

Erasure of African Philosophy

A few decades ago some African philosophers were involved in theorizing about African philosophy.¹ The central question was whether there is such a philosophy. Evidently, the question could not be answered intelligently without defining what philosophy is, and more specifically, without indicating what distinguishes African philosophy from other types of philosophy. Whether this question has been or can be answered definitively is not self-evident. What appears evident is that there are now texts and articles that are explicitly on African philosophy, and there are courses that are taught under the title “African Philosophy”. The existence of these texts, articles, and courses may have rendered the question moot, but to the extent that philosophers have a habit of not leaving any stone unturned, perhaps, this mootness stands in need of being scrutinized to determine whether there is anything thought provoking that is harbored therein. Put differently, for philosophers, there is no stone that is definitively turned. For some philosophers, it may be because every stone is internally linked to every other stone, and to fully turn any of them is turn all of them. Even more to the point, must philosophy itself not be its own stone that it has to turn over and over again as it turns other stones over and over again? And could this process be what is essential about philosophizing, a process that touches the core of the process of being human?

That the existence or the non-existence of African philosophy became an issue is itself an issue. The issue is: why did the existence or the non-existence of this philosophy become an issue whereas the existence or the non-existence of some other philosophies such as European philosophy, or even for that matter, Greek philosophy, did not become an issue? In the annals of the history of philosophy, there does not appear to be any

speculation on what makes any one of these philosophies what it is. That is, one does not encounter in these annals speculations on what makes European philosophy European, or what makes Greek philosophy Greek. It is not that at one time there was a question regarding the existence or the non-existence of any one of them which later became answered once and for all. If such a question is relevant to these philosophies, it remains veiled in silence, a provocative silence, if only because it is the nature of silence to invite speech.

To be sure, it could also be pointed out that the existence of these philosophies is incontrovertible since there are philosophical texts and philosophers that can readily be associated with them. Further more, it appears that no one has doubted the existence of either of them. There is an impression given that what is philosophical about these philosophies is definitively settled and that what distinguishes either of them has not been and is not a philosophical issue. But how philosophical is this impression? Is it simply an article of faith? If it is, why isn't this faith extended to African philosophy?

In regard to African philosophy, other than the texts that are written by those who have debated the issues of the existence or non-existence of African philosophy, there are very few books or articles that explicitly deal with this philosophy. Using a written text to demonstrate the existence or the non-existence of philosophy is problematic, just as it would be to claim that to be a philosopher one has to distinguish oneself as such in a written text. Why should it be the case that the existence or the non-existence of philosophy, not just the existence or non-existence of African philosophy, depends on the existence or non-existence of a written text designated as a philosophy text? In trying to determine the existence or the non-existence of African philosophy why should one turn

to Africa or to African history to hunt exclusively for a written text that is designated as an African philosophy text? And why should a philosopher be designated as such solely because he or she has written a text that is designated as a written philosophy text? Why should text fetishism exhaustively determine the existence or the non-existence of philosophy? Or differently put, why should philosophy be held hostage to the regime of writing? And why should one be held hostage to those who have succumbed to this regime or to those who administer this regime?

Those who have debated the issue of the existence or the non-existence of African philosophy appear to be responding to a provocation by those who have denied or those who are indifferent to the existence of this philosophy. It appears that the respondents want to prove that there is indeed such a philosophy, and the question they feel compelled to answer is, if indeed there is such a philosophy, what is it, and how is it to be distinguished from other philosophies? For the most part, the philosophy from which it is to be distinguished is Western European philosophy. At least, one of the reasons why the existence or the non-existence of Western European philosophy, or the existence or non-existence of Greek philosophy is not an issue is that there is no provocation that would pressure some individuals to prove the existence of any of these philosophies. The Greeks were not provoked by non-Greeks to demonstrate that there is such a thing as Greek philosophy, and similarly, Europeans have not been provoked by non-Europeans to demonstrate the existence of European philosophy, unless such a provocation be deemed to be what is intended by what is said about African philosophy. For centuries, what Europeans have taken to be philosophy has been uncontested. To the extent that what African philosophy is, is clearly understood and like a phoenix arises from the ashes into

which it has been reduced by Europeans, it may dawn on Europeans that they too need to reflect on what hitherto they have taken to be their philosophy. That is, they too need to make a case for the Europeanness of their philosophy. It is not only the African who have to be put on the defensive in regard to the existence of their philosophy. The provocation of Africans has gives birth to the provocation of Europeans. Europeans can no longer afford the luxury of philosophizing as if they were in a dream. Awakening Europeans from their slumber is one of the inevitable consequences of taking up the issue of the erasure of African philosophy. It is in the interest of European philosophers to be put on the defensive in regard to what they have hitherto understood as European philosophy. Being on the defensive may open an opportunity for them to engage in a serious philosophical dialogue about philosophy with non-Europeans.

