
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NKIRU NZEGWU AND WANGARI MAATHAI: TOWARD AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

From the 6th century when Eurocentric philosophy commenced in the ancient city of Athens in Greece, the world has been blessed by the contributions of eminent philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Locke and Aquinas. Others are Descartes, Bacon, Augustine, Rousseau, Dewey, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Pestalozzi and so on. In Africa, we have had fantastic contributions from elites like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ahmadu Bello and Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria, Milton Obote of Uganda, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. Recently, we have had people like Mary Field Belamkay, Jane Rowland Martin, Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings and Kieran Egan making their inputs globally. Their works were very philosophical, rich in content and demonstrated life realities, contributing to knowledge in the process. Also, to a great extent, they provided some kind of solutions to intellectual, social, economic, ethical and health problems nationally, continentally and universally. It is obvious however that most of the mentioned philosophers were not Africans neither were the African female philosophers represented despite the successes recorded, hence the need for a study of this magnitude. Philosophy in Africa has continued to evolve despite myriads of problems in the continent which must not be left alone to the African male philosophers or people from other climes to handle. Likewise, it is important to recognize the contributions of African female philosophers especially in recent years toward African development. This study thus, discusses the seemingly unrecognized roles of African female philosophers such as Nkiru Nzegwu and Wangari Maathai, their philosophies and relevance to philosophy and development in general.

Keywords: Philosophy, African Female Philosophers Nkiru Nzegwu and Wangari Maathai and African Development.

Introduction

Philosophy has in many reverences been criticized for its failure to recognize the contributions of women in philosophy and as epistemic agents. Another group of critics believes that the field has not highlighted very well the works of African female philosophers over the years, especially in recent times. This has not only swayed how philosophy is practiced but has also shaped the discourse of philosophy in general, resulting in the underrepresentation of women therein and in extension, African development. That women are marginalized in philosophy is an assertion that has dominated academic philosophy recently (Chimakonam & Du Toit, 2018; Edet, 2018), with more persons lending their voices. Haslanger could hardly contain her fury when it came to the little attention women have received in philosophy. She felt their mal-treatment / poor recognition in philosophy and bemoaned, “there is a deep well of rage inside of me; rage about how I as an individual have been treated in philosophy; rage about how others I know have passed through same and rage about the conditions that I’m sure affect many women and minorities in philosophy, and have caused many others to leave” (Haslanger 2008: 210). Haslanger’s rage emanated from what she called the blatant discrimination of, especially, women in philosophy and what appears to be the persistent drive to keep them out of the discipline. An instance was the exclusion of women in a curriculum design aspect and, also, a representation aspect. The former involved the adoption of Western education, which excluded and decimated the knowledge of people in Africa. The latter had to do with the staff demographics at universities, which have, after colonialism, continued to preserve the colonial organization of universities (Haslanger, 2008: 5). Looking at the long history of the discipline, it is actually very recently that women have appeared as would-be equals in a field that has in the past actively and systematically disparaged their capacity for its key qualifying attribute the possession of reason itself. (Hutchison & Jenkins, 2013: 2). Some efforts have been made to justify the existence and legitimacy of philosophy in Africa. Hence, has been presented in comparison and contrast to Western philosophy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). The reason for this way of doing African philosophy has majorly been to prove that similar philosophical themes, debates, tools and discussions existing in philosophy in Africa as they do in Western philosophy. This is fundamentally what Serequeberhan (2009: 46 & 47) noted in his reference to philosophy in Africa as the practice of resistance. He described African philosophy as having a double task as in deconstructive and reconstructive while the deconstructive task concerns engaging in combat on the level of reflection and ideas, targeted at dismantling the symmetry of concepts and theoretic constructs that have sustained Euro American global dominance, the

constructive task engages in the systematic and critical study of indigenous forms of knowledge and know-how.

