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CONVERSATIONAL THINKING AS A NEW METHODOLOGICAL OPTION FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

In response to the question about what the most attractive method for African philosophy is, we consider conversational thinking as an alternative to pre-existing methods in African philosophy, especially in contemporary times. We shall show in this essay that the heavy critique of the ethnophilosophical method–concerning its inadequacy–left a gap that both philosophic sagacity and hermeneutics have failed to fill. In the contemporary period, Innocent Asouzu developed what he calls complementary reflection, which is a framework for bridge-building between old and new, weak and strong, local and alien and in all aspects of reality, which he claims constitute missing links of reality. Unfortunately, Asouzu's method of complementary reflection appears to say little about resolving conflicts among dissenting variables, and in this regard, his method, though promising, also remains inadequate. Our goal here is to demonstrate that conversational thinking is a viable attempt at a systematised and well-developed methodology for doing

African Philosophy – one which proceeds from an African place and discovers its relevance in the global space. To properly articulate the relevance and viability of conversational thinking, we begin by examining, in some detail, the various flaws of the pre-existing methodologies of African philosophy. We go a step further to explicate the tenets of conversational thinking and present it as a viable method(ology) borne out of the African experience for African philosophy. Furthermore, we introduce the up-down movement of thought as a novel description of conversational thinking at the level of what we refer to as the sub-micro level of conversational thinking. We conclude by identifying the ways in which conversational thinking situates African philosophy and can drive its discourses in contemporary time.

Keywords: Complementary reflection, Conversational thinking, Ethnophilosophy, Methodology, Philosophic sagacity, Hermeneutics.

Introduction

The development of African philosophy has encountered a huge resurgence in the last decade, particularly with scholars such as Bruce Janz, Oladele Balogun, Thaddeus Metz, Michael Eze, Bernard Matolino, Fainos Mangena, Jonathan Chimakonam, Edwin Etieyibo, Ada Agada, etc., as well as schools, such as the Conversational School of Philosophy, appearing as leading figures in this particular wave of resurgence. Generally speaking, the discipline has continued to develop steadily, although one can easily conclude that much more needs to be done. Whereas the rise in the development of African philosophy has remained steady, one problem that has bedevilled the discipline has been the problem of discovering and/or deciding what method precisely constitutes the proper methodology for doing African philosophy. This problem appears even more poignant in the contemporary period of African philosophy. Scholars have grown disgruntled with the older methods because of their inclinations towards certain extremes. Some African philosophers today discover themselves in what can only be described as a methodological limbo with most of them employing Western methods of philosophising (not necessarily a bad thing, but that is a debate for another time).

With this gap presenting itself clearly as a problem that needs to be fixed, Jonathan Chimakonam proposed a new method in African philosophy that he calls the "conversational method" or "conversational thinking" as a direct response to the problem of method in African philosophy. Interestingly, this method derives its powers from the foundation laid by Asouzu in his *Ibuanyidanda* (or complementary) method and Chimakonam's *Ezumezu* logic. To be sure, the conversational methods involve a deliberate and constant shuffling of thoughts between both interlocutors, known as *nwa nsa* (proponent, thesis) and *nwa nju* (opponent, interrogator, anti-thesis), not with the aim of achieving a synthesis, but to improve both thesis and anti-thesis (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 116).

In this essay, therefore, we discuss what the conversational method entails and how it resolves the problem of method in African philosophy. We begin by identifying the problem of method in African philosophy, especially as it relates to the inadequacies of previous methods of African philosophy and their application in contemporary times. We then identify the conversational method as a new historical moment in what we recognise as the evolution of African philosophical methodology. We conclude by explicating what is meant by the conversational method as well as its tenets and presuppositions. We shall consider the conversational method as characteristic of what a truly African method of philosophising should entail, especially in contemporary times.

