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AFRICAN ORAL TRADITIONS, LITERACY AND THE AFRICAN PERSONALITY IN THE
GLOBAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT

The particularly dehumanising African historical experience of colonialism and slavery over the years contributed a great deal to the image of the African as an inferior specie of humanity. It fed an unfortunate controversy over the authenticity of African oral traditions and knowledge systems, and questioned the African personality. The tendency to dismiss African traditions as 'primitive' or inferior, mainly on account of their orality, is an apparent contrivance to sustain the mental enslavement of Africans by diminishing the integrity of the very oral traditions that give them authenticity as a people, and in its place foist the Western colonial tradition anchored on writing. The absence or non-predominance of writing does not translate to a lack of sophistication in the peoples thought processes. These deal with sensibilities that already exist in the mind, and writing or orality is merely a means of their articulation. African oral tradition serves as the major means for recording and preservation of the people's perception of their past and lore. Their narratives are a rich reservoir of information about their culture and systems of knowledge which define their personality. Oral literature serves as an effective repository of African values, traditional modes of thinking and perception. A conscious embrace of its liberating potential would sustain and enhance the African personality, and enrich the consciousness of humanity in the global space.

The authenticity or lack, thereof, of African oral traditions and knowledge systems has, over the years, generated such immense controversy that has questioned the African personality. The controversy has its deep roots in the African historical experience which has tended to sculpt the African person in the image of an inferior being. Western colonization and partitioning of the continent, the massive slavery and subjugation of its people, the mental, emotional and physical degradation that accompanied them through the middle passage, to the dehumanizing existence in the New World could not have drawn a respectable image for the African person. As a slave, he was simply an item of commerce, less than human, lacking in cognitive ability; he had no culture, neither philosophy, nor philosophical orientation, and no integrity.

Where his humanity was granted, albeit grudgingly, it was considered to be profoundly inferior and 'primitive'; his culture and knowledge systems backward. Notwithstanding the ignorance, apparent laziness and

mischief upon which these prejudices and stereotypes were built, it has been obvious that no human race exists without a culture, or a philosophy that defines its cosmology. The impatience, disrespect and, or, inability, especially of the early western anthropologists and philosophers, to comprehend the African culture, cosmology, or underlying principles of their philosophy could neither translate to an absence of these, nor justify a summary dismissal of the people's mentality as either inferior, or primitive.

A major argument in the dismissal of much of African culture and its components as primitive has been the question of literacy, or writing. Without writing, some have argued, the mind has no capacity for the articulation of such complex concepts as history or philosophy. They fail however to appreciate that such concepts deal with sensibilities and therefore already exist in the mind. Orality or writing is only a means of recording or communicating them.

The argument against orality has often been extended to generalisations designed to diminish the integrity of oral traditions which otherwise give authenticity to a people. Often such diminutive arguments are a mere ploy to sustain the mental colonization and enslavement of the people as they are based on the yardstick of writing carved from the 'superior' culture of the West. Abubakar Zaria Ibrahim (2009) notes the tendency and warns that:

The danger in the thought that oral traditions are not a reliable history source material is [so] enormous that it has skulked into the minds of some students of history. This is a Eurocentric view that the early Africanist historians have always debated against. (Abubakar Ibrahim 2009; P1).

Phillip D. Curtin (1969) also posits that:

...the supposition that oral tradition is a veritable source for African history has been subject to controversy for decades. However, extreme positions for or against this supposition are not really helpful... Oral traditions make it possible for a society to pass on knowledge and information across generations without writing. (Curtin 1969: P.2)

Of course, traditional African cultures are predominantly oral. The absence or lack of predominance of writing does not translate to a lack of sophistication in the peoples thought processes. Their oral tradition serves as the major means for recording the people's perception of their past and preservation of their lore. Their narratives are a rich reservoir of information about their culture and systems of knowledge. Consequently, oral literature has a pervasive influence in the African society, which explains why African literature, in its oral and written forms, is heavily suffused with cultural and oratorical devices and serves as the gauge of sensibilities in the African society.

