Shaping Future African Philosophy

J. O. Chimakonam (ed.), *Atụọlụ Ọmalụ: Some Unanswered Questions in Contemporary African Philosophy*, Maryland: University Press of America, 2015, 315 pages.

The question about the existence of African philosophy seems to be settled. Nevertheless, the question of its future still remains. *Atụọlụ Ọmalụ: Some Unanswered Questions in Contemporary African Philosophy* sets out to chart a course for future African philosophy. The general aim is to propose a conversation between and among African philosophers and African philosophy, on the one hand, other philosophical traditions, especially non-Western, on the other. This work produces a critical survey of a structured African philosophy that aims at a future African philosophy.

The editor, Jonathan Chimakonam, and contributors to this volume identify significant questions in African philosophy. These include questions of History, Being, Ethics, Knowledge, Logic, Democracy, Cultural Imperialism, Transliteration, Culture of Philosophy, Language, the Relation between the West and the ›Rest,‹ and the Future of African Philosophy. Since there are common elements in many of the contributions, this review, though not exhaustive, will examine some key issues.

The history of African philosophy has been till date unclear because of the undecided geo-political affiliation of Egypt. Geographically, Egypt is in Africa. However, the differentiation made between the Caucasians of North Africa and the black people of Southern Sahara makes the African's claim to the legacy of civilization associated with Egypt problematic. In ›Dating and Periodization: Questions in African Philosophy‹ (9–34), Chimakonam provides a thought-provoking insight that African philosophers need not systematize the history of African philosophy according to the Western paradigm: »ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary« (4). He claims that African philosophy began following the return of the Western-trained scholars such as Leopold Senghor (1906–2001), Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), Julius Nyerere (1922–1999), John Mbiti, (1931–) etc. with the feeling of frustration caused by the dehumani-

zation of colonialism and slavery. This feeling of frustration generated many questions and reactions in these philosophers. Consequently, in Chimakonam's view, the history of African philosophy differs from that of European philosophy (4), in the sense that philosophy began in Africa out of frustration but in the West it began with wonder (9)[1]. However, one may argue that the distinction made between wonder and frustration is inconsequential. Both wonder and frustration can either lead to admiration/despair or can generate philosophical questions. Hence, wonder and frustration are not the beginning of philosophy but the resultant questions about reality that confront people. Arguably, it makes more sense to ground intercultural philosophy in the primacy of question.

Innocent Asouzu in his ›The Question of Being in African Philosophy: A Case for *Ibanyidanda* Ontology‹ (35–52), makes a profound and insightful contribution to the question of being. He proposes a reconciliatory approach to the ambivalence regarding human consciousness (*ihe mkpuchi anya* i. e. concealment), which constitutes the bifurcation problem or dualism in Western thought. For Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda* ontology argues that all existent realities are »missing links of reality,« (41) in view of the unity of being and the subjectivity of consciousness (36–37). Hence, ›being‹ is ›to be with‹ *(sọ mụ adina);* and non-being is not a negation of being but ›to be alone‹ (43).

Mulumba Obiajulu devotes his paper to ›The Question of Moral Paradigm in African Philosophy: A Case for Communocentric Ethics‹ (53–66). Relying on his analysis of African (i. e. Igbo) understanding of personhood and community (54–57), which one can also find in Ubuntu and Ujamaa, Obiajulu argues that persons are persons only within a community, through the processes of recognition which the person receives from a community (54).[2] He writes, »an individual in Igbo language therefore is *mmadu* as man is also *mmadu*« (57). However, one may argue that this is too reductionist within the Igbo language family to which he refers. Individuality is *otu* (singularity). Hence *otu* can refer to *otuonye* (human person) or *otu ihe* (one

[1] Chimakonam may not be alone in claiming that the history of philosophy in Africa is a product of struggle. Leonard Harris made the same claim about African-American philosophy, as a »philosophy born of struggle.« *Cf.* L. Harris, *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, Dubuque, USA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2002 [1983].

[2] This article appears to neglect the oppressive aspect of the referred African community ethics with regards to gender and the unjustly outlawed (the outcaste – *osu).*

thing). In other words, there is a problem of transliteration. Furthermore, his etymology of *mmadu* as a contraction of *muo di ndu* (57) is also objectionable. *Muo di ndu* refers to the claim that a human being is body *and* spirit or mind *and* body. Consequently, *muo di ndu* depicts the transcendent nature of the human person. In contrast, *mmadu*, rather than a contraction of muo *di ndu*, is derived from two root words, *mma* (beauty) + *ndu* (life), which supports the idea of the sacredness of human life.