Methods for Doing African Philosophy and Why They Are Inadequate

One of the fundamental problems that confronted African philosophy after the "Great Debate" was the problem of discovering the proper method for doing African philosophy. For those who belonged to what came to be known as the Universalist/professional school, African philosophy could be done with the already established methods of Western philosophy. In direct opposition to this view, the particularist school argued that African philosophy is best done and should be done with a particularly "African philosophical method" which emanates from and is inspired by decidedly "African" ideals and perspectives. In the course of this methodological wrangling, one encounters other questions regarding the need to fashion out a method for African philosophy. These

questions were captured quite succinctly by Jonathan Chimakonam in a paper titled "Ezumezu as a Methodological Reconstruction in African Philosophy". They include: Do we need a new method for African philosophy? Or are the methods of Western philosophy adequate for African philosophy? (CHIMAKONAM 2016b, 123). In an attempt to ascertain the authenticity of African philosophy as truly "African", African philosophers must confront these questions headlong (and they have attempted to do so). We must ask even further: if one contends that there is a need for a method for African philosophy, would it then imply that those Africans doing Philosophy using Western methodology only fail to achieve authentic African philosophy? If one agrees that Western methods are more than adequate for African philosophy, is it then true that African philosophy is not truly "African" as yet (CHIMAKONAM 2016b, 124)?

These questions still pose a huge challenge for African philosophy, even today. This is because if African philosophy is done with Western-formulated methods, it might fall short of a truly philosophical tradition in its own right (CHIMAKONAM 2017b, 12) and fail to earn the respect it truly deserves in the global scheme of things. Against this backdrop, it is easy for us to accept, as the particularists did and like Chimakonman (2016b, 2016c), Outlaw (2003), and others who agree that African philosophy in this age needs a methodological re-direction, that to free African philosophy from the spell of Plato and Aristotle, it must operate with its own method and one that is true to the spirit of a truly philosophical enterprise (CHIMAKONAM 2016b, 124).

Universalism aside, there have been many attempts throughout the history of African philosophy to churn out Africa-inspired methods for philosophising or doing African Philosophy. Some of these attempts were not necessarily deliberate but only arose in response to certain historical necessities. The ethnophilosophical method falls under the above-stated category. Others were more deliberate. Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity, Asouzu's complementarism and Chimakonam's Conversational thinking are all examples of deliberate attempts at proffering a method for African philosophy. What we shall proceed to do now is to briefly describe some of these methods, stating why they are

inadequate for contemporary African philosophy and why the conversational tradition fits the bill.

To do this, we shall broadly divide these methods into two groups namely; African methodological universalism/universalist (AMU) and African methodological particularism/particularist (AMP).

African Methodological Universalism

Before we begin, we dismiss any viewpoint or claim that may want to consider nationalist-ideological philosophy as an actual method of African philosophy beyond its current status as a trend in African philosophy. The reason for this is simple. In the first instance, trends are not synonymous with methods, with the former mainly describing a historical and/or thematic categorisation and the latter describing a systematic and clearly defined mode/rules for (in this context) doing philosophy of a specific type. Beyond this, the nationalist-ideological trend can be easily categorised as some form of political philosophy – hardly an all-embracing style of philosophising.

Moving on, we find the views of the AMUs representative of the disdain with which some African philosophers of the modern period of African philosophy regarded the ethnophilosophical enterprise. With the mostly descriptive, anthropological and historical leanings describing the ethnophilosophical project (HOUNTONDJI 1996; ATTOE 2016), the unattractiveness of the ethnophilosophical model led to the serious criticisms it received from members of the universalist school. As the fallout from these criticisms, the need to provide an alternative to the ethnophilosophical method became apparent and something which AMU, such as Paulin Hountondji, seemed to have failed to provide. However, most universalists took the easier route by simply falling back on the trusted criteria of criticality, argumentation and/or analysis as the real requirements for doing African philosophy. Criticism and argument were thus seen as essential characteristics of any procedure designed to pass as a method of doing African philosophy (BODUNRIN 1991, 65). Thus, suggesting that African philosophy must, in essence, operate as a critical and analytic enterprise – something that the professional school argued was

lacking in the ethnophilosophical method. Criticality, justification, argumentation etc., thus formed the hallmark of the method of professional African philosophers. Unfortunately, what these philosophers failed to realise was that the route to criticality often only regarded the Western paradigm. While there is nothing overtly wrong with that, the fact remains that strict adherence to Western philosophical values would most likely allow for the neglect of other methods of knowing, with the intellectual and political effects of such neglect ominously tagging along (CHIMAKONAM & NWEKE 2018b, 277-301).

