DISCUSSION FORUM

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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Introduction

I appreciate the opportunity the editors of *Modern Africa* have given me to continue the "Conversation with Rettová" by formulating a response to the critical article that will be published in the present issue of the journal. I also thank the authors of the article, Isaiah A. Negedu and SimonMary Asese Aihiokhai, for engaging with my work and for opening this conversation. I would like to orientate my response in two directions. First, I will clarify the definition of "African Philosophy" in my article and examine to what extent the article portrays "African Philosophy" as monolithic or fails to give space to its "polyphony of voices." A second important issue the critical article raises is the question of the place of African languages in African Philosophy. I will link my response to this with an elucidation of my positionality as a scholar.

African Philosophy: A Brand and a Discourse

I define African Philosophy in the article in the following words:

> [T]hese connections . . . define African philosophy a discourse, a field of enquiry. Needless to say, African philosophy is not understood here as a single set of beliefs or a specific existing philosophical system. The authors discussed are selected for their participation in and contributions to this discourse. Many of these authors identify as philosophers by profession, but this self-definition is not a key criterion for the inclusion in this survey: political theorists, scholars in religious studies, anthropology, literary studies or critical theory, even novelists or poets may be and are producers of texts that contribute to African philosophy (Rettová 2021a, footnote 2).

This definition states what is meant by African Philosophy in the article very clearly: a discourse. A brand, a tag. An umbrella under which many

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streams and voices come to dialogue. My article has a bibliography of 17 pages, and the article itself maps the developments in African Philosophy in selected areas of Africa and in specific areas joined by the language they use: *Ateliers de la pensée,* Makerere, Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu, the Calabar School of Philosophy, Lusophone philosophical thought, Francophone histories of Africa; these streams have their specific sections while many more trends are mentioned in the framing sections of the article (the introduction and the conclusion). The excluded areas (mainly African-language philosophies) are specifically mentioned and addressed as a "gap" (Rettová 2021a: 41) filled in other research. Does this very pluralistic nature of the article suggest that I consider African thought as monolithic? Does it not open a forum for a "polyphony of voices" by bringing together Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone voices, of several schools and orientations of philosophy, something that is very rarely done in African Philosophy, which still remains largely compartmentalized according to its (ex-colonial) languages?

Raising these questions, I invite Negedu and Aihiokhai to a closer reading of my article and ask them to match more precisely their statements with what I wrote. The authors accuse me of "scarce imagination . . . the inability to see the nuances in complex discourses and to reduce them to a monologic discourse." Where specifically do I suggest in my article that "there is only one way of doing philosophy"? Where am I arguing that "there is nothing new to learn outside of what has been taught in the past"? Where did I reach the conclusion that "African philosophical thoughts inherent in some philosophical concepts originating from African linguistic heritage are themselves products of European intellectual tradition"? Where did I write anything that would deny that "[p]hilosophies from the global north are culture-inspired"? Finally, where do I "portray some misrepresentations of African cultural worldviews"? I mention this, because I am not aware of having written about "African cultural worldviews" in my article; I only and strictly referenced published works by African or Africanist philosophers in it.

The discussion about the dating of African Philosophy is really interesting. I agree with Negedu and Aihiokhai that my article uses the "ideological end of those events [i.e. apartheid, genocide], not their actual end." I also agree with the suggestion that both events have had repercussions that continue well into the present. The article uses these events metonymically, taking them for events that shape key orientations in African philosophical thought. Philosophy indeed moves in "ideologies," in conceptual abstractions of events

or even persons (consider Edet's notion of "mandelanization," also evoked in my article) and I do not think that using these events in their ideological, conceptual abstraction disqualifies the assembling of African philosophical discourses along the axis that these two events form, from normative idealism to critical realism (as I called it elsewhere, Rettová 2022). I am willing to interrogate whether this axis, or what I call "fundamental tension" in the article, is a helpful way to organise and read the individual streams of African Philosophy. What is, however, highly important about this axis is that it rests upon two African events, two manifestations of the political and military agency of Africans. In this way, it introduces a periodisation of African Philosophy informed by African agency, as opposed to periodisations that make reference to colonialism or the postcolonial condition, that is, to Africa's subjection to and objectification within another continent's history.

African Languages in African Philosophy

The article critically misunderstands my position on the relevance and use of African languages in African Philosophy – and more generally. As most of my academic work revolves around the use of African languages in African Philosophy, I would like to respond to this in some detail. I will preface this section with a consideration of my positionality as a scholar.

I position myself as a philosopher who grew up behind the Iron Curtain and was deeply impacted in her formative years by (post-)Soviet imperial politics, and local resistance to it, and (post-)socialist economy of that region. The academic culture I grew up in was one of deep respect for language and its horizon in culture; in my philosophical formation, we were always told to "go back to the original." No philosophical interpretation was allowed that did not consult the philosophical text in its original, and we read and analysed texts in Ancient Greek, Latin, French, German, English, and Russian, on top of our native languages, Czech and Slovak. I followed this attitude also when I started working on African Philosophy.

