

ORAL TRADITION IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE: A CRITIQUE OF SOPHIE OLUWOLE'S ACCOUNT

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Abstract

This paper critically discusses the nature and place of oral tradition in African philosophical discourse with focus on Sophie Oluwole's scholarship on the subject matter. Oluwole, a foremost female African philosopher, defends the thesis that oral tradition almost invariably contains criticisms, analysis, and rational justifications. She argues that one of the most acceptable ways of actually showing and establishing ancient African philosophy is direct dependence on the actual oral texts and tradition of the people. This paper exposes some of the problems in her positions and challenges, critically, the cogency of relying on oral tradition as an index of a people's philosophy. In spite of the various problems and limitations of oral traditions, this paper defends the position that oral traditions still offer valuable literature as philosophy, and materials for philosophizing in the African context, and elsewhere.

Keywords: Oral tradition, written literature, African philosophy, ethno-philosophy, Sophie Oluwole.

Introduction

In recent times, several African scholars have attempted to document their local philosophy entrapped in oral tradition. Some fundamental questions arise in such documentation: can oral tradition qualify as philosophy? Can there be philosophy in oral tradition? In what ways can we use oral tradition in philosophizing? Can knowledge derived from oral tradition be cogently relied on as a foundation for building a philosophical system? In answering this array of questions, one is also implicitly raising another as to the dichotomy between orality and writing and the extent to which one can stretch the strength(s) and limits of the place of orality in philosophy. This paper engages in a critical examination of the foregoing questions focusing on the account of Sophie Oluwole in the context of African philosophy.

This paper is organized in five sections. The first section provides a conceptual elucidation of oral tradition. The second section discusses the role of oral tradition in philosophy by distinguishing between the styles in oral tradition and the content of oral tradition in relation to philosophy. The third section explores Oluwole's discourse on oral tradition in African philosophy. A critical evaluation of Oluwole's scholarship in oral tradition in African philosophy is attempted in the fourth section. The last section homes in the concluding remarks.

The idea of oral tradition

The term oral tradition is seen in different perspectives. Vansina (1985, p. 12) describes oral tradition as "the testimony of the past which are transmitted from mouth to mouth." This connotes that oral tradition must necessarily be of the past, and transmitted through spoken words from one generation to the other. Basically, the term means the transmission of facts, values and fiction through oral means. It would not be termed "tradition", however, if it were just a momentary and temporary method of approach to historical knowledge. It is a tradition simply because it is widely understood and practiced in a society and handed down for at least a few generations, with certain level of persistence, and sometimes, dynamism. The term is therefore used by the observer- the scholar- to refer to the source of his/her knowledge of a people's history and culture (Gbadegesin, <http://yoruba.org/Magazine/Summer97/F4.html>: par. 2).

Ozumba (1997, p. 72) tells us that "orality refers to all kind of unwritten communication of intellectual significance." Perhaps, it may be added that oral tradition is an indispensable source of history, indicator of deep thought, and transmitter of cultural and religious values and a testimony of

material, symbolic and intellectual aspects of culture. Orality presents to us the ideology that radiate among a people, contra individual thought.

From the foregoing, the expression “oral tradition” applies to a process as well as to its products. The process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over a long period of time. The products are mainly oral messages based on previous oral messages which are at least a generation old. Oral tradition entails “the process of using speech rather than writing for the reciting, chanting and discussing all extant works in our heritage” (Ajikobi, 1998, p. 6). It does involve unwritten past events or cultural values transmitted through the words of mouth. Oral tradition is a source of history, religion, philosophy, and even culture. This point is underscored in the words of Akinyoola, Akano & Oyatowo (2009, p. 187): “Oral tradition to the peoples in pre-literate societies, is many things rolled into one, including religion, knowledge, the natural science, apprenticeship in craft, history, etc., with a view to re-enacting the past.”

“Oral tradition provides the most important source of data for any serious study of the cultural beliefs and practices” (Omolafe, 1996, p. 1). We need to note that it is not all aspects of oral tradition that are originally motivated by the urge to record history. Folktales, proverbs, songs and chants may serve the people primarily as means of entertainment and expressing their ideas of ultimate reality and meaning, though these forms may also serve scholars as a means of understanding their history. The most important defining features of oral tradition are its oral nature and the fact that it is a medium for cultural continuity (Gbadegesin, 2010).