The deconstructive aspect thus is focused on a critical return to the source. Moreover, the constructive task does not necessarily follow from the deconstructive, there is a sense in which the latter births the former. This way of characterizing philosophy in Africa is also related to some claims presented in view of epistemic decolonization support (Tamale 2020; Wiredu 2002). Thus, in view of decolonization, African philosophy has to operate as an instrument to eradicate colonial thinking and to reconstruct and reposition the knowledge of people of African origin (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986). Going further, Le Grange explored both the deconstructive and reconstructive projects and offered his thoughts. He averred that the former concerns discarding what has been wrongly written and interrogating distortions of people's life experiences, deficit theorising, negative labelling, genetically deficient or culturally deficient models that pathologised the colonised; the constructive project, on the other hand, concerns 'retelling the stories of the past and envisioning the future' (Le Grange 2016: 3). This paper therefore attempts to analyse the works of two eminent African female philosophers - Nkiru Nzegwu and Wangari Maathai. Their contributions toward the development of Philosophy in the African region and the continent in general is most commendable and worth emulating.

(a) The Philosophy of Nkiru Nzegwu

Nkiru Nzegwu is Professor of Africana Studies at Binghamton University, where she also previously held appointments as Professor of Art History and Philosophy, Interpretation and Culture. Her 2006 monograph, 'Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture' strengthened her place in Africana philosophy, Women and gender studies, Philosophy of culture, Anti and postcolonial studies as well as African studies. To assert that *Family Matters* is a classic is no overstatement. It receives attention in many articles, books and reviews (Gordon, 2019a). The core ideas of *Family Matters* is the ongoing dispelling of misrepresentations of Africa and the ideas produced by them and diasporic peoples (Gordon & Bragato, 2018). A lot of academic study on Africa are unfortunately guided by projections that differ from reality; similarly, the conceptual frameworks governing market forces about Africa create a worrying situation of an underlying set of communicative practices that guided the African peoples. Thus, this understanding connects Nkiru's artistic and scholarly works through a meta-critical examination of what had been said and seen versus elements that transcend both. Though her empirical work focuses on Igbo society mainly, she synergizes those elements across ideas from different ethnic groups in Nigeria and across the African continent into the Americas. Since women and gender are frequently referenced in her work, this noble approach ponders how women and gender are produced. Her work thus dissects and questions Euromodern hegemonic misrepresentations of the scope and rationality of Eurocentric forms of knowledge (Gordon, 2019:

5). Her work was valuable for scholars and theorists who may not have Africa as their application since the conceptual tools she produces such as understandings of relational models of family units not dependent on Euro modern bourgeois nuclear ones with a patriarch at its center, brings humility to disciplinary hubris. Born in Nigeria of Igbo ethnicity. She asserted that for the purpose of the interview, she will limit my responses to the discipline of philosophy, in particular and the academia in general”.

Nkiru Nzegwu’s passion and efforts to building institutions, her compendia are efforts to lend voice to communities often overlooked. This is obviously the case in her decision to put together the speeches of the *Obi His Majesty Igwe Nnaemeka Alfred Achebe*. Her work on him are both editorial and comprehensive discussions on governing structures in Igbo society, Afro-modern reconciliations with tradition and the unique history of Onitsha (Gordon, 2019; Nzegwu, 2013). She brings to the fore the difficult reality of translating certain African concepts into European frameworks. An example is how she uses the term “monarch” to imply the Obi, though it means “heart.” In other words, the Obi is the heart of the people, which connotes leadership and rule as symbiotic concepts. In her introduction to *His Majesty Nnaemeka Alfred Ugochukwu Achebe*, she explains Obishop in a detailed form and associates it to spiritual leadership (Gordon, 2019a; Nzegwu, 2013a). The issue of translation appears in almost all Nkiru’s writings for which the main audience is steeped in Eurocentrism. For example, she enunciated early on the task of translating African terms in her introduction to her 1998 book *Issues in Contemporary African Art*. There, she highlighted that the word “contemporary” in the African context has similar functions like “modern” in the European setting. The delicate question of historical expurgation becomes apparent in hegemonic assumptions of there being no past “modern” Africa, though *modern* actually construes present or relating to the present (Hutchinson, 2013). There is therefore a retroactive impact on the notion of the contemporary and the present, since it entails a future belonging which affects the past.