Beyond criticality, whatever is African philosophy for the professional school should necessarily involve:

> …the written work of a live flesh and blood person or groups of persons (or schools) which contains assertions, explanations, and justifications. It is only in such cases that there is little doubt as to what is said and who says it. It is also in such cases that we can evaluate what is said with respect to philosophic content, methodology, influence(s), or originality. (BELLO 2004, 265)

This interesting proposition suggests that African philosophy must indeed involve real academic philosophers whose ideas and criticisms of those ideas can be traced back and addressed to them, and not in some general appeal to a communal name such as "African", "Igbo", "Shona", etc. It makes sense to agree with this line of thinking, and although this does not directly speak to "methodology" in the strictest sense of the word, it would make sense to aver that for the professional school, doing African philosophy involved a methodic divorce from the snares of unanimity and philosophical jingoism. The problem with this sort of thinking, however, was the disregard of certain periods in the history of African philosophy (as unphilosophical) from contemporary professional (academic) philosophy. One needs not to think too hard to realise that the ability to write is not a marker of intellectual or philosophical ability – a point that cannot be ignored if we remember that we currently have no knowledge of any piece written down by the great Socrates himself.

If we continue to do African philosophy under the auspices of "philosophical universalism", it is inevitable that certain issues will arise. The first problem is that it will make African philosophers "error pointers" – that is, African philosophers would be mainly fault-finders rather than mainly providers of their own original epistemic perspectives. This is evident in the sublime dexterity that the professional philosophers discovered the problems associated with ethnophilosophy, deconstructed those problems and failed almost dismally in providing a concrete and original alternative. Originality is important, especially with regard to the development of African philosophy and Agada has offered a few ideas as to why this is so (see AGADA 2015, 40-46). This originality (as far as African philosophy is concerned) is not a mere propulsion of new ideas. One might re-examine Hegelian metaphysics in a new and different light, but that sort of originality appears far removed from the type of originality that will propel the discipline of African philosophy itself. Here, the originality we speak of should emanate from the African place – either inspired by it or in reaction to it. We believe, like Agada does, that in taking up the burden of originality, those who are African philosophers will have no other option than to provide fresh African perspectives on deep philosophical issues and, in so doing, foster the growth of the discipline. It is this sort of unbridled originality that AMU fails to inspire.

African methodological particularism

The methods associated with African methodological particularism generally comprise of the ethnophilosophical method, the method of sage philosophy and to a large extent hermeneutics. Generally speaking the main objective of the AMP is to narrate, describe or interpret cultural corpus as philosophy or as something that emanates from, and is representative of, the view of a particular group – in this case, the African worldview (BODUNRIN 1991, 63). Also, they generally seek to present the collective worldview of African people, their myth, folklore and wisdom from specific cultural backgrounds as philosophy. One might add that these are the methods of tribal "philosophising". Some prominent individuals associated with the AMP methods include Oruka, Godwin Sogolo, Lansana Keita, Henry Olela, Emmanuel Edeh, Mangena, Theophilus Nwala, Chris Uroh, Francis Ogunmodede, among others. The underlying argument

propelling these methods is the view that no philosophy is African philosophy unless it fully represents the African cultural worldview and deals explicitly with a specifically African theme, topic, or problem. How this is done is mainly through the unreserved excavation of African belief systems and the establishment of those traditional thoughts as philosophy proper.

Our analysis of the AMP methods begins with the examination of the ethnophilosophical method. Without a doubt, it is quite plausible to claim that the ethnophilosophical, as well as other related AMP methods, arose from the great accusations of irrationality and pre-logicality levelled against Africans by Western scholars such as Lucien Levy-Bruhl Immanuel Kant, David Hume, etc. (More 1996). Ironically, it was a European – Belgian missionary Placide Tempels – that instigated the rise of ethnophilosophy by delving into the Bantu culture and excavating what he thought was Bantu metaphysics and representing his findings as Bantu philosophy (HOUNTONDJI 2002, 79; BOTZ-BORNSTEIN 2005, 153). Whereas Tempels has been roundly criticised by scholars such as Asouzu (2007), there is no doubt that he laid the foundation of what is now termed the ethnophilosophical method.

The need to prove that Africans (both ancient and modern) could philosophise in a rational way, coupled with the need to decolonise what would become African philosophy in a bid to rid of Hellenic underpinnings, led to the development of the ethnophilosophical method. Thus, the ethnophilosophical method began as a reversion to pre-colonial – pre-colonial because it was believed that colonial and post-colonial African values were tainted by Western influence – indigenous African cultures, traditions, norms, thought systems, myths, beliefs etc., as both source and content of African philosophy. In other words, the method thrives in excavating, projecting and polishing only those ideas that are drawn from the philosopher's indigenous culture – or what we term *tribal memories*[1] – and passing those polished ideas as philosophy (HOUNTONDJI 2004, 529-530; OZUMBA 2009). It is usually the case that in narrating cultural beliefs as philosophy, the individual philosopher is exempt from culpability since the views s/he

[1] By tribal memory we mean the historical (re)collection of traditional ideas, stories, proverbs, myths, etc., of a particular community.

expresses only supposedly expresses tribal memory rather than the individual's views.

