

**Date of publication: February 1, 2019**

**DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2531915](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2531915)**

## **Philosophical Sciences**

# **MAPPING OUT THE DOMAIN OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHER**

**Bisong, Peter Bisong<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Ph.d, Mba, Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria

E-mail: [pbbisong@yahoo.com](mailto:pbbisong@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

The question, who is a philosopher? seems simple at surface value but when looked at deeply, becomes perplexing and even annoying. What criteria are to be used to categorize someone as a philosopher? In answer to this question, many criteria have been given in history; some of them too embracing that, there make all human beings philosophers, and some too strict that some who have a genuine claim to being philosophers are shockingly left out.

I have been bothered for years about the loose criteria that qualifies every human as a philosopher, but what prompt this research is the strict criteria that put even those with a Ph.D in philosophy at risk of being excluded from the category - philosopher. This worrying criterion is the one adopted by Chimakonam and others of his ilk.

They argue that a philosopher is one that mainly creates ideas. This research lays forth a criteria for assessing who a philosopher is – one that avoids both extremes, bridges the dichotomy between thought and practice and would enhance the speedy development of African philosophy. As will be explained in the body of the work, a philosopher is one who consciously and deliberately either preoccupies self with the creation of ideas, interprets (analyzes) ideas or applies ideas.

**Keywords:** philosopher, African philosophy, ethnophilosophy, worldview.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In my days as a student, I often received chastisement from my lecturers for failing to make my seminar papers philosophical. I have stubbornly maintained that the lecturers were the one wrong. For how could my well thought out paper not be philosophical?

This stubbornness is not a total one however, for deep within me, the questions kept resurfacing, are you sure you are a philosopher? Does being a philosopher consists in being trained in philosophy? Does obtaining a Ph.D. in philosophy automatically conveys the status philosopher to someone? These questions have always troubled me and have become more troubling after reading Chimakonam idea that the proper role of philosophy is the churning out of ideas (2016, 515). Have I produced any new idea? I cannot remember one? Does it mean I am not a philosopher? These questions inspired me into this research. My hope is to bring out a more accommodating definition of a philosopher that could pacify the hearts of many.

Chimakonam and others who stand with him, over tighten the domain of philosophy, leaving out so many who genuinely have a claim to be philosophers. On the converse, there is a position that is equally if not more repulsive, one that is pursued by most African philosophers, in their quest to justify the existence of philosophy in Africa. These scholars hold that all humans capable of reasoning can philosophize and thus are proximately philosophers. Since Africans are imbued with rationality, there is philosophy in Africa. This position makes everyone embedded with reason, a philosopher. If this position is true, it will also be true that anyone capable of judging a case correctly is a judge; any one capable of treating himself even accidentally is a doctor and any one capable of instructing his/her child is a teacher. This position will make everybody to be everything possible. In reality this is not the case, though every human has the potentials to become anything, he/she only succeeds to become that whose potentials he/she is able to turn to actuality. Every human has the potential to be a lawyer, but only those who actually water and nourish this inherent potential to full growth could be called lawyers in the real sense of the word. This is also applicable to philosophy. Every rational human is potentially a philosopher, but there is a difference between potentiality and actuality. Not all potentialities become actuality. Not all potential philosophers become actual philosophers. What it takes to be a philosopher is therefore, much more than what Chimakonam and others of his kind envisages. Also, African philosophy is much more than what African philosophers will have it be. There is therefore, a need for a more balanced categorization of a philosopher/philosophy.

This research attempts a clear cut definition of a philosopher that would avoid the excesses and deficiencies that have trailed its definition from antiquity. This is of urgent necessity, as it will give direction to the lost as well as those gaping in despair as to whether or not they are actually practicing philosophy. Many of the attempted definitions and categorization of philosophy will be examined and their shortfalls exposed.

