

## BOOK REVIEW

**Title of the Book:** *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection In and Beyond African Philosophy.*

**Author of the Book:** Reverend Professor Innocent I. Asouzu, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy, University of Calabar.

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**Reviewer:** Heinz Kimmerle, Zoetermeer

### REVIEW

In the following remarks I want to give a critical review of the book *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and beyond African Philosophy*, written by Innocent Izuchukwu Asouzu, a Catholic priest and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Calabar in the Igbo-region of Nigeria. This book has first been published in July 2004 with Calabar University Press and republished in 2005 as volume 4 of the series 'Studies in African Philosophy' with LIT-Verlag at Münster in Germany (ISBN 3-8258- 8578-x). When numbers between brackets are given, they refer to pages of the new edition. In his 'Comments to the Lit-Verlag edition' the author reports that the earlier publication had certain shortcomings ('oversights' and 'avoidable errors'), which the new edition 'endeavours to address'. (15) In his book Asouzu presents a fresh approach to African philosophy, which has an incisive impact on the discussions about this particular kind of philosophy. First of all it is underlined that African philosophy has to be regarded as philosophy precisely in the same way as the philosophies of any other region of the world: 'Arab philosophy, Greek philosophy, Asian philosophy, Indian philosophy, Japanese philosophy ... American philosophy, European philosophy' and other philosophies. (52) The specificity of African philosophy, with its primarily oral practice and tradition and its particular cultural ambience, is worked out by Asouzu from the perspective of the Igbo community. He comes to generalisations, which are valid for the big majority of peoples living in Africa south to the Sahara. As the key notion and the paradigm of thought of African philosophy in this sense is introduced 'complementary reflection'.

The special conditions of partly nomadic living peoples in Africa south to the Sahara like the Masai, Hausa, or Fulani, and of groups with different historical backgrounds on this continent like the Pygmies, San or Khoi Khoi are not taken into consideration in detail. Although it is not discussed at length, one can say that the northern parts of Africa, which have a primarily Arabic cultural

ambience since about the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century, are not excluded. 'Besides the ancient Egyptian heritage', Asouzu refers to the 'highly intellectualised and sophisticated climate of thought' in this region, which 'produced such brilliant minds of the third century Alexandrian school as Tertullian, Clement, and Origen'. (275) African philosophy in this broad context is part and parcel of the philosophies of the world as a whole, and it contributes to the contents and the potential of problem solving reflections all over the world. Therefore, the paradigm of complementary reflection has its meaning 'in and beyond African philosophy'.

In Azouzu's book complementary reflection has mainly three different aspects. Firstly, there is 'ontological complementarity'. Reality is regarded as an all-embracing whole, in which all units form together a dynamic play of forces, which are in harmony with each other, by completing and supporting one another. The harmony of this play of forces does not exist without dangers, but it can maintain its balance against the influence of counter-forces, which try to disturb or undermine it. 'The worldview of the traditional African shows, in a very natural way, strong moment[s] of the transcendent ontological categories of unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future referentiality as authentic dimensions of thoroughgoing complementarism'. (150)

Secondly, complementarity can be found in society. What is true for the units of reality as a whole is also and in a more conscious manner valid for the members of society. They do not leave alone somebody, who is in danger or in need, but in the family or in the larger community, which is regarded as an 'extended family', this person will find support. There are limits to this kind of harmony between human beings in society. Envy and hatred between them do occur, even sacrifice of human beings are real sometimes and somewhere. Personal interest and the personal existential situation are the causes of these limits. However, completing and supporting one another is and remains the main attitude of the members of African societies, so that the principle of 'caring is sharing' forms the predominant feature of them. The ant is the example of strength by cooperation and mutual support, as it is expressed in the 'Igbo work song', in which the following verse is repeated many times: 'Bunu bunu oo ibu anyi danda' ('Lift the load, lift the load, nothing is impossible for the ant'). (118)

