
BEYOND THE FOUR CATEGORIES OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: *The question of what can be authentically called African philosophy has been a major problem in philosophic endeavour. The four categories of African philosophy further heightened this quest as we begin to wonder if it passes for African philosophy. With the aid of critical analysis, we will investigate this trend of thought. In the final analysis, African culture being a product of the life of the African people may not pass for philosophy, but it is an essential element in the formation and constant unfolding of African philosophy.*

KEYWORDS: Bantu, Ntu, Ojájálí, Force, Being, Categories

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Using the Bantu people of Rwanda as a case study of African philosophy, Alexis Kagame delved into the very nature of Bantu worldview. This he dealt in his four categories of African philosophy. He therefore gives a preliminary outlook as he ventured into the life of the people.

Kagame begins by giving a distinction between a prefix and a determinative in African ontology. In describing the four categories of being, he discouraged the use of prefix to qualify them, for when a prefix such as, (un)pleasant, is used to describe a word or concept, the word retains its meaning. However, in Bantu language, the stem without the determinative is meaningless. The stem cannot stand alone and at the same time, it loses all the concreteness that accrues from it. The four categories of African philosophy are: *Muntu* (human being), *Kintu* (thing), *Hantu* (place and time), *Kuntu* (modality.) All that exist in the universe of being and becoming is summed up under any of these categories. “Everything there is must necessarily belong to one of these four categories and must be conceived of not as substance but as force.”¹

Man (*Muntu*) is therefore a force, dog (*Kintu*) is also a force. West and yesterday (*Hantu*) are forces; also beauty and laughter (*Kuntu*) are forces. Being forces, they are related to each other. Their relationship to each other is seen in the determinative *Ntu*; this is common to all of them.² What then is *NTU*? It appears meaningless and to some extent contradictory to begin to give credence to the concept of *NTU* as Kagame had already referred to it as a determinative from which all four categories are derived. But it is not meaningless and poses no threat to our understanding of the categories, for *NTU* is what all the categories are. It is not something that completes itself. It is the central force in which all four categories find their unity and express their being.

FORCE

Since all four categories of African philosophy are forces and *Ntu* is what the categories are, then *Ntu* is a force. To say that *Ntu* is what the categories are, is to say that force is what they all are

too. But to define force would be contrary the very nature of force as it can only be described and not defined. In African worldview therefore, force has a metaphysical connotation. It is not accessible to science. In its meta-empirical state, it is dynamic.

THE CATEGORIES

Beginning with the concept of *Muntu*, he analyzed the four categories. It is note-worthy at this point to state that *Muntu* and human being are not coterminous.³ By this, he meant that though all human beings are *Muntu*, not all *Muntu* (Bantu) are human beings, as *Muntu* includes the living, the dead and spirits. Masolo clearly explicates the concept of *Muntu* as it embraces the living, dead and spirits. Humans are different from other physical beings by their ability to reflect, compare and invent. All these are functions of intelligence. In order to be distinct from animals, man must have two vital principles. Human beings share a principle with animals, that is, the principle of shadow (it is the principle of birth and death which man share with animals.) However, human beings are separated from animals by the possession of the principle of intelligence. Human nature is therefore the union of body with the principle of intelligence. Life, which in Bantu language is called *Amagara*, is definitely not on the same plain with the animalistic kind of life.⁴

The Bantu people of Rwanda therefore make a clear difference between sensitive beings in general and a sensitive being that is imbued with intelligence. The two beings have certain faculties and operations. But the concept of intelligence as it is attributed to man does not mean the same when attributed to animals. In the sense that it is used for animals, it is only used analogically; this is because animals are able to exercise the properties of intelligence, but only on the level of sensations.

Kagame calls the problem of human immortality the problem of the “disincarnated soul.”⁵ When the principle of intelligence is liberated in the human person, it is called the spirits of the dead. Two concepts worth-noting at this level are *Umuzinma* and *Umuzimu*, both of which are Bantu concepts. The difference between the two is the “U” that ends the second concept. *Umuzimu* therefore means a nonliving being with intelligence.⁶ The knowledge of these beings is in most cases abstract and can only be made necessary and is more concretized as long as they are symbols and appear in practice of reverence to the ancestors. They are thus immortal and cannot die. That does not presuppose eternity as they have their coming into being in time and space. Having beginning without end, they are therefore *eviternal*. Kagame relegated the term *Abazimu* to the background as an offshoot of missionary influence, because all known Bantu words are classified into eleven concepts and thus into four categories. Only the essence of God goes beyond the confines of the categories and hence, beyond the category of *NTU*. The Bantu never speaks of the dead in terms of separate conceptual category distinct from that of persons.

