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Sophie Oluwole's Hermeneutic Trend in African Political Philosophy: Some Comments

Abstract: The intent of this paper is to discuss hermeneutics as one of the current trends in African political philosophy using the works of the erudite female African philosopher, Sophie A. Oluwole, as an exemplar. This paper explores the nitty-gritty of the political thoughts of Oluwole on the riveted issues of democracy and human rights in contemporary African socio-political discourse. It identifies the limit of Oluwole's hermeneutic approach and critically exposes some of the shortcomings of hermeneutic thoughts on the subject-matter. Concerned about the dearth of literatures by female African professional philosophers in the area of African political philosophy, the paper concludes that Oluwole's scholarly erudition should inspire more female African professional philosophers in working within any identified emerging trend(s) in African political philosophy, in so far they are moved by it.

Keywords: political philosophy, human rights as hermeneutically given

Introduction

In his paper, "Four Trends in Current African Philosophy," Odera Oruka (1979) identified ethno-philosophy, philosophic sagacity, professional philosophy and nationalistic ideological philosophy as the defining trends that have contoured the discourses on African philosophy². The earlier political reflections, thoughts and juggling of African nationalists and scholars in the mid-1950s to the 90s have been described by Odera Oruka as the 'African nationalist ideological philosophy.' This trend is an attempt in the area of African political philosophy; it consists of works with focus on evolving new and unique political theories that are pro-independence and anti-colonial in nature; traditional and authentic in identity; as well as first-order reflections on how best to arrange African collective life, political institutions and social practices.

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² In his *Sage Philosophy* (1990), Oruka added two more trends to the list of four making the number to six trends in African philosophy. The addenda are African literary/Artistic philosophy and African hermeneutic philosophy.

Much as the political and discursive moods of the time when Oruka wrote his piece on trends in African philosophy seems supportive of his categorizations, some questions are left hanging as to the appropriateness or otherwise of such delineation today. Theorizing in African socio-political philosophy has come of age. Beyond the corpus of political thoughts of African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, L.S. Senghor, Sekou Toure, Kenneth Kaunda, Obafemi Awolowo, and Nnamdi Azikiwe amongst others, today, there is growing avalanche of scholastic interests in African political philosophy with diverse trends and focuses. This development necessarily raises doubts as whether or not Oruka's identification of nationalistic ideological philosophy as a (and the only) trend in African political philosophy still subsists.

We may ask: What are the general directions of discourse in African political philosophy today? Are they in anyway fundamentally different from the anti-colonial and post-colonial structuring of African states, which defined the trend of nationalistic ideological discourse? Are there views that can be authentically called 'philosophical' as well as 'African' in the works of scholars that are brandished 'nationalistic ideologists' in Oruka's typology? Who can be termed an African political philosopher? Are there female African philosophers who have made significant contributions within and outside Oruka's nationalist-ideological trend? What are the new (emerging or well established) issues and orientations in contemporary African political philosophy?

This paper is an attempt to respond to the above posers by locating and bringing to the fore, an emerging trend in current African political philosophy. This is the hermeneutic trend. Foremost representative of this trend in contemporary African political philosophy are Tsenay Serequeberhan, Theophilus Okere, Bruce B. Janz and Sophie A. Oluwole. In de-gendering the African politico-philosophical space as a purely male-dominated affair, this paper seeks to critically discuss the political philosophy of a prominent African female philosopher, Sophie Abosede Oluwole³. Our aim in this regard is to expose and establish her thoughts

³ Sophie Abosede Olayemi Oluwole is a leading figure in Yoruba philosophy. Born (and bred) in 1935, Igbara-Oke, Ondo State, Oluwole's parents were from Edo State, Nigeria. Though by virtue of ancestral lineage, she is an Edo woman, but her deep grounding in Yoruba culture makes her more of a Yoruba person. She had her primary education at St. Paul's Anglican Primary School, Igbara-Oke; from there she proceeded to Anglican Girls modern school, at Ile-Ife in 1951. In 1953, she enrolled at the Women Training College, Ilesha, where she finished with a class IV certificate in 1954. She had her first degree in Philosophy in 1970; her Master of Arts degree in philosophy in 1974 and completed her Ph.D thesis on Meta-ethics and the Golden Rule in 1984. With the successful defence of her thesis, Oluwole broke the ice by being the first Ph.D in Philosophy awarded by a Nigerian university, the University of Ibadan. Upon completion of her Ph.D with specialization in metaphysics and ethics in Western philosophy, Oluwole started

within the hermeneutic trend in a motley array of other new trends beyond Oruka's 'nationalist ideological philosophy' in contemporary African political philosophy.

The rest of our discussion in this paper is organized in four sections. In the first section, a discussion of the hermeneutic tradition in African philosophy in which Oluwole's political ideas find expression is attempted. The second section takes us through her political thoughts and how they subsume within the hermeneutic trend. In furtherance of our discourse, the third section is a critical appraisal of Oluwole's hermeneutical predilection and some concluding remarks features in the last section.

