Identities, Rationalities and Clustering in African Philosophy

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Introduction

In his contribution to the debate in African philosophy, Paulin Hountondji refers to African philosophy as “a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by the authors themselves.” Although Hountondji was responding to the views that he considers counterfeit to the philosophical enterprise. His annotation of African philosophy has elicited a flurry of responses, especially from those African philosophers who purport to demonstrate the inappropriateness of his characterization of African philosophy. The main arguments against his characterization have been that writing is not a prerequisite for philosophy, especially since writing is neither part of the thought process nor of the rigor in philosophical argument. Hountondji has also been criticized for his view that one has to be African to write African philosophy. It has been argued that the universality of philosophy makes it inappropriate to attempt to exclude certain groups of people from contributing to a specific trend in philosophy and more especially as the same demand is not usually made of those who contribute to Chinese, British or American philosophy. Thirdly, Hountondji has been criticized for implying that mere declaration by an author that a piece of writing is philosophical is sufficient for the work to be deemed philosophical. Critics have observed that the intent of the author or any declarations by him concerning his work is not relevant to the classification of the work.

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Although much have been made of inappropriateness of Hountondji’s characterization of African philosophy and Hountondji has tried to respond to his many critics, there has not been much interest in an important spinoff of the debate and that is the question as to who an African actually is. This question is especially important for today’s Africa where the homogeneity that could be said to have once characterized the African population is disappearing as people of Asian and European descent become naturalized ‘Africans’, and as population contact results in children of mixed parentage. The question is also important, given the growing trend towards globalization and the tendency for trends and ideas from far afield to be find favour with indigenous population. But in saying that African philosophy consists in texts written by Africans, Hountondji seems to be in no doubt as to who an African actually is. Also when his critics reject his assertion that an African identity is purely geographical, they do not also seem to be in doubt as to who is an African. What is incontestable is that the image of the African constructed by Hountondji appears to be completely different from that of his critics and that different scholars in African philosophy tend to give different characterizations of the African. This paper is an attempt to explicate the Africaness that is sometimes taken for granted in African philosophy. It explores the different African identities that have been constructed in the course of African philosophy, in a bid to determine whether any of such identities is authentically African.

Of Literature and Identity

An introduction to African philosophy usually starts with what has now become a perennial question concerning the existence of African philosophy and its peculiarities as a unique trend in philosophy. The answer to this question, though many and varied, has ultimately been reduced to the four trends identified by Odera Oruka (1990), viz. ethno-philosophy,
philosophic sagacity, nationalistic–ideological philosophy and professional philosophy. In all these various trends reference is consistently made to Africa and Africans and there is an assumption that those participating in the debate usually refer to the same thing and that the audience equally have a uniform understanding of the concepts. Whereas, as a geographical concept, ‘Africa’ is quite easy to define and demarcate, the same cannot be said about ‘African(s)’ as an identity concept and the disparity in African identities used in philosophical literature makes this apparent. But the confusion is not limited to African philosophy. The same question has been posed at different times in the popular press, prompting the further question as to whether there is really an African identity and if so whether such an identity can be clearly demarcated.

The African philosophical trend that is commonly referred to as ethno-philosophy is usually looked upon as portraying African philosophy as a communal intellectual exercise whose thought process is indiscernible from the thought of his community. It is mirrored in the works of such scholars as Placid Temples³, Alexis Kagame⁴, John Mbiti⁵ and Robin Horton.⁶ What has been identified by many commentators on African philosophy to be common to these scholars has been their attempt to reduce African philosophy to what Hountondji refers to as a “collective, spontaneous, unreflective and implicit worldviews, … accepted, consciously or unconsciously,

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³ Temples, P. Bantu Philosophy, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959,
⁴ Kagamé, A. La Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de L’être
⁵ Mbiti, J. M. African Religions and Philosophy
by all Africans in general or, more especially, by all the members of a particular ethnic group or a particular African society.”

The African that is referred to in these various ‘philosophies’ is usually black and a native of one of the many ethnic nationalities of sub-Saharan Africa. This African is also traditional, either in the sense of being shielded from Western influence or in the sense of rejecting such influence, as in the case of the évolués that first generated the interest of Temples. In more recent literature, such a concept of African is often abstracted from the more contemporary Africans through a process of projecting into a past where the African was pure and untouched by Western influence. The African of ethno-philosophy is also communal not merely by virtue of the living in a communal African traditional society, but because the philosophical ideas espoused by him are communal both by origin and by letter. This African is also illiterate and therefore cannot document his own thoughts; but even where he is literate, such literacy does not make much difference to his outlook. This African is also unreflective and merely mouths the dogmas of society without subjecting it to ratiocination but rather accepting the absoluteness of such dogmas. He is also intellectually unconscious in the sense alluded to by Temples, when he says,

we do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treaties, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such a systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in précised terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognize themselves in our words...  

