



KNOWLEDGE(S), CULTURE AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: AN INTRODUCTION

YUSEF WAGHID

YW@sun.ac.za

Stellenbosch University

ABSTRACT. In a previous work, entitled *African Philosophy of Education Reconsidered: On Being Human* (Waghid, 2014), a defense is offered for the notion of African philosophy as a reasoned and culture-dependent concept on the basis that any philosophical genre cannot be devoid of reasonableness and dismissive of culture. The premise on which the latter claim is built is two-fold: Firstly, any form of philosophizing involves (and ought to do so) an aspiration towards the attainment of what can be conceived as being reasonably justifiable – that is, reasons are offered and amended to elucidate meanings that can be convincing to others in the inquiry; and secondly, meanings are (re)constructed and deconstructed on the basis of people’s cultural stock (a term I borrow from Jane Roland Martin, 2013) – that is, people’s images, attitudes, backgrounds, symbols and other ways of seeing things in the world. Thus, as a combination, reasonableness and culture determine what constitutes African philosophy. In this way, it would not be implausible to embrace explications of African philosophy that connect with the reasons people offer on account of their ethical orientations, indigenous perspectives, and/or sagacious utterances. This is what makes African philosophy a reasoned and culture-dependent practice. But then, as with any form of philosophy, African philosophy foregrounds culture in so far as it provides the notion of knowledge with a distinctive form in relation to what Africa has to offer. Put differently, knowledge(s) are a manifestation of the ways in which philosophy organizes cultural understandings on the African continent. This article examines at least three ways in which culture is organized through an African philosophical discourse, and how knowledges are manifested in the practices of people on the continent: Firstly, African philosophy guides cultural practices in accordance with practices of communal interactions – that is, *Ubuntu* (human interdependence); and, when *Ubuntu* is under threat, ethnic conflict, political tension and strife seem to hold sway. Secondly, African philosophy orientates people towards an appreciation of an ethical life and, when the latter is tangibly at risk, destruction is perilously imminent; and thirdly, African philosophy inclines people towards some higher good, and when the latter is visibly absent, religious conflict seems to be hazardously omnipresent. My understanding is that

Ubuntu, ethics and an inclination towards a higher good are cultural practices that give knowledge, as understood by Africans, a distinctively reasonable form. In short, the reasonableness of African knowledge(s) is guided by an appreciation of Africans' cultures. And, when these cultures are at risk, the potential exists that African knowledge(s) will become misguided.

Keywords: African philosophy; education; culture; knowledge

1. Introduction

Africans and their communities have cultures that are unique to the enactment of peoples' lives on the African continent. The multiple ways in which people live on the continent in response to other human beings, the environment, political and socio-economic contexts are tantamount to patterns of human engagement that often are couched as people's indigenous cultures. In other words, the forms of life – to borrow from Wittgenstein – Africans enact on the continent constitute their indigenous cultures. For the reason that people's ways of engaging with others and their contexts are relational, the term "indigenous" is used. It is African people's indigenous cultures that depict the relational experiences of Africans to others and their contexts, and not that Africans have indigenous cultures that often are contrasted with what is perceived to be cultures that are not indigenous – that is, non-indigenous "Western" cultures. It does not make sense to talk about non-indigenous cultures, as all cultures involve humans' relational experiences with others and their contexts. So the claim that African cultures are indigenous on the basis that such cultures differ from other cultures is implausible, as all cultures – whether African or non-African – are indigenous to their peoples and contexts.

Similarly, if philosophy is a way in which people understand, organize and enact their cultures, then African philosophy is a discourse according to which people's understandings, organization and enactment of their cultural experiences are being made sense of. That is, African philosophy is a discourse that gives a reasonable account of the enactment of people's cultural ways of being. It is for this reason that Paulin Hountondji's (2002) critique of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy does not make sense. For him, ethnophilosophy depicts Africans' cultural experiences as incommensurable with rules of "strict science". He warns against "the temptation of a reductive, unilateral, and overly simplifying reading of cultures, and especially, of the worldviews of the African continent" (Hountondji, 2002: 81). His valorization of "science" seeks to locate African philosophy as a legitimate form of methodological inquiry with the same aims as that of any other philosophy in the world within the geographical context of its authors (Hountondji, 2002: 126). For him, oral narratives of

people's cultural experiences cannot be considered to be philosophy, as such narratives are not "scientific". Now, if "scientific" is a term that explains the justifications that are offered in defense of particular views, then it does not mean that the term cannot be applicable to African philosophy. African philosophy, as mentioned earlier, is a way in which people's cultural, social, political, economic and religious practices are justified. Hence, a justification of people's cultures can be associated with what it means to be scientific. And, if Africans' cultures are explained and reasons are offered in defense of particular ways of being, then it seems plausible to talk about a justification of practices – practices that involve Africans' cultural experiences. So, to claim that Africans' understanding, organization and enactment of their cultural experiences is not "scientific" is to assume that such practices cannot be justified; more specifically, reasons cannot be rendered for their existence. Consequently, Hountondji's harsh criticism of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy, and therefore not strictly philosophy, does not necessarily hold water.