Sophie Oluwole and the hermeneutic tradition in African philosophical discourse

Oluwole accepts the study of African oral tradition as a precondition for the discovery of cogent philosophical principles. And central to such a study is the hermeneutic method. The method of hermeneutics does not guarantee truth, nor does it merely focus on the analysis of propositions, rather, it makes different forms of life and thought accessible to reflection through interpretation of life-world. Oluwole's interest is in the interpretation of the rich oral tradition using the Yoruba exemplar of proverbs and *Ifa* corpus. In this hermeneutic study, as Kolawole Owolabi (Kolawole A. Owolabi 2001, 158) rightly noted, Oluwole attempts a deeper analysis and hermeneutic interpretation of the various positions taken in the oral narratives, insisting that the philosopher's priority is to identify the primary concern of the *Ifa* verses in an attempt to characterize the goal the thinkers wish to attain through thought. In Oluwole's words:

researching and writing on African philosophy, which is her area of interest. Oluwole has enviable contributions to the enterprise of philosophizing in Africa. An incredible scholar by all standards, Oluwole is one of the most prominent Nigerian philosophers in the world today. The breadth and the depth of her scholarship are not only impressive but also widely acknowledged through many awards and honours from institutions in African and beyond. Being a philosopher is her profession; writing, publishing and speaking at public gatherings are her passions; and living up to what she preaches is a habit. Oluwole's consummate passion for the teaching and critical promotion of African culture both in her philosophical writings and outward advocacy is unflinchingly second to none. Given her linguistic training in German and English languages together with cultural grounding in Yoruba language, and her analytical philosophical background, Oluwole is theoretically rigorous, methodologically nuanced and sophisticated in the art of criticism. Oluwole has written on a wide variety of philosophical issues and her works cut across different areas of Yoruba philosophy: metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, science, religion, jurisprudence, gender studies and political philosophy. Our interest in this paper is to discuss her ideas on African political philosophy, with emphasis on democracy and human rights. Her thoughts on these issues necessarily partake in the hermeneutic tradition to which Oluwole belongs.

My approach is to stay within the disciplinary orientation of philosophy. Contrary to the focus of history and the social sciences, philosophy's primary endeavour is not with what people do but what they say, that is, verbal expressions by human beings. That is why we find that one of the most commonly used phrases in philosophy is "X said" Hardly do we hear "Plato did" or "Russell did." Our references are always to what some people said....Given the undeniable fact that we have little or no written documents in which the actual sayings of our progenitors are passed down to us..., the words of our sages will be used as the common referential phrase, the Yoruba people say. (Oluwole 2003, 423)

What drew Oluwole's attention to studying African thought in the authenticity of the languages in which they are expressed is the centrality of the concern with what people say in the intellectual endeavour known as philosophy. Employing therefore, the hermeneutic approach for the reinterpretation of the deep reflection underlying the proverbial narratives of what the Yoruba say, Oluwole discusses some philosophical themes: justice, time, human rights, democracy, development, sexism, knowledge and reality.

In what follows, we shall present selectively, some specific expositions of how Oluwole partakes in the hermeneutic trend in African political philosophy. In this regard, we will focus our discussion on the issues of democracy and rights in Oluwole's thoughts. We are aware that her political thought is not simply encapsulated in these themes; we only focused on these twin issues in this paper because they lurk beneath current discourse in African political philosophy, and have indeed gained ample attentions of scholars working in the field.

For Oluwole, Western philosophical study of law, legal and democratic systems and human rights is not the only possible jurisprudence. This is because oral tradition offers a veritable literature and database from

which traditional African thoughts and notions of law, democracy justice and human rights can be hermeneutically understood. Her thoughts on these issues can be found in her works: “Democracy and Indigenous Governance: The Nigerian Experience” and *Democratic Patterns and Paradigms: Nigerian Women’s Experience*. Her other essays in African socio-political philosophy include: “The Legislative Ought” (1988), “Democracy or Mediocrity” (1989), “Culture, Nationalism and Philosophy” (1997), “The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind” (2001), “The Centrality of Culture to Economic and Social Development” (2008) amongst others.

Sophie Oluwole’s political thoughts on democracy and rights

Two basic popular but erroneous views on democracy, in Oluwole’s submission, are discussed in these works. One, contrary to the popular conception of democracy as the “government of the people, by the people and for the people,” which has led to the common view that democracy itself is a form of government; Oluwole does not conceive democracy as such. She faults this popular definition not just on the basis of the ambivalent construal of the term “people” but essentially on the ground that “the definition gives no inkling about the specific structure of the political organization in a particular society” (ibidem, 419). The second erroneous view of modern times, which Oluwole observes and discusses through the hermeneutic method, is that a monarchy cannot be democratic.

