

## **Barry Hallen, 2006, *African philosophy: The analytic approach***

**A review by Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo**

Barry Hallen, 2006, *African philosophy: The analytic approach*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006, viii + 361pp. (ISBN 1-59221-370-7)

The text is made up of 16 chapters plus a conclusion. Eight of these chapters had been published earlier but substantially revised, updated, and interrelated so as to make the text a coherent composite. It is divided into 4 broad parts. Part I, consisting of 4 chapters, revolves round the question of the nature and status of African philosophy. The views of Robin Horton, Richard Rorty, and Paulin Hountondji are explicated and analyzed. Part II, made up of 3 chapters and entitled 'Methodology', challenges the view that assumes or presumes that African conceptual systems, like the Western ones, divide up human beings into rational and emotional components. The author also demonstrates that what is essentially the same methodological technique may be used and viewed in a radically different manner in different cultures. The gist of part III (containing 4 chapters) is that African (Yoruba) discourse reflect individual and artistic sophistication and genius: that the misguided attempts to impose equivalents of Western notions of witchcraft upon African conceptual systems have only seemed to sustain the image of African societies as primitive. Part IV (made up of 5 chapters) is essentially an extension of part III. Whereas part III deals with 'Moral Epistemology', part IV is anchored on 'Aesthetics'. Here the concern is to show aesthetic links to ethics as well as epistemology among the Yoruba.

Chapter 1 engages certain assessments by social and cultural anthropologists regarding the nature and character of indigenous African thought. In particular those assessments that hold that: (1) in indigenous African thought, religion and worldview exercise virtually an absolute monopoly over the minds of the traditional community and; (2) as a consequence therefore, that Africans in the traditional set-up employ logic in a nonreflective and noncritical manner. On the basis of his research conducted among the Yoruba, the author argues that these assessments are not accurate for they are premised upon certain 'exotic' and 'bizarre' theoretical elements that have been attributed greater explanatory significance than they merit (24). Despite the fact that the main argument of the chapter has been part of the 'deathless' discourse and debate regarding the nature of African philosophy, the author's examination of a Yoruba onisegun's statement is refreshing.

The second chapter is a detailed representation and interpretation of Rorty's contention that philosophy is Western and, additionally, that it does not translate. Despite the fact that the view expressed by Rorty is not novel, in that the issue of the philosophical character of indigenous or traditional African thought and of the role of philosophy in Africa generally have been subject of debate for many years and given rise to rigorous and emotional exchanges, Hallen gives reasons why he raises the issue again. The main reason being, Rorty's increasing influence in contemporary philosophical and cultural circles hence making his views difficult to ignore despite their attendant ethnocentric leanings. The other reason given is the originality in Rorty's arguments. To a reader who has not had the benefit of a thorough reading of Rorty's views on the relation (or disconnect) between philosophy and indigenous African thought, the chapter would be quite encapsulating. Also, anyone whose concern is simply to grapple with the general question of the nature of philosophy would find the chapter indispensable and fairly resourceful.

Whereas chapter 2 is an exposition of Rorty's contention that philosophy is Western, chapter 3 is a critique of that contention or if I may borrow Kwasi Wiredu's words, it is a surgical critique of Rorty's theory of the absence of philosophy from all cultures except those of the West.

The chapter also evaluates the status Rorty grants anthropology in African studies. Regarding Rorty's contention, Hallen argues that its implications point to a wrong direction; it mistakenly or unnecessarily narrows down the import of philosophical works to culture. And according to Hallen

‘from Plato through Quine, philosophers’ ruminations and arguments are concerned with human understanding rather than with species they regard as peculiar to the Greeks or to the West’ (63).

On the status of anthropology, Hallen argues that though it is professionally entitled to speak for and about African cultures to the West, in reality, this has unfortunately not been the case. Contrary to Rorty's belief that the role of anthropology is to promote ‘dialogue’ between African and Western cultures, in actuality, Hallen thinks that it has been the vast chasm separating the two cultures.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of Hountondji's view expressed in his paper entitled ‘Scientific Dependence in Africa Today’. The gist of the paper, according to Hallen, is Hountondji's rather controversial suggestion that

‘the encouragement of academic philosophy in Africa should not be a priority. Precious resources and personnel would be better allocated to developing a scientific infrastructure for research and development’ (106).

