interpretation of the African condition, symbols, culture, language, history, environment, social institutions etc.

### **African Philosophy and Hermeneutics**

In the history of African philosophy, some African thinkers have proposed that hermeneutics is the instrument for analyzing the African experience. Three African philosophers are notable in this regard: Theophilus Okere, Tsenay Serequeberhan and Raphael Okechukwu Madu. Their perspectives will therefore be discussed.

Okere (1983) argued that all philosophies must spring from and deal with non-philosophical features of lived experience and its expression in religion, culture etc. By non-philosophy, sometimes referred to as the irrational or pre-rational or transcendent refers to the non-reflected or un-reflected baggage of cultural background. This is based on the understanding that for a philosophy to be described with the adjective ‘African’, it must have an expression of the African life-world; this becomes the apparatus for reflection. In this process, hermeneutics becomes a bridge between culture and philosophy for “it is only within the context of hermeneutics that African culture can give birth to African philosophy” (p. 15). The work of Okere was a reaction to Hountondji’s critique of ethno-philosophy, and his intention was develop a better approach to African philosophy; an approach that would not disregard the African context and culture. Hermeneutics, therefore, becomes a method of interpretation and understanding. In hermeneutics, whatever is intelligible is accessible to us through and in language and the employment of language calls for

interpretation. Thus, Ricoeur (1992) argues that “there is no self understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols and texts; in the final analysis self-understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (p. 15). In Okere, one can philosophize from culture or from the elements of culture that can be called symbols because culture is pregnant with meaning and has to be explained and understood with the aid of reason within the parameters of philosophy. It is in this regard that African philosophy is said to be hermeneutical, that is, regarding the question of relation between culture and philosophy.

While Okere like Dilthey focused on culture, Serequeberhan following the path of Gadamer emphasized that history is relevant to the nature of hermeneutics. This explains why Serequeberhan (1994) avers 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 African which brings forth the concerns and originates the theoretic space for the discourse of contemporary African philosophy. (p. 18).

In the West, he argued that hermeneutics grew out of some questions such as: the challenge of technocratic society, the reduction of reason to technique, the alienation of the self from the social world and the rise of positivistic version of social sciences; in Africa, hermeneutics was built around the question of the encounter of Africa with a ‘foreign and aggressive piety’, however, in the present, it is the question of the crisis resulting from the colonial project of Europe. In this regard, hermeneutics emerges as a result of some failure, a quest for understanding which begins from misunderstanding. The failure in terms of understanding must be defined in encounter and not in essence or in some essentialized manner. Thus, the operative of emancipation takes precedence over the integrity of theory. In the face of the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism, Serequeberhan (2000) sees hermeneutics as a means of constructing an identity. In the age of neo-colonialism, he speaks of the state of the African as an in-between state which calls for emancipation:

This nonidentity, 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 ‘ambiguity adventure’ and feel, in the very depth of our being, the unnerving experience of being two in one, Europe and non-Europe. (p. 2).

He therefore sees hermeneutics as not an already established interpretation of nature, history, the world and the ground of the world; it is rather an open-

ended project of humanity, a process, which finds itself in a joint struggle. Hermeneutics thus, becomes an instrument for the struggle out of the non-place or the between place; It involves a practical understanding of oneself as an actor, an agent and the situation in which an action has meaning.

Madu (1992) understands hermeneutics as a tool of knowledge for the extraction of philosophical thought from within culture. He Based his perspective on that of Ricoeur who was committed to symbols and metaphors and the need to connect with human existence rather than an abstract structure and set of functions. Hermeneutics was used by his in this regard:

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'. (pp. 31-32).

Contrary to the opinion of some philosophers that symbols were pre-rational and thus unworthy of philosophical attention, Madu, with the intention of rehabilitating symbolic, proverbial and mythological thoughts, argued that they are relevant to philosophy, and that hermeneutics is the method of abstracting the philosophical content of symbols, proverbs and myths. In his analysis of symbols, Madu like Ricoeur combines the ontological and existential to save hermeneutics from abstraction.

### **Conclusion**

The perspectives of Okere, Serequeberhan and Madu on hermeneutics have enriched African hermeneutics. In Okere there is a recognition of the relevance of philosophy in articulating non-philosophy, even though his hermeneutics is only a universal method applied to a particular context with nothing specifically African about it; in Serequeberhan the taste of history, praxis and emancipatory possibilities are added to African hermeneutics. In Madu, African hermeneutics is brought to the service of symbolic structures. The beauty of these perspectives is that they teach how philosophy should reflect on the stuff of the world, and the manner in which this is realized to save philosophy from being abstracted from the particulars of human experience. Through hermeneutics, philosophy thinks about but from a place; philosophy becomes a creative act rather than simply an analytic act. And this is where African philosophy belongs, it is hermeneutics. African philosophy is a hermeneutics of culture, of history that

leads to paxis. The ontologico-existential character of African philosophical hermeneutics balances the tension between universality and particularity in philosophy.

The particularist school of African philosophy would argue that African Philosophy is the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. It is based on this understanding that Tempels (1959) wrote that “I confidently hope to be able to convince my readers that real philosophy can be found among indigenous peoples and that it should be sought among them” (p. 17). From the perspective of African philosophy as hermeneutics, this piece argues that African myths, folklores, proverbs, worldview etc., are not African philosophy, however, it would give birth African philosophy only within the context of hermeneutics. They could be considered the sources of African philosophy, however, can become African philosophy through hermeneutics. This therefore, establishes the strong connection between African philosophy and African culture. They can be said to be congenial in the sense that they need each other to remain germane and perennial. Culture therefore becomes a material for the reflection of philosophy, thus, pointing to the tension between the particular and universal in hermeneutics: while philosophy concerns itself with universal problems, the human person who does philosophy must speak from an environment or culture or an experience with particular expressions and language, and this particularity decorates philosophy with a galaxy of experiences. African culture therefore becomes the source of African philosophy’s initial impulse and nourishment. The fact of the recognition that philosophy has come from a place does not in any way undermine its philosophical character, but rather it helps philosophy to become a task rather than an assumption. The interaction between African culture and the hermeneutical process which birth to African philosophy, is a creative enterprise that requires the presence and ingenuity of a genius; this genius is the African philosopher.

With the emphasis on a genius, Okere (1983) agreeing with Hountondji denounced the idea of collective philosophy, asserting that hermeneutics is the work of an individual thinker. Contrary to this perspective, Oguejiofor (2009) rightly avers that the idea attributed to a people as a whole is in the final analysis those which have become so repeated and popularized that they have become known to the general populace. This does not mean that the thoughts were collectively proposed. Moreover, these thoughts referred to as collective thoughts in African philosophy are the reflections of particular African philosophers about their experience of particular cultures; they are therefore



particular interpretations and readings of their experience. The reason why many African philosophers have spoken in terms that seem collective is to be seen in the foundation of their projects and the circumstances surrounding their philosophical interpretation. For instance, in the case of Tempels and Senghor, the foundation of their project was to affirm the dignity of the black race as a whole. Oguejiofor (2009) avers that “such an aim would be better served if one presents the whole race as the architect or repository of a particular philosophy, with the ultimate calculation of changing the image, not just of the particular thinker but of the people as a whole” (p. 94). Therefore, the fact that it sounds collective does not in any way mean that it is a collective philosophy produced as a chorus by the community to which it has been attributed to.

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