With respect to the first issue, democracy, in her view, adequately understood, is a theory that sets some basic [socio political] principles according to which a good government, whatever its form, must be run. (ibidem, 420) Such principles, which as she notes, exist in all African traditional societies include those of justice, freedom, equity, accountability, rule of law and liberty. These social principles are universal criteria for distinguishing between good and bad governments. In other words, they are features of democracy that are not culturally specific, and whose abrogation inevitably produces tyranny.

To give a few examples; accountable government, the citizens’ rights to decide, speak and organize are essential to free political expression. The universality of these principles notwithstanding, Oluwole notes that African conception of her own interest, hopes, aspirations, etc. may determine her own peculiar pattern of democracy without violating any of the principles of freedom, liberty, rights and justice as these are embedded in democracy generally.

It is against this background that Oluwole attempts to study *in situ* the principles underlying the cultural, political, economic, social and justice institutions in an African culture, with a view to showing explicitly, the understanding of existing axioms within the historical African culture.

Concentrating on the Yoruba, Oluwole hermeneutically explores a quantum number of the principles of democracy and human rights in the peoples' oral tradition.

Her conviction is that such approach will allow us to discover the democratic nature of political organization in pre-colonial Yoruba culture; it will also open our lenses to the principles that guided social relationship in the people's cultural milieu. She believes also that through a hermeneutic understanding of such principles, and the adherence to them, we can arrive at an authentic socio-political African theory that can be used as basis for the entrenchment and development of democratic norms in contemporary Africa. She is against the culture of swallowing hook and sinker some foreign democratic patterns and paradigms and equally opposed to the idea of going back to everything traditional.

According to her, "a total dependence on the paradigms and patterns of democracy as practiced in many countries of Europe may not be the only ideal way to progress" (Oluwole 1996, 28) because several traditional socio-political systems in pre-colonial Africa hold some lessons for contemporary Africa. Her urge is the need to critically examine and re-evaluate different democratic systems in Africa pre-colonial times. (ibidem, 21) In this critical exercise, "there is the need to identify, analyse and formulate specific paradigms which respect the positive values in our different cultures and at the same, are not blind to new experiences" (ibidem, 31). This is important because it will allow us to see better what wrongs need righting and which rights have been wronged by the contemporary system. Not until we have established this, we may be unable to develop cogent new democratic structures and social habits that will satisfy our cultural aspirations as well as development.

In Oluwole's analysis, a distinction can be made between "governance" and "rulership." Among the Yoruba, the act of organizing society is *ijoba*, which literally means "rulership." The act of state management by a group of (s)elected people is referred to as *iselu*. The fundamental difference between *ijoba* and *iselu* is that while the *Oba* (king) rules, and not expected to be involved in politics, that is, *iselu*, but to exercise political power and authority, the political management of society lies with the selected group of people, that is the *oselu*. This group, which the *Oba* traditionally chairs, actually manages the political affairs of the state (Oluwole, 2003, 421). But in contemporary times there is this distortion in the usage of the word *ijobato* mean governance/government, especially democratic type.

Given the traditional political roles and responsibilities attached to distinction between *ijoba* (rulership) and *oselu* (state management), there is the temptation to think that a monarchical system, which is typified of the

Yoruba political society, cannot be democratic. Oluwole shows this temptation as false by her analysis of the processes involved in the appointment of an *Oba* in Yoruba societies. She describes the traditional Yoruba political as constitutional monarchy though with some negative aristocratic elements (Oluwole 1996, 23).

Pre-colonial Yoruba societies were kingdom based. Each of kingdoms comprised a central town and several villages. The ruler of the whole kingdom is called the *Oba* (king). A subordinate ruler, called *Baale* (village head), ruled each of the subordinate towns and villages, and acknowledged the suzerainty of the king. Every town was divided into quarters, and each quarter is under the control of a quarter chief. Each quarter was made up of many large family compounds each of which housed many nuclear families (a nuclear family being a man and his wife or wives and their children) all of whom claimed descent from one ancestor (Akintoye, www.YorubaNation.org. Par. 1). The leader or head of a family compound is called *Oloriobi* (family head). Each of these stratifications is interconnected with the other with respective internal governments. The choice of who governs at these various levels is done through democratic means. The choice of the *Baale* and the *Oloriobi* is mostly based on age and prominence in the ancestral tree of the village or compound, and each has a number of royal families among which the *Oba* is chosen (Salami 2006, 69).

Contrary to popular belief, an *Oba*, in most Yoruba societies, is neither arbitrarily appointed nor regarded solely as a divine representative on earth. Ruling houses are traditionally established along the lines of the number of wives a founding *Obahad* (Oluwole 1996, 23). So the title of king was hereditary in the royal family group. So too were the titles of village heads and quarter chiefs in their own particular family groups (Akintoye, par. 3). Nevertheless, in the appointment of a king, the Yoruba political system was decidedly democratic. When a king died, he was not automatically succeeded by his son as in many other monarchical systems. Candidates for Obaship would emerge from the royal families, involving all male members of the royal family group. Thus, sons (and even grandsons) of former kings, were eligible for selection as king. When they emerged, they are all treated as equal candidates to the stool, hence subject to the same rules and treatment. The power to carry out the selection on behalf of the people was vested in a standing committee of chiefs now known as the Council of Kingmakers in consultation with the *Ifa* oracle. The *Ifa* oracle guides and authenticates the Council of kingmakers in their selection process.