Another trend in African philosophy that is close to ethno-philosophy was developed by Odera Oruka and is commonly referred to as “philosophical sagacity.” It came as a reaction to Hountondji’s insistence that writing is a prerequisite for philosophy and Oruka’s belief that literacy is not a necessary condition for philosophical thought. It is different from ethno-

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8 Temples, Placides, Bantu Philosophy, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959, p25
philosophy in the sense that it is non-holistic but rather consists in the thought of individual philosphic sages who are rationally critical and who “recommend as far as communal pressure allows, only those aspects of beliefs and values that pass their rational scrutiny.”\textsuperscript{9} This is without prejudice to the existence of folk sages whom he identifies as being well “versed in the commonplace culture, customs and beliefs of his people.” Like ethno-philosophy, this trend in African philosophy also defines the African in peculiar but interesting ways. Like the African in ethno-philosophy, the African of philosophical sagacity is black and also a native of one of the ethnic nationalities of sub-Saharan Africa. This African is also traditional, not in the sense that they have not been “influenced by the inevitable moral and technological culture from the West but because their own outlook and cultural well-being remains that of traditional Africa.”\textsuperscript{10} This African is illiterate, not merely because of some historical accident of made it impossible for him to read and write, but more so because the absence of writing is celebrated and held to contribute some uniqueness to this individual. The African of philosophic sagacity though living in a communal society does not subscribe to communal thought but is individualistic and didactic in his thought. He is intellectually conscious and capable of moving beyond the first-order level of philosophical enquiry to the second-order level that involves critiquing the popular wisdom of his community. His intellectual consciousness notwithstanding, this African, while incapable of documenting his own thought is capable of formulating philosophical treaties as well as recognizing the systematic presentation of the philosophical ideas of others.

Oruka also identifies nationalist-ideological philosophy as a trend in African philosophy and consists in the attempt by African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Obafemi Awolowo and others to abstract a unique political theory from traditional African

\textsuperscript{9} Oruka, H. Odera, \textit{Sage Philosophy}, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990, p. 31
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. p.28
patterns of governance. It flows from the belief that traditional Africa has something unique to offer the contemporary world and that if contemporary Africa is organized following the traditional and sometimes communal model, it could avoid some of the pitfalls of contemporary Western and Eastern societies. Although traditional Africa plays an important role in this philosophical trend, there appears to be an acceptance that contemporary society is evolving and is no longer traditional.

This notwithstanding, the African identity constructed within this philosophical trend is still black and native to one of the ethnic nationalities of sub-Saharan Africa. It does not appear to include the black African Diaspora even when African scholars in the Diaspora have contributed to the development of such theories. The interventionist tone of nationalistic-ideological philosophy and its commitment to restoring Africa to its communal past, seem to suggestion that the African of this philosophical trend is no longer traditional nor is it communal in thought. The articulation of this philosophy and the process through which its objectives are to be achieved suggests that the African of this philosophical trend is at least functionally literate and therefore capable of appreciating the philosophy. He (the philosopher in question) is also reflective, in the sense of being able to compare the philosophical ideals of the new ideology to his current muddled existence, where Western, Eastern and African ideals struggle for supremacy. The African of this philosophical trend is expected to possess the philosophical sophistication of the sage and be adept in juggling the values of traditional Africa with the needs of a modern nation-state. To this end, he is not only expected to be well grounded in the traditions of Africa but is also sufficiently familiar with other political ideologies.

The fourth trend in African philosophy is identified by Oruka as professional philosophy and its proponents consist chiefly of Peter Boudunrin, Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, and
Odera Oruka. It conceives of African philosophy as contemporary philosophy done by Africans that have received professional training in philosophy. According to Peter Bodunrin, “it is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics or history of philosophy.”\(^{11}\) Although Bodunrin mentions the desirability of some sort of African context in the philosophy, such a context is not necessary and therefore does not define the philosophy. Hountondji thus argues that the defining criterion for African Philosophy is “the geographical origin of its authors, rather than an alleged specificity of its content.”\(^{12}\)

Although the above seems to suggest that being an African is simply a matter of being born in Africa, the stated purpose of defining an African by geography, viz., “demystifying Africanity, by reducing it to fact – simply the fact, and in itself, perfectly neutral, of belonging to Africa – by removing the mystic halo of values arbitrarily grafted upon this fact by ideologists of African identity,”\(^{13}\) suggest that there is more to the African identity. On closer examination, the African in this trend is in reality black and a member of one of the ethnic nationalities of sub-Saharan Africa; it is not clear that Africans in the Diaspora are included in this definition. This African is not only literate but is trained in the philosophical traditions of the West and therefore highly skilled in the art of argumentation and criticism. He is individualistic in his approach to knowledge and reflective in thought. The only difference between him and his Western counterpart appears to be his ethnic origins and his black skin.

