

Review of: "Okolo on the Question of African Philosophy and its Periodization"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This essay--"Okolo on the Question of African Philosophy and Its Periodization"--derives from the continuing discourse, in African Philosophy, around the significance and relevance of the concept itself. And i want to commend the effort of the authors for taking one of the early avatars in the debate on whether or not there is a species of philosophizing called "African Philosophy" as different from universal philosophy.

Like all effort at philosophizing, African philosophy is not immune from a meta-theoretical analysis of what philosophy itself is all about. And this is where this particular critique of Okolo constitutes a relevant addition to the meta-philosophical corpus surrounding the nature of African philosophy.

However, the authors must be taken to task on several issues that equally affects the way the fundamental significance of the role of African philosophy in African and human experiences. First, what the authors engaged with in Okolo's corpus is a very old debate; a debate that no longer hold any water in the trajectory of discussions on African philosophy (except merely as a pedagogical reference). And the reason for this is that the basis for denying philosophy, and philosophizing, to Africans and their cultures was essentially ideological--the intellectual apotheosis of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.

The implication of this is that the objective of this essay ought to have taken a different meta-philosophical track: using Okolo's argument about the nature of (African) philosophy to make further clarifications about what philosophy is and its historical imperatives in Africa. On the contrary, the authors rather rehashed arguments about philosophy and philosophizing that had already made the rounds in the discourse on whether or not there is an African philosophy. This is clear from the dated texts that constitute the bulk of the materials around which the authors built their arguments.

What could also have been done is to reflect on Okolo from the perspectives of contemporary discussions on the nature of contemporary African philosophy, of which Okolo is a part, and which he argues for. It is this meta-philosophical track i took in a recent essay, "On Critical African Philosophy" (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/meta.12610>). In that essay, i deployed a meta-theoretical methodology to insist that what i call "critical African philosophy" (CAP₂) constitutes the critical turn that contemporary African philosophy (CAP₁) need to take in order to stop African philosophy from regressing into sterile arguments that are unenlightening about the nature of philosophy or the historico-political responsibility of African philosophy.

Secondly, the authors seem not to be unaware of the nuanced nature of the arguments deployed by African philosophers on the nature of African philosophy. I am deeply shocked that the authors, on the very first page of their essay, could (a) lump Wiredu, Hountondji, Okere, etc. together with Hegel, Hume, Levy-Bruhl, Kant, etc. as collaborators in derogating the significance of African philosophy; and (b) lumping Wiredu and Hountondji together as if both deployed the same arguments on the nature of African philosophy. This simply tells me that the authors were not careful enough to read in between the arguments. The difference between Wiredu and Hountondji is deeply nuanced, even though both are often regarded as “universalists” in the discourse on the nature and responsibilities of African philosophy.

Thirdly, the authors are caught in some sort of contradictions and false deductions on the arguments deployed by Okolo. Two examples will suffice. One, on p. 11, the authors argue:

It is disappointing that what Okolo presents to us is 'Europeanized/Westernized-African Philosophy'; a philosophy characterized by everything western: western education in classrooms in the western formality of logic and principles, western curriculum, western pattern of education and writing capabilities. A philosophy based on formal education, undertaken in the classroom and in western logic and written documentation which started Post-Second World War is what Okolo presents as AFRICAN philosophy.

However, earlier on p. 8, the authors had quoted Okolo's assertion and argument that African philosophy feeds on African experiences and African worldviews. One is therefore at a loss how such a deduction about how Okolo's Europeanized philosophy “praises the African predicaments like the slave trade, colonialism, etc.”. Two, and further, the authors further deduced--without any evidence--that, for Okolo, “educatedness or literacy” implies ‘philosophy’.

On p. 12, the authors ask of Okolo:

has the African never engaged his existential challenges and used the available resources obtainable in his environment before the European contact or precisely Pre-Second World War to resolve these challenges be it in politics, war, creativity/entrepreneurship, economy, ethics and moral related fields, significantly practical education, arts, home management, interpersonal and inter-community relationship, among other life-endeavours?

From this question, it would seem to me that the authors fail to connect the dots in the argument of Okolo between a loose sense of (African) philosophy as worldview (present before the Second World War in Okolo's categorization), and (African) philosophy as critical thinking or discursivity. Thus, Okolo did not deny philosophy or philosophizing to Africans before their contact with Europe. On the contrary, he denied philosophical discursivity that characterizes modern philosophy--philosophizing that involves engaging with other philosophers over the nature of philosophical arguments, and the larger objectives and relevance of philosophy itself.

Lastly, and on p. 17, the authors reached a most uncharitable point when they argue that given their arguments about Okolo and his perspective on African philosophy,

Three things must have happened to Okolo: (1) It is either he had no clear understanding and implication of what philosophy means; (2) He was not able to overcome westernization and its mentality in most Africans; or (3) He just wanted a place of pride among African scholars who debated about the reality(periodization) of African philosophy. These three factors(idols) played out in his conceptualization of what philosophy ever means and implicates.

For me, and in the final analysis, I think the joke is really on the authors themselves rather than on the philosopher whose cogent arguments they failed to decipher coherently.