In Kiswahili, the term *Uzima* means biological life. However, *Mtu mzima* could mean more than just life. It could mean a mature person capable of displaying correct mental activities expected of adulthood. Its opposite is called *wazimu*, which means “out of right mind”, one that is incapable of good reasoning, or “madness.” It is not the same as one who is dead. For death is represented by the word *kifo*, from the verb *kufa* (to die). The dead are therefore called *wafu*.

As a follow up of the above, Kagame appears to argue that in *Kinyarwanda*, the coinage of *Umuzimu* with *Abazimu* as its plural, which is an opposite of *Umuzima* (Pl. Abazima) is inappropriate. The word *Uzima* in Kiswahili is a polysemic term that could serve as a prefix to support or add meaning to something. Thus, apart from its physical and psychological usage, it also implies wholeness.

Kintu or *Ikintu* as it is called, is the category of things that includes all forces that do not act on their own, but demand the agency of a force with intelligence. From the above, animals, plants, minerals and any inanimate thing fall within this category.⁷ In their plural form, they are called *Bintu*. They are frozen forces which demand the command of *Muntu* to function.

The category of *Hantu* is where the general activities of beings on one another enter into the general concept of motion as an essential element of nature or beings. Kagame however, made distinction between three kinds of places. The first is physical; it has to do with locality or space occupied by an object. The second type is localization insofar as it is a position in space or internal place. Then, there is a third one called external place. This is what is called *ubi* in Latin. For example, the hairs of the body certainly delimit the internal place. In other words, the idea of “where” as a place, denotes the actual application of bodies to the space where they are situated. The internal and external places are therefore of a metaphysical type as distinct from the physical place.⁸ This category also includes that of time, for in Bantu language, they are interchangeable. ‘Becoming’ is what gives credence to time, that is its constant unfolding. It converges with space as a category to individualize the movement of being as its activity and internal perfection progresses.⁹

It is more problematic to classify and explain *Kuntu* as a mode. Beauty for example is hard to imagine as an independently active force, just like the *Kuntu* concept of laughter. Laughing is a force that is attached to an individual. But is it possible to understand it independently from a person? The answer may not be in the affirmative.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

The theory of knowledge that is projected by the African cultural experience is predicated on the fact that man who is at the center of the world, lives in a personal world of culture. The African culture does not assume that reality can be perceived only through reason but through imagination, intuitive experience and personal feelings. That is why the deepest manifestation of African cultural reality has been through art, myths, music, etc. Man is therefore linked to man.

Kagame is a very important figure in the history of African philosophy as he excelled not just in his ideas but his courage and is influential to the breed of African philosophers in contemporary period. With all these reflections in mind, we note that philosophy as a discipline, is not done in a vacuum. The tree of authentic philosophy is timeless and universal, but it has its root in culture.¹⁰ It germinates from culture, experience, human will and at times human arbitrariness. That is why Kagame’s work is a pointer to the fact that Africa has something of philosophical value which deserves to be taken seriously and studied accordingly.¹¹ Even the sophisticated Western European system emanates from culture. Hence, it is on this note that African philosophy becomes a reflection on the being of the African world. This reflection, like any other system, is not done in

an immobile present, for if it is, then its end is near. It is a constant evolving, a progressive evolution, which makes African philosophy still in the making. As our culture unfolds, it is also being revised and it is within the domain of philosophy that answers questions and questions further answers, which makes this revision possible.