This brings me to a discussion of the cultural experiences of Africans in relation to communal action as reasons why such reason-dependent cultures can be explicated as manifestations of African philosophical discourse.

2. Communal Action as Constitutive of African Philosophical Discourse

The concept of *Ubuntu* (human interdependence) has been in vogue in Africa for many years and gained academic prominence under the leadership of the then South African president, Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki was intent on promoting the idea of an African renaissance in a quest to advance a case for Africa's intellectual, political and economic independence, much in the same way as Leopold Senghor, Jomo Kenyatta and other African leaders before him. In a way, he reintroduced the concept of Africanism as a means to continue on the path of decolonization. His accentuation of *Ubuntu* alongside the idea of an African renaissance not only propelled the quest to decolonize Africa, but more importantly to foreground a way of doing along the lines of communality and human interdependence. In other words, Africa would become economically independent and politically autonomous if Africans exhibited a seriousness to work together – a matter of exercising *Ubuntu*. The idea that individual action becomes subjected to social action, and that individuality should be directed at achieving social goals for all Africans, has mostly been inspired by *Ubuntu* – that is, "I am because we are". It is this idea of *Ubuntu* that has been proclaimed in contestation of corrupt, antagonistic and nepotistic practices that favored mostly narcissistic individualism associated with leadership in ongoing tribal and ethnic wars, religious conflicts, and instances of genocide on the continent. Of course, the

argument can be used that African philosophy advocates *Ubuntu* (human interdependence and co-operation), yet there is perpetual conflict and violence on the continent, which suggests that *Ubuntu* as a practice on the continent is non-existent. Of course the latter is an indefensible claim. There are several and multiple examples on the continent to show that communities live in a spirit of *Ubuntu*, and often the most violent incidences are highlighted and used by critics of *Ubuntu* to show that the concept is not only problematic, but that it actually does not exist in the lived experiences of people. If violence persists in some communities it is evident that *Ubuntu* has not been internalized by them, but this is not an indication that the concept is not enacted. It is for this reason that African philosophical discourse can be used to make *Ubuntu* more pronounced – a matter of offering reasons why some violent communities on the continent should use the notion of human interdependence and dignified co-operation and coexistence to possibly subvert unreasonable and disdainful actions such as conflict, wars and violence. The point is, African philosophical discourse offers *Ubuntu* as a communal problem-solving practice that can counteract even the potential of violence. To my mind, South Africa offered a pertinent example of how hatred and violence can be quelled through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where *Ubuntu* as human interdependence through forgiveness was used to subvert possible violent action. That is, the cultural experiences associated with living on the African continent were used as a way to cultivate human coexistence – a matter of African philosophy having been enacted. Commensurable with the Deweyan idea that democratic experience is socially enacted, *Ubuntu* as a manifestation of human interdependence and dignified co-existence was understood and enacted to prevent the possibility of a human tragedy associated with a violent post-apartheid revolution.

3. African Philosophical Discourse as an Appreciation of Ethical Life

African philosophical discourse has a very strong leaning towards an ethical pursuit of becoming a balanced individual (Bewaji, 2004: 396). In other words, a person is obliged to cultivate ethically his or her well-being in the interest of community. As poignantly noted by Bewaji (2004: 396), “each person is a representative of himself or herself as well as of his or her family ... [which] has the implication that an individual has to consider not only how a course of action contemplated by him will affect him personally, but also how it will affect his family ... in terms of the way in which they will be perceived by society”. Similarly, the community also does not reduce its responsibility toward the individual, so that the moral obligation that arises between the individual and the community is “an interactive one” (Bewaji,

2004: 397). In support of the ethical responsibility of both individuals and society towards each other, Gbadegesin (1991: 66–67) posits “... [that] community is founded on notions of an intrinsic and enduring relationship among its members”. Moreover, the basis of ethics in African philosophical discourse in relation to situating the self authentically in community with others is human welfare. Following Wiredu (1980: 6), ethics in African cultures is motivated by humanistic considerations:

It has often been said that our traditional outlook was intensely humanistic. It seems to me that, as far as the basis of the traditional ethic is concerned, this claim is abundantly justified. Traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalistic. Not that one can find traditional sources elaborate theories of humanism. But anyone who reflects on our traditional ways of speaking about morality is bound to be struck by the preoccupation with human welfare: What is morally good is what befits a human being: it is what is decent for man [and woman] – what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy, to man [and woman] and his [her] community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace.