There is a distinction between oral tradition and oral history. The former refers to and encompasses the totality of the ways of transmission and preservation of cultural material, norms, folklore, including the literature of non-literate societies. It is a form of human or verbal communication and actions wherein knowledge, the arts, ideas and cultural material are orally stored, transmitted (principally in speech or song), received and, or, preserved across generations. These are the main constituents of the corpus of the oral literature of African peoples, or their orature (as Pio Zirimu would prefer to call it, as an alternative to the self-contradictory term, "oral literature"), which can also refer to the non-written expressive African traditions. Oral history, on the other hand, refers to the act of collecting evidence and documentation through various scientific methods, including especially active interviews.

In relation to an African philosophical outlook, several scholars have also argued that the lack of comprehension about African philosophical principles does not necessarily preclude an African philosophical stand-point. It is therefore well known that African philosophy, embedded in African knowledge systems and oral traditions, serves as the means for an African cosmological system or world view. It also defines the African concept of nature, religion, life, death, and the relationships between individuals and among them as a group. *Ubuntu* is a typical evidence of this. It is a philosophy of collective existence, as opposed to the Cartesian concept of individualism peculiar to western cultures.

In response to the charge of a lack of an African philosophical stand-point, Ali A. Abdi (2008) problematizes the place of African thought systems and philosophies of Education in the European Canon. He argues that Europe trivialized Africa and African thought systems, and foisted educational philosophies, structured and aimed at preparing Africans to be dependent on Europe. He therefore situates prominent European philosophers within the context of colonialism and post colonial discursive hegemonies that continue to marginalize Africa, its world views and knowledge systems. Abdi then introduces a counterpoint philosophy which potentially plays down on these ostensibly hollow European philosophical postulations about Africa and instead asserts the relevance of several anti-colonial writings by both emergent and established African philosophers and cultural critics. Prominent among these deconstructionist cultural critics of colonial theories and philosophies are Paul Gilroy (1995); Homi Bhabha (1995); Gayatri C. Spivak (1988); Edward Said (1978).

On his part, Christian Bn Gade (2017) outlines the tenets of the *Ubuntu* philosophy, while rejecting western philosophical concepts as alien to the African environment and therefore incapable of offering explanations on the African environment and world view. He insists that:

...the ethno-philosophical approach to African philosophy as a static group property, just like African oral literature is highly problematic and unacceptable.

He, therefore, proposes *Ubuntu* as an alternative collective discourse on African philosophy that takes into consideration differences, historical developments and social contexts as serious phenomena that determine African approaches to philosophy. He submits that *Ubuntu* operates at two levels: first as a moral philosophy that guides ethical and moral relationships among Africans and second, as a phenomenon of African ethnic humanism or worldview according to which persons are interconnected. *Ubuntu* as a philosophical outlook is therefore of central importance to the African worldview of collective existence that does not differentiate between humans. It is opposed to the concept of 'homo sapiens' which counts as persons, only those who behave in a morally acceptable manner (see Thaddeus Metz et al: 2010).

The dependence of philosophical concepts on historical antecedents and environmental peculiarities also occupies the minds of some African scholars who have argued that African philosophy is distinct from its western counterpart because the African environment and African historical experiences are different from those of the western world. Etieyibo and Chimakonam (2016) are therefore of the opinion that historical contexts play an important role in African philosophical development. History, they argue, provides the framework from which one can inspect philosophical problems.

From their perspective, African philosophy can therefore be formally defined as "a critical thinking by Africans on their experiences of reality" (Etieyibo: P5). In corroboration, K.C. Anyanwu (1989) sees African philosophy from the perspective of "that which concerns itself with the way in which African people of the past and present make sense of their destiny and of the world in which they live." (Anyanwu: culled from Wikipedia).