Having considered the meaning of oral tradition, it is pertinent to examine what oral tradition consists of. Uduigwomen (2002, p. 39) itemizes its composition to include: myths, fable, legends, stories, proverbs, beliefs, folk tales, songs and dances, liturgies and rituals, pithy sayings, riddles and adages, ideas, social attitudes, conventions, institutions and customs. All these are some of the ways by which thoughts and cultural heritages of a people are presented to posterity.

Oral tradition through its various media has helped in the transmission of knowledge from one epoch to another. It has assisted humanity in general to preserve their thoughts and cultures. In this sense, the historical relevance and import of oral tradition is incontrovertible. Akinyoola et al rightly noted this when they write that “history is firmly rooted in the human memory, and this is really understandable since no formal means existed by which to document, in a chronological order, the sequence of events right from the time the people originated” (Akinyoola et al, 2009, p.187). But it may be asked, if granted the above, one important question that agitates the mind is, what is the place of oral tradition in philosophy? There is serious acrimonious debate on this as opposed to the pivotal and undisputed place of oral tradition in historical incursions. But what could have accounted for this doubt with reference to philosophy? Without pretension to cultural nostalgia, what exactly is the role or place of oral tradition in philosophy?

Oral tradition and philosophy

In order to expose the role played by oral tradition in philosophy, we shall consider a possible distinction between the styles in oral tradition and the content of oral tradition. In respect to style, some scholars have claimed that literature is essentially philosophy, and given the fact that oral tradition constitutes oral literature, which is a literature, therefore, in style, oral tradition is philosophy. Philosophy is essentially literature. In understanding what literature is, two definitions suffice. The first is a common and popular view that literature is “everything in print” while the second definition is particular to Curtis (as quoted in Flack, 1993) who defines literature as:

A transmission of power; textbooks and treatises, dictionaries and encyclopedias, manuals and books of instruction – they are communications; but literature is a power line, and the motor, mark you, is the reader. (Flack, 1993, p. 118)

These two definitions of literature are erroneous because they do not give room for the literature in non-literate societies; they base their judgments on the literate society without considering the unlettered society. But this is not all there is to literature. There is no doubt that Literature has its foundation in oral tradition. It is in the recognition of this point that Ajikobi (1998,

p. 2) avers “any coherent idea of literature ... must include ‘oral literature’ which is not only in popular demand by the people in rural societies but also exists as a ‘universal phenomenon’ in every culture worldwide.”

True to Ajikobi’s view, oral literature plays a significant role in the transmission of ideas in a literate world. Generally, we cannot supplant writing with oral literature, as writing has its base in oral tradition and it is meant to corroborate it and not to unseat it. Therefore, if oral tradition is literature and literature is philosophy, it can be concluded that oral tradition qualify as philosophy. But there is a caution here: should we say that philosophy will just be attached to anything spoken? A consideration of this question leads us to the second dimension on the content of oral tradition. The important question here is what considerations are most fundamental in assessing the content of oral tradition in order to be classified as philosophy?

There are divergent views on the above question. These views can be broadly classified into three. One is the view that oral tradition as it were can only serve as source materials for philosophizing. One finds p’Bitek (1970), Gyekye (1987), Ozumba (1997), Kimmerle (1997), Imbo (2002) and Adegbindin (2010) in this category of opinion. Second is the view that certain aspects of oral tradition constitute philosophy in themselves. Here we find Oluwole as a foremost ardent defender of this view. A loose position on oral tradition as philosophy is maintained by Ihuah (1999, p. 136), who says that there is “authentic philosophy expressed in all African oral texts: names, proverbs, folktales and songs amongst others.” The third view on the relation between philosophy and oral tradition is an outright denial of the theses of the first two views by scholars such as Hountondji and Ong.

Samuel Imbo (2002, p. 68) maintains that “it is more fruitful to realize that the oral traditions are just a means of transmitting the culture’s rigorous intellectual traditions. Philosophy is the extraction of meaning from the accounts of the oral traditions.” Therefore, if we are to examine the philosophy of a people, the myths that exist in such culture are ready made materials that assist us in understanding the philosophy of such people. Proverbs, myths etc., which exist in oral literature are rich in content of the people’s worldview and as such, can serve as a source material for the professional philosopher to work on by applying the essential tools of philosophy to them. Therefore, without resorting to any equivocation, oral tradition has significant role to play in the evolution of authentic African philosophy. Imbo is not alone in this orientation.