As long as everyone belongs to an age or culture, not minding the age or the school of thought of a philosopher, he/she is first and foremost a person of culture, a product of the education and belief of his/her society. If a philosophy in a culture sets a higher standard of philosophizing, it is because it sets a higher standard of education, belief, knowledge, moral and social values than in some cultures. This may also include the propensity for critical examination.¹²

It becomes more interesting when we note the importance of language on the philosophy of a people. As different cultures have different languages, so also should we expect different philosophical temperaments. We assume that two cultures with different languages need not have the same philosophy. Hence we speak of British empiricism, Continental rationalism, German idealism and American pragmatism, etc. Though our philosophy is rooted in our culture as Africans, the philosophical frame of mind that is uniquely African is yet to be established. This difficulty extends further when we come to the knowledge of the role of language. Since language and culture are closely related, beliefs and ideas in a culture must be reflected by its own language system.¹³

No African language at present is suitable to be adopted as a continental language; hence it makes its applicability to rich analytic philosophy difficult. For many Africans, it is easier to learn English and French than learning a second African language, because they are well developed than African languages. When African scholars learn foreign languages therefore, they come close to English and French cultures and philosophies. The knowledge of such languages therefore induce reality in a way that comes close to such cultures.¹⁴

At present, the trouble surrounding many discussions on African philosophy, socialism, politics, traditional medicine, etc, still persists, because many of the concepts used are foreign concepts. Hence, discussions on these concepts are usually not done in African languages. If one therefore enters into the debate of African philosophy, or socialism, one must look at the meaning of words in English and what it would mean in African philosophy. "All talks about African philosophy or African socialism are bound to result in conflict of meaning, cultures, and perception of reality."¹⁵ One is therefore prone to distort its meaning as it is in English, when translated to an African language.

It is in the light of the above that Kagame is criticized for being too Aristotelian in his elaboration of what he calls *Bantu philosophy of Being*. This defect is partly because of the faint basis of Kagame's thesis. His exposition rests exceedingly on the assumption of similarities in thinking between the ancient Greek philosophers and the ordinary Bantu. The basis of his comparison rests on the fact that philosophical problems are common to all peoples without distinction.¹⁶ What Kagame has done therefore is to examine the cultural differences in the application of categories to the concept of Being. Thus, Masolo avers that the title of the work betrays it. There could be similarities between certain Greek thought and Bantu worldview. However, this similarity need

not produce the same result. Kagame wants to prove that the unity of a metaphysical principle (a characteristic of Aristotelian-Cartesian philosophies) is as much Hellenistic, as it is in Bantu. This he does, by first trying to portray the ordinary person among the Bantu as being primarily *res cognitans*, whose primary attribute is a contemplation of essences. He then attempts to prove the universality of the principle of unity in beings, through the forceful formulation of the *Ntu* category.

That is why among professional philosophers, there is that anxiety to save philosophy in its pure form. This anxiety was endangered by the programmes of ethno-philosophy. Their position was tailored towards the tradition in which they were trained. Hence, the canons of philosophy with all its nuances are at most British philosophy. Hence, Wiredu sought for conceptual decolonization.

Some scholars made recourse to linguistic decolonization which is a vital step for cultural decolonization. As much as language is necessary for thought, Africa has neglected a more crucial deconstruction, which is the decolonization of the mind. This is because thought is very crucial in the crystallization of cultural identities. It is with this that we are able to confront conceptual ontologies. Yet, African scholars have unwittingly been carrying out the process of cultural reclamation and reaffirmation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o therefore advocates that European languages be overthrown, so as to shift base away from the West, if we are going to make decolonization possible.¹⁷ This problem is not unconnected with colonialism that brought with it cultural colonization. Yet we still aver that total linguistic decolonization is not feasible as it has consequences even for our system of enlightenment.

African nations had Western ideas imposed on them with the advent of colonialism. They imposed a common intellectual culture and a set of languages with a sort of family resemblance on a set of diverse languages and cultures that exist on the African soil. The domino effect of cultural colonialism was the rootedness of African intellectuals in Western intellectual traditions, which has been propagated from age to age. It has an adverse effect on indigenous cultures. Also, many of those intellectuals had their educational training in Western culture, such that they were faced with the problems of self-identification on their return back home. This problem of identity was two-faced; cultural and professional identities. The former had to do with authenticity in African philosophy; that is, the problem of creating a philosophic tradition that is specifically African. The latter (professional) raises questions as to who is qualified to be truly called an African philosopher.