The ethnophilosophical method formed the referral point from which other related AMP methods drew their inspiration. One such related method is the method of sage philosophy. Like ethnophilosophy, this method thrives in excavating tribal memories. But unlike ethnophilosophy, the sage philosophical method is specifically focused on excavating tribal memories from elders or sages in a community who show a strong grasp of the tribal memories of their communities, as well as maybe show some level of wisdom and criticality, especially regarding moral/normative issues. This excavation is mostly done through question and answer sessions where the interviewing philosopher asks the sage question while nudging him/her towards philosophical profundity. Perhaps it is in response to the view that maybe the ethnophilosophical method did not produce ancient sages, such as Plato, Socrates etc., that Odera Oruka (1990) and others like Marciel Griaule (1975) considered sage philosophy as a method that both captures tribal memories and in the same vein points at certain knowledgeable tribal personalities who would rub shoulders with philosophers elsewhere (GRANESS 2012, 9).

Beyond sage philosophy, it is also plausible but perhaps controversial that one drags hermeneutics into the mix as one of the AMP methods. This is because hermeneutics was not developed in Africa or by an African but by German philosophers such as Gadamer and Heidegger. This, however, did not stop scholars such as Tsenay Serequeberhan, Sophie Oluwole, Theophilus Okere, etc., from employing this method (FAYEMI 2016), and it is not hard to see why. As a method, hermeneutic seeks to interpret and/or re-interpret certain views, myths, symbols, metaphors, etc., in a bid to project the philosophical underbelly of these tribal memories. Through interpreting (via the understanding of context, intentionality etc.), one gains access to the philosophy behind these tribal memories while at the same time expressing philosophical rigour (the lack of which is a common criticism of the ethnophilosophical method) via a critical examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the mostly metaphorical tribal memories.

However, the AMP methods described above are not without their problems. The first and obvious problem is the inherently static

and near-dogmatic nature that an overly particularistic method of philosophising entails. It is hardly the case that a sublime description and in-depth narration of one's tribal memories expresses the individual ingenuity (in churning out new ideas) and originality of the philosopher nor is it the case that such a descriptive type of philosophising engenders the type of development that contemporary African philosophy needs to progress. The political motivations of the AMP methods, whereas noble, only seems to inhibit its development and the development of the individual philosopher who engages it. This is not to say that the AMP methods are without merit. Indeed, it is through the excavation and baring of tribal memories that the conversationalist taps some of his/her inspiration (as we shall see in the next few sections). However, even though this is the case, we cannot discountenance the fact that these methods generally immerse the individual in tribal thoughts, allowing the philosopher to lose not only his/herself but his/her personal conviction as s/he lays prostrate to the tribal worldview.

The Evolution of African Philosophical Methods: Towards a Conversational Turn

From the preceding views about the various methods in African philosophy, we see a pattern that begins to manifest itself as one looks more closely at the development of African philosophy. In this pattern, we see a dialectical movement that culminates in something true and spectacular – conversational thinking. Whereas one can examine the strengths and the weaknesses of the various methods of African philosophy, there is another way we can understand why each of these methods seemed strong and robust during certain periods in the history of African philosophy and then weak and unnecessary as time went by. This new mode of understanding the strengths and failures of each method of African philosophy is via a historico-dialectical understanding, and we shall explain what we mean presently.