Expressed enthymematically, the basis of Hountondji's reasoning is that once the latter is established then it would engender the former since philosophy is a second order of science in its empirical practice. Hallen cautions against this view; his argument being that the continued insistence of philosophers in seeing their discipline as essentially and only a second order discipline is what has hindered the development of African philosophy. They see African philosophy as a first order activity and hence are reluctant to engage in it. They consign it to the periphery with the result that it is the anthropologists who have ended up guiding African philosophy. Yet, ironically, according to Hallen, academic (Western) philosophy has developed and legitimized its own form of ethnophilosophy (108). Hallen is also distressed by Hountondji's hostility towards orality and insistence on only written texts as the basis of intellectual exchange and in-

novation. He argues, as well, that Hountondji's use of the term scientific is counterproductive

'because it invokes the orthodox view of cognition—that there is a single cognitive or rational norm that different cultures must more or less approximate...thereby attracting adjectives such as prelogical and protorational' (113).

In chapter 5, the author recognizes that both the philosopher and the anthropologist should play complementary roles in the attempt to understand non-Western cultures, the role should not be left only to the anthropologist. The philosopher because of his or her interests and training definitely has a role to play. However, he warns that the philosopher in his or her endeavours

'must take care not to distort the non-Western view by unfairly reducing it to a theoretical alternative already developed by, for example, Western philosophy' (121).

In the chapter, the author also explicates three points which he thinks ought to govern the relationship between the informant and the scholar (whether an anthropologist or a philosopher) if the encounter between the two and the results stemming there-from are to be representative and objective (123-4). There is no doubt in my mind that those scholars who are engaged in philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy would find this chapter quite enlightening. More specifically, if they adhere to Hallen's three points when conducting their researches, then it would enhance the relationship and encounter between the researcher (philosopher) and the informant (interlocutor), and this would in turn have positive effects on the production and explication of sagacity.

Sometime in the early 1980s, Hallen together with John Olubi Sodipo undertook some research on the epistemological discourse among the Yoruba. To them, the results of their research proved the existence of African philosophy beyond what Placide Tempels had earlier presented. However, some critics dismissed their efforts as another exercise in Tempelsianism. Chapter 6 may very well be construed as Hallen's reply to such critics. Using Quine's Indeterminacy Thesis, he argues that the Hallen-Sodipo exercise, unlike ethnophilosophy, is certainly of philosophical

substance (144), and hence Hountondji's complaint about ethnophilosophy does not and should not apply to the Hallen-Sodipo exercise.

The essence of chapter 7 is to show that the use of the scientific method as a paradigm of thinking has led to misleading comparisons, obscuring rather than illuminating the methodologies of non-Western systems of knowledge. According to Hallen, the methods of non-Western systems may be not only different from their Western analogues, but are coherent and objective in their own terms (153-4). To illustrate the point, he uses Awo (secrecy) in the Ifa system of knowledge among the Yoruba, Edo, Ibo, Igala, Jukun, Nupe, Fon, and Ewe peoples of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. To Hallen, the error defenders of science make is failure to recognize that Awo is a different species of secrecy from what they (defenders of science) have in mind.

In chapter 8, the opening chapter of part III, the author advises academic philosophers to take another look at indigenous African abstract or theoretical thought. He suggests that they would find it of greater philosophical interest (in its own right) than certain stereotypes within the social sciences may have (mis)led them to believe. He argues against the stereotype of oral tradition as frozen and resistant to change, and disagrees with Horton's assertion that African systems of thought are closed, relatively inflexible, and have frequent recourse to secondary elaboration. To illustrate the point, he shows that the Yoruba distinction between imo and igbagbo as classifications of information disprove Horton's position, for while imo is relatively inflexible because it is so certain, igbagbo is not.

Lately, there has been a concern among African and Africanist philosophers that the discourse on African philosophy has been more of a second order talk about whether there had been and was 'philosophy' in indigenous African cultural contexts. This, they argue, has been at the expense of actually doing African philosophy. Chapter 9 in particular (and one may say the text in general) has this concern in mind; it proceeds to produce individualized, specialized philosophical studies that arose from those cultural contexts. In the chapter, which is a follow-up of the previous chapter, the author argues and shows how amongst the Yoruba

knowledge is intricately connected to morals, hence the coinage of the expression 'moral epistemology'. The comparison and contrast that the author draws between Yoruba (moral) epistemology and Western epistemological theory is intriguing.

Chapters 10 (focusing on divination) and 11 (embedded on the notion of witchcraft) lend themselves well to chapters 8 and 9. The gist of chapter 10 is that among the Yoruba, in addition to appreciating divination as ritual and performance, a further essential dimension to the process is the intellectual prowess of the diviner; a dimension that generally goes underreported. In chapter 11, Hallen argues that the Yoruba 'aje' and its English translation 'witch' are not equivalent contrary to what people have been made to believe. The chapter is an effort to restore the intellectual and social standing of what has been (mis)interpreted as the witchcraft phenomenon in Yoruba culture; the 'aje' should not be portrayed or stigmatized as the 'witch' (212).