This comparison which Kagame tries to establish falls in line with what Okere sees as the fallacy of comparisons. This is one of the grave errors in dealing with intercultural relations. This tendency to compare cultures is even liable to various loopholes. The first is that one's culture is both taken for granted and also as the standard. But by taking one's culture for granted, one uncritically harbours some ignorance of some aspects of one's own culture, thus even becoming an ignorant judge of it. On the other hand, to take one's culture as the standard, one cannot avoid the pitfalls of relativism and subjectivism. Too many parameters, quantities and equations become unnoticed and unknown.¹⁸

To buttress the cultural element of philosophy, Oladipo states that we cannot divorce the scholar from his society. Society not just invests an abstract duty on the scholar. The scholar makes returns

to the community to which he/she belongs. The mere fact that he makes demands on this community in the fulfillment of his intellectual aspirations, commits him to this task. Scholarship is a social phenomenon mainly because it is a product of our interaction with nature and one another. The primary goal of scholarship therefore, is to extend the scope of human knowledge by way of enhancing the ability of human beings to cope with their environment.¹⁹

Culture is a complex phenomenon, but its constitutive elements are of two broad types. The first has no essential bearing on truth, falsehood, or well-being of a people. These include procedures, customs, dance, music, recreation, language, etc. They are contingent in the sense that adopting one of their forms instead of another, makes no objective difference to human well-being. There cannot be any compelling reason to change such elements of culture in favour of foreign ones. When an attempt is made to effect a change, we put the identity of a people in jeopardy.

There is however, another element of culture that is anchored on truth value, or has some essential bearing on human well-being. It is not desirable, even if it is possible, to ignore the development of some cultures over others; science, philosophy and religion belong to this domain. Although this classification by Oladipo is not without limitations, its message is clear in terms of a culture shedding off its trait to embrace foreign ones without losing its identity.²⁰ Africans therefore need not demonstrate their uniqueness by clinging to all elements of traditional culture to maintain their cultural identity. All that is needed for them to do is to safeguard those contingent aspects of their culture that defines them as a people. At the same time, they should avail themselves of such opportunities offered by the advances of other cultures in areas of philosophy, science and technology. "It is the only way they can ensure their effective participation in the quest for development which is a continuing world-historical process in which all peoples, Western and non-Western alike, are engaged."²¹

The answer to this identity crisis does not lie in cultural traditionalism, but in a critical and reconstructive self-evaluation. The point of self-evaluation is to help them to develop a modern identity, which guarantees cultural autonomy without setting them apart from others in their bid towards freedom and development.²² This was what Appiah referred to when he said that "we (Africans) will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a specific situation... we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others."²³

With this in mind therefore, Makinde, Masolo and Asouzu though share the same thought pattern, they do not in any way go in contrast to Oladipo, as they all together argue for the preservation of those contingent aspects of that, which gives us our real identity. For if their views were contrasting, Oladipo would not argue for the sustainability of some aspects of our culture. Even if it is possible to reject them, it is certainly not desirable.

Oguejiofor opines that works such as Tempel's Bantu Philosophy, Mbiti's African Religions and Philosophy and Kagame's *La Philosophie Bantou Ruandaise de l'etre*, can by no means pass for African philosophy. He gives a dismissive critique of these works based on the fact that philosophy has to do with an individual's interpretation of his culture. This is because for him, developing Okere's faint understanding of philosophy, he is of the view that the community or culture

constitutes the seed ground for the thriving of philosophy, but it must in the final analysis be the individual's self-understanding or appreciation in the context of his culture.²⁴

Culture as such with its various manifestations is not philosophy. Philosophy arises from culture and the mediation between the two is the process of hermeneutics which has to do with the interpretation of symbols of the culture under study. That is why Okere opines that there are evidences of symbolic elements in African culture.²⁵ But as the discourse progresses, Oguejiofor says that such production is not automatic. "Philosophy is not simply a coming together of cultural symbols and the hermeneutical process. It is a creative enterprise, and creativity presupposes the presence of a genius."²⁶

This work would be incomplete if we neglect the contributions of Asouzu. We can say that Kagame was tempted to indulge in the excitement that was induced by what has come to be seen as Tempels' bold steps. He therefore wears Tempels' mantle and sought to investigate Tempels' sources. Little did it occur to Kagame that anyone who attempts to build on the legacy of Aristotle, will most likely put on Aristotle's spirit. The difference in Kagame's categorization of *Ntu* with the logic of Aristotle is that, while the latter is bifurcating, polarizing and exclusivist, the former is complementary and harmonizing.²⁷

This has been a problem with many African scholars who think that reality as perceived by an individual equals reality of a vast majority of people. Hence, for him, Rwandan-Bantu thought equals that of Aristotle. This has been a problem in higher schools of learning where students are required to compare for example, the African idea of state with that of Plato. Asouzu calls it "a presumptuous and precarious undertaking."²⁸ This ethnocentric undertaking is fully expressed in Tempels and Kagame. All the members in traditional African societies never perceived reality in a uniform way, even though there were some similarities.