To understand the historico-dialectical movement that we speak of, one must also pay attention to the historical development of African philosophy as we know it today. The history of modern Western scholarship has been inundated with certain claims about Africans and their ability to philosophise that are less than stellar (IJIOMAH 2014; MORE 1996). In response to this question and in

tandem with the advent of colonialism, most African scholars were inclined to excavate through their histories and cultures for ideas that would provide concrete evidence that would refute the uncharitable accusations that characterised the somewhat sceptic and largely racist views of some of these Western thinkers. It then makes sense that ethnophilosophy, whose preoccupation is the excavation of ideas from an indigenous cultural history, would serve as the dominant method of African philosophy during the early period of African philosophy and the foundation from which other methods of African philosophy sprung forth. Indeed, in his award-winning book, *Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis and Values in African Philosophy,* Agada suggests that:

> The school of African Philosophy called ethno-philosophy necessarily became the foundation of African Philosophy, marking the first victory for African philosophical thought. Ethno-philosophy did not emerge as the originality of the individual mind, but it did establish itself as the originality of the collective mind…. (AGADA 2015, 3)

Ethnophilosophy's place as the foundation of African philosophy, for some, cannot be discounted – although we like to think of it as *a* source of inspiration for African philosophy. It is only obvious that the evolution of academic African philosophy should begin with a rebuttal of the accusation of pre-logicality through the excavation of thought that is considered traditional, pre-colonial and specific to the cultural orientation of the African.

With the ethnophilosophical tradition established as the base from which the dialectical evolution of the methods of African philosophy sprung forth, the next step in the dialectical movement (as we see it) involved the refinement of ethnophilosophy from a *philosophy of a particular collective* to a philosophy that involved the views of specific special individuals insofar as those specific individual minds reiterated the views of the collective mind. Thus, sage philosophy (as we have previously discussed it) naturally grew and sprung forth from ethnophilosophy as the next step in the dialectic movement in the discovery of the proper methodology for African philosophy – stemming from the need to contest against raw

communal philosophising and point at the philosophical figureheads of traditional African thought.

The fascination with the ethnophilosophical model and the method of sage philosophy led to the implementation of ethnophilosophical ideas on contemporary problems. Beyond the implementation of ethnophilosophical ideas on contemporary problems, African philosophers also sought to gain new insights by interpreting related philosophical ideas that are drawn from ethnophilosophical ideas. Thus, the trend of nationalist ideological philosophies arose as an instance where traditional ethnophilosophical views were adopted in political thinking, with hermeneutics also gaining traction as a means of understanding and interpreting raw traditional ideas and gaining new insights from some of those interpretations.

The harsh criticisms of ethnophilosophy from the universalist/professional school stemmed its flow and questioned its relevance as a viable method of African philosophy beyond its foundational history. The demise of the ethnophilosophical methodological model was only natural. But this demise was not total. The direction in which the universalists wanted African philosophy to go also led to the same partial demise of their own position. The demise of the two views was necessitated by their inclinations towards certain extremes – with the ethnophilosophers diluting the African philosophical enterprise with their inclinations towards an extreme particularist and descriptive anthropology (ATTOE 2016) and most universalists diluting the African flavour of their philosophies by an inclination towards an extreme universal understanding of philosophy which was mostly Western.

With the tension building between these two broad methods of doing philosophy, it is only natural that with regards to finding a method of doing African philosophy, one of two things would occur – a continuation of the methodological contestation between the two camps mentioned above with the appearance of yet another method that still prostrates before any of the two camps and/or the cessation of hostilities via the emergence of a new method that addresses most of the overarching concerns of both camps. Such a method would thus become the final conclusion to the dialectical movement we spoke of, serving as the dominant method of contemporary African philosophy and essentialising what African philosophy is about.

Such a method would have to grow into a tradition since subsequent methods would only serve as footnotes to this method in much the same way that much of Western philosophy is said to be footnotes of the Greek tradition – specifically the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition.

Fortunately, the conversational method of African philosophy, as proposed by Chimakonam, has emerged as one practical method that has so far tackled the overarching concerns expressed above. We shall explain how this is so presently.

The Conversational Tradition: An Introduction

What we describe here as the conversational method was originally propounded by Chimakonam (2015a; 2015b; 2016a; 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; CHIMAKONAM & NWEKE 2018B; CHIMAKONAM 2021). It is currently being developed by members of the "Conversational School/Society of Philosophy". Conversational thinking draws its methodological powers from the philosophy of Asouzu and may be described as the logical conclusion to Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* philosophy – the philosophy of complementary reflection. A quick detour to briefly explain the main thesis of Ibuanyidanda philosophy is important as it would enable us to understand the roots of conversational thinking more clearly.