The Council of Kingmakers was all-powerful in this matter of selecting a king. Their decisions were not arbitrary as there were laid down principles and norms that stringently guided their final decision on who became the

Oba (king). First, they investigated the historical family background of each of the candidates and their respective characters as well as moral disposition to the members of the society. They allowed the general populace to lobby individually and collectively and to express opinions on the princes, whether for good or bad. The kingmakers were obliged to listen to the people and due considerations were given to the peoples' complaints, opinions and wishes.

To be successful at these tedious processes of screening by the Council of Kingmakers, a candidate's choice must have been supported by the majority of the Council of Kingmakers upon overwhelming merit in the historical, moral, and good personality yardsticks used. It was not until these mundane requirements had been fulfilled by the candidate, that the spiritual guidance of the *Ifa* oracle would be sought. When supported by the *Ifa* oracle, other ritual processes would then commence for the ascension of the king to throne of his forefathers.

The *Oba* as the head of the political organization of traditional Yoruba society had political, juridical, and executive power, which he did not exercise alone. While the King occupied the highest seat of the kingdom, there existed an elaborate organization of palace officials and council of chiefs with whom the King directed the affairs of kingdom with. This council of chiefs included civil chiefs, the military chiefs, the ward chiefs and heads of compounds and extended families. The councils of chiefs met with the king daily in the palace to take all decisions and to function as the highest court of appeal. After its decisions were taken, they were announced as the king's decisions. The functions of the King as the head of the council of society include the protection of the general interests of members of the society, which called for overseeing the general health of the society and her citizens, including the internal security of members, issues of peace and war, and the administration of justice, with the King as the last court of appeal for the whole Kingdom, and also concerned with the conduct of the relationship with other regional Kingdoms and societies (Fadipe 1970, 206).

The power arrangement in traditional Yoruba political setting was such that it provided checks and balance mechanisms. For instance, the powerful institution of the *Iya Oba* (mother of the *Oba*) in conjunction with some chiefs constituted a team of advisers. It often functions as an opposition, and not as sworn enemies, which must always disagree with the *Oba*. The *Iya Oba* institution supports good policies but had the power to check the *Oba* excesses (Oluwole 2003, 422).

If a king became over-ambitious and tried to establish personal power beyond the limited monarchy system, or if he became tyrannical, greedy, or otherwise seriously unpopular, some chiefs bore the constitutional duty of

cautioning, counselling, rebuking him in private. If he would not mend his ways, the chiefs might take his matter before a special council of spiritual elders called *Ogboni*, where he would be seriously warned. If he still would not change, the quarter chiefs might alert the family heads, and the latter might inform their compound meetings. The final action would then be that certain chiefs, whose traditional duty it was to do it, would approach the king and symbolically present him with an empty calabash or parrot's eggs. The meaning of this sign is that he must compulsorily evacuate the throne and commit suicide usually by poisoning (Oluwole 1996, 29). This final action against a king was very rarely taken, but every king was informed at the time of his installation that it was in the power of his subjects. According to Oluwole, an ancient Yoruba oral text expresses this:

- (i) *Ajuma, Ajuma,
Apo eran o juko
O un lo d'ifa Alakoleju,
Ti o ko won je n ife Oodaye.
Won niki o so gboitad'ode;
Won niki o ma so igboigbalede'oje,
Won niki o ma f' igbo Osun se de.
Nje Alakoleju o gbo
Nje Alaakoleju o gba.
A o feon'ileyimo, ma a lo.*

I am greater than everyone; I am more important than all.
In me, public mismanagement is not easily discoverable
These were the principles of public management which the greedy operated upon when s/he cheated in the primordial society.
S/he was told to be careful in handling political affairs, and not to act as if s/he is hunting in a game forest.
S/he was warned not to turn political associations into fraudulent organizations
S/he was cautioned against converting public funds into personal use.
The greedy did not listen, the greedy did not yield.
“We do not want you in this society anymore” (the people say) go away!
(ibidem)

In the above quote from *Ifa* oral literature as translated and interpreted by Oluwole, politicians who cheated in pristine Ife society believed they were so powerful and clever such that the people would not easily detect their atrocities. However they received signals and warnings not to treat citizens the way they hunt animal in the forest. They were advised not turn to political associations into cheating organizations. In fact, they were cautioned against embezzling public funds and converting public

property to personal use. The cheating politicians did not listen. They refused to play the game according to the set rules. In the end, the people were left with no option other than to chase them out of office. Evidently illustrated in the above excerpt from *Ifa* corpus is the democratic principle of responsibility, accountability and sovereignty of the people in democracy. These are inter-related with the issue of human rights, rule of law and justice between the governed and the machineries of the state.