Ozumba also holds similar view. According to him, in non-literature society, people are conscious of preserving their culture, history, occurrence, religion, and philosophy in the right way. To achieve this, they use different method which makes it easy for members of the society to retain such thought and pass it through posterity. Myth is one of such ways. It is mostly transmitted to posterity in form of entertaining the younger ones. Myth, present to us stories about the people of the past, event in the past, ideas of the past etc. Myth present the thinking of our fore-fathers on issues in form of fiction, in these stories wisdom are embedded in it. It is now left for us to have the ability and understanding of myth in order to extract such wisdom or philosophy. Ozumba (1997) quoted Vico’s words when he said:

It follows that the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables, for all histories of the gentiles have their beginnings in fables... By such a method the beginnings of the sciences as well as the nations are to be discovered. (Ozumba, 1997, p. 80)

It is important to note at this point that mythology is not just the coinage of some people. It is the reality that radiates among a people and their beliefs about certain occurrence. “We must not discountenance the truth that there is no myth without a basis in reality. And conversely there is no sophisticated knowledge without its mythical basis” (Ozumba, 1997, p. 80).

Gyekye (1987, p. 200) informs that in Africa, a great deal of philosophical system has remained oral for a long time. He sees philosophical materials embedded in the proverbs, myths, folktales, folksongs, rituals, beliefs, customs and the traditions of the African people. In establishing the truth of this claim, Gyekye (1987, p. 200) analogically notes that “the Vedas were handed down from mouth to mouth from a period of unknown antiquity.... When the Vedas were composed, there

was probably no system of writing prevalent in India..." The point here is that it was through oral tradition that the philosophies contained in the Vedas were preserved. So also is the case with the philosophy of Socrates.

We now turn to the second strand of viewing the relationship between oral tradition and philosophy. If one construes philosophy as the love of wisdom, and accepting the role of proverbs in the preservation of a people's wisdom and worldview, then it opens one to the conclusion that oral tradition, which proverb is subset, is philosophy. Without necessarily oblivious to the fallacy of composition involved in this reasoning, and let us take for granted the misunderstanding of the phrase, 'love of wisdom' in the context of the above argument, one finds such reasoning in Akporobaro (2001) and Obiechina (1975). Seeing proverb as a community thought, Akporobaro says:

A collection of the proverbs of a community or a nation is in a real sense, an ethnography of the people which if systematized can give penetrating picture of the people's way of life, their philosophy, their moral truth and social values. (Akporobaro, 2001, p. 10)

Corroborating this view, Obiechina contends that:

Proverbs are the kernel which contains the wisdom of the traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words, and they form a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to everyday life has to be committed to memory. (Obiechina, 1975, p. 156)

The soundness of the above view finds expression in Aristotle's view of proverb, who as quoted by Momoh (1989, p. 232), says that "a proverb is a remnant from old philosophy, preserved amid countless destruction by reason of its brevity and fitness for use."

Sophie Oluwole's discourse on oral tradition

In her book, *Philosophy and Oral Tradition*, Oluwole (1999) aims at establishing the existence of an ancient tradition of African philosophy. She exposes the false distinctions between orality and literacy on the one hand and the relationship between philosophy and oral tradition on the other hand. She sees philosophy as the critical examination of ideas, beliefs and principles of human existence. For her, philosophy presupposes the existence of human critical thinking in a particular language. This is so because philosophy is expressed in words, and words are expressed in language.

Thus, when talking of the existence of ancient African philosophy, we are simply referring to its existence within the gamut of a particular language. By ancient African philosophy, she does not mean one monolithic philosophy for the whole of Africa. In other words, it is not a single metaphysical and/or epistemological point of view shared by every African just as ancient Greek, Chinese and Indian philosophers were not. Rather, she means different classical philosophical accounts and views as expressed in different African languages and cultures.

Just as the terms 'Greek' and Chinese each refers to the thoughts of different philosophies, which share some literacy form and style of expression as well as some particular intellectual orientations, the term 'African' is also a family similarity that justifies the classification of several African languages and ethnic groups into one cultural group. In her attempt to discover an instance of an ancient African philosophy, she explored the oral tradition of the Yoruba. Before considering her analysis of the conceptual structure and philosophical cogency of the oral text she presented, it is important to first examine her arguments on the dichotomy between orality and writing, and the implications of such analysis on the possible existence of ancient African philosophy.