Thirdly, 'personal complementarity' is taken into consideration. Every person represents this paradigm because his or her permanent and transcendent flow of consciousness connects the present life to the former life of the ancestors and to

the own afterlife in the land of spirits. Thus the understanding of reality and all its different units turns out to transcend personal life by embedding it into a spiritual whole of a cosmic process, which develops in time and space. To every person the possibility is offered that he or she can participate in what is called in the Igbo-language: 'Jide ka jii' ('Joy of being'), which permeates the cosmos as a whole, society with its structure of extended families, and personal life. (148) When a person is referred to by 'using the impersonal pronoun it', this gives expression to the fact that one is speaking of the human being in its totality that 'can never be conceptualised in a fragmented mode, but as complementary units that form a whole'. (159)

The 'complementary approach to reality' is not exactly 'anthropocentric or human-centred' as it is sometimes described. Ontologically it is 'rather comprehensive': 'to be is to be in a relationship of mutual joyous complementary service'. (156/7) There is a special accent on being part of the community, and certain metaphysical and mythological ideas about the influence of the spirits occur in the worldview of African people. Also a misuse of these ideas for 'ideological manipulation' cannot be denied. Nevertheless the 'theoretical technical reason' of the African mindset and also a widespread pragmatic attitude in solving everyday problems have to be argued for.

Asouzu knows about complementary reflection from his own personal history and experience as a member of a family within the Igbo people. In the Section 'Dedication and Acknowledgement' the reader gets thoroughly informed about this personal background. Asouzu participates in this particular knowledge by learning from his ancestors and from the fellow members of his people and also by listening to his language, especially to proverbs, sayings or maxims. This knowledge is spread in the society as a whole.

Nevertheless it is concentrated in persons like himself, summarising and critically evaluating what is handed down and communicated to them. These persons can be elders, office bearers, priests, healers or ordinary people. At any rate, it can be attributed to certain individuals in the present situation and in the history of the Igbo community, although Asouzu does not and/or cannot give their names. In this sense, he speaks about 'the anonymous Igbo philosopher'. (142-148, passim) The 'experience of transcendent complementary unity of consciousness joins' this thinker 'to his milieu'. This can be regarded as an advantage. For, 'the thinker and his environment reinforced themselves

mutually'. On the other hand must be admitted: 'Due to the symbiotic relationship between the ideas of these thinkers and their environment, their thoughts did not attain the level of refinement, freshness and dynamism it would (or could) otherwise have attained'. (212; addition in the quotation between brackets by me, HK) By the reformulation of the method and principles of complementary reflection Asouzu tries to avoid the limits and the negative aspects of the teachings of the anonymous Igbo philosopher. In respect of the 'ontological reflection' the conditions for overcoming the negative forces in the world and for stabilizing harmony are sorted out. This kind of reflection includes a certain type of logic, which 'seeks to explore missing links in a comprehensive, total and universal' way of thought. Thus 'it presupposes the acquisition of an inclusive comprehensive logical mindset as opposed to a disjunctive logical mindset'. (355) And it has an impact on the 'ethical reflection', which is not only related to the questions of right or wrong, but also to those of beauty and ugliness in an aesthetic sense (369), and to the 'the joy and sadness of human action', as they are incorporated in the joyful being of cosmic and natural harmony. (361) Above all, this ontology has a religious foundation. For, 'the ontological joy of being is transcendent in the sense that it is something that has to do with the foundation of our being outside ourselves' in the land of spirits. In connection with that, 'the search for this ultimate foundation of our existence takes very concrete and acute shape in religious experiences where this one true, absolute, and transcendent being is clearly identified indifferent cultures under diverse names. Some of these names are Chukwu, God, Mu'umba, Udali ...Olodumare, Onyankupon ... Allah, Yahwe' and others. (438/9)