Therefore we find in Kagame one whose conception of reality can compete favourably with those of Aristotle. Yet we are still waiting to see how he was able to overcome the difficulties that Aristotle faced bearing in mind the traditional African complementary system of thought that is his source of inspiration. He therefore struggles to carry Aristotle's baggage with the limitations found in some traditional African thinkers whose ideas he internalized.²⁹

But it is worth noting that Kagame did not subsume himself in the traditions of Tempels as some would assume. While for Tempels, Being is equivalent to force, for Kagame force is only mentioned in relation to the dynamic consideration of Being. He therefore conceives Being as that which designates force as a substantial quality in some beings, as opposed to the Tempelsian parallel of force as substance. This was one of the Tempelsian damage that sees the transcendental notion of being as rooted in the West and the immanent nature having its root in Africa. He therefore sets a false thesis and went ahead to investigate and prove it. His vital force therefore leaves us with nothing elevating, but sheer magic and superstition.³⁰ This is true when viewed from the fact that force is something metaphysical that demands no explanation and is not accessible to science. But Kagame avers that if the Bantu concept of Being has been denominated as dynamic, it should be recalled that it is primarily static. It is also notable that if the concept of Being in Western thought is static, it is secondarily dynamic, because the operational predisposition

supposes essence and the structure of essence is in function of its finality. Force and substance are therefore not the same, for force is a predicate of substance that denotes the dynamism of Being.³¹

Asouzu is of the view that *Ibuanyidanda* goes beyond Tempels and Kagame; it provides us with a new ontological horizon that seeks to overcome the reductionism that is inherent in all forms of ethnocentric rationalism. Its merit is seen in the fact that it seeks to “articulate philosophy in a way that supercede this ambience based on personal critical reflection.”³² It is a philosophy that emanates out of the communal nature of man. Man is in relation to his fellow man, the world and the creator.

The very first attempt by the colonialists to institute the idea of subjugation of various territories in Nigeria was not before the 18th century. We can only speak of colonialism because in the first place, people were living in those colonized areas. Strictly speaking, only human beings are being colonized by fellow human beings. This implies that there had been communication long before the advent of colonialism. In those colonized territories, concepts were being used but not in their uniquely critical manner as we have them today. Among the Igala people, *Ọjájáńlń* (reality as it is) stands for reality. There is a mental colonial atmosphere that suggests that African conceptual clarifications are only appendages of Western concepts. While we make recourse to the fact that certain words are mere interpretations of English (Western) meanings, we are also quick to say that certain concepts as used in any of the local Nigerian languages predate Westernization. *Ọjájáńlń* is the ontological constant that interconnects the Igala world-view of reality; it does not represent the being of Aristotle, nor is it a consequence, or an appendage of Aristotelian categories, it is rather, what reality is.

CONCLUSION

If Kagame’s work is relegated to the level of ethno-thinking, it is not a defect in any way as he tries to pose questions out of the cultural life of a people. He therefore provides the rudiment for adequate philosophizing. On another hand, it should not be seen as ethno-thinking as such, for such conceptions as; being as force, or force as being, *Ntu* as a higher force that manifests itself in man, are not just limited to the cultural level, but are serious metaphysical issues. That is why Okere is of the view that philosophy must be hermeneutical, yet it must also get its initial impulse and nourishment from the African culture.³³ It must also have to operate within a conceptual framework that is authentically African. It is just within this framework that African philosophers and Kagame in particular operate. We cannot dismiss the cultural element of philosophic task, as culture necessarily leads to critical philosophy. We should rather make the task of philosophy ongoing, for it is in philosophizing we discover the aim of philosophy. Hence, even while we say that cultures and traditions cannot pass for philosophy, they ought to be present if we are to give meaning to our cultures and traditions. Hence, they are not just passive but essential rudiments in the task of philosophizing.

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