One of the major arguments upon which the non-apologists premised their claims on the denial of ancient African philosophy has to do with the issue of writing as a necessary condition of philosophy. For Oluwole, there are no 'a priori' rules against the adequacy of presenting a philosophic treatise in any specific literary form. There are no universal paradigms, which all forms of thought must adopt.

In other words, critical or strict philosophy can occur whether in the oral or written form. She argues that the history of Western philosophy itself does not justify that oral tradition is anti-intellectual and that it cannot contain philosophy. For instance, Plato's predecessors used aphorism, imagery and tales to formulate critical philosophy. While Plato himself used this style, modern philosophers like, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer also wrote strict philosophies using image and aphorism. The point Oluwole is making is that tales, aphorisms, proverbs, folklore, among others which are all part of oral tradition can entail philosophy. Contrary to the claim that philosophy is best promoted in the written form, she argues that "it is not impossible that philosophers who codify their works in writing sometimes produce irrational and inconsistent thesis" (Oluwole, 1999, p. 15).

Kimmerle shares the view of Oluwole on the dichotomy between writing and orality, but differs from Oluwole on oral tradition as philosophy. Kimmerle maintains that it is wrong to speak of an opposition between oral and literate. This is because there are elements of writing in a mainly oral tradition and elements of orality in a mainly literate tradition. Following Jacques Derrida's *Grammatology*, Kimmerle argues against the hierarchic thinking that writing is superior to orality. Construing writing as the production of readable traces and signs connected with human behavior of any kind (such as alphabetic signs, graphics, pictures on the body, traces in the sand, etc.), Kimmerle (1997, p. 43) hammers that the opposition between literate cultures and oral cultures has to be avoided because both are of the same age. None is either "higher or lower in any sense, but just different" (Kimmerle, 1997, p. 44). This position of Kimmerle notwithstanding should not be misconstrued to mean that she agrees with Oluwole that some oral texts passes muster as strict philosophy in themselves. Kimmerle is explicit on this below:

Ethno-philosophy is constituted by two different instances: the myths, proverbs and language structures on the one hand, the authors, who make a philosophical text of them, on the other hand. Only when both instances do exist together, ethno-philosophy emerges. Myth, legends or proverbs are not already philosophy by themselves. And also the opposite is true: the authors who conceptualize ethno-philosophical texts do not take them out of their own ideas. The former belong to the spoken language, which is for all kinds of philosophy (that is to say: not only for ethno-philosophy, for it, however, in a very specific way) a constitutive starting point of philosophizing. The latter produce written texts, which become part of the history of continuous interpretation and critique. Ethno-philosophy is constituted commonly by spoken language and written texts. From the interaction of both instances, ethno-philosophy emerges as philosophy. (Kimmerle, 1997, p. 47)

Obvious from the above is the claim that Kimmerle's interest lies in the dissolution of the opposition between oral and written literatures, and not in the discovery of philosophy out of oral literature as Oluwole is primarily concerned. Cognizant of the distinction between oral expression and written expressions, Oluwole harps that:

Spoken words...exist only for a very limited time and can travel on their own only within the limited distances. Because of this very short spatio-temporal existence, oral tradition in a substantial sense, is quite ephemeral...The inherent dual short comings of oral expressions, that is, the limitations of time and space, can be greatly reduced through the use of human memory. Yet, memory is never a perfect way of recording or transmitting thought because lapses do occur through normal and accidental conditions. (Oluwole, 1999, p. 3).

The point in the above excerpt is that oral tradition has some limitations. Memory is an important aspect of oral tradition. Without memory no person can lay claim to an iota of knowledge or possession of oral tradition. Russell (1963) avers, "memory is the source of all our knowledge concerning the past." Any time we are revealing a myth, folklore, proverbs etc., it comes from our

memory. Memory serves the bi-function of storing information and synthesizing them for future use. In fact, “oral texts cannot perform without the aid of memory” (Oluwole, 1999, p. 3).

However, memory is unreliable. As its own arbiter, memory is consigned to the private realm; “it is subject to forgetfulness, discordance of information, misrepresentation, opacity and miscontextualism” (Ozumba, 1997, p. 75). The use of memory “is never a perfect way of recording or transmitting thoughts because lapses do occur through normal and accidental conditions. Damage to the brain, forgetfulness, and the most permanent of them all – death – may occur without notice. In such a situation, brilliant and important ideas may be lost forever” (Oluwole, 1999, p. 3). These are accidental events that can occur to the memory which prevent it from being a perfect way of preserving the knowledge of a people. The memory makes a man the source of a people’s knowledge and if such man eventually dies, it is similar to a burnt library. This is one of the critiques brought against oral tradition through memory.