It is a remarkable contribution to the history and the specific problems of philosophy in the Western world that complementary reflection leads to a possibility of 'overcoming the subject-object dichotomy'. It turns out not to be adequate to 'raise a thoroughgoing subjectivism' or 'a thoroughgoing objectivism' to 'a universal methodological principle'. On the one hand, scepticism and relativism, which undermine every true statement, would follow from that. And on the other hand dogmatism and imposed orthodoxy could not be avoided. In the way of thought, which is suggested by Asouzu, 'we see how a transcendent complementary unity of consciousness belongs to the same region as (or is in correspondence with) the transcendent categories of being'. (474-481; addition in the quotation between brackets by me, HK) Not all dimensions of complementary reflection can be reviewed here. In a final analysis Asouzu comes back to a perspective of the first part of his book: the 'African paradigm' forms

an answer to the 'global imperative' of political peacekeeping and social justice. The promise of a New World Order can become true by using complementary reflection instead of thinking in oppositions and in terms of friend and enemy. (51-60) In the 'new global family' nobody 'can be understood without reference to other members of the family'. And everybody has the right to be helped in a situation of danger or of need. The 'differences in age, in sex, in nationality, in religion, in language, in ethnicity, in tribe, in race, in culture, in ideologies' are expressions of a multidimensional reality. They can and must be seen as enrichment for each other in 'building a viable and meaningful human family'. (481/2) In his Preface to Asouzu's book, Obi Oguejiofor from the Seminary at Enugu in Nigeria declares it as an advantage and as 'a clear indication of its originality' that this book 'does not dwell on discussions of theories and contentions about past writers', but 'charts its unique course in contriving a special theory'. (13) And this special theory, one could add, is based on the author's personal knowledge of authentic African traditions in the Igbo community and on dealing with them in his own philosophical thinking. This is a reasonable judgment of Asouzu's approach to African philosophy and its meaning in the context of world-philosophy.

Nevertheless I am of opinion that his approach becomes clearer and more concrete, that it gets sharper contours, if it is embedded into the context of other interpretations of African philosophy. Of course, in certain connections Asouzu is in discussion with other African and non-African philosophers. He is referring especially to well known and also to less famous Nigerian thinkers and theorists, more in particular from Igboland. References to Achebe, Bodunrin, Eboh, Eze, Okolo, Serequeberhan, Sodipo or Unah are important and often enlightening, those to Aligwekwe, Arazu, Iwe, Okadigbo, Ugorji or Uwalaka add something to the list of authors, who have already been quoted in many other books on African philosophy.

From the Nigerian environment I miss names as Gbadegesin, Oluwole or Momoh. Absolutely essential contributions to African philosophy as those of Senghor, Nkrumah, Hountondji, Odera Oruka, Wiredu or Gyekye are only mentioned incidentally and not always judged carefully enough. For instance, Wiredu's project of 'conceptual decolonisation' is taken as 'a typical example' of a 'reactionary mindset'. (265) Actually Wiredu endeavours with this project to include original African thought into the worldwide philosophical work of today. To decolonise the mind does not mean to go back to traditional ways of thought, but to make them active and influential in present debates.

Odera Oruka does not refrain from giving the names of 12 Kenyan traditional philosophers from different peoples: Mwitani Masero (Utonga), Njuhi Muthoni (Kikuyu), Simiyu Chaungo (Luhyia), Oruka Rang'inya (Luo), and others. (*Sage Philosophy*, Leiden a.o.: Brill 1990) And he presents more in detail the politician and philosopher *Oginga Odinga. His Philosophy and Beliefs* (Nairobi: Initiatives 1992) He calls them 'sages', like Hampaté Bâ had done in his book, written in French, with regard to his own teacher Tierno Bokar. (*La vie et l'enseignement de Tierno Bokar. Le sage de Bandiagara*, Paris: Seuil 1980) As a follow up to that, Yacouba Konaté is looking for great names of sages further back in history and at the same time is he investigating the connection between the work of the sages and the origin of proverbs with philosophical contents. ('Le syndrome Hampaté Bâ ou comment naissent les proverbes', in: *Quest. An International African Journal of Philosophy* 8,2; 1994, p. 23-44) Thus it becomes clear how the philosophical impact of language can originate and why proverbs can be regarded as philosophical texts in the primarily oral African traditions. (H. Kimmerle, 'The philosophical text in the African oral tradition', in: Kimmerle/Wimmer (eds), *Philosophy and democracy in intercultural perspective*, Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi 1997, p. 43-56)