For Asouzu, all aspects of reality are metaphysically understood as serving as missing links to a complementary whole. What this generally implies is that in understanding the dynamics of the relationship in and among realities, one must first see each aspect of reality as equally important as any other insofar as their individual authenticity is predicated on their mutual complementarity. One can understand this idea if one considers each reality as chain links whose powers are augmented and makes more sense in the strength of their linkage with other chain links rather than in a separate individual existence. Epistemologically speaking, this sort of understanding would imply that no knowledge form gains full authenticity by standing alone and that it is by possessing and engaging in a mutually complementary relationship that each or any body of knowledge arrives at full legitimacy. By implication, interaction amongst claims to knowledge – especially opposing claims to knowledge – is precisely what eventually validates such claims to knowledge.

From the above groundwork, one begins to see the foundation where conversational thinking springs from and the direction it is headed. The conversational tradition preys on complementarism in the building up of its methodology, taking up its basic tenets and taking it to its logical conclusion. Conversational thinking, thus, arises from the need to foster interaction amongst ideas since all ideas are missing links of the epistemological whole – but how does this translate to a method of doing African philosophy? To understand how, we must remember the debate between the universalists and the particularists. Whereas the former sought to appeal to a universal reason and avoid the perils of ethnophilosophy, the latter sought to appeal to cultural influence and identity in a bid to avoid the perils of the loss of identity through immersion in a universal reason – this is minus the suspicions about the infiltration of Western hegemony (especially since this universal reason appeared to be modelled after Western thought). As a remedy to this situation, it was therefore pertinent that African philosophers develop a methodology that both appeals to one's background as an African and, at the same time, appeals to rationality, which is the hallmark of any proper philosophising. From this search for a systematic African Philosophy, conversationalism as a doctrine was born.

Conversational thinking does not mean mere conversation – i.e. a chat amongst people – and, as such, one must discard that understanding of conversation as a word and rather begin to build an understanding of conversational thinking as a philosophical concept (CHIMAKONAM 2017a, 120). The first presupposition of the conversational method is one that appeals to the sensitivities of the particularist school and that is the fact that philosophies (including African philosophy) and/or ideas are context-motivated – although this does not imply unanimity. The reason for this assumption is not far-fetched. It seems quite reasonable to accept that the distinct geographical and cultural background which a philosopher emerges from generally influences what that philosopher philosophises about and how that philosopher employs the tool of reason to philosophise about it. What these hints at is the fact that philosophers from different backgrounds and influences philosophise in unique ways that align with their background or influences, even if that uniqueness is in its most basic form. If this is true, one can go even

further to suggest that this sort of perspective allows for an acknowledgement of unique ideas or philosophies and, at the same time, disapproves of tendencies towards the feeling of superiority over others in terms of the relationship between these unique ideas or philosophies. Hence, the first tenet of the conversational method is the view that unique philosophies do exist, and the second tenet is the view that unequal power relations amongst philosophies/ideas should not exist and that any appeal to any type of philosophy as possessing intellectual superiority (as expressed in instances of epistemic injustices) should be deemed irrational. With these two tenets in mind, it becomes easy for one to properly understand the method of conversational thinking as expressed in the notion of *arumaristics*.

The Conversational Method as Arumaristics

The concept of "arumaristics" is basically the foundational thought in conversational thinking and fully encapsulates the method of conversational thinking. The term is etymologically derived from the Igbo word *arumaru-uka or iru-uka,* which generally translates to "doubt" or "criticality". In developing the term, Chimakonam employs and sees it as a *critical conversation*. For Chimakonam, the term can be understood in two senses viz.:

> (1) The Act (but not the state) of engaging in a critical exchange and (2) The mechanism for engaging in a critical exchange. While the first sense describes its doctrine of conversational philosophy, the second sense describes its methodic ambience. When corrupted, the adjective arumaristic may be derived to qualify any relationship that is characterised by a critical exchange (CHIMAKONAM 2017b, 17)

What one garners from the above is the idea that arumaristics can mean the act of conversing and the *method* of conversing. In fully defining what arumaristics means, Chimakonam further states that "the noun arumaristics is defined as a type of critical encounter that involves the reshuffling of thesis and anti-thesis, each time at a higher level without the expectation of a synthesis" (CHIMAKONAM 2017a, 17).