Also, oral tradition is said to be confirming what has been revealed to one from an aged scholar who might not necessarily be the most informed person. “The oldest may not be the most informed, the popular may not be the most versatile in thought, the mellifluous may not be the one with the most authentic information” (Ozumba, 1997, p. 79). Another critique that can be leveled against oral tradition is that many of the knowledge brought about by oral tradition are related by old men and women. And it is a truism that old age brings forgetfulness and senility is the disease of the old which has no cure. The simple implication of this is the skepticism on the reliability of oral tradition as a source of knowledge. This point becomes more sacrosanct especially when we bear in mind such problems as: “the progressive breakdown of the transmission of oral tradition from one generation to another, the mortal nature of informants as well as their motives and changeability, the difficulty of separating the past from the present, selectivity and, the lack of chronology” (Mugaju, 1990, p. 32) in oral tradition.

In the words of Ajayi (1981, p. 2) “oral traditions are sometimes subject to additions, subtractions, exaggerations and distortions. Consequently, it is difficult to separate truth from fiction.” Because of the possibilities of distortions in the original ideas when passed through oral tradition, from one generation to the other as well as other short comings of oral tradition, Oluwole observed that writing must have evolved to come as a rescue to all the undesirable limitations of oral expression.

The most fundamental feature of writing is according to her, that of being a means of producing readable signs and symbols for the purpose of external communication. And by implication, writing does not refer to the thought documented or recorded. Once such signs and symbols are conventionally learnt and understood, it conveys similar meanings to the sender and receiver. And in this way, writing bridges time and space in communication with least distortion. This is the advantage writing has over oral tradition.

On the basis of the above analysis, Oluwole notes that thought occurs, first, in the mental realm just before or during the act of oral expressions, and that writing comes third in the process, because it is only a means of documenting and transmitting thought, words and ideas through visible signs. By implication therefore, literary styles and context of human thought cannot be said to have been created through writing. Indeed, while oral expression may occur independently of writing, the reverse may not be possible. This is because it is difficult and even impossible to write without reflecting, without pronouncing each word, without making of inaudible sound. As Akinjobi (1998, pp. 5-6) correctly observes, “Without oral traditions, we could know very little about the past of large parts of the world. Writing art cannot possibly subsist without the speaking art.” The existence of writing therefore depends on the existence of oral performance: “on the reflection that goes on in the mind at the time of writing” (Oluwole, 1999, p. 5). This means that oral performance precedes writing and writing has its source in oral art.

Drawing further on the distinction between oral and written texts, Oluwole writes on the act of thinking. This is because the later depends on the former. While thinking is an art, which may be learnt and which greatly depends on a thinker’s natural capacity, writing is a craft, which must be learnt both by the highly gifted and the man of average intelligence. The teaching of a person with low intelligence the techniques of writing will not necessarily make him or her gifted thinker. According to

her, merely knowing the technique of writing will not make fool a genius. On the contrary however, ingenuity may be expressed in the oral form by thinkers who have never learnt the art or writing. On this showing therefore, oral tradition is the creation of individual minds; though the ideas, beliefs and principles expressed in them later become the accepted norms by the society. Writing only performs a supplementary function of helping people to memorize and know what has been said orally.

Oluwole quite believes that writing has its own advantages. One, when used to document individual thought, writing provides immense opportunity for clearer explanations, analyses and criticism, which may arise at the level of discussion. It allows a thinker to be cautious of and avoid self-contradiction and other fallacious thinking. Writing allows for making work available to wider audience and this promotes a better opportunity for corrections of views and idiosyncrasies in human thoughts. In spite of all these merits of writing, Oluwole said that writing can also lead to narrow-mindedness, inward looking and parochialism in individual thinkers. It sometimes hinders the initiation of novel theories. Also, since writing has to be produced in specific forms, "it tends to lack the kind of rapturous immediacy and spontaneity of expression" (Oluwole, 1999, p. 16). Scholles & Kellog (1978) in their book, *The Nature of Narrative*, notes the shortcomings of writing by recounting the view of the historical Thamus. Thamus, the primordial king over all Egypt, expressed a great fear when Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom and magic invented writing. Thoth had come to inform King Thamus how writing would increase both the memory and wisdom of the Egyptians, but Thamus exclaimed thus:

O most ingenious Thoth, one man has the ability to develop a new skill, but another to judge whether it will be a curse or blessing to its users. Now you, the father of letters, through your affection see in them the opposite of their true power. For this invention (writing) will cause those who use it to lose the learning of their minds by neglecting their memories; since, through this reliance on letters which are external and alien to the mind, they will lose the ability to recall things within themselves. You have invented not a medicine to strengthen memory but an inferior substitute for it. You are providing your students with a way of seeming wise without true wisdom; for they will appear to have learned without instruction; they will seem to know a good deal while they are really ignorant of many things; and they will become public nuisance, these men who look wise but lack wisdom (Scholes & Kellogg, 1978, p. 19)

Given the above critical analysis of the short comings of writing as a necessary condition of philosophy, a position defended by the non-apologist of ancient history of African philosophy, Oluwole's position is that there were ancient Africans whose thoughts were rational and critical, even though these have been transmitted from generation to generation through the medium of oral tradition. Accordingly, she is of the view that the acts of reflection, criticism, analysis, arguments and discussion can all be carried out in a purely oral form without writing. And "since the formulation of poetry, discursive prose, verse, narrative, etc., did not depend on the art of writing, the creation of these literacy styles and structures cannot be said to depend on the mastery of writing" (Oluwole, 1999, p. 6).

In effect, Oluwole's position is that the non-apologists failure of recognizing the literary qualities of oral tradition is as a result of their misconception of Western science and written literature. Contrary to their positions, she holds that "oral literature almost invariably contains criticisms, analysis, and rational justifications" (Oluwole, 1999, p. 6). But the difficulty in identifying all these intellectual compositions in African oral literature and appreciate their distinctive literary style is because of ignorance and incompetence of many African scholars and understanding oral texts in the indigenous language. According to her, "many can neither speak nor read in African languages. Those who can were never taught how to analyze, understand and interpret African thought within its own conceptual structure" (Oluwole, 2007, pp. 13-14).

It is arguable to posit, contra Oluwole, that the alleged ignorance of African languages as expressed in the people's oral tradition is a consequence of many factors; most important is the contents of oral traditions which are often expressed in cryptic languages that are highly complex and

of such depth and obscurity that comprehension becomes rather difficult if not impossible (Omolafe, 1996, pp. 4). This excuse may not be genuine and satisfactory to Oluwole.

This is understandable because of her quest to defend the ancient existence of African philosophy, which she thinks can only be discovered in oral traditions. Oluwole believes that Africa must have had her own Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, etc. though most of their names are now lost in memory. She therefore sees as imperative, the crucial task of interpreting their ideas (as domiciled in oral tradition) in contemporary medium for easier understanding and critical examination. She objects the insistence of members of the school of professional philosophers (e.g., Peter Bodunrin, Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, among others who are for the most part, the non-apologists of the existence of ancient African philosophy) on their position that ancient Greek thought is scientific, critical and rational, and that these intellectual qualities are absent in oral tradition, which she presented as ancient African philosophy.

Hountondji for instance, dismisses not only the use of oral tradition as a source material for philosophizing; he rejects also the claims of scholars like Oluwole who claim that oral text is philosophical. For Hountondji (1983, p. 101), oral literature by its very nature, prohibits criticism, tends to perpetuate a conservative and anachronistic tradition which is backward and unscientific. Philosophy in Hountondji's (1976, p. 106) thinking "begins at the precise moment of transcription." Sharing the view of Hountondji, Ong says without writing there can be no philosophy. He maintains that:

We know that all philosophy depends on writing because all elaborate; linear, so-called "logical" explanation depends on writing. Oral persons can be as wise, as wise as anyone, and they can of course, give some explanation for things. But the elaborate, intricate, seemingly endless but exact cause-effect sequences required by what we call philosophy and by extended scientific thinking are unknown by oral people. (Ong, 1986, p. 43)

Both Ong's and Hountondji's perception of oral tradition as anti-intellectualism and enclave of mysticism has been criticized by Oluwole. She does not take Hountondji seriously because he is seen to have accepted Western paradigms without question. Her point in this regard is that Hountondji failed to realize that "intellectual features do not occur in same literary form and conceptual genres in all traditions of human thought" (Oluwole, 2007, p. 13).