It is not only Africans who have been under pressure to demonstrate and defend the existence of the philosophy that pertains to them. For the most part, Latin Americans appear to have been under a similar provocation -the provocation to demonstrate that there is indeed a Latin American philosophy that is unique to them. Although it is arguable, the pressure directed to Latin Americans is not as great as the pressure that is directed against Africans. A part of the reason may be that the majority of the Latin American philosophers who have set out to make a case for a unique Latin American are descendants of Europeans. To a large degree, have positively embraced their European ancestry. As Lepoldo Zea, a leading Latin American philosopher, points out “Latin America leans toward Europe as a son to his father, but at the same time resists becoming like its own father”², and adds “From Europe we have received our cultural framework, what could be our structure: language, religion, customs; in a word, our conception of life

and world is European”.³ Barring the exception of the Christian theology, the father is not the son, and the son is not the father. Accordingly, Latin Americans want to mark their philosophical independence from their ancestors by making a case for a philosophy that is uniquely their own. Even if a few have intermarried with the indigenous people, the dominance of their European heritage makes it difficult to distinguish clearly their philosophy from the philosophy of their European ancestors, and few if any recognize their philosophical indebtedness to the indigenous people of Latin America. The possibility that indigenous people of Latin American have an indigenous philosophy appears not to figure centrally in the philosophical mainstreaming of the Latin American philosophers. This, however, has not prevented them from making an effort to establish a philosophy that is uniquely Latin American, or a philosophy that is more than an imitation of European philosophy. And in this undertaking, they are entirely right, for Latin American existential beat is different from the Euro-existential beat. Breathing Latin American air has transformed Latin American life into a life of its own. The fact Latin America is also populated by people of African descent, attention to a philosophy of these people will have to be reckoned with in the articulation of what unique about Latin American philosophy. In part what will have to be reckoned with pertains to a philosophy that has African roots. A Latin American African philosophy is an integral aspect of African philosophy, and this is why it is important that the erasure of African philosophy be taken seriously in Latin America. In this reckoning the erasure of African philosophy must be taken into account. The African de-erasure of the erasure of African philosophy has implication in the constitution of Latin American philosophy. It has a direct bearing on the way that Latin Americans perceive African philosophy.

Accordingly, what Zea says about Latin American philosophy does not exhaust what can be said about the Latin American philosophical landscape. The extent to which Africans have contributed to Latin American philosophy must be taken into account in the course of developing the Latin American philosophy. However, it is equally important not overemphasize the link between the course of philosophy in Latin American and the course of philosophy in Africa.

In Africa, one faces a situation that is largely different from the Latin American situation. Even with colonialism and religious cultural imperialism, Africans do not have a claim to European ancestry the way that the Latin Americans of European descent do. Africans do not lean to Europe as their father. Although there is European cultural influence in Africa, the cultural framework of Africans is not primarily derived from Europe. With an exception of European cultural influence on Africans, to the majority of Africans, Europeans are culturally strangers. Europeans who have lived in Africa for centuries are yet to think of themselves as Africans, and they never claim that their culture has been definitively shaped by the African cultural framework, and clearly, Africans do not think of them as Africans. For the most part, the few European settlers who engage in philosophical thinking are pre-occupied with the tradition of philosophy of their European ancestors. Thus, when it comes to the issue of the existence or non-existence of African philosophy, they have not been significantly involved, or have played or play a very marginal role. They are not under an existential imperative to make a case for African philosophy. That is, they have not been fully challenged by the European provocation to take a stand on the existence or non-existence of African philosophy. They do not perceive African philosophy as affecting the core of what it

means for them to be grounded in philosophy. The current crop of philosophers of European descent in Africa, appear to concern themselves primarily with issues in modern or contemporary Western philosophy.