Munyaradzi Mawere, et al (2016) piece together the different postulations on the availability, uniqueness and authenticity of African philosophy, and situate these within the African environment, as a means by which Africans define themselves and feel a sense of belonging. They therefore argue that:

...the debate on the existence of African philosophy has finally come of age and the need for the cultivation of a culture of belonging is now more demanding than ever before in the face of globalization. (M. Mawere: 2016, P.2).

In their view, analyzing the African world view and knowledge systems as reflected in the African philosophical thought systems therefore presupposes five or more basic principles of the existence of African philosophy which include the following:

1. That there is African philosophy traceable to a particular geographical space called Africa, thus affirming the existence of a philosophy in Africa and recognizing that the environment does, in-fact, shape a philosophical view point.

2. That the prefixing "African philosophy" confirms the denialist position of African philosophy, while acknowledging instead the existence of a philosophical camp that rebuts and denies rationality and existence of an African philosophy, independent of western philosophy. If there was no such denial then there would be no need to talk about a specific African philosophy different from other world philosophies, since philosophy would have been universal which it is not.
3. The prefixing "African philosophy" also confirms that philosophy is not universal as are the sciences. Instead we can and do in fact talk of African philosophy and thought which may only overlap with other national or regional philosophies but is distinctive in terms of both essence and methodology.
4. That the prefix "African" implies that philosophy is almost always attached to race and culture and
5. That the prefixing also implies the possibility of the existence of a pluralistic or pluriversal rather than universal concept of philosophy.

From the above existential suppositions, it becomes clear that African philosophy refers to the multifarious ways or activities of doing, writing or teaching that define the African essence and, or, the African personality as reflected in African, distinct from western philosophies. Mawere et al then conclude that the epistemic problem of philosophy cannot be conclusive. One can therefore safely posit that what makes a philosophy African is enduring and will continue to boggle the mind for many years to come; it is therefore not a question to be hastily addressed.

Western postulations about African oral traditions, knowledge and thought systems have therefore elicited several responses from African and non-African Africanist scholars aimed at elucidating the true position and eliminating the biases and falsehood sometimes peddled in high places about the primitivity of African peoples. Jared Runk (2002) observes that "it is very difficult for literate persons to objectively analyse the connections and divergences between oral and written modes of perception". Emevwo Biakolo (1999) also points out that the two modes of perception, oral and literate are both simply

... cognate concepts in the field of verbal communication ... [which] embodied a change in the psychological preconditions of the act and process of communication. In other words, it resulted in alterations in the organization and operation of the human consciousness.

Knowledge acquisition is dependent on, and enhanced through, either the oral, or written modes of communication. Both modes exist side by side in many cultures of the world today and are not dichotomous. Yet, western cultures, largely from the dubious (?) standpoint of literacy, have evolved theories and anthropological postulations aimed at subjugating oral cultures and subsuming their personality and knowledge systems under the guise of primitivism and lack of cognitive ability. As Francis M. Ganyi observes, only:

When writing and documentation of ideas through writing became the yardstick, in western cultures, for the measurement of rationality and intellectual capacity [did] the definition of rationalism and intellectualism [become] narrowed to include only what was written to the exclusion of what was spoken or verbalized... (Ganyi: 2014, P.61).

Writing or the print only enhances fixity as opposed to the fluidity of oral or verbal communication; it does not necessarily imply originality or sophistication of thought processes. These are present in oral cultures and traditions. The barrage on, and consequent marginalization of, African traditions and thought systems, sustained and perpetrated through the imposition of European values, Eurocentric modes of perception and made possible largely through advanced information technology is therefore simply a function of globalization and trans culturalism.