The democratic import of the traditional Yoruba mode of social organization and governance is discernible from the fact that there were rules set for a choice of leaders, and governance was based on the rules and laws of the community. It was democratic to the extent that the rules were strictly followed, which made it impossible for anyone to impose himself on the society as it ensured that to become an *Oba*, both the spiritual and material criteria were observed (Salami 2006, 74). It is believed among the Yoruba that for there to be social order, law must not only be clearly stated and enforced, but also all the constituent organs of the state must work harmoniously to the progress of the society. For this reason, the Yorubas will say:

(ii) *Ilu ti o siofin, eseosi*

(A society with no law, has no punishment)

There was the recognition of peoples' rights and freedom. The people had the freedom to express their opinion to the *Oba* and the rulers either directly or through songs and other forms of symbolism during various festivals. Other host of rights recognized by the Yoruba democratic monarchical system is the right to property ownership, right to life, right to labour, right to fair hearing, rights of women, rights of children, rights of slaves, among others.

The traditional political society accommodated the participation of both the rulers and the ruled; although the *Oba* was the supreme commander, every cadre of the society was in various ways included in operating the Kingdom to the point that the activities of the *Oba*-in-council at the societal level were replicated at the ward and compound levels to indeed establish a participatory democratic process in traditional Yoruba society (Salami 2006, 75). A proverbial evidence in support of this is:

(iii) *Agbamerinl'oonse' lu: Agbaokunrin, agbaobinrin, agbaomode, agbaalejo*

(Four experienced groups of people manage the affairs of state: experienced men, experienced women, experienced youths and experienced sojourners) (Oluwole 2003, 426).

Proverb (iii) encapsulates traditional Yoruba theory of political leadership, which is quadrant in dimension: wise men, experienced women, intelligent youths and veteran foreigners. Much as traditional Yoruba society was guided by this leadership principle, it must however be stated at this

point, that the continuum of the Yoruba indigenous system of governance, was historically truncated by the advent of colonialism.

Though, peradventure it was not disrupted by the contact of the Yoruba with the Western powers, the sustainability of the traditional democratic system was uncertain in view of the serious tensions and conflicts that resulted from the synthesis of monarchism and democracy in traditional Yoruba culture. The Yoruba social history is replete with cases of power tussles between the executive power of the *Oba* and some other democratic institutions meant to check the absoluteness and excesses of the *Oba*. These institutions were sometimes weak in the face of the powerful and immensely influential *Oba* superstructure within the Yoruba traditional society (Salami 2006, 76).

Besides these shortcomings, Oluwole (Oluwole 1996, 26) noted that different operators of the modern democratic system at the formal level have done a lot to destabilize and corrupt this traditional system by supporting candidates not recommended by members of their societies to become rulers. The justification is too often rested on some ill-founded claims of democracy: the right of the government to be involved in the selection of an *Oba*. In this situation, political leaders now hand over staff of office to traditional rulers and by extension; many rulers are nothing more than glorified warrant chiefs (Ibidem).

In view of the above shortcomings of the notion and institution of monarchical democracy in traditional Yoruba culture, some brief note on human rights as hermeneutically given by Oluwole is apposite.

Human Dignity (Fundamental Human Rights):

- (iv) *Erukuni' le won lo sin s'oko*
Omokul'oko, won lo sin s'ile
Beenibi o juibi,
Bi a se b'eru
L'a se b'omo
Eruni baba,
Onal'ojin
Ma fiya je mi
Nitorimo je alejo,
biinonaaba de ibomiran,
Alejol'o o je.

When a slave dies at home, s/he is buried at the farmstead.
 When the true born dies in the farm, the corpse is brought home for burial.
 Yet one birth is not greater than the other.
 The way the slave's child is born,
 So also the master's child is born.
 The slave has a father.

Only he is far away.
Do not oppress me
Because I am a stranger.
If you get to another land,
You too will be a stranger. (Oluwole 1997,105-106)

The philosophical import in the above *Ifa* verse is according to Oluwole, the respect for human dignity, which is the core of human rights. The verse shows the critical expression of a thinker against the Yoruba conventional view and attitude to slaves. Construing philosophy as the criticism of the ideas we live, what this anonymous Yoruba thinker (who is most likely to be a slave) has done is to offer critic with evidence of reason against the maltreatment of slaves, and in defence of human dignity and equality. This *Ifa* verse, in Oluwole's view, is nothing short of philosophy. Though, one major criticism that has been customarily levelled against the possibility of human rights in traditional Africa is that of the prevalence of the practice of slavery, which even predated African contact with an experience of the Western trans-Atlantic slave trade. This criticism can easily be disposed on the basis of the distinction between trans-Atlantic trade and the slavery of the traditional Africa. The former was a total dehumanization of man by man. In the case of the later, C. Williams rightly noted that "the African slaves were considered as members of the community, they learnt crafts, had rights to farm, held important offices of state, and had virtually all the rights and privileges of a freeborn" (Williams 1976, 129). This truism of this position is well illustrated in the above verse of *Ifa* corpus cited by Oluwole.