In pursuing the logical conclusion, her belief in the existence of ancient African philosophy, Oluwole said that one of the most acceptable ways of actually showering ancient African philosophy is direct dependence on the actual oral texts. These oral texts are different African languages in most ancient African societies. A careful study of these oral texts, she believes, will reveal the reflections of ancient African thinkers on the mysteries of the universe, nature, human experience, and other fundamental themes of philosophical relevance. In her words:

Research into oral literature is justified on the assumption that some rational principles must have guided traditional African thinkers in the past. Present day African intellectuals have lost contact with their forebears as well as with one another. Colonial education did not bequeath to Africa only new systems of government, education etc., it replaced African traditional principles of thought with foreign ones. Worse still, it gave Africa several alien languages that cut their intellectuals from their base. (Oluwole, 1999, p. 34)

The above call to hermeneutically research into oral tradition by Oluwole aims basically therefore to discover principles that underlie traditional African thought. The idea is not to bring back specific views, beliefs or values from ancient African societies. Rather, the reason d'être, according to her, is that "we will never have valid grounds for comparing African thoughts with Western alternatives if we fail to grasp the basic principles under whose guidance African intellectuals operated" (Oluwole, 1999, p. 35). Furthermore, it is doubtful if Africans will ever be sure of what to retain or jettison from their

traditional thoughts so long as they continue to be apathetic towards a rigorous hermeneutic study of oral literature from Africa. On the imperativeness of studying oral tradition, Oluwole notes:

We cannot legitimately dismiss oral literature as a reliable source of discovering an authentic African intellectual culture if our genuine aim is to compare and if possible promote inter-cultural understanding. African tradition of thought, as an ancient intellectual culture, must have principles which have existed long before modern times. And to have a full grasp of the present day line of thought we need a good understanding of each culture. For if we are not fully conscious of what we were, hardly can we really understand who we are now and how we can have a clear vision of what we ought to be. (Oluwole, 1999, p. 40)

Contrary to the view of philosophers like Hountondji, Mudimbe, and Appiah, who believe that 'strict' philosophy cannot exist in oral texts, Oluwole illustrated the existence of explicit philosophy in oral text, using the Yoruba example. In doing this, she allowed the oral texts to account for their own existence as philosophy. For instance, in her article, "African philosophy as illustrated in *Ifa* corpus", she showed how 'oyeku meji' and 'owonrin', which are verses in *Ifa* literary corpus, each passes muster as critical philosophy in spite of the fact that they were preserved and transmitted in the oral form (Oluwole 1996). She argues that there is a distinctive literary tradition identifiable in *Ifa* literature, where proverbs, aphorism, metaphor, tale as well as imagery are freely used. The two texts on 'oyeku meji' and 'owonrin meji' qualify as an instance of ancient African philosophy because they contain arguments, criticisms and justification of the ideas expressed.

A critical evaluation of Oluwole's scholarship on oral tradition

One possible criticism that might be leveled against Oluwole's attempt is that she is only trying to create new philosophies from the texts, especially with her translations. However, a counter response to this charge is that professional philosophers traditionally engage themselves in the analysis, explanation, criticism and/or justification of the works of different philosophers without thereby creating new philosophies out of them. Her intention is to discover cogent philosophical principles and treatise, inherent in these indigenous oral texts. She agrees with Kimmerle (1997), who also defends this approach of studying oral tradition as a way of discovering different ways for expressing philosophy, which will avoid the Western opposition paradigm, in which difference is necessarily regarded as evidence of inferiority. More fundamental, her goal is to initiate the process of putting an end to the dominant imperialistic thinking, which has over the years, unduly influenced Africans in despising and ignoring their oral tradition as a primitive and inadequate heritage for modernist living.

Another possible criticism that might be posed against Oluwole's attempt to showcase oral tradition as ancient African philosophy is that what has been presented is nothing short of Yoruba (African) worldview, mysticism, religious system, rather than philosophy. This is because individual authors of the ideas, beliefs and thoughts so expressed are not known by name. A counter reaction/response to this criticism, as given by her is that classical philosophies, in almost all cultures, existed as religious systems. This is true of ancient Indian philosophy and ancient Greek philosophy. What qualifies them as philosophy is that critical reflections were carried out in them. It is, therefore "an error to declare a thought system non-philosophical just because it uses religious terms to explain knowledge and human experiences" (Oluwole, 2007, p. 26).