It also appears to be the case that, for the most part, the current crop of African philosophers is engaged in the same issues as their European counterparts in Africa and in the West. This should not come as a surprise since a serious effort has not been undertaken to rid Africans of colonial mentality in the area of philosophy. They have been educated by Western European professors, or by African professors who have been educated by Western European professors. Issues in Western European philosophy continue to pre-occupy them. Western European philosophers craft a bandwagon and Africans are quick to jump into it and even vie for taking the reigns. We compete with one another for the attention of our Western European masters, or to compare ourselves with one another to determine who is more intelligent and make the determination using Western intelligence as the yardstick. Primarily, due to colonial influence, for us, being a good philosopher is the same as being intelligent, and being intelligent is being intelligent like the Western European. The most philosophical among us is identified with the most intelligent, the cleverest, or the smartest. We are enamored by philosophy as a cognitive activity, or by philosophy as nothing more than argumentation.

To be sure, it can be claimed that philosophy concerns itself with universal issues, and thus, there is nothing uniquely European or African about philosophical issues. If this were indeed the case, it would be reasonable to ask what is European about philosophy, just as it would be to ask what is African about philosophy. To say that there is nothing unique in either case, one would still have to make a case for the qualification of

philosophy as European or as African. Moreover, if philosophy deals with universal issues, one would have to make a case for the universality of these issues. This needs to be done to avoid the projection of a particular issue as if it were the universal. Europeans and their descendants may not see the need to call this possibility to our attention, but Africans and other people who have been subject to European domination have a reason, and perhaps, a duty to bring this possibility into relief and preserve it there as long as it is necessary.

Making a case for the existence of African philosophy does not preclude and is not intended to deprive philosophy of a concern with what is universal. A philosopher has a duty to ensure that the territorialization or the particularization of philosophy does not lead to the destruction or to the concealment of the unity of philosophy. If one were to accept the view that philosophy deals with issues that are exclusively universal, the acceptance would still be problematic. The nature and the history of these issues would still have to be determined. One would have to ask: how do these issues manifest themselves in history? Did Africans explore these issues prior to the invasion of Africa by Europeans, or were they instilled in Africans by European professors of philosophy once Africans became subject to their teaching? Prior to the adoption of Greek philosophical issues by Europeans, were Europeans exploring philosophical issues? Were the Greeks the first among human beings to raise or to become aware of philosophical issues? Philosophically meaningful answers to these questions presupposes a determination of what makes an issue philosophical, and of course, one would have to determine whether the determination is universal or is specific to a particular people or to a particular individual.

A solipsistic philosophy is a contradiction. It is madness. As philosophy regionalizes itself, it cannot do so by having the boundaries of any of its region completely separated from other regions of philosophy, for then, it would not be truly philosophical. Thus, in making a case for an African philosophy, it should not be expected that one will come up with a conception of philosophy that is totally alien to other philosophies. This does not imply that philosophies are fungible. If this were the implication, it would not be substantively meaningful to qualify philosophy as African, or to assign it any other qualification. All human beings are implicated in philosophy regardless of when and where they live. To be sure this claim presupposes an understanding of philosophy which in a more profound way ought to be self-evident if only because it is necessary for making agreements and disagreements in philosophy intelligible.

One of the questions that is worth raising is: if Africans do not take up the issues of philosophy as exclusively universal, are there philosophical issues that are uniquely African that should be the subject of their concern? A major problem that African philosophers had to face and that they still face is that of the condescending attitude in philosophy on the part of Western philosophers. The latter appear to think that African philosophers, if they exist at all, are to be treated like new kids on the block - kids who have to be nursed allegedly by mature Western philosophers, and allegedly by a mature Western philosophy. Ultimately, under Western European paternalism, the view is that Africa is philosophically barren, and as a result, she has not been able to produce philosophy until Europeans watered the soil and planted the seeds of philosophy. One of the often quoted Christian missionary spoke for many of his compatriots when said

We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are incapable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognize themselves in our words and will acquiesce saying, "You understand us: you know us completely: you "know" in the way we "know".⁴