An effective shield against such subtle attacks on African traditions, is the liberating potential of oral literature which serves as a repository of African values and traditional modes of thinking and perception. The neglect of such oral traditions and oral literature obviously aids the continuous enslavement of the African mind and personality, arising from excessive reliance on Eurocentric paradigms for the interpretation of African reality. It is therefore the supposition here that literacy, though possessing the potential of widening the scope

of knowledge through access to other ideas, thought systems and processes, does not in itself necessarily enhance or engender intellectual capacity or cognitive ability. These are genetic endowments nurtured by the environment; they may or may not be improved through literacy. The advocacy therefore is for a resort to the liberating potential of African oral traditions and literature to strengthen the African image, identity and personality, which can then serve as a positive attribute in the modern capitalist market economy driven by globalization.

Africans must develop self-worth and a sense of pride in their own culture, as a foundation of common identity that would enable the world to recognize and appreciate their unique potential and that of their oral traditions. Authentic awareness of the African environment and oral traditions is largely facilitated by knowledge of the people's culture, values and traditions embedded in their oral narratives. These provide the proper milieu for the release of the creative energy that catalyzes the development of a sense of cultural belonging and sustains the foundation of a common identity and personality profile. For this reason, Kimani (2010) observes that:

...orality has been an important method of self understanding, creating relationships and establishing equilibrium between body, soul and the environment. Through oral narratives, communities have been able to pass on values, attitudes, knowledge and modes of practice for generations.

It is also known that a strong communal identity strengthens a people's uniqueness and enables them to confront the challenges of modern day existential, economic, political and cultural changes occasioned by the dictates of globalization. For this reason the role of African oral literature in the strengthening and acknowledgement of cultural peculiarities, traditional elements and the promotion of identity, culture and personality of local communities is inevitable as a contribution to the quality of life of a people and a nation or race.

A vital aspect of African culture which is subtly being eroded and obliterated is language. African languages are today under severe threat of extinction. The threat is a consequence of globalization and the impact of advanced technology replicated in social media practices. These have had the negative consequence of luring younger generations away from age old African modes of education and entertainment. Traditional modes of entertainment and education are deeply embedded in African popular culture, which draws its material nourishment from the African environment, experience and world view, encompassing values and the value system. It includes music, dance, literature, drama or festival, language use, sports and other leisure activities. Its major objects are events, objects, persons, and its construction and transmission are through verbal and non-verbal symbols which aim to persuade, influence, motivate or inspire other peoples or cultural entities to the appreciation of African traditions and thought systems.

Oral tradition therefore refers to stories, wise sayings, proverbs, cultural artifacts, songs and other such cultural products that are not yet written down or recorded. All of these constitute African cultural arts which contain the sensory residue of past cultural life, articulation of contemporary experience and traditional wisdom engendered and constituting a medium for the organization, examination and interpretation of African communal experiences. The traditions are venerable and kept alive through verbal transmission across generations. They are often improvised aesthetically through performance sessions and the diverse forms reveal and authenticate African values and beliefs, the things that the people hold sacrosanct to their existence and the lessons they keep and pass on to younger generations about life and how to live it, even within the dimensions of contemporary social experience.

Oral tradition therefore serves as a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression, transmission and survival through the ages thus maintaining the African personality and projecting the collective consciousness of the African people. It serves as a means for the preservation of the cultural heritage and collective experiences of the people, their norms and their taboos while also distilling the essences of human experiences and shaping them into memorable and retrievable images that are broadly applicable with the extra-ordinary potential to elicit emotions and responses.

It is not necessarily a dweller of the past. It is also a dweller of the present. African oral tradition remains strong, nourished, enlivened and enhanced by the various dimensions of contemporary experience, including the media, which assure its efficacious relevance in time. Indeed as Harold Scheub (1985) aptly observes:

The strength of African oral traditions seems not to have abated as a reciprocal linkage has worked contemporary media into a unique collaborative fusion with the traditional oral art forms which exude potent influences on the African mentality. There seems to be a marriage of modern or written literature with the traditional artistic forms which serve as the bedrock of African traditional values and knowledge systems (Scheub: 1985, P1).

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