What the above brings to mind is the Western equivalent of Hegelian dialectics, which seeks to derive a synthesis through an engagement between a thesis and an anti-thesis. For the conversationalists, the movement is somewhat different. Ideas or philosophies are demarcated into two aspects. First is the nwa nsa (roughly interpreted to mean proponent or original view) and second is the nwa nju (roughly interpreted to mean opponent or opposing view). The nwa nsa and the nwa nju engage in something that is much more than mere interaction. They converse together. What this means is that these two aspects interrogate each other and engage in rigorous argumentation via reason, construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of their various positions. It is important to note that the purpose here is not to achieve a synthesis of ideas. Synthesising only plays too keenly to the universalist side and as well would suggest an immersion of particular uniqueness into a grand new whole where such uniqueness is lost. The aim of arumaristics (or conversational thinking) would be the reshuffling of ideas on each side such that each aspect, rather than achieve a synthesis, improves upon their various positions and both the nwa nsa and the nwa nju continue grow in rational depth via conversation with others, preserve their uniqueness and therefore fulfil the complementary mantra of serving as missing links. This understanding of arumaristic relationships compels a clear understanding of what conversational dialectic or what the conversational method entails. To summarise this point, Chimakonam states that:

> [Conversational thinking] is an encounter between philosophers of rival schools of thought; between philosophers and non-philosophers; and between different philosophical traditions. This encounter involves primarily written (and or other documentation media) exchanges in which one critically responds to the ideas, thoughts, and theories of the opposed other with the aim of not only establishing the historicity of thought but of structural loopholes and ultimately attempting a reconstruction where possible or creating alternative structures in order to sustain the conversation. Hence, in a philosophical conversation of this kind, unlike in the British-styled method of analysis, actors do not merely seek to deconstruct, they are also

> obligated to reconstruct except where such is impossible and clearly shown to be so. (CHIMAKONAM 2018a, 144)

We must agree here that the type of conceptual interaction that the conversational method brings to mind is one that appears to share certain similarities with the Socratic method – especially with regard to rigorous argumentation and deconstruction. However, it must be noted that although the Socratic method seeks to establish the negation of a position (CHIMAKONAM 2017b, 16) that has been proven false (usually via a *reduction ad absurdum*), conversational thinking requires "the sustenance of the engagement over the outcome of such engagements" (CHIMAKONAM 2017b, 16). This is important because as knowledge improves, concepts, ideas or philosophies must also continue to improve in light of new knowledge. The Socratic method, on the other hand, prioritises the defeat of one thesis by another. Furthermore, Chimakonam states:

> Granted that the conversational relationship takes some measures of inspiration from Socratic dialectic, it is important to note that they are not quite the same. Both of them prioritise the revision of positions and the opening of new vistas for thought but conversational relationship does not place a premium on *telos* as does the Socratic dialectic. The goal of the Socratic Method appears to be geared towards 'proving a position false and establishing the truth of its negation'.... [the Socratic method]is capable of exposing philosophy to future danger if it allows for the certainty of the truth of philosophy to be established today on the basis of inaccurate facts only for it to be disestablished tomorrow when more accurate facts become available. For this, the conversational method prioritises the sustenance of the engagement over the outcome of such engagements. (CHIMAKONAM 2017b, 16)

Beyond this, we must also remember that the conversational method is inspired, even more, by the African complementary worldview. This method immediately reminds us of our earlier claims about unique ideas and philosophies, their equal validity and their need to flourish through interaction. This need for interaction is not lost on

philosophers today and intercultural philosophy stands as one way of interacting. However, the pitfalls of intercultural philosophy immediately become apparent when we discover that in the intercultural arena, philosophers gather to display their philosophies, clap their hands and dance away without any real critical interaction amongst philosophies (or at least, the type that conversational thinking seeks to offer), such that one influences a critical readjustment of views that is mutual. Indeed, where there is interaction, some form of hegemony rears its head since stipulations are made in reference to another philosophical paradigm that itself requires interaction.

The Up-Down Movement of Thought in Conversational Thinking

From our preceding analysis, we have seen a method of doing African philosophy that encapsulates the true meaning of African philosophy. The conversational method thrives in intellectual contestation, not for the sake of developing a synthesis (as seen in Hegel's philosophy) or a simple negation of one narrative but rather the mutual development of each narrative. The conversational method, whilst speaking more clearly to African philosophy at the macro and micro level (i.e. at the global intercultural level and at the level of African philosophy, respectively), would appear to say very little about doing African philosophy at what we term the sub-micro or subjective level (i.e. at the level of the individual who is philosophising). This is, however, not the case. The principle of arumaristics and conversational thinking can be extended to philosophising at the subjective level. How this is done is encapsulated in what can be described as the up-down movement of thought.