Meanwhile, regarding the knowledge question in African philosophy Chimakonam proposes a cogno-normative epistemology capable of transforming Africa (67–81). According to him, this reading provides a pragmatic approach to the nagging problem concerning African development and contains the logical structure of African thought (73). By cogno-normative, Chimakonam means a synthesis of cognitive/rational, empirical and normative aspects of the knowledge question (80), which one can interpret to be the question of epistemological authority, sources, production, decoding, communication, storage and transmission of knowledge in the modern African context. He calls this »humanized epistemology« (79).[3] For him, the question of knowledge should take an ›ought‹ rather than ›is‹ status (76–77). Thus, he argues that the ›is‹ presupposes an existing traditional epistemic order (73). Chimakonam suggests that due to the African historical predicament, there is no valid epistemic order or a valid organized authoritative knowledge (76), mainly because all that Africa is considered to have is sensual rather than rational. Moreover, for the most part knowledge is revealed by the gods (73). However, one may object that to argue that there is no epistemic order implies the denial of the existence of the epistemic agent as a historico-culturally situated agent. Moreover, experience may as well be an authoritative source of knowledge. The exclusive authority assigned to rea-

[3] I wish to observe that it is not clear what exactly Chimakonam means by a humanized epistemology. Moreover, such an argument is already present in Julius Nyerere's views on education and human development (*cf.* J. Nyerere, »Development is for Man, by Man, and of Man: The Declaration of Dar es Salaam,« in B. L. Hall, and J. R. Kidd (eds.), *Adult Education: A Design for Action*, Oxford: Pergamon, 1978, pp. 28–29). Additionally, though he criticized Paulin Hountondji, I do not see, Chimakonam distancing himself technically from Hountondji's ›reposition of the original problematics.‹ For Hountondji's argument on the question of knowledge, see P. Hountondji, *Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies*, RCC Annual Review, 2009, pp. 1–11.

son which Chimakonam seems to defend as the sole source of valid knowledge is, stands in need of justification.

›The Logic Question in African Philosophy: Between the Horns of Irredentism and Jingoism‹ by Uduma O Uduma (83–100) and ›The Criteria Question in African Philosophy: Escape from Horns of Jingoism and Afrocentricism‹ by Jonathan Chimakonam (101–123) focus on the debate about whether logic is universal or specific to a particular philosophical tradition. Although Uduma acknowledges the motivations for an African logic that arises as a response to Eurocentrism, he claims that logic is universal, and hence, the call for an African logic is »at best tendentious« (89, 93 ff.). By that he means that the need to develop a logic with African specificity is merely a response to the question of the specificity of African philosophy, its logical form included. In contrast, Chimakonam suggests that the specificity of African philosophy also requires a specific African logic, one he calls »*ezumezu logic*« which is a three-valued logic. Chimakonam claims that in the three-valued logic, there are no contradictories (i. e. A = X is Y is true, B = X is not Y is false), rather sub-contraries that complement each other to give rise to the third value – *ezumezu (ezu + izu = ezumezu)* in a contextual mode (117). One needs a close study of the proposed three-valued logic to critically evaluate its validity. Nevertheless, if he argues that logic is primarily about intelligibility (107), it means that logic is a way of reasoning to communicate truth or understanding. Hence, there is nothing in *ezumezu* logic that denies Uduma's claim to the universality of logic in so far as, logic, two-valued or three-valued, is about intelligibility. Nevertheless, Uduma remarks that »though, logic as a study of formal inference was non-existent in traditional Africa, the situation is not different in the West because it is only those trained logicians both in the West and Africa are at home with the formal logical inference of truth« (86). Consequently, the non-existence of formal logic does not entail absence of logic in its informal form.

I would like to conclude with some general comments. Firstly, Chimakonam's etymological analysis of ›*Atụọlụ Ọmalụ*‹ (1–3), is not satisfactory. *Atụọlụ Ọmalụ*, whose completion is *Ọmalụ mana Atụọlụ ofeke ofenye isi n'ọhia* stands for the idea that a word is enough for the wise. The use of *atụọlụ ọmalụ* is not elitist. Chimakonam's analysis, in which he distinguishes the knower (philosopher) from the ›unknower‹ (non-philosopher) (1–2), suggests a certain kind of elitism. Within the cultural and language family where it is used,

Ofeke means fool. But an unknower, who is not an expert in philosophy, need not be a fool.

Furthermore, knowledge is contextual and situated within the circumstances of the epistemic agent. Consequently, one may not talk about objective knowledge devoid of the subjective circumstances of the epistemic agent, since the epistemic agent has a central role to play in the knowledge process. In other words, knowledge cannot be abstracted from the particularities of human circumstance; space and time play a role in the making and evaluation of knowledge claims.

It is indeed important to commend the contributors of this anthology for distilling these wide-ranging issues concerning African philosophy and Africa in general. Coming from within and outside Sub-Sahara Africa and beyond Africa, the contributions set the stage for a critical engagement on African thought. Although the several questions this volume raises and the proffered answers are not exhaustive, one may confidently say that it is a step in the direction of shaping a future African philosophy and general development of Africa.

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