## II. THE NEED FOR A PROPER DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY/PHILOSOPHER

Is it necessary to delineate the boundaries of a philosopher? Many would argue that it is a waste of research effort. I think it is something that is not just necessary but an urgent necessity. The urgency of the need strikes me whenever I observe the grimace on a student face when he/she is told that his/her paper or thesis is not philosophical. I once witnessed a scene whereby after a thorough presentation of a paper in Graduate Research Forum, a Ph.D. candidate was told that his paper was not philosophical. He retorted, perhaps in frustration, "I am a philosopher, whatever I say is philosophical". This remark sent the audience in wild laughter and caused some pandemonium. I did not join in the laughter, for I did not see it as a laughing matter but as a serious issue that needed urgent redress. It is interesting to note that a renowned philosopher Paulin Hountondji, made a similar remark, though perhaps his is not from frustration but from a conviction that is a result of rigorous thinking. He asserts "by „African philosophy“ I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by African and described as philosophical by their authors themselves (Hountondji, 2003, 147).

Hountondji is here obviously concerned merely with the intention of the writer, if the writer believes his/her writing is philosophical, then it is, *inter alia* philosophy. And if he/she says it is not then, it is not. Is it really intention that makes a work philosophical?

Many undergraduate and postgraduate students and even doctorate degree holders in philosophy are still at a loss as to what possibly counts as philosophy and what does not. It is this inability to draw the limits and scope of philosophy that has made some scholars to portray the worldviews and cultures of traditional Africans as African philosophy. They do this without sufficient thought that a worldview is larger than philosophy – a people's worldview is a composition of its religion, myth, philosophy, magic etc. To show the worldviews of Africans as its philosophy is a function of the defective understanding of philosophy. This defective understanding of philosophy has unfortunately earned for Africa philosophy the inglorious name – transcendental philosophy or spiritualism. More unfortunate, is the fact that most African philosophers accept it and even glory in it. Momoh for instance boastfully proclaims “any work that claims to be an African philosophy, is not an African philosophy, if it is actually not in harmony and congruence with the spirit of Africa, which reality is primarily spiritual” (66). Metz in like manner gleefully portrays the African as one who, “routinely appeals to „spirituality“, or what is more carefully called „invisible“ or the „insensible“ world, taken to include at least God and ancestors, wise founders of a clan who have survived the death of their bodies and who continue to guide the clan” (2016, 491). Whoever accesses African worldview without adequate effort to separate the religious, philosophical and mythic elements from it, is bound to reach the same conclusion that the philosophers we have considered reached – that Africa holds a spiritual concept of reality. Reacting to this sort of zealotry, Henry Oruka laments: “what may be a superstition is paraded as „African religion“, and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as „African philosophy,“ and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy (2004, 8.).

To denote African philosophy as transcendental is to confuse African philosophy with its religion, myth, folklores etc which is a constituent part of the worldviews and culture of Africans. There is no worldview that does not have the transcendental element in it. The difference between Africa and the West is that the West are able to give the boundary between religion and philosophy. Their religion is spiritual and transcendental while their philosophy is rational and empirical. The African muddle religion and philosophy together and thereby obfuscate the boundary. The root cause is the mistaken presentation of African worldviews as its philosophy, without properly separating the religious and mythic elements from the philosophical in the worldviews. The blame lie squarely on the shoulders of philosophers for they failed to sieve out the philosophical from the non-philosophical. But is this actually one of the roles of philosophers? If it is their role, it could be said then, that they failed in their duties because they did not know their proper role, which implies the need to state explicitly who a philosopher is and the roles expected of him.

Knowing the proper boundary of philosophy is like knowing how to read a map. Properly delineating the domain of philosophy would guide the philosopher or intending philosopher aright. A philosopher would know when he/she is doing philosophy and when he/she has left the shore of philosophy. Knowing this will give him the choice of whether to return to philosophy or to remain where he/she has wandered to. The intending philosophers would be able to easily step into the domain of philosophy, if it is clear to them what being a philosopher entails. It will stem cases whereby, some who deliberately wants to do philosophy find themselves accidentally not doing philosophy and some not intending to involve in philosophy wallow unconsciously in it.