Recall that the conversational principle of arumaristics focuses on the reshuffling of thoughts and ideas such that whether as nwa nsa or nwa nju, one's views are consistently improved upon without the dissolution of identity through the immersion that a synthesis characterises. With regards to the up-down movement of thought, nearly the same thing applies, albeit with a few differences, and it is important to take note of this concept as it enables us to properly understand what it means to "converse" at the sub-micro level.

We begin by describing what is meant by the "up-movement". The up-movement simply describes an upward shuffling and improvement of the philosopher's thoughts through arumaristic discourse. Through rigorous contestations and intellectual scuffles between the philosophising subject and "others" (this other may include other philosophers, philosophical traditions or even one's self), new insights and clarifications that were previously non-existent or unclear become apparent. This informs a positive and upward shuffling of one's ideas that is never-ending and without a ceiling since there appears to be no absolute claim to absolute truth, especially with regards to philosophy.

The down-movement, unlike the up-movement, suggests an improvement of one's thoughts and ideas, but through a shedding of claims that have proven irrational or rationally non-viable. In employing the principle of arumaristics, the restructuring of one's ideas is inevitable. Sometimes, this restructuring involves a nearly continuous discarding of certain ideas or beliefs that were once the building blocks of one's philosophies or conceptualisations of reality. Whereas it is possible to discard our ideas and replace them with new ones, it can also be the case that some ideas are discarded and have no replacements. With this in mind, it is also plausible for one to think that it is possible for a conversational imbalance to occur – this is where those ideas that are discarded become quantitively more than any replacement thought and/or new insight gained. When this begins to happen, the individual experiences a *downward complementary turn*. This is where one's previously held views about a thing begin to diminish through conversation with others. Indeed, if one's views continue to shed in such a way that the previously held position becomes untenable, the individual or conversationalist must necessarily abandon his/her previously held position as the downward complementary turn encounters the nil-point. It is also important to note that for us, this down-movement of thought also in some way entails a positive improvement of thought. This is because the shedding of ignorant and incompatible views improves one's conceptualisation of a thing albeit through a somewhat negative process. For us, bogus claims inundated with inconsistencies and ignorance are negatively inferior to little claims with little or no inconsistencies.

The up-down movement of thoughts, for us, cuts across all aspects of conversational thinking and/or arumaristics. It also plays a huge role in our understanding of conversational thinking at the subjective level. We recognise that the subjective foundation of our raw opinions about a matter or understanding of a thing is predicated on our contextual prejudices and lived experiences. For the conversationalist, it is through reason and the arumaristic process that these raw opinions are transformed into rational claims. At the subjective level, the nwa-nju and nwa-nsa are not two different interlocutors but rather one's raw opinion and the tool of reason. By rubbing off one another, one's raw opinions are fine-tuned and developed in the manner described in our understanding of the up-down movement of thought. If one encounters a nil-point, it is only expected that that individual discards that defeated raw opinion and form new ones. However, unlike in the upward movement described above, there is some sort of rational ceiling that serves as a springboard for conversations at the macro and micro levels (i.e. at the intercultural level and at the level of African philosophy itself, respectively). This ceiling cum stepping-stone is described as the *conversational optimum*. The conversational optimum points at a situation where one's opinion, refined by reason, begins to resist the contestations of one's internal reason. At the subjective level, the aim is to achieve the conversational optimum. It is the achievement of the conversational optimum that enables the leap from the subjective level to the micro/macro level.

Conclusion

In sum, we have, in the preceding sections, attempted to show the inadequacies of previous methods of doing African philosophy and also explain what the conversational method means and how it might be employed. In identifying a method that resists the descriptive attitude of ethnophilosophical/particularist methods and the seemingly non-contextual attitudes of the universalist school, we have shown that the conversational method does exactly this. Whereas the conversational method resists the negativities just previously mentioned, it also embraces the positives of both camps viz. it locates African philosophy in a contextual place while at the same offering reason (rather than description) as its driving force.

Driven by reason, ideas, thus, obtain universal validity and utility. Since the above is the case, conversational thinking must then be recognised as not merely an alternative to other African philosophical methods, or even the Socratic method, but as *the* method of African philosophy as it pertains to the contemporary period of African philosophy. Because it cannot be a perfect method of doing African philosophy (since it is highly unlikely that any individual or group of individuals can lay claim to a purely perfect method), we invite other African philosophers to engage critically with this method in order to improve it – in the true spirit of conversational thinking.

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