These contemplations also bring to the fore Nkiru’s position as a critic. This feature of her work is demonstrated not only in her rigorous, frequently poignant, interrogations of Eurocentrism in the works of white Africanists (e.g. Philip Curtin) and white feminists (e.g. Martha Nussbaum) but also internally in view of the works of African critics, philosophers and scholars, such as Paulin Hountondji and K. Anthony Appiah (Fall, 1996; Ojah, 2018). Going further, the connecting threads of her critique dwell on scholarly integrity, responsibility and their relevance for analyzing the distinction and complexity of concepts and how communities apply them. The idea that sexual designation is equally formulated as kinds of offspring in the Igbo society holds within it the absence of a hierarchy in which a female is got from a male. Hence, the English translation of *nwanyi* into “woman,” for instance, misrepresents the concept since the Igbo term surpasses its scope in the English language (Nzeagwu, 2002; Brophy, 2025). Nkiru gives attention to such

translational failures in her studies concerning gender and sex as well as across groups such as the multivariant African diaspora. Her co-edited work *The New African Diaspora* is an example of this commitment. The sad attempt to interpret African diaspora in a singular, linear model dependent on the United States both in the hegemonic white academy and in some programs of African diasporic studies leads to much confusion and frustration (Gordon, 2019; Nzegwu, 2013a). Normally, African populations are culturally diverse and dynamic in the United States and across the globe. Unfortunately, the global hegemony of the U.S. elides this reality often through an invested portrait in conceptions of African Americans that function only in part in key areas of the country. Professor Nkiru Nzegwu is among an intellectual movement which includes a group of distinguished Nigerian philosophers and social theorists such as Lawrence Bamikole (University of the West Indies at Mona), John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji (University of the West Indies at Mona), O. J. Oguejiofor (Nnamdi Azikiwe University), Ike Ferdinand Odimegwu (Nnamdi Azikiwe University), Chika Mba (University of Ghana), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (Stony Brook), Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò (Cornell) and Art historian Rowland Abiodun (Amherst). They have continued with the path of those eminent Philosophers such as Sophie Bosede Oluwole (1935–2018), F. Abiola Irele (1936–2017) and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1963–2007), who have transited this world (Gordon, 2019a; Henriques, 2011).

Summary of Her Philosophy

- i. Feminist / African women studies.
- ii. African Philosophy.
- iii. African and African Diaspora Art.
- iv. Linguistic analysis.
- v. Critical reasoning.

(b) The Philosophy of Wangari Muta Maathai

The industrious Wangari Muta Maathai (Ph.D) was a Kenyan environmental and human rights activist who had many parts. She was the first woman from Central and East Africa to earn a doctorate degree, from the University of Nairobi in 1971 and also the first black and African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions to sustainable development, democracy and peace in 2004. Despite her accomplishments, not much was heard or known about her. However, her activism especially in the African have helped to create significant changes and a lasting impact on women's lives and the environment over the years. Born in 1940 in Ihithe, a small village in colonial Kenya. Maathai worked hard to finish her early education in the country before acquiring both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from American universities in the 1960s and eventually obtained her doctorate at the University of Nairobi in veterinary anatomy in

1971 (Mmah, 2021). She became involved in a number of humanitarian organizations such as the Kenyan Red Cross, the Environmental Liaison Centre and the National Council of Women of Kenya. Maathai's work led her to discern a connection between poverty and environmental degradation, based on experiences of food security and water scarcity in rural Kenya, which prompted her to establish the **Green Belt Movement** in 1977. This movement assists in agricultural activities and tree planting among others which help to manage the environment and strengthen government's commitments to the populace. The Green Belt Movement has also inspired similar movements in many other African countries and continues to help combat rural hunger, desertification and water crises in over 30 countries in the world including US and Haiti.