In his book *An essay on African philosophical thought. The Akan conceptual scheme* (Cambridge: University Press 1987) Gyekye refers to the names and the dates of interviews with Akan 'wise persons' (anyansafo) whom he regards as traditional philosophers. We learn from Asouzu and also from other African philosophers (Tschiamalenga Ntumba and Mabe) that sagacity cannot only be found with a certain group of persons. But is there in general such a recognisable group of 'wise persons' in African traditional communities? Are there persons among the Igbo people who could be identified as sages? Except his mention of Oruka's research, Asouzu refers to Ogotemmel, a blind hunter and wise person of the Dogon, by quoting the (not quite correct) story, which Masolo tells about him. (*African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1994) And he knows about the work of Hallen and Sodipo who have discussed epistemological questions with traditional healers among the Yoruba. (Hallen/Sodipo, *Knowledge, belief and witchcraft. Analytic experiments in African philosophy*, London: Ethnographica 1986) (134-36) Odera Oruka contests that Ogotemmel and the persons who have been interviewed by Hallen and Sodipo may be called 'sages' in the sense of the word as he understands it. Is such a rather strict understanding possible? And what about philosophical

sagacity which is possessed by other people than the sages? These questions arise when Asouzu refers to 'the anonymous Igbo philosopher'.

Complementary reflection of living in society makes it necessary to look at 'African communalism' and 'sense of community' as they are worked out by Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere and others. (87) However, the theoretical project of these authors, especially in connection with the movement of Negritude, is not discussed clearly enough by Asouzu. The historical context of reassuring African culture of its own value is not part of his judgment. And these authors are brought together with quite a different current in the emerging self-consciousness of African philosophy. I mean the representatives of ethnophilosophy, Tempels, Kagame, Mbiti and others, whose work was fiercely contested by Hountondji and Towa. It is true that communalism, by which a somehow idealistic picture of the African sense of community is drawn, has a limited meaning compared to complementary reflection of societal relations. It could help to show this by a more detailed argumentation. Actually the broader ontological context of complementarity in society, embedding it into a cosmic dimension, is closer to ubuntu than to communalism. Here again a discussion of conformities and differences would give sharper contours to the meaning of complementary reflection. According to Ramose ubuntu refers to the relations between human beings, completing and supporting each other, and at the same time to the forces of the universe, which are unfolded and come to self-consciousness in human thinking and speaking (*African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, Harare: Mond Books 1999). That traditional African philosophy has been practised mainly in oral forms of tradition and communication does not mean being in any way less important, less elaborate or less thoughtful than philosophies, which prefer written forms of tradition and exchange of ideas. I agree also with Asouzu that there is no strict contradiction between orality and literacy in the practice of philosophy. (146-148) In this respect the new concept of writing which is developed by Derrida, putting it exactly on the same level as the oral use of language, can be very helpful (*De la grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit 1967). Nevertheless it is worth-while to work out the special possibilities and strong aspects of primarily oral forms of philosophising. Oluwole has pioneered in this field relying also on the philosophical impact of oral literature, especially of the Ifa-corpus in the Yoruba tradition. (*Philosophy and Oral Tradition*, Lagos: ARK Publications 1999) And a lot can be expected for the contribution of African philosophy to solving the problems of philosophy all over the world by bringing together and harmonising both forms of philosophising, and by combining the

strong aspects of them, as Mabe has suggested (*Schriftliche und mündliche Formen philosophischen Denkens in Afrika*, Diss. habil., TU Berlin 2003).