Here, we come face to face with the problem of the language of philosophy. From the standpoint of nineteenth Century European thinking –the thinking that informs this man of the cloth, Africans have not evolved to the level where their brains could generate the kind of language that is suitable for grasping what their innermost concept of being. That is, African languages have not evolved to a level where Africans can grasp the fundamental concepts of philosophy. They have a primitive and a savage language to match their primitive and savage brains. Under the guidance of their European mentors, they are to look up to European languages and find therein ready made essential categories that bear the truth of their innermost sense of being. To be sure, this includes the very concept of being itself. According to this man of the cloth, Africans are to have the inmost knowledge of themselves through the mediation of concepts provided by European language and thought. Given their alleged conceptual inadequacy, it is difficult to imagine how they could be intelligently guided, or how they could intelligently guide their guides to guide them. But if they are to guide their guides to guide them to what they really are, why would they need to be guided? Clearly, there is a problem here. I suspect that the missionary may be talking to himself, about the African and about the African's language. This is precisely the point that Paulin Hountondji makes in his book *African Philosophy* where he argues that this man of the cloth and his followers are doing nothing more than constructing an ethnophilosophy (a bogus philosophy) that they are mistaking for African philosophy.⁵ What this man of the cloth has accomplished is a

creation of a double mystification. He mystifies both himself and the African. He understands neither himself nor the African. He understands neither his own language nor the language of the African. And since he takes himself to be the interpreter of the African to his fellow Europeans, he mystifies them all around if they take his word for truth. We will call this complex mystification erasure. This is an erasure that has multiple faces. It is an erasure of language and an erasure of self, an erasure of the self because the being of the self is tied to the being of language. It is in language that self is constituted and through which it expresses itself. Moreover, since the language of self is the language of the world in so far as the self is worldly, the world itself erased in the erasing of the self. The world that is erased the erasing of the self is at the same the world of nature, for, for the African being African is being in nature and of nature. Ultimately, the missionary's mystification leads to the mystification of nature. In his eyes, the African's language fails to exhibit elemental concepts that grasp what is essential about nature. He mystifies the African world, the world in which the African's nature exhibits its truth.

One of the questions that are generated in the thinking of the man of the cloth is: can one radically philosophize in an African language? More specifically, can the African fully philosophize in concepts from an African language, or must he or she borrow concepts from a European language? Obviously, as evidenced by his paternalistic language, the man of the cloth provides a negative answer. If it is born in mind that being philosophical entails not taking an answer at face value, one ought to inquire about the basis upon which such answer rests. Such a basis comes to light if one bears in mind that the man of the cloth is making a theo-religious claim. Out of the European medieval background, the man of the cloth confuses a theo-religious claim with a philosophical

claim. He mistakes the former for the latter. He seeks to save the African from being African, and thereby, prepare the African for transformation into a Euro-version of being a Christian. In this effort he is assisted by Euro-racism, by European cultural imperialism, and by European cultural chauvinism. Generally, when a Western European philosophizes, he or she appears to be oblivious of these isms, and the converted or the unconscious African philosophers philosophize as if these isms have no effect on the way they philosophize. Thus, one readily embarks on typical philosophical issues, such as the epistemological, ethical, metaphysical, ontological issues as if these issues exist in a cultural vacuum, as if they exist in a historical or intercultural/interracial vacuum; as if conceptual imperialism is irrelevant to philosophizing. One can now see why the universalizing of philosophical issues is such a seductive tendency among both Africans and Western European philosophers. Attraction to logic as the essence of philosophy and attraction to the scientization of the language of philosophy appear irresistible, for here, the universal seduces and promises to open the door into itself. Even Hountondji, the pre-eminent foe of ethnophilosophy, has not fully escaped the lure of this attraction. He says

African physicists are not generally ashamed to use the concepts which are proper to their discipline. Likewise, the African philosophers must not shirk the technicalities of philosophical language. We shall never create an authentic African Philosophy, a genuine philosophy,, genuinely African (that is what I mean by the term “authentic”), if we skirt round the existing philosophical tradition. It is not by skirting round, and still less by ignoring, the international philosophical heritage that we shall really philosophize, but by absorbing it in order to transcend it.⁶