What follows from the aforementioned understanding of ethics is that it is not only found in the cultural (and religious) practices of Africans, but motivated by the concern to be in service of humanity in all aspects of human life. In other words, ethics in Africa is strongly humanistic. However, the human predicaments we witness on the African continent from time to time are instigated by sporadic surges of atomistic individualism that bring a concern for human welfare into conflict with other despotic and patriarchal imperatives, such as to dominate people and to exclude them from authentic ways of living – in peace, stability and prosperity. However, despite the lapses in living ethically, African cultures are still concerned innately with living worthwhile lives, as cogently stated by Wiredu (1980: 6):

There is an aesthetic strain in our traditional ethical thought that is worthy of special mention in this connection. As noted already, what is good is conceived to be what is fitting ... what is fitting is what is beautiful ... There are, indeed, aesthetic analogies in the moral language of other cultures. But aesthetic analogies are taken much more seriously and have more extensive moral relevance in our traditional thought.

Consequently, in African philosophical discourse, the authenticity of an ethical life is determined by concerns to advance both morality and human welfare on the continent within a spirit of community.

In keeping with the themes of an ethical, humanistic and community-conscious approach to knowledge cultures, the following contributions offer some account of why and how these themes can be interrelated:

N'Dri Assié-Lumumba offers a cogent account of why “cultural authenticity” is important for African (higher) education to transform its colonial influences. The implication for an African philosophical discourse is that cultural agency should be recognized as legitimate if such a discourse were to be influential in shaping African education systems. More specifically, African traditions and languages, she argues, ought to be recognized as enabling conditions for the post-colonization of African society.

Berte van Wyk argues the need for the reconstruction of indigenous Khoisan identities with regard to their rights, epistemologies and language. The problematic is defined by the erosion of their rights in a democratic dispensation that seemingly disregards their epistemologies related to the land, the importance of community and the prominence of indigenous (not traditional) leadership.

Nuraan Davids explores the marginalization of Muslim women in a cultural and religious context and how they might navigate the space between preserving a culture and, at the same time, resisting the oppressive structures therein in order to produce a particular form of knowledge. This expression of identity, inclusivity and belonging contributes and defines a unique perspective of education and culture and makes claim to an autonomous agency that promotes critical engagement and social activism.

Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo offers an account of knowledge production in contemporary Africa by addressing epistemological issues such as the definitions, conceptualization and consumption of knowledge with a view to ways of bringing about social transformation. The present problematic is defined by the neoliberal interests in knowledge production and is historically hampered by a European colonial legacy, necessitating a much-needed critical theory of African knowledge systems that avoids the romanticization of an African past, but rather focuses on transformative knowledge.

Tracey Isaacs argues in defense of critical student agency and how this concept might inform education relating to the post-colonial subject. Through a contemplation of decolonizing agency that displays resistance and self-expression, she avers that students subvert the destructive socio-historically constructed and imposed definitions of their particular reality.

Joseph Divala contends that the development of knowledge should be in consonance with an African metaphysical understanding of being. He accentuates the importance that an appropriate understanding of *Ubuntu* is used in the development of knowledge in African universities.

Rachel Ndinelao Shanyanana builds on a critical notion of *Ubuntu* by bringing an understanding of the silences of marginalized groups (the poor, people with disabilities, women, homosexuals), and the instances that characterize them as unequal members of an assumed equal society to the fore. She accounts for such a notion of *Ubuntu* by bringing it into contention with inadequate transformation of higher education in Africa and forces a consideration of how to curtail exclusionary practices.

Philip Higgs's post-modern narrative conceptualizes how knowledge cultures are local but also inter-subjective, opening up an avenue for plural conversations that result in cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. He posits that such a move develops an epistemic identity that accommodates alternative forms of knowing premised on a knowledge culture that incorporates the moral, political and social relations defined by commitment, caring and rational feeling.

REFERENCES

- Bewaji, J. A. I. (2004), "If my people must go, they will have to find their way by themselves – Critical Comments on Wim van Binsbergen's *Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society*," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22(4): 378–387.
- Gbadegesin, S. (1991), *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary Realities*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hountondji, P. J. (2002), *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa*. Athens (US): Ohio University Center for International Studies.
- Roland Martin, J. (2013), *Education Reconfigured: Culture, Encounter, and Change*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Waghid, Y. (2014), *African Philosophy of Education Reconsidered: On Being Human*. London: Routledge.
- Wiredu, K. (1980), *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.