But one can probe further the superior veracity of the *Ifa* verse over and above other contrasting views on slaves, discrimination and unequal treatment of humans as latent in the people's proverbial repertoire. There are some Yoruba proverbs that argue against equal treatment of slaves and the freeborn as well as against allowing equal doors of opportunities to them:

(v) *Imado 'obaj'obaabaluje; bi eruba je oba, ijoyekobakuikan.*

Peradventure a wild boar is made a king, the community would have been ruined; if a slave had been crowned, the rank of chiefs would have been depleted.

(vi) *Kosibi a se ma se ebolo, tikoninruigbe.*

Irrespective of how sumptuous the spices in cooking the 'ebolo' vegetable are, its aroma will remain offensive.

The surface interpretation popularly given to the immediately cited proverbs is that slaves are of no intrinsic worth, and that any attempt to elevate them to the status of a freeborn will bring about fatal consequences. Proverb (v) is an analogical indication that by nature, slaves are unfit to pilot the affairs of the society because they will desecrate existing institutions of political leadership. Extenuating the unequal treatment of slaves and the freeborn in being opened to windows of opportunity in social/political network, proverb (vi) is a figurative expression that knocks out any attempt to polish the personality of the slaves as a futile endeavour because the dispositional nature of a slave is irredeemable. In effect, proverbs (v) and (vi) are contraries to Oluwole's thesis of recognition of human dignity and equal opportunities of the slave and the freeborn in traditional Yoruba culture.

Gender Equality:

The idea of predominance of gender imbalance and inequality in traditional African culture as widely held in Western social anthropological findings is a deluge. While there was male chauvinistic proverbial oppression of women, such did not translate into suppressed gender role of women in Yoruba African society. Women are neither inferior nor superior to their male counterpart. While women in traditional African society were given the unrestrained opportunities to develop to their greatest capacities, the emphasis was on complementarity of gender relations and roles (Balogun 1999, 42). This is demonstrated in an *Ifa* verse, *Ose Itura* that reads:

(vii) *Da gike, da gike*
Aakekanko le e da gike
Da' gi la, Da' gi la
Eelekan o le ledagi la;
B' o s'ere lu
Osugbo o le e da anwo se

Cutting alone, cutting alone,
 The axe cannot cut alone,
 Splitting alone, splitting alone;
 The wedge cannot split alone;
 Without the *Erelu* (the female member), the cult of *Osugbo* cannot operate (Oluwole 1997, 110).

The above *Ifa* verse is an argument about the complementary roles of the male and female in society. The *Osugbo*, generally operated as a secret society, is the legal arm of government among the Ijebu people of Yoruba land. And there is always a woman representative. The argument here is that no one section of society can rule alone just as the axe or the wedge cannot function alone. True democracy, in the thinking of the author

of this proverb, does not justify the proscription of women participation in decision making processes.

(viii)

Atodunmodunl'erinti n rin. Erino fara k'asa. Atosumosu'efonti n rin, be eni o t'esebopoolo. Eeyanti o onil'eni, ti o m'eyanl'eyan, eeyanti o koede de 'le, niipet'obinrin o sil'aye

(Leaders and self-respecting personalities who recognize the importance of women go through life without a hitch. Those who refuse to respect the rights of women and/or despise them do so because they are shallow in knowledge) (Oluwole 2003, 426).

Oluwole interpreted from the above oral texts that the Yoruba believe that wise people who recognize the importance of women go through life with minimum difficulties. Only those who have a poor sense of human values would fail to appreciate the centrality of women's role in creating a peaceful and harmonious society.

Children's Rights:

The Yoruba, according to Oluwole, give pivotal interest to children's rights. She cited such proverbs as:

(ix) *Omode o j'obi, agba o j'oye*

Adults who deny children their rights do not earn social respect

The Right to Fair Hearing:

In the *Ifa* verse of IworiMeji, it is stated that:

(x)

Owoomode o to pepe, t' agbalagba o woakeregbe, ise ewe be agbaki o masekomo, gbogbowani a nise a jo n be 'rawa. A dia fun Orunmilaeyitiakapoo re o pelejol'odoOlodumare,

OlodumarewaaransesiOrunmilapeki o wa so idinaatiko le fi be akapoo re. NigbatiOrunmila de iwajuOlodumare Oniounsagbogboagbaraoun fun akapoo, o niipinakapoonikogbo. Nigbanaanioronaa to waa ye Olodumareyeyekeye. Inuureesi dun wipe ounko da ejoeekunkan. Ni Eledaabanilatijonaa lo omoedakankogbodo da ejoeekunkan. Anikandajo, o oseun:anikandajo, o oseeyan, nigbati o ogbot'enuenikeji, emil'odajo se?