While the focus of part III (chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11) is on Yoruba moral epistemology, parts IV revolves round the domain of Yoruba aesthetics. Chapter 12 is a critique of Robert Farris Thompson's contention that when he undertook research among the Yoruba he set out to let Africans finally speak for themselves. Hallen's concern is the extent to which Thompson allows the Yoruba to speak for themselves and how much he speaks for them. He is critical of Thompson's introduction of the word *emotional* as criteria of sculptural excellence among the Yoruba. In Western personality theory the assumption is that emotion is rigidly distinguished from intellect or reason. Thompson assumes that his informant's reference to the heart refers to his feelings or emotions in the same way a Westerner would. On the contrary, according to Hallen, the heart for the Yoruba is to act as the repository of mind or consciousness—it describes something much more like the Western concept of mind or reason. Hallen also warns that Thompson's usage of

'such specialized English-language terms as proportion, composition, and symmetry are too full of Western theoretical connotations to represent a Yoruba point of view' (224).

In chapter 13, the author argues that in academic scholarship the

systematic study of indigenous African aesthetic criteria begun only in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and even then the aesthetic standards used to evaluate 'African art' by connoisseurs for and in Western culture were not of African origin as such (237). He also notes that it was during the African Primitive Art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1984 that pieces that were unabashedly accorded the title 'masterpiece' were displayed (238). And even then, he observes a paradox here in that

'the relationship between the African aesthetic masterpieces and Western connoisseurs...that this sculpture [masterpieces] was said to have been created by primitive tribesmen who were incapable of substantive aesthetic sensitivity' (238).

Drawing from the Yoruba, the author enunciates an alternative approach to the study of African aesthetic sensitivities. Using the Yoruba word *ewa*, he argues that for the Yoruba, beauty is seen primarily in terms of human beings rather than associated with the arts and crafts. Unlike in Western cultures, he argues that in the Yoruba culture, the episteme, the moral, and the aesthetic can not be separated. *Handsome is as handsome does*.

Chapters 14 and 15 are a bit strange and stand out. They do not fit well in the sequential outlay of the chapters. In fact, a critical reader may soliloquize if it was really necessary that the two chapters stand independently. Nevertheless, chapter 14, which is basically a critique of Kwame Anthony Appiah, has as its mainstay advice to scholars working in African studies. The author believes that the scholars would learn as much from one another if they were to concentrate as much upon writing on the problems and confusions as they do upon the 'solutions'. Chapter 15, which is fairly brief though laden with endnotes, compares and contrasts the two relative latecomers to the general field of African studies namely African art history and African philosophy. The chapter is

'meant to suggest that professionals reconsider the notion of overlapping meanings between languages as a basis from which to work' (271),

other than consider one language as a paradigm for others.

Chapter 16 scrutinizes the meaning of the term traditional and de-

lineates three schools. Scholars who belong to the first school 'hold fast' and insist that the word does refer to something about the mentality and/or social practices of some societies, and these mentalities and social practices are unique (275). This is the orthodox view of 'traditional'. The second school consists of those who view it as a relic of Western ethnocentrism that should be eliminated from the technical vocabulary of African studies (276). In the third school, the feeling is that it can still be of use and value if its terms of reference are clarified and stripped of pejorative elements (276). Without being judgemental and decisive as to which one of the three schools offers the most appropriate meaning, Hallen proceeds to examine the ramifications of each of the schools and contends that the process of refining the meaning of traditional is ongoing and that each of the schools is making a contribution. He opines that it would be foolhardy for any of the schools to think that it can independently 'fix' a new definition.

In the concluding chapter of the text, the author notes that the combined onslaughts of the postcolonial, the multicultural, and the postmodern has succeeded in putting Western scholarship on the defensive. Disciplines whose aims and methods were hitherto thought to be culturally transcendent and universal in principle are being reevaluated as ideological tools meant to disseminate Western beliefs and values. And according to the author, this is desirable because a basis can now be established for a more clear and more fair understanding of the arts, literature, and philosophy as elements of African cultures (315).

On the whole *African Philosophy: The Analytic Approach* sets out to demonstrate that the analytic approach is not a monopoly of the West; that it is both applicable to and derivable from Africa's indigenous cultural heritage. Though the amount of literature on African philosophy has in recent years increased, none of them would rival this text in terms of the numbers of issues raised and discussed to justify the analytic approach to African philosophy. The explication involved lends itself to historical detail while the analysis is that of surgical and logical precision. The text is representative and reflective of the many years of patient and painstaking research and fieldwork that the author has undertaken

amongst the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria on some aspects of their culture. Besides being ruminative, instructive, and engaging; the text is relevantly multi-faceted and consequently one that would attract a wide and diverse readership. These would include philosophers, social and cultural anthropologists, art historians, literary critics, linguists, ethnographers, scholars of divination and religion, and scholars of performance studies.