I have engaged with about twenty African languages with considerable focus and dedication, and I have worked on the literatures and cultures of a narrower subset of these. My academic work is based on original, largely untranslated texts in seven African languages, from West and East Africa, Central and Southern Africa. In addition to the languages themselves, I have studied the literary traditions and the historical grammars (where available) of these languages. I have of course also used discourses in languages of European origin, including

English, French, and Portuguese. I have published a long philosophical article in an African language, translations of philosophical texts from several African languages into European and African languages; for instance, I have translated several philosophical passages from Bambara into Swahili. For many years, I have also taught in an African language, specifically courses on African Philosophy and African literature, at university level. While I do not claim to have the deep hermeneutical immersion of an insider of an African culture, I profit from the broad scope of my expertise to develop a comparative perspective in African Philosophy, fanning out precisely the polyphony of voices that Negedu and Aihiokhai's article speak about. The nature of my academic work is the very opposite of the assumption, attributed to me in Negedu and Aihiokhai's article, "that African linguistic traditions are themselves monolithic."

Now, the explicit objective of my 2021 article in *Modern Africa* was to map recent African Philosophy in three languages, English, French, and Portuguese. This article is set apart from my work on Afrophone philosophies (see below). In the article I explicitly refer to the "gap" (Rettová 2021a: 41), with a reference to my other work. The article states:

> [This article] has looked at Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone African philosophy; the gap is, of course, philosophies in African languages and philosophy expressed through channels that are not necessarily associated with global academia (Rettová 2007). (Rettová 2021a: 41)

I also highlight scholarship on texts in African languages as a key issue for African Philosophy to be interrogated further:

> There are several meta-philosophical issues that continue being of interest. These concern in particular the question of resources in African languages (Rettová 2007; Kresse 2007; Diagne 2016; Kane 2012 and 2016; Ngom 2016; Kayange 2019). Text-critical work with African sources is almost entirely missing and many philosophical works remain deplorably limited in their understanding of the nature of language and translation. (Rettová 2021a: 40)

Therefore, my article is not about African languages in African Philosophy. I speak rarely about the use of language in my article. I only referred to the linguistic practice of the Calabar School of Philosophy (renamed to Conversational School of Philosophy), or CSP, in it, but I did not comment on the use of African languages in African Philosophy in general. With respect to

the uses by the CSP, my criticism, i.e. coining excessive concepts that are never used again, merging Western and African words, coining concepts for existing concepts without clarifying the distinction, etc., can be demonstrated on the notion of *ratiosusuism*. Jonathan Chimakonam defines it in the following words:

> I would like to describe this inseparability of language and rationality as 'structural *ratiosusuism*'. Derived from two root words '*ratio*' (Latin) meaning reckoning, reason or having the ability to reason or state of being rational; as well as '*asusu*' (Igbo) meaning language. Thus *ratio* + *asusu*, gives birth to the concept *ratiosusuism*. By structural *ratiosusuism* I mean a structure of two inseparable units in which language is the manifestation of rationality and rationality is the form of language. This makes thinking linguistic and portrays language whether in speech or writing as a manifestation of rationality,. (Chimakonam 2019: 16)

The example of *ratiosusuism* manifests all the issues I have highlighted in my article. First, how does this concept differ from the linguistic relativity hypothesis, on which there is abundant literature which would then enable a much more nuanced understanding of the link between rationality and language? Second, for whom does *ratiosusuism* have cultural resonances? In other words, who uses both Latin and Igbo in their daily life? Thirdly, Googling the concept, it appears twice, in two publications by Jonathan Chimakonam. I appreciate Google may not cover all the uses of a word, but I still get the impression that no one is using *ratiosusuism* other than the person who coined it; and then I wonder, was there a good reason for the coinage? The word appears four times in the book, three times in the definition itself and the fourth time in the index. Why has even the author himself not used it again in the book in which he introduces it? What was the reason for its introduction?

My own approach towards African-language philosophical texts is very different. I have developed it in a series of publications, starting with the coinage of the term "Afrophone Philosophies" in 2004 (Rettová 2004), with a monograph under that name coming out in 2007 (Rettová 2007; the full text is openly accessible on the internet), and culminating in my work in an ERC-funded project that I lead, entitled *Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy* (2020–2025) (a programmatic outline of this project is provided in Rettová 2021b). This work is referenced in my 2021 article in *Modern Africa*. I invite Negedu and Aihiokhai to consult some of these resources. I trust a conversation about the role of African languages in African Philosophy can start, with more accuracy and sophistication, from there.

Conclusion

The present article formulates a response to Isaiah A. Negedu and SimonMary Asese Aihiokhai's critical engagement with my article published on the pages of *Modern Africa: Politics, History, and Society* in 2021, entitled "Post-Genocide, Post-Apartheid: The Shifting Landscapes of African Philosophy, 1994-2019." I have clarified my position on the definition and nature of African Philosophy, as presented in my 2021 article in *Modern Africa*, and on the use of African languages in African philosophical thought – the very subject of my research for over two decades. I reiterate my thanks for the opportunity to elaborate these two points in order to avoid any misunderstandings that my 2021 article in *Modern Africa* may have caused.

References

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