A child's hand does not reach up to the mantelpiece that of an adult cannot enter into a gourd. When a child appeals to an adult for help, s/he should not refuse; we all live to complement each other. This is the oracular message for *Orunmila* whose priest sued him before *Olodumare*. And *Olodumare* sent for *Orunmila* to come to explain why he refused assistance to his priest. When *Orunmila* came before *Olodumare*, he said he tried his best for

his priest; but that it was the priest's "nature" that is his problem. Then *Olodumare* was completely enlightened and he was happy that he did not give judgment after listening to the complainant alone. That is why the Creator made it a law from that day; no human being should give judgment after listening to only one side. He, who judges without hearing the other side, does wrong; he who judges without listening to the other side is inhuman. When you have not heard the other side why did you give your judgment? (Oluwole 2001, 94)

There are two ideas of jurisprudential relevance that could be discovered from this *Ifa* verse. One is that which expresses the complementary qualities and responsibilities that adult and the young have to each other. Both have rights and obligations that must be respected and observed. Second is the legal principle of *Audi alteram partem*. This principle states that parties involved in litigation must always be heard before a verdict is given.

The Right to Property Ownership:

(xi) *A ki i gbaokitilowoakiti, a ki i gbaile baba eni'owoeni*

(Just as you do not deny a wrestler the right to summersault, you do not deprive a person of his/her father's property) (Oluwole 2003, 424).

Environmental right:

(xii)

Bi a ba be 'gini 'gbo, ki a fi ro' raenivo; lo d'ifa fun alasokannioye. Won niki ofasokan a ru 'bo. O n "bi o bi se iwona n ko, fi orororaarewo

(Put yourself in the shoe when dealing with all things that have life. If you do, you will understand what it means to give up an only dress during the harmattan) (Oluwole 2008, 8).

The aim of Oluwole in proverbs (xi) and (xii) is to show that traditional Yoruba-Africans were not oblivious of the right to own property as well as the right to protect bios and the environment at large.

Sophie Oluwole and the Hermeneutic Trend in African Philosophy: Some Comments

Before appraising Oluwole's hermeneutical thought on the issues of human rights and democracy in Yoruba context, it is apt to first question the hermeneutic method itself, which she employed in the course of her

analysis. If the method is perhaps marred, the outcome may be more suspicious. Given the history of hermeneutics as it were in the West, as it is rooted and developed in the works of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur amongst others, one may begin to ask whether or not the hermeneutic approach is not too alien to the African tradition. Though it is not enough that a method must be indigenously rooted before being philosophical, even where it risks being tagged as 'derivative'; it can be adapted with modifications, if need be. What is more important is to interrogate if the factors that necessitated the emergence and development of Western hermeneutics are the same for the adoption of hermeneutics in the African context.

Hermeneutics has its root in German thought and evolved as a response to the pervasive reduction of reason to technique, rise in positivistic social science among others. But from all indications, there are no elements in Oluwole's works pointing either to the exigency of warranting factors for the hermeneutic method in African philosophy or recognizing that the challenges that dictated the emergence of the method in the West are the same in the African context. But in no way should Oluwole's silence on this query suggest that African hermeneutic approach is inherently flawed. It may just be that she is trying to weave the identity of African philosophy around the kind of method it adopts in its investigation, without some further justification. Problematic as this may be, our task in the main is not to probe this further; we are more concerned with the concatenation of her political views in relation to human rights and democratic principles.

Two basic points can be made on Oluwole's hermeneutic interpretation of oral texts on human rights and democratic principles in Yoruba thought. One is that each of these texts is the result of deep reflections and historical experiences. Many of them are critical reactions to some existing ideas, beliefs and practices of the traditional people in their cultural milieu. With the understanding of philosophy as the criticism of the ideas we live by, and given the critical stance of the oral text as reactionary to certain norms of belief, behaviour, ideas and assumptions of the people at a given time, the philosophical composition of each text is not in doubt. The various texts analyzed and discussed aptly reveal that Yoruba-African intellectual heritage is neither mythical nor unscientific.

Oluwole does not even seem to claim that the ideas are unique; only that the ideas and principles expressed in them are rational in the conventional sense and cogent within a conceptual structure that is in no way inferior to Western tradition of thought. Thus the temptation of regarding her presentation on the themes as ethno-philosophical rather than philosophical may be resisted. Her hermeneutic engagement in African

political philosophy does not necessarily depict the no-philosophy, especially since it suggests that members of a particular school of thought in traditional Yoruba culture held some beliefs and principles in common, and not holistic attribution to a whole people.