Drawing clearly the boundary of philosophy would totally end the debate as to the existence or nonexistence of African philosophy. Not knowing or not being certain of the proper constituents of philosophy is what has kept the debate as to the nature of African philosophy going. This debate would fizzle out the moment, a clear cut answer to what constitutes philosophy and consequently philosophizing is provided.

### III. WHAT PHILOSOPHY/PHILOSOPHER IS NOT

Most times a term is clearer if we disrobe it of its negative connotations. I think it will do us good if we mark out those features, often appended to philosophy that do not enter properly into the constitution of philosophy. These features outlined below may touch on philosophy/philosopher but do not correctly describe or define it.

Philosophy is not love of wisdom and consequently a philosopher is not a lover of wisdom. The love of wisdom is the etymological definition of philosophy but does not totally capture the meaning of philosophy in the technical sense. Not everybody who loves wisdom could truly be categorized as a philosopher. The theologians, magicians, mystics, scientists also love wisdom as well. Thus, to define philosophy as the love of wisdom and philosophers as lovers of wisdom is to include many who are not philosophers and may not want to be, into the domain of philosophy.

Philosophy is not the pursuit of wisdom, consequently a philosopher is not a pursuer of wisdom. Many fields pursue wisdom, but the methods employed in this pursuit is what categorized them into different fields. Theology and theologians pursues wisdom but through the methodology of revelation and the instrumentality of faith. Philosophy obviously has its instrument (reason) with which it seeks wisdom. To categorize philosophers as seekers of wisdom is to embrace other elements that seek wisdom but are not actually philosophers.

Philosophy is not a worldview and thus a philosopher is not a presenter of a worldview of a people. A worldview is not philosophy, rather it is a combination of philosophy, religion, myths, magic etc. All these elements add up to create a worldview of a people. This composite cannot correctly be described as philosophy and thus those who see it as their task to unearth the worldview of a people could be called a different name (possibly historians or ethnographers) but certainly not philosophers. Unfortunately, this has been the preoccupation of most so called African philosophers. We could only include into the fold of African philosophers, those who deal with the ideas and worldviews of traditional Africans, but do so analytically. These are those who seek to analyze the worldviews of Africans and possibly bring out its philosophical contents. A worldview merely serves to show that a people have philosophy but “that we have a philosophy does not mean that we are philosophers” (Oguejiofor 2005, 72).

Philosophy is not a product. We could have a product of philosophy, but there is no product that is philosophy. Philosophy aims at yielding results but the result itself is not philosophy. Philosophy always transcends its results. Those who presents unexplainable cultures as philosophies of a people are merely presenting the product of the philosophies and not the philosophies themselves. Philosophy is “an activity and not a body of doctrines” (Nwigwe, 2015, 3). It is an activity that leads to the body of doctrines (worldview) but is itself not the worldview. Philosophy is a process and takes the form of the arguments and analysis that leads to the product (culture or worldview). Pragmatism for instance is not a philosophy but a method of philosophizing and the truth arrived at is the product. Pragmatism is a method whereby the activity of philosophy is carried out. One may ask, where then is the activity that could be categorized as philosophy. The activity consists in the argumentations and analysis conducted through the methods of pragmatism to arrive at the conclusion. The conclusion is merely an end point of this process. The product of pragmatism could be, „democracy is true“. „Democracy is true“ as the product of pragmatism is not a philosophy, the philosophy consists in the activities that are undertaken (democracy works in practical life) to give birth to the conclusion, „democracy is true“. To take the conclusion or product as philosophy is to make a mistake, which means to take for instance, African proverbs as their philosophy is to make a mistake. The real philosophy is behind the proverbs and transcends it.