Hountondji confuses the language of science with the language of philosophy. Even if it is assumed that physics has reached a level of technical universality, such universality should not be assumed for philosophy. After the abandonment of ancient philosophers

who maintained that philosophy is synonymous with science –wisely understood, today, philosophy is not viewed as a science, and philosophy of science is not exhaustive of philosophy. The technical universality of science is not synonymous with philosophical universality. When Christian theology was dominant in Europe, philosophical thinking in Europe was subordinated to this theology, and it barely escaped from total erasure. Even today, it appears that philosophical thinking is yet to be immunized from this danger. Just as it was about to break away from the grasp of Christian theological thinking, it was threatened by scientific thinking –the thinking that sought to replace theological thinking as the master of philosophical thinking. The contribution of the logical mathematical reasoning in the success of science became the oasis of those who were thirsty for success in philosophy. Philosophy was readily pressured into securing a position on the logical mathematical path. Increasingly, this path became confused with the path of philosophy, and an attempt was made to reduce philosophy to a menial service of removing debris from this path. It is precisely to this menial service that philosophy was confined by Wittgenstein, especially in his book *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. Accordingly, what Hountondji calls philosophical tradition remains philosophically unthought. If by philosophical heritage he means European philosophical tradition, it is not clear that this tradition is freed from Christian roots or from scientific roots. It is not clear that this heritage is purged of European racism, and purged of European cultural imperialism. Equally, it is not clear what Hountondji means by international tradition in philosophy. It does not take a genius to recognize that international tradition in philosophy, as is the case in many other faces of internationalism, is dominated by the Europeans and their descendants. It must be born in mind that the concept of nation is a

product of European industry of concepts at a particularly stage in European history. The imposition of the concept in African industry of concepts is a part of the European project of colonizing Africans. It is not clear how international tradition in philosophy is to be distinguished from international politics a political order that is largely created and administered by Westerners to sever Western European interests. Moreover, it is not evident where philosophy should be channeled along national-international line –a line that appears to be largely a product of Western European ordering of the human community. The line of philosophy is irreducible to this line, and what it is remains a problem for philosophy –a problem that is ultimately a problem regarding the nature of philosophy. Challenging this lining of philosophy is what involves African philosophy today to the extent that it is taken seriously.

Granted that, today, Africans cannot philosophize in a vacuum, and indeed they have to engage and be engaged by non-Africans, one of the issues to be addressed is how African philosophers are to engage non-Africans in the philosophical arena without falling victims into Western politics of philosophy? If this question is authentically raised by African philosophers, it must arise from an authentic African philosophical perspective. To be able to raise this question in an authentic way, the philosophical arena itself must be co-constructed by Africans. It is not to be entered into having already been constructed by others. Africans cannot be assisted on to this arena if only because without their co-construction, it is not the arena of philosophy. They are indispensable to its construction. One cannot breathe for another. Primarily, what is being referred to in this essay as the erasure of African philosophy is the project of dis-essentializing the African

from the construction of the arena of philosophy -the arena that thematizes philosophy. Let us elaborate further on what is at stake in this erasure.

The idea of the erasure of African philosophy presupposes that there is such a philosophy that is subject to erasure. Obviously, if the presupposition is contested the intelligibility of erasure will be contested. After all, if there is an erasure there must be something to erase. One does not erase nothing. In trying to make sense of what is presupposed, namely the existence of African philosophy, it is not only the African component of philosophy that is at issue; it is philosophy itself. One must know what philosophy is if one is to identify its particularities. If what philosophy is, is subject to contestation recognition of its manifestations will be subject to contestation, for it will not be clear what it is that one is recognizing. The erasure of African philosophy is problematically tied to the erasure of philosophy. One cannot erase it without erasing philosophy. Its erasure intrinsically affects the being and the existence of philosophy wherever and whenever it manifests itself. By the being and the existence of philosophy, we do not refer exclusively to the being and existence of European philosophy. What is at issue here is the nature of philosophy, which is the fundamental question of philosophy. It is an answer to this question that is presupposed by those who venture to designate where philosophy is or is not, of what people have or do not have a philosophy, what language can or cannot express what is essential about philosophy. For example, it is an answer that Heidegger gives when in an answer to the question on what philosophy he tells us, “But not only what is in question –philosophy – is Greek in origin, but how we question, the manner in which we question even today , is Greek”.⁷ Also when he claims that “philosophia appears, as if it were, on the birth certificate of our own history”,⁸ by which