Be that as it may, concomitantly, one major problem, which has a paralyzing effect on the outcome of the hermeneutic approach adopted by Oluwole, is the foreign language in which the interpretation has been done. Had the issues discussed been presented, analyzed, explained and interpreted within their own warranted intellectual culture and language in which they originally exist, the cogency of the discussions would have been more discernible.

Another critical problem in the hermeneutic approach of Oluwole in her discussion of democracy and human rights is that she made no effort to justify any of the democratic and human rights principles she presented. Explanatory justification is essential to any philosophical discussion, but we find this in its limited form in Oluwole's hermeneutic discourse on the themes. This is where Serequeberhan's horizon of hermeneutics differs from that of Oluwole. Serequeberhan is of the view that African hermeneutics must engage itself with praxis and emancipation of the Africans out of the "politico-existential crisis interior to the horizon of post-colonial Africa." (Serequeberhan 1994, 18)

It is on the above basis that we think hermeneutics of ancient thought is not enough without being complemented with reconstruction of the thought in question for contemporary use.

Re-constructionism involves first an extrication of anachronistic idea or practices from a whole lot of traditional thought and beliefs. Secondly it entails an identification of relevant ideas in traditional corpus of thought and practices that can still be rehabilitated and improved upon for immediate or future use. Thirdly re-constructionism involves a juxtaposition of identified relevant idea in traditional thought with contemporary perceptions and practices with a view to integrating and evolving anew, cogent idea for solving basic problems confronting our world today. Re-constructionism dwells on a concern for human interest; for practical relevance in order to mitigate fundamental problems of existence, be it political, social, cultural, economical, and technological amongst others. On this showing, Oluwole's hermeneutic discussion of democracy and human rights in African political philosophy could have been more cogent, if the traditional political ideas so interpreted have been reconstructed for contemporary African use.

Conclusion

The thrust of trends in African philosophy today is simply not wholly definable in terms of the challenges of anti-colonial violence, identity and self-definition, nor in terms of liberation struggles and national reconstruction, which strictly informed the early post-independence works of scholars and nationalists in African political philosophy. The then trends provided a basis for today's discourse. This is unassailable in the sense that one can still find such issues like African socialism, communalism, Pan-Africanism, development among others as recurring decimals in today's discourse in African political philosophy; though with re-invigorative perspectives and dimensions.

While it is arguable that many of the works of the nationalist scholars are not 'philosophical' in the strict sense of the word (with the exception of Nkrumah's classics), I think the pioneering intellectual legacies of these nationalist scholars are worthy of further philosophical study. This is imperative bearing in mind that many of them (such as Senghor, Azikiwe, and Kenyatta) owed much of their inspiration both at the levels of philosophy and ideology, to figures of the Diaspora, such as Aime Cesaire, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and others (Wiredu 2002, 23). For contemporary African political philosophy to therefore be holistically robust, the insightful contributions of all these scholars cannot be carpeted.

Though it is true that some of the issues that instigated the interests of the first generation of scholars in African political philosophy are now partially settled and won (such as the formal liberation struggle from colonialism), no doubt, we are still left with an array of many others, which have constituted the focus of the second generation of scholars working in African political philosophy today. These issues include among others: the problem of violence, conflicts and terrorism, nationalism and social order, democracy, human rights, reparation, justice, Africa and globalization, etc. All these socio problems seem to indicate the necessity for fresh ruminations in African political philosophy beyond the wall of the nationalist-ideological trend identified by Oruka.

While the contributions of second generation of scholars (such as: K. Wiredu, T. Serequeberhan, O. Taiwo, P. Boele van Hensbroek, M. P. More, K. M. Kalumba, O. Oladipo, J. A. I. Bewaji, D. A. Masolo, A. K. Appiah, E. Eze, I. A. Menkiti, S. Gbadegesin, T. Kiros, E. Wamala, K. Ogundowole, K. Owolabi, M. Falaiye, O.A. Balogun, S. O. Opafola, etc., who are predominantly male) working on these and other related issues in

current African political philosophy are laudable, it remains to be seen, the complementary insights of female African philosophers on the themes.

It is on the above lacuna that this paper has attempted bringing to fore, the thoughts and views of a prominent African female philosopher, Sophie Oluwole, on the issues of democracy and human rights. This should not suggest that the themes of democracy and human rights exhaust the political ideas that occupied the thought of Oluwole. We only focused on these twin issues in this paper because they lurk beneath current discourse in African political philosophy, and have indeed riveted a lot of attention.

The point is made clear in the paper that rather than being motivated by the concerns of the nationalist ideological trend, Oluwole opts for the hermeneutic trend in her discussion of democracy and human rights. Insightful as her views are on the themes under reference, they are not without possible objections. Such objections notwithstanding, in our submission, we think Oluwole's attempt should inspire more female African professional philosophers in dispensing socio-political ideas not necessarily by following the paths of the nationalist ideological trend, nor the hermeneutic orientation; but by working within any other identified emerging trend(s) in African political philosophy, in so far they are moved by it.

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