Philosophy is not spectatorship and a philosopher is not a spectator. Heraclitus likens a philosopher to a spectator at the games, who merely watches, enjoys and analyses a game without doing anything more. This implies that a philosopher is merely a creator of ideas without getting involved in the application of the so generated ideas. This is the role that has been assigned to philosophy since ancient times. It is by virtue of this assigned role, that the question as to whether philosophy bakes bread arises. It is in connection to this that

Thales the ancient Greek philosopher got jeered at, as following an unproductive endeavor, moving him to demonstrate that philosophy could be productive and produce even better than other so called productive fields. The argument is that if philosophy could be productive like Thales demonstrated, what justification is there for philosophers to sit back without involving in production. In my opinion, the demonstration of Thales is a clear pointer to the inevitability of applied philosophy. There is therefore in existence two spheres of philosophy - theoretical philosophy and applied philosophy. Philosophy is therefore, not merely spectatorship, it is also a performer. It is not an armchair discipline but a dynamic and versatile one.

Philosophy is not narrative history. To narrate history is not to do philosophy. To write a textbook of History of Philosophy, does not amount to being a philosopher. Similarly, to give an account of the philosophies of traditional Africans is not to do philosophy. This implies that “a black African philosopher is not to become a cultural historian, a laudatory *tempris acti*, or a curator of the ethnic museum, jealously guarding the purity of ancestral heritage and protecting it from the adulterating encroachment of time and evolution” (Osuagwu 2005, 54). It is not a descriptive or narrative history, but rather a critical history. Thus, those who write history, but do so critically, could be included in the fold of philosophers.

Philosophy is not merely analysis and a philosopher is not merely an analyzer of ideas. This is the position held by Gilbert Ryle and most other analytic philosophers. They believe that the proper role of philosophy is the analysis of language and ideas. Ryle enthuses, “the sole and whole function of philosophy” is philosophical analysis (1931, 61). The analytic philosophers obviously oppose the view of Chimakonam that, “it is the duty of the philosopher to create ideas” (2016, 515). These are two extremes that fail to capture the philosopher completely. A philosopher create ideas and also analyzes ideas and could also apply these ideas. This is why I demarcate philosophy into theoretical and applied. Theoretical philosophy concerns itself with the creation or formulation of ideas and the analysis of ideas while applied philosophy apply these ideas to achieve pragmatic results.

A philosopher is not one who studied philosophy as a course. This is the mistake of the student who retorted “I am a philosopher, therefore anything I say is philosophy”. It is also the mistake of Nweke, who argues that philosophers include all graduates of philosophy (2016, 1). If this is true, then a history graduate would be a historian. A law graduate would be a Barrister. But this is not the case. A history graduate could actually become a historian if he/she engages in historical narration and a law student becomes a Barrister if he/she practice law. At graduation they are merely trained and their potentials are raised to the highest level, it is the individual himself/herself who would turn this highly raised potentiality to actuality by an act of the will. One could be a professor of philosophy, but is not a philosopher. Being a doctor or professor of philosophy merely means that one has good knowledge of the philosophies as propounded by others. It does not in any way imply that such trained persons are philosophers. One becomes a philosopher, immediately he begins to do what a philosopher does – creation, analysis and application of ideas using argumentation as a tool. The title „philosopher” is not conferred but earned.

Philosophy is not judged by the intention of the author. The intention of the author does not make a work philosophical as Houndtonji believes. Philosophy is a “formal science, a disciplined enterprise with its rules and regulations, principles and methods to be obeyed” (Osuagwu 2005, 54). To miss the rules and methods is to go out of philosophy, no matter the intention of the author. Houndtonji assertion would imply that a person could write theology and it becomes philosophy as long as the author think it is philosophy. It would also imply that someone can write and philosophy and term it science, and it becomes scientific, because he thinks so. Or someone can write mathematics and claim it to be Literature and it automatically becomes so. I think this is a mistaken assumption.

Philosophy is not ethnophilosophy. Ethnophilosophy as captured by Oruka consists in the customs, traditions, and religions of a specific people (Oruka 1990, 15) and as such is not philosophy. Philosophy is purely an individual endeavor. Anything short of this is not philosophy. We could have ethnoculture, ethnolanguage, etc but not ethnophilosophy, because philosophy is a rational activity and one rational activity cannot possibly be carried out by a group at the same time. There is no philosophy called ethnophilosophy. The coinage is a mistake by Houndtonji who for lack of a proper term, chose a derogatory term „ethnophilosophy”.