he means European history, he has already answered the question as to what philosophy is. It should be clear that the answer that he gives is exclusionary. The answer associates philosophy exclusively with the Greeks, and by presumed descent, with Europeans. The answer is the staple diet of education in the tradition of philosophy in the West. It is a mantra that is often repeated in literature on Western philosophy. It is so entrenched in the Western European culture that nothing short of a revolution would loosen and disgorge philosophy from this entrenchment. Accordingly, it is extremely difficult to engage Westerners in a dialogue on the nature of philosophy, unless one is willing to join a Western monologue. But where monologue prevails erasure of philosophy has taken or is taking place. To be sure, this presupposes a view of philosophy that is radically different from what Heidegger proposes. In part, it is in the light of this proposition that one can speak of the erasure of African philosophy. If, as Hontondji advises us, we are not to shirk the technicalities of philosophical language, and if we are not to skirt around existing philosophical tradition, what is called for is a challenging of claims such as the one Heidegger makes, which ultimately entails challenging the Western European tradition of philosophy, which means challenging the technicalities of Western philosophical language and its alleged hegemonic aspect, and this includes challenging the concept of philosophy as it appears in Western cultural tradition. At the core of the technicalities of philosophical language is the concept of philosophy.

Thinking what is at stake in the erasure of African philosophy inevitably and necessarily takes us to African languages. Philosophy, whether African or non-African, has its home in language. Accordingly, the erasure of African philosophy is exhibited in the erasure of African languages. On a more general level this erasure was what

constituted the European colonial project in Africa. Colonialism was a systematic attempt not only to trivialize African languages but to actively destroy them. Moreover, these objectives could succeed only if Europeans were able not only to destroy these languages but to make Africans forget them. And as Ngugi wa Thiong'o has correctly pointed out

Europe went further and planted its memory on the intellect. This was achieved by imposing European languages on the conquered. In Africa this meant raising European languages to the level of an ideal whose achievement was the pinnacle of pure enlightenment. But languages of course comes with culture; for instance, in recruiting new servants of the Empire from among the colonized. Lord Macaulay believed that teaching English in India would produce a class of natives, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect, who would stand as interpreters between them and the people they governed –a buffer between the real owner of the empire and the vast masses of the owned.⁹

The African philosopher runs the risk of being nothing more than a missionary spreading Western tastes opinions morals and intellectual out puts couched in philosophical jargon to his or her African philosophy students who, in turn, propagate them to the African masses. It is the risk of perpetuating the erasure of African philosophy under the guise of engaging in an authentic philosophical project. The overcoming or the inhibition of this risk calls for preservation of African languages –African mother tongues, a project that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's has been promoting. The erasure of African philosophy has called for the severance of African mother tongues –for silencing of African mothers and for substituting their tongues for Western European mother tongues. We barely know who our philosophy mothers are, and this loss of memory is reinforced by the philosophy we teach to our students. And because we barely know who our mothers are, we barely know what our mother tongues are. We trade our African mothers for Western European mothers. The milk from their breasts appears sweeter and more nutritious than the milk from the breasts of our African mothers. With the loss of our African mothers comes the

loss of our African mother tongues. Africans suffer from mother tongue implants – implants that are carried out without the consent of Africans. They have been carried out in the name of civilizing the Africans. Western European philosophy continues to be taught to Africans, and some times by African, as a part of this civilizing project. The deeper this project becomes embedded in us the more hollow the concept of African philosophy sounds to us.

If one is to follow Heidegger lead, and think of philosophy as appearing at the birth certificate of Europeans, we as Africans, should question ourselves about our birth certificate, since we are not the children of Europeans. How does our certificate read? Does philosophy appear in our birth certificate, or is it the case that our certificate is a tabula rasa in regard to philosophy? And should we have non-Africans read our certificate for us to determine whether there is anything philosophical inscribed on it? And if we let others do so, how do we know whether there is already an inscription that they are reading there, or whether the non-Africans are reading what they have written there? Should we look to them for answers? If we do, how do we know they are telling us what is true? How do we protect ourselves from being lied to? And how do we protect ourselves from lying to ourselves? If we truly hear and understand these questions they appear to be coming from within us, and because this is where they appear to be coming from, we should not seek answers elsewhere. If this is the case, then, it should dawn on us that the erasure of African philosophy intimately implicates the erasure of being African. The phrase “African philosophy” refers to the being of the African. What is at stake in being of African philosophy turns out to be the being of the African. The erasure of the African philosophy turns out to be the erasure of the African. African philosophy is