Furthermore, Maathai was criticised by many persons, groups and organizations like the Kenyan Government for her outspokenness, leading to multiple arrests and threats. Her husband divorced her for being too strong-minded. However, she remained undeterred and continued to advocate for human rights, women's rights, peace and democracy, in 2002, she was elected to the Kenyan parliament where she won 98% of the vote, serving as assistant minister for Environment and Natural Resources between 2003 and 2005. In 2004, Maathai won the "Nobel Peace Prize" for her contributions to sustainable development, democracy and peace. In 2005, she was selected to preside over the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council. She was also named "one of the 100 most influential people" by Time magazine and among the 100 most powerful women by Forbes magazine. She was honoured in 2006 with the Legion d' Honneur, France's highest award (Mmah, 2021; Matolino, 2018). In her later life, Maathai continued to work with international organisations such as the United Nations and spearheaded the Billion Tree Campaign. Sadly, she passed away due to ovarian cancer in September, 2011 at the age of 71.

Maathai's Contributions and Why She Remains Very Important

Maathai's contributions are enormous which go beyond comparism. She was a pioneer who fought the vicious cycle of environmental destruction and poverty, nationally and globally. She began the Green Belt Movement in 1977, which has led to over 51 million trees being planted and over 50,000 women trained in conservation trades that help them earn sustainable income, such as beekeeping and forestry (Alsobrook, 2023, Africa in Women Development Fund, 2007). Likewise, the Billion Tree Campaign has witnessed universal success and has been transformed into the Trillion Tree Campaign with increasing ambitions, particularly required as climate change accelerates. In the process of Maathai founding the Green Belt Movement on Earth Day in 1977, farmers (70 percent of whom were women) were encouraged to plant "greenbelts" to stop soil erosion, provide shade and develop / innovate a source of lumber and firewood (Azenabor, 2008). She distributed seedlings to rural women and set up an incentive system for each seedling that survived. By so doing, she attempted preserving the environment and at the same time, offering job opportunities for the less privileged, especially the women folk.

The environmental movement has been greatly whitewashed; periodically, there are individuals such as Greta Thunberg and Leonardo Di Caprio or groups such as Extinction Rebellion or Greenpeace and those from the global North, the face of a movement that randomly affects those in the global South. Maathai represented those in developing countries who saw first-hand what climate change was / is doing to their communities and who were / are making the biggest waves to counter environmental degradation without similar kudos from the global community. She was an inspiring representation of how grassroots activism can make a real impact and instigate change internationally (Ngugi, 1986; Gyekye, 2002). According to Azenabor (2008), there is still work to be done in the area of climate change democracy just as the livelihoods of women and girls in rural areas need more attention. However, Maathai's story teaches one that listening to those in the global South is vital to finding innovative and sustainable solutions to the many crises in our societies. Dr. Maathai was an icon and inspiration for women in so many ways. Her estimable and worthy qualities included intellect, bravery and compassion, which led Hillary Clinton to comment that her passing left a void among the ranks of women leaders (Chilisa, 2012; Friedman, 2013). For the women and girls who knew Maathai, her accomplishments offer hope, especially for those in Africa that they can equally become leaders and role models (Collins, 2000; Du-Toit & Coetzee, 2017). Thus, in celebrating and spreading her story, shows women, particularly Black women, that they can handle opportunities which they never imagined were open to them or capable of handling.

Summary of Her Philosophy

- vi. Preservation of the environment
- vii. Women and girl child empowerment especially in the rural areas.
- viii. Being a good role model to the younger ones.
- ix. Pragmatic democracy / government.

Conclusion

The study shows the existing Philosophy in Africa which has often be misunderstood, ignored or misrepresented before now. Happily, with the continued efforts of modern and contemporary philosophers, African Philosophy is now getting the attention it deserves globally. Also, despite the enlightenment campaign for Philosophy and development, the African female philosophers appear to have been ignored or relegated, with more emphasis placed on the male philosophers, making some persons to feel that African female philosophers have been marginalized for too long. In view of their contributions over the years, they ought to be acknowledged, respected and included in activities / issues that concern the development of the continent. It is important

therefore to look into the works of African female philosophers periodically such as this writer has done and utilize their beautiful suggestions / philosophies for our collective good.

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