This term implicitly implies that a group can think, which is impossible. What is adopted as the thinking of a group (ethnophilosophy), is actually the thinking of an individual, which later won the acceptance of everybody and became their collective worldview.

That we do not know the philosopher behind these views does not mean we should call it a group-think. The best way to categorize such, is to call it a philosophy from an anonymous author. To present a collection of worldviews as philosophy is to mistake philosophy for a collective experience that is “obvious to all members of the stock.” (Oruka 1991, 21).

#### IV. WHAT PHILOSOPHY/PHILOSOPHER IS

Our task is easy now. Having considered the limitations of earlier conceptions of philosophy/philosopher, it is clear now what a philosopher could be. A philosopher is simply one who consciously, following the method of argumentation, either create ideas, analysis existing ideas or apply existing ideas in the solution of practical problems. The key terms in the definition are consciousness, argumentation (rationality) and ideas. As long as a person consciously, that is deliberately, employs the methods of philosophy (and not faith or experiment) to bring out a result which could be new ideas, analysis of new ideas or application of these ideas, he is a philosopher. Philosophy then is the conscious use of argumentation for the generation, analysis or application of ideas. The emphasis on argumentation is based on the understanding that all other methods of philosophy are nothing but argumentation in its diverse forms. This is so because, the central structure of the faculty of reason, which is a tool of philosophy is argumentation. Reasoning proceeds either through deductive or inductive argumentations. All forms of reasoning are therefore basically argumentation, meaning that all methods of philosophy converge into argumentation.

This definition of philosophy/philosopher has the advantage of being broad enough to encompass those who genuinely have a claim to philosophy and narrow enough to exclude those who genuinely are outside the scope of philosophy. It includes those who do not generate ideas but analyze them and also those who do not analyze but apply ideas to solve issues. Most people would have a problem with the categorization of those who apply ideas as philosophers. Chimakonam clearly asserts that, “that is the responsibility of the ancillary sciences” (2016, 515). It is indeed, the responsibility of the ancillary sciences to apply ideas using their peculiar methods, philosophy could also apply ideas guided by its own unique method. Thus, as long as application of ideas is done following the methods of philosophy, then the work is philosophical.

This definition of philosophy also cuts off those, Victor Nweke calls philosophizers out of the category of philosophers. For Nweke, the “basic requirement to be a philosophizer is the ability to think and this is inherent in every human being” (2016, 1). Philosophizers are those who accidentally or unconsciously employs philosophical methods to arrive at a result. These set of people are akin to those who accidentally consumes a leaf that happened to cure an ailment. Such a person is not a doctor, since he got the healing by a chance action and not a rationally and consciously willed one. The same is true of one who not through a willed knowledge judges a case well. The same is also true for one who philosophize by accident. A philosopher is one who knows the scope and limit of philosophy and deliberately plunge his/herself into this area called philosophy – others could at best be termed „philosophizers“ and not the restricted term „philosopher“.

This definition in addition to being more accommodating and at the same time delimiting, also bridges the chasm between theory and practice that had tended to be on the trail of philosophy since antiquity. The knowledge of this chasm is what makes Russell to helplessly proclaim: philosophers have interpreted the world, what is left is application.

This dichotomy between theory and practice in philosophy is an artificial one that stems from the one sided conception of a philosopher. Philosophy is a dynamic activity and not static as Chimakonam correctly noted. “It is a continuous journey of self-manifestation from age to age and from culture to culture” (2016, 514). Its dynamism bridges every opposition. Theory and practice are complementary activities made possible by the dynamism of philosophy. Thus, every definition of philosophy must capture theory and practice in a complementary relationship. It must overcome every divisive mindset and attempts to look at reality from a complementary and global mindset.

## V. CONCLUSION

At this point I am strongly compelled to state categorically, that those who apply generated ideas are also philosophers – they are applied philosophers. Thus, they should be spared the sledge hammer that Chimakonam and philosophers of like minds wield at them.