the philosophy of the African. An inquiry into African philosophy is an inquiry into the being of the African. An inquiry into African philosophy that is not an inquiry into the being of the African is a diversion from authentic African philosophy. What is distinctive about African philosophy is not simply what the African does or what the African thinks. To find out what is distinctive about it is not to find out what the African does or how he or she thinks, or to find out how what he or she does or thinks is to be distinguished from what others do or what others think. If doing and thinking matter, and indeed, in a more profound sense they do, it is because doing and thinking designate the being of the doer or the being of the thinker. What is distinctive about African philosophy is what is distinctive about the being of the African. How is one to understand this distinctive mode of being African is a central issue in African philosophy, and it is in taking it as a central issue that African philosophy distinguishes itself as African. Here, the being of the African is itself at issue. It is not an issue because it is made as such by non-Africans. It is an issue from its own standpoint. How it is an issue will remain obscured if the issue is not illuminated. One enters into the neighborhood of this illumination if one steers away from thinking of the African as an object. It is in living that the African distinguishes himself or herself as an African. The issue of African philosophy is the issue of African living, and because living is living, the issue of African philosophy is an alive issue. The issue implicates moyo –an African word that names living, a naming that vivifies. It is a word of words. What is true of it is true of language. Accordingly, it is in the very nature of language to bring into living what is spoken or what it expresses. To this extent, it is moyoism that constitute the core of African philosophy. It is also inherent in moyo that it is what it is by being and remaining open, by being mobile. Moyo is without closure, for

as long as living is living, it remains open and mobile. An African is an open being, a mobile being. It is in being open and in being mobile that the African is African.

What is being erased in the erasure of the African philosophy is the openness that the African is. It is in living and by living that the African expresses what the he or she is. This is not only true of African. Non-Africans too express who or what they are in their living. Philosophy is not simply an intellectual activity that amounts to no more than mental gymnastics. One measures how philosophical one is not by being looking at how intelligent one is, or how clever or smart one is. It is in the way that one lives that distinguishes how philosophical one is. One masters one's life not through cognition but by living. But mastery here is not the work of human being. Being human is mastered by life. For the African, the African concern with philosophy is the concern with living. How one is to lead one's life as an African is and should be the focus of African philosophy. The erasure of African philosophy amounts to the nullification of this focus – a nullification that subverts African living. It is a dislocation of the African from his or her living. It is being dis-located, mis-located and re-located away from what he or she is. This is precisely the project of negation that Europeans launched in Africa in the form of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. This is what the European version of philosophy has meant in Africa to Africans. Africans too contribute to these European projects by being unmindful of African living.

The philosophical task the African phases today is one of stemming the erasure of African. The erasure, which amounts to the nullification of African living, has its birth at the same time as the birth of European modernity. Since then the historicization of European modernity has been attended by systematic negation of the African's sense of

living. As evidenced by Hegel's history of philosophy and philosophy of history, it is by negating African sense of living that European modernity has affirmed itself. It is by negating this negation that the stemming of the erasure of African philosophy can be on its way to reaffirming the African sense of living. As Africans embark on this task, they cannot simply and solely engage in a reactive philosophy. That is, that they cannot reduce African philosophy to reacting to what Europeans and their descendants have done to Africans. A philosophy that is no more than a reaction is not a genuine philosophy. Living in general and philosophical living demands creativity; it calls for constant self-surpassing. The aim of de-erasing of African philosophy is not intended to be an archaeological work –the work of digging the fossils of African life and displaying it to the public. The aim is not to unearth a mummified African philosophy, dust it, and place it on a shelf in the academy, or on the world stage, where it can be seen, deciphered, or analyzed to unravel its secrets. Philosophy, African or non-African, does not allow itself to be approached this way, It is a form of living that is open-ended if only because it a living.

Since the erasure of African philosophy came about at the birth of European modernity de-erasing of the erasure calls for a rethinking of this fateful event. In de-erasing European philosophers have an important role to play. They are indispensable in the bridging of the gap that sets Africans and Europeans apart. This calls for rereading and re-understanding of what has passed or what passes as modern European philosophy. This will not happen unless European philosophers become aware of the need to re-read and re-understand their own philosophy. They can be on their way to recognizing this need if they pay attention to the philosophical work that is being done by Africans to de-