In her book: *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head* (Lagos: Excel Publishers 1992) Oluwole argues more cautiously than Asouzu and with reference to the restrictions of reliable knowledge in Western philosophy, especially in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, when she speaks of the belief in supernatural powers, the existence of God and the coming back of persons from the invisible world of spirits to the visible world of people living now. Her argumentation runs, roughly speaking, like this: If finite human beings cannot have reliable, scientifically proved knowledge, whether these dimensions of thought have a correspondence in reality, the option that there is such a correspondence (as preferred in the African worldview) is in the same way possible as the other one that there is not such a correspondence (as preferred in the Western way of thought). According to Oluwole the developments in the most advanced forms of science, particularly in microphysics, strengthen the African position. Like Achebe, to whom Asouzu refers several times, Oluwole strongly affirms that in African thought 'nothing is absolute'. (126) Therefore, she would contest that 'the worldview of the traditional African shows ... strong moment[s] of the transcendent ontological categories of unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future referentiality as authentic dimensions of thoroughgoing complemetarism', (150) which is a core argument in Asouzu's book.

The predominant 'future relatedness' of Igbo thought, of which Asouzu speaks repeatedly (150-51, 181 a.m.o.), is also different from Mbiti's thesis that the past is the most relevant dimension of time in African thought. (*African religions and philosophy*, London 1969) Although Mbiti's statement that in African languages no anticipation of future events farther away than about two years can be expressed, has been contested heavily by Hountondji, Odera Oruka, Gyekye and others, these authors do not deny that there is a predominantly backward orientation in the African way of thought. Therefore, Asouzu's report about the future relatedness of the anonymous Igbo philosopher is in sharp contrast to most of the other philosophies of African peoples we know about. One could say, it adds a radically new aspect to the African philosophies of time. However, the close and concrete connection of time and space as 'integral dimensions of the unity of consciousness' and in the same way of 'the aspects of processes observable in nature' and of the 'aspects of the spiritual immaterial world' in Asouzu's text (175-177) is very much in accordance with the unity of time and



space in the philosophy of Bantu-languages, which is worked out by Kagame. (*Sprache und Sein. Die Ontologie der Bantu Zentralafrikas*, Brazzaville/ Heidelberg 1985) To Asouzu's ideas about 'building a viable and meaningful human family', can be added Odera Oruka's conception of a 'parental earth ethics'. In this conception the African sense of family is also extended to humanity as a (concrete) whole. And within the human family different roles and obligations can be determined. The human rights should be made more complete by the right to an existence minimum for every human being, which includes eating, clothing and housing. The former colonising countries, which are now, not independently from their colonising past, the rich countries of the world, have clear ethical obligations to share with the former colonised and now poor countries. In a future related perspective it is wise, if the rich countries now more effectively share with the poor parts of the world, for in the long run the relations between dominant and dominated parts of the world never remain the same, as history teaches us. ('Ecophilosophy and the Parental Earth Ethics', in: Graness/Kresse (eds), *Sagacious Reasoning. Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, Frankfurt/M. a.o.: Peter Lang 1997, p. 119-131, 'Philosophie der Entwicklungshilfe. Die Frage des Rechts auf ein menschliches Minimum, in: *polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* 6, 2000, p. 6-16)

In a final judgment I would say that Asouzu's book presents a new approach to African philosophy as a whole and gives valuable details about African philosophy of a certain region. He argues himself that this kind of regional differentiations of African philosophy are useful and necessary. (121-22 a.m.o.) This is in line with his general claim for differentiation and multidimensionality. (450 a.m.o.) Without reducing the renewing value of Asouzu's approach to African philosophy in general, we can add his conception to those of other regional African philosophies. Besides the knowledge we have about thought systems of African peoples in the literature of cultural anthropologists, we know about Luba and other Bantu philosophies by the works of Tempels and Kagame, about Fulani and Toucouleurs philosophies by Tierno Bokar and Hampaté Bâ, about Dogon philosophy by Ogotemmel, about Luo, Lyhsia and other Kenyan philosophies by Odera Oruka, about Akan and Ga philosophies by Abraham, Wiredu, Gyekye and Kudadjie, about Gikuyu philosophy by Wanjohi, about Yoruba philosophy by Hallen/Sodipo, Oluwole and Gbadegesin. And fortunately now we know more about Igbo-philosophy by Asouzu.