Although these variations in what it means to be African have been adopted by the different trends in African philosophy, the different identities could be said to be variations of two competing identities. On the one hand, an African identity that is constructed by Western anthropologists based on their interaction with Africans during the colonial era or some period

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\(^{12}\) Hountondji, Op.cit., p.66

\(^{13}\) Hountondji, Op.cit. p.xii
prior to it. This African is traditional and black, untainted by western influences and usually a member of the one of the ethnic nationalities of sub-Saharan Africa. He is also illiterate but though he lives in a purely communal society may not necessarily be communal in thought. He is more likely to be unreflective and to merely mouth the dogmas of society without subjecting them to ratiocination even if he is, such reflection would be basic and therefore devoid of the sophistication that is the hallmark of contemporary philosophical thought. He is intellectually unconscious but even where he is intellectually conscious, he is still incapable of formulating philosophical treaties and documenting same independent of an interlocutor.

On the other hand, there is a second identity of the African that is more contemporary and is an amalgam of the African referred to in the nationalist-ideological philosophy and the African of professional philosophy. The identity here is a more recent construct and as such the African is no longer traditional, but may need to be sufficiently familiar with African traditions. He is however still black, and has traceable roots to one of the ethnic nationalities of sub-Saharan Africa. He is often highly educated or at least sufficiently educated to understand and reflect upon political ideals and their application to contemporary life. Where he lacks philosophical training, a distinct philosophical streak usually makes up for this and imbues him with peculiar insights into issues and processes that govern everyday existence. In short, the distinction between the two identities is basically the distinction between the traditional and the modern and the question that arises is as to which is the authentic African identity.

**Of Africans and Identity**

Debates concerning the true African identity are not new but have been part of the literary corpus on Africans for over a century. From the pre-logical identities of the early anthropologists through the ‘noble savage’ of Rousseau, the African identity has been
constructed and reconstructed over time, with the identities constructed in the course of the
debate on African philosophy being part of this trend. There has been, however, a growing
tendency to regard these different African identities as mythical constructions. Blyden, for
instance, observes,

The Negro of the ordinary traveller or missionary – and perhaps, of two-thirds of the
Christian world – is a purely fictitious being, constructed out of the traditions of slave-
traders and slave-holders, who have circulated all sorts of absurd stories, and also out of
prejudice inherited from ancestors, who were taught to regard them as a legitimate object
of traffic.  

Although Blyden was not commenting on any of the identities constructed in the course
of African philosophy, the identity he referred to is similar to the identity of the traditional
African constructed in ethno-philosophy and could therefore be said to be an indictment of it.
Since all identities are constructions, the challenge has been to find a constructed identity that is
sufficiently authentic and therefore acceptable as representative of the African.

There is a sense in which talk of an authentic African identity could be said to be
premature and therefore inappropriate at this time in history. In reflecting on the several
identities that usually applies to him, Chinua Achebe observes “It is, of course true that the
African identity is still in the making. There isn’t a final identity that is African. But, at the same
time, there is an identity that is coming into existence”.

His reason for this is that it is not entirely clear what it means to be an African, since
different people associate different penalties and responsibilities to this tag. African-ness is
therefore something that needs to be explored, discovered and most probably transmuted into
something that will be sufficiently representative and of which the African will be comfortable.

In defending Achebe’s view, Appiah argues that the African “identity is a new thing; that it is a

15 Achebe, Chinua A., Interview, quoted in Kwame Anthony Appiah, In my Father’s House: Africa in the
product of history…; and that the basis through which so far it has largely been theorized – race, a common historical experience, a shared metaphysics – presuppose falsehoods too serious for us to ignore.”

Appiah’s position appears to rest on three basic assumptions. First, that identity ought to be something that is consciously held and since the people that we now refer to as Africans have never been conscious of having a common identity prior to colonization, whatever is touted as an African identity should not predate colonization. Second, that the variety of cultures and the variety of colonial experiences have resulted in differences that are not easy to overcome and that it is in the overcoming of these differences that an African identity is being constructed. Third, that the different African identities constructed in the course of interaction with the West are at best “useless falsehoods” and at worst “dangerous falsehoods”, which should not be countenanced in developing an African identity.

The above assumptions raise several issues concerning collective identity and its construction. The first is whether or not a collective has to be conscious of itself as a collective, or, at least, be conscious of having common properties before it can be credited with a certain identity or for its identity to be authentic. It also raises the question as to who should determine the identity of a collective; whether this has to be done by the collective itself or by some other person/group with certain qualifications. Again it raises the question as to whether a collective can be credited with an identity of which it is not aware, There is still the question as to what it means for an identity to be authentic and whether it is actually possible to construct an authentic identity. The answers to these questions not only respond to the above assumptions by Appiah but also contribute to our understanding of the African identity.