Though, while it is true that some of the accounts given or presented as an ancient African philosophy may be intuitive, bold and unscientific, those of several ancient Greek and Chinese philosophies were not free of this same charge. Besides, there are many ideas, beliefs and values in ancient African worldview that can be adjudged rational. And for this reason, it becomes important that texts in the language of thinkers are studied so as to expose their philosophical meanings, their critical strength and/or weaknesses. These oral literatures are in themselves texts on ancient African philosophy.

It must be pointed out at this point that for Oluwole, it is not the analysis per se that will make any of the oral texts philosophy. What qualifies them as philosophy must already be inherent in them. But the critical assessment of such text would be a work in contemporary African philosophy. In other words, when we formulate some philosophy from oral texts, we are engaged in contemporary African philosophy rather than studying ancient African philosophy. On the charge of anonymous and unknown names, this is a criticism equally applicable to many texts in classical Greek philosophy. For instance, many of the sayings accredited to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have been argued to be popular mythology – “they said, he/she said”. And strictly speaking, the fact that the authors of the oral text are mostly unknown by name does not destroy the cogency of the text as philosophy.

Another possible criticism against the apologist position of Oluwole on the existence of ancient history of African philosophy as explicit in oral tradition is that many of the media of oral tradition, for instance, proverbs, are short and crisp, and as such, cannot constitute philosophy, which by standard entails justificatory explanations. As a counter response, it is arguable to say that the shortness of a literary piece does not necessarily deprive it of being philosophical. Classical Chinese and Indian philosophies were crisp and appeared mystical and intuitive. Even many of the ancient Greek philosophers like – Thales and Heraclitus were initially short and crisp before they were later developed into elaborate theories by their later disciples.

Arguably, this call by Oluwole on the need for serious studies of African oral literature can be said to be a plea for a wholesale return to things African just in the name of propagating unwarranted uniqueness and distinctiveness. But then, this critique can only be a product of the illusionary thinking that culture, in its different ramifications, is an ancient, traditional, changeless and hermeneutically sealed heritage which can be preserved intact (like virginity) more or less forever. In defense of Oluwole, one can refute this charge of philosophical study of oral tradition as a path to anachronism by arguing that a genuine call for adequate research into African oral heritage does not necessarily entail “romantic vision of the past” for the sake of carving unique African intellectual identity. Oral literature does not establish a dead form of thought. It is generative in nature and can still be developed and explored for modern use.

Conclusion

On the whole, Oluwole is a strong proponent of the view that there was ancient history of African philosophy and that the ideas of these ancient thinkers could be found in our African oral tradition in their varieties. With her emphasis on oral tradition as philosophy as a distinctive African literary thing, one is likely to criticize her silence on written traditions of the Egyptian and Ethiopian civilizations, which are also part of Africa. Without recognition of the historical root of ancient African philosophy in these civilizations, her account is at best, biased and myopic.

Well, arguably, Oluwole is not totally incognizant of the existence of written traditions of Egypt and Ethiopia; only that she does not regard the account of ancient history of African philosophy in these civilizations as entirely an indigenous creation of black Africans (Oluwole, 1999, p. 21). This is because of the influence of both Islam and Christianity on the philosophical ideas of the ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian thinkers. Whether this quest for authentic and purified or unadulterated intellectual heritage is in itself justified and possible is a different question entirely.

However, it is conclusive to note that oral tradition is not without its own shortcomings. In spite of the various limitations of oral traditions identified in this paper, we are of the view that oral traditions still offer valuable literature as philosophy, and materials for philosophizing. Mythical narratives, legends, personal poems and testimonies, proverbs, and maxims, drum texts and art motifs, which form the core of African oral tradition have a basis in historical reality and are at the same time explorations of the possibilities of group and individual thoughts and views about their intellectual heritage, historical experiences and philosophical thoughts. Since every philosophy is cultural conditioned and historically influenced, oral literature cannot be swept under carpet in philosophical matters. We need to re-state that written literature cannot supplant oral tradition as they both have their merits and demerits.

In conclusion, we do not say that oral tradition should be placed above writing. The fact remains that both belong to literature. They are both forms of transmitting the philosophy of a people

to the unborn generation and have their advantages and disadvantages respectively. Philosophy being the child in the bath water of oral tradition should not be thrown away with the bath water. Therefore, there is a need for contemporary African (and Diaspora) world to consider, thoroughly, existing oral traditions in order to discover the philosophy inherent in them for intellectual posterity.

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