They are not just philosophers but a necessary part of philosophy – they necessarily complete the circular horizon called philosophy. Without the applied philosophers, philosophy would remain incomplete. African philosophy and economy at large would remain stunted. When philosophy is defined to include applied philosophy, it means the scope of African philosophy would also enlarge. Those scholars who apply foreign ideas to African problems could be said to be doing African philosophy and consequently would be considered African philosophers. African philosophy would now be defined by the place of application of ideas and not merely by its place of origin. The origin of the ideas would no longer be the only consideration, but where it is applied becomes also the determiner of African philosophy. This is an appropriate definition of African philosophy – one that holds the hope of enhancing its growth.

There is nothing wrong with borrowing a Panadol manufactured by Peter to cure the headache of Paul, if Peter’s headache has caught up with Paul. There is nothing wrong with borrowing ideas from the West to solve problems in Africa, since the problems that were peculiarly western now infects Africans too. There is no culture that is presently homogenous. Globalization has made possible the intermingling of different cultures, beliefs, religions, ideologies and even problems and sicknesses. Since the culture, religion, ideologies, problems and diseases of Africans are now multifaceted, they demand a similar heterogeneous approach to their effective resolutions. This means that a heterogeneous composite of ideas must be utilized to tackle the divergent issues in a given place. African philosophers then must be allowed to borrow ideas from different quarters to handle African problems. To apply philosophical ideas borrowed from the West to solve African problems should not be derided, because these problems being solved do not emanate entirely from Africa. And a person who does that, should not be denied the status of philosophy, for philosophy is both theoretical and practical (applied).

More so, what should determine African philosophy should be what determines philosophy universally? An African philosopher is one who applies the philosophical method of argumentation to the generation, analysis and application of ideas to the surrounding problems. Placing African philosophy this way, tantamount to exposing it to exponential growth.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Chimakonam Jonathan. (2016) Can the philosophy curriculum be Africanized? An examination of the prospects and challenges of some models. *South African Journal of Philosophy*. vol. 35. №. 4 Pp. 513-522. (in Eng).
- Hountondji Paulin. (2003) An Alienated Literature. Trends in African Philosophy 147, in *The African Philosophy Reader*. (Second edition).Eds. P.H. Goetze & A.P. Roux. New York: Routledge. (in Eng).
- Metz Thaddeus. (2016) Teaching African philosophy alongside Western philosophy: some advice about topics and texts. *South African Journal of Philosophy*. vol. 35. №. 4 Pp. 490-500. (in Eng).
- Momoh C. (2003) African philosophy: nature, schools and substance. *Philosophy for all disciplines*. Ed Jin Unah. (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publication). (in Eng).
- Nweke Victor. (2016) Global warming as an ontological boomerang effect: towards a philosophical rescue from the African place in *A Paper presented at the international colloquium on Marginalization of Philosophy in Africa: Women and Environment*. University of Calabar. (in Eng).
- Nwigwe, B. (2005) The Philosopher and the Society: Portrait of Msgr. T. Okere in *African Philosophy and the Hermeneutics of Culture: Essays in Honour of Theophilus Okere*. Eds. J. O. Oguejiofor & G. I. Onah. (New Bruswick: Transaction Publishers). (in Eng).
- Odera Henry. As quoted by Peter Bello in African Philosophy in a crisis of Method. *NAPSSEC Journal of African Philosophy*. Vol. 2, 200, Pp. 8-9. (in Eng).
- Oruka Henry. (1990) Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy. Nairobi: Shirikon Pub. (in Eng).
- Oruka Henry. (1991) African philosophy: A brief personal history and the current debate. H. O. Oruka ed. *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous thinkers and modern debate on African philosophy*. Nairobi: African Centre for Technology Studies. (in Eng).
- Osuagwu M. (2005) Philosophy of Non-philosophy: Okere's Trilogy on African Philosophy. *African Philosophy and the Hermeneutics of Culture: Essays in Honour of Theophilus Okere*. Ed. J. O. Oguejiofor & G. I. Onah. (New Bruswick: Transaction Publishers). (in Eng).