erase their philosophy. The recognition calls for staying away from the imitative philosophy that a good number of Africans have embraced. They will not philosophize responsibly if they continue encouraging African philosophers to imitate European philosophy or if they continue carrying out missionary work in philosophy in Africa. Philosophy proper does not lend itself to missionary activity. Hence, a proper philosophical way for European philosophers to relate to African philosophers is by weaning themselves from the Christian missionary temptation. By succumbing to this temptation, they thereby demonstrate that they are not true heirs to Greek philosophy. For the Greeks, philosophy was not a missionary activity, and it ought not be such an activity for any people because the nature philosophical activity is different from and antithetical to missionary activity. Hence, the error of construing philosophical activity to be nothing more than argumentation. When philosophy is viewed as being nothing more than argumentation it turns out to be nothing more than a form of missionarism, or a form of adversarism that is driven by the desire to subdue others.

Overcoming the erasure of African philosophy can severely be compromised if African philosophy is viewed as being nothing more than a reaction to Western missionarism. African philosophy has an internal link with the non-missionary Western philosophy. Moreover if we understand African philosophy as the flesh of African living, African living has an internal link with Western living provided that the latter is purified of its missionary thrust. Failure to recognize and affirm this link may reduce African philosophy to being nothing more than a reaction to Western philosophy, and viewing it as such is simply another instance of bondage to the West. It could also be a bondage to ignorance about the nature of philosophy. Trying to undo what the West has done to

Africa for the last five centuries should not obscure the fundamental link that Africans have with Westerners, and should not command so much of African attention that Africans forget that there still remains an essential project for Africans to recognize their autochthonic relation to philosophy. Over the last five centuries the Western project in African has been one of colonizing Africa – a violent undertaking to orient Africans towards the West. Western philosophy has been employed towards this end, and perhaps, this is why it has been shielded from its own self-critical examination and why its admirers have been ignorant of African philosophy, and why many of those who embrace it ignore, dismiss, and denigrate African philosophy. To this extent, it has played an essential role in the erasure of African philosophy.

If African philosophy is to be truly itself it has to call attention to the role that Western philosophy has played in this unphilosophical undertaking. But this cannot be its only task. It must make a case for itself irrespective of what has been done in the name of Western philosophy. Overcoming of the erasure of African philosophy must revive and reinforce the African autochthony. It must revive and reinforce this autochthony in a way that does not shut off Africans from the rest of the humanity. Africans are yet to open up to the richness of Asiatic philosophical living. Inhibiting this opening up has partly been the work of Western philosophy, and this inhibition has been strongly reinforced by the way that science and technology are understood in the West. In the West, science and technology have become the means of exhibiting a particular belief of what it is to be a human being, and it is a belief that weighs heavily not only on Africans but also on Asians. In the light of this belief Africans and Asian appear to fall short of what it is to be human being. De-erasure of the erasure of African philosophy can make a significant

contribution to the lifting off this weight from humanity. It is also worth bearing in mind that de-erasing of the erasure is not a turning in by the Africans unless by turning in it is also to be understood as a turning out. Indeed, in so far as it is authentic, it has to be a turning out, for it is only as such that it can attain to the universality that is a part of what it is. This turning in that is a turning out constitutes the core experience of African philosophy. It is not a turning in to or a turning out to. It is an exhibiting. The turning in and the turning out are not exclusively intellectual processes or cognitive processes. Primordially, they are poietic. They view of philosophy that Africans have inherited from the West keeps them away from such poiesis. The erasure of the erasure is a renaissance of this poiesis. This renaissance is a living process that one has to undergo, and it is an undergoing that is creative.

¹ One of the key African philosophers involved in the project is Paulin Hountondji. See his book, *African Philosophy Myth & Reality*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996)

² . *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Gracia, J.E. Jorge, (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1986) ,p. 222

³ . *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Gracia, Jorge J. E., p.225

⁴ . *Temples*. Placide, (Paris: Africaine Presence, 1959)p 34

⁵ . See a discussion of ethnophilosophy in *African Philosophy : Myth and Reality* by Paulin Hountondji (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1996), pp. 55-70

⁶ . Hountondji, *ibid.*, p. 72

⁷ . Heidegger Martin, *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kublack, (Albany, New York: NCUP, Inc., 1956), p,35

⁸ . *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁹ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o "Europhone or African Memory: the Challenge of the Pna African intellectual in the era of globalization in *African Intellectuals*, Thandika Mkandawire, ed., (Codeseria Books: London, 2005), p. 158