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In his evaluation of different African identities, Appiah seems to suggest that identities ought to be constructed by the referent group and exported to others, and as such the group should not only be cohesive but also be conscious of itself as a homogeneous unit. This is despite acknowledging Achebe’s view that one can possess an identity of which one is not conscious and can suffer the penalties that come with such an identity over time before becoming conscious of and sometimes embracing the identity. Also, Appiah seems to suggest that sharing an identity entails the absence of differences within the identity group or at least, the consciousness of a collective determination to overcome such differences by members of the group. Again, Appiah’s position seems to suggest that an authentic identity need to be completely devoid of falsehood and that such an identity needs to be consciously constructed. This is despite acknowledging that identities are the products of histories, some of which are ‘useless falsehoods’; an acknowledgement that is not only true of constructed African identities but of all constructed identities.

In contrast to Appiah, Masolo argues that “identities of persons are determined biologically and socially, by some assumed homogeneous characteristics which they share with other members of the group to which they belong.” This suggests that even such ‘useless falsehoods’ as race and national histories could legitimately feature in the construction of identities. Again, since “dominant identities are formed almost solely by exclusion” and the exclusion may be made both by those to whom the identity refers or by others, it seems we cannot escape the possibility of having falsehood incorporated into identities. Also it appears reasonable to assume that where identities are constructed by those other than persons to which

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the identity refers, the referent group need not be conscious of itself as a homogeneity group, nor is it necessary for the homogeneity to be factual. Again, since the construction of an identity, whether by the referent group or by outsiders, usually serves a purpose outside the constructed identity, it cannot be completely free of falsehood, since the underlying circumstance in the construction of the identity, in other words its history, can only be a perspective of actual events. What this means is that no constructed identity can be completely free of falsehood since the construction of an identity necessarily involves emphasis on certain features of the group and the suppression of others in order to make the identity either flattering or pejorative. This is without prejudice to the fact that a constructed identity, whether flattering or pejorative could be completely false.

**Of Identities and the Authentic**

There is still the question as to what it means for an identity to be authentic and whether such an authentic identity could ever be constructed. It is a question that confronts the African not only in view of the problems that Appiah identifies with the African identity but also in view of the conflicting African identities constructed in the course of African philosophy.

An identity could be said to be ‘authentic’ if it is “worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact.”\(^{19}\) An African identity would therefore be authentic if it depict the true African and portray an image of the African that is based on facts about the African and therefore acceptable as a sufficiently representative of the African. But here, the problem confronts us anew. First, it is not clear what facts about the African sufficiently represent the African and is therefore worthy of incorporation into the African identity. Secondly, it is not clear who should authenticate the representative character of such facts. In considering this, we

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have to be conscious of Heidegger’s\(^{20}\) caution against the ‘inauthenticity’ that arises from our passive and uncritical acceptance of identities constructed from the unnoticed forces of the cultures in which we live. In other words, we should avoid defining an authentic African identity from the ‘inauthenticity’ imposed on us by culture.

It is perhaps this caution against ‘inauthenticity’ that Appiah heeded in trying to construct an African identity that is a rational choice of the African rather than the product of race, histories, nationalities, and shared metaphysics. His concept of the African identity appears to emphasize what the African identity ought to be in a world where every identity has its rewards and penalties. But even if we heed Heidegger’s caution against ‘inauthenticity’, an authentic African identity would still be elusive, since Heidegger acknowledges that some degree of ‘inauthenticity’ is unavoidable in view of the fact that the critical assessment of values presupposes the uncritical acceptance of the values upon which the critical assessment is based. What this seems to suggest is that an authentic identity is an ideal, towards which the construction of every identity ought to aim. This means not only that an authentic identity cannot be constructed but also that what constitutes the authentic is for ever changing in response to new insights as to what the authentic ought to be. By this view, it is not only true that an authentic African identity is in the making but also that it will always remain in the making as it responds to new ‘inauthenticities’ and their accompanying rewards and penalties.

It follows from the nature of identities that an African identity can neither be authentic nor homogeneous. It is neither the traditional identity of ‘ethno-philosophy’ and ‘philosophic sagacity’ nor the modern identity of ‘professional philosophy’ and ‘nationalistic ideological philosophy’, but is rather an ideal to which none of these identities has ever, or will ever be constructed to conform. It is not an identity that can be clearly constructed or articulated, but

rather an ideal that will continue to mutate in response to new ‘inauthenticities’ that define the world from time to time.