

An Amazing Piece of Comparative Philosophy

Sophie Bosede Oluwole: *Socrates and Orunmila. Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*, Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2014, 224 p.

With this book, the debate about African philosophy and the understanding of what African philosophy is about are raised to a new level. S. B. Oluwole has worked already for a long time to make clear what is specifically African in African philosophy. From a great number of publications I just mention her book: *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head. Issues in African Philosophy* (Ikeja: Excel Publications, 1991). In this connection she has drawn special attention to the problem of *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (Lagos: Ark Publishers, 1999). She uses frequently and is very familiar with the *Ifa Literary Corpus*, an extensive text of Yoruba oral tradition, of which big parts have been published in print and also translated into English by Wande Abimbola. The main chapters of this text can be found in the volume, edited by Abimbola: *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* (Paris: UNESCO, 1975).

In order to understand what is groundbreaking and new in the comparison of Socrates and Orunmila, one has to realize that Orunmila and the other figures of the *Ifa Literary Corpus* are not gods in the Western meaning of the word. They are not just mythological figures, as are the gods on Mount Olympus in the Greek tradition. More specifically it is wrong to speak of Orunmila as the »God of wisdom.« Oluwole teaches us: These figures are called *Orisa*; they are historical human beings who have been »revered only after death« and »deified« because of their special contribution to philosophy, political science, knowledge of agrarian production, building of cities, warfare, etc. (see p. XIII).

Oluwole's extensive research into Socrates and Orunmila shows that there are amazing similarities in their life and work. Both lived around 500 BCE as the sons of stone masons. Their faces look alike to a great extent. They had about ten or sixteen disciples to whom they preached virtue as the ideal of the good life. They heavily criticized those who claimed to possess absolute knowledge. They lived in centers of intellectual and social life, Athens in ancient Greece and Ile-Ife in Yorubaland respectively. Both left behind no written work (pp. 22–24).

It is true for Socrates and Orunmila that we know about them from secondary sources. There is not an objective report about who they were and what they taught. Of course, we rely heavily on Plato in trying to find out who Socrates was. But Plato wrote his famous *Dialogues* about thirty years after the death of Socrates. And we have quite different information from Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Diogenes Laertius about the person and the teachings of Socrates. From these sources we come to a certain general picture. In this sense also Gernot Böhme speaks of *Der Typ Sokrates* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1988). With regard to the person and teachings of Orunmila there are also quite different sources, which in part have a legendary character. Thus it remains unclear »who really was Socrates« as well as »Orunmila« (pp. 8–12 and 19–21).

Oluwole confronts »The Fictitious Socrates,« »The Corporate Socrates,« and »The Historical Socrates« with »The Mythical Orunmila,« »The Corporate Orunmila,« and »The Historical Orunmila.« Because there is also a fictitious picture of Socrates, especially in the work of Aristophanes, corresponding to the mythical picture of Orunmila in the *Ifa corpus*, both are comparable. A detailed comparison of the theoretical »views and ideas« of Socrates and Orunmila about »The Nature of Reality,« »The Nature of Truth and Wisdom,« »The Limits of Knowledge and Wisdom,« »The Good and the Bad,« »Political Rights,« »The Rights of Women« and other topics makes clear that here two philosophies of equal standard are under discussion. And it is obvious that both argue critically and reasonably. Their argumentation meets rigorous standards. They deny that absolute knowledge is possible. »For them, such wisdom belongs to God« (p. 57).

What is said about Orunmila and what Orunmila »is said to have said« proves that he developed a philosophy within traditional African thought, which is in no way less critical or rigorous than that of Socrates. Even the most advanced principles of »Particle Physics which contains algebra and mathematics« are already applied in the »scientific and mathematical system« of the structure of the *Ifa corpus* (p. 79).

From this point of view, Oluwole can not only reject European-Western positions, which deny the existence of critical and scientific philosophy in traditional Africa, but also the ideas of many African scholars, who do not give the full rank of rationality and scientific spirit to traditional African thinkers. She refers to Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, Gerald Joseph Wanjohi, Peter O. Bodunrin, and others. Most

characteristically wrong is the view articulated by Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Negritude movement. When the latter contrast the superior position of the West in the field of rational thought with a superior position of Africa in the field of emotion, they imply that Africans are less rational (p. 75). J. A. I. Bewaji, who has been teaching at different Nigerian universities, has delivered a »Critical Analysis of the Philosophical Status of Yoruba Ifa Corpus.« This results, however, in complete »confusion.« Oluwole summarizes: Bewaji admits that this text-corpus »is not lacking in a high degree of ›abstract reasoning‹«, but at the same time he insists, »that it does not deal with ›abstract entities,‹ ›concepts,‹ and ›terms,‹ all of which are abstract reasoning« (p. 90).

In a final conclusion Oluwole clarifies how Socrates, the »Patron Saint« of classical Western philosophy, makes binary distinctions in the sense of »binary oppositions.« The binary distinctions of Orunmila, the »Patron Saint« of classical African philosophy, on the other hand, are »binary complementarity.«¹ The way of thought which is expressed in the idea of complementarity is identified as the specific contribution of African philosophy to world philosophy. That »the other« is the necessary condition for my own existence as a human being leads to the idea of universal brotherhood. The same conception can also be found in the term »ubuntu« as a ground-word of African philosophy. Mogobe Ramose from the University of South Africa has developed *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 2002). Oluwole appropriates the »Bantu-sayings« to which Ramose refers as expressing the core of *ubuntu* and of binary complementarity. I quote here only Ramose's interpretation of the first of these sayings: »*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. To be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, and on that basis, establish humane relationship with them« (p. 157). It is necessary to reread Oluwole's and Ramose's books to understand better what is African in African philosophy.

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¹ The term »Patron Saint« instead of »Baba Ifa« for Orunmila and »Father of Greek Wisdom« for Socrates is chosen in accordance with the practice in the »early Christian Church« by which »prominent philosophers [...] were later canonized as saints,« and more particularly with the suggestion of Erasmus to include »*Santa Socrates, Ora pro nobis* [...] in the liturgy of the Catholic Church« (p. XIV).