
Rethinking the Nexus: Gadamer's Hermeneutics and The Interplay of Culture and African Philosophy

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Abstract

This study delves into the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer, with a particular focus on its implications for understanding the intricate nexus between culture and African Philosophy. The prevailing skepticism surrounding the rationality of African philosophy, perpetuated by the ethno-philosophical debate, has led to a myopic conception of African philosophy as mere cultural beliefs, bereft of critical ratiocination. Against this backdrop, this article aims to investigate the mediating role of hermeneutics in bridging the cultural and philosophical dimensions of African thought, as exemplified by the works of Okere and other notable African scholars. Employing a critical analytical method, this study interrogates Gadamer's notion of culture as the foundation of philosophy, revealing the ways in which hermeneutics can facilitate a nuanced understanding of African philosophy that transcends the limitations of ethno-philosophical approaches. The findings of this study suggest that Gadamer's hermeneutics offers a robust framework for mediating the tension between culture and African philosophy, underscoring the rational foundation of African thought and contesting the reduction of African philosophy to mere cultural beliefs. This paper argues that a hermeneutic approach, with its emphasis on the interplay between culture and critical reflection, provides a fertile ground for rethinking the epistemological status of African philosophy and reclaiming its legitimacy within the global philosophical discourse.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, African Philosophy, Culture, Gadamer, Epistemology

1. Introduction

African philosophy is a critical thinking by Africans on their experiences of reality, encompassing ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. It seeks to understand the world and human existence from an African perspective, drawing from traditional African thought, culture, and experiences (Wiredu, 1995). The debate surrounding African philosophy has led to the identification of several trends, including Ethno philosophy, philosophical sagacity, Nationalist and ideological philosophy, and Professional philosophy. However, these trends have been marred by controversy, with some critics dismissing African philosophy as mere cultural beliefs (Okolo, 1991).

Hermeneutics, as a philosophical approach, emphasizes understanding and interpretation, providing a framework for examining African philosophy in its cultural context. The works of scholars like Theophilus Okere, Okonda Okolo, and Tsenay Serequeberhan demonstrate the relevance of hermeneutics in African philosophy, highlighting the importance of interpretation and understanding in uncovering the meaning and significance of African thought (Okere, 1983; Okolo, 1991; Serequeberhan, 1991). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, in particular, offers a robust framework for understanding African philosophy. His concept of "fusion of horizons" provides a framework for understanding the interplay between culture and African philosophy (Gadamer, 1975, as cited in Nsiah, n.d.).

African philosophy is not just about abstract concepts; it's about lived experiences and cultural practices. For instance, the concept of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and community, is a key aspect of African philosophy (Balogun, 2013). Similarly, the Yoruba concept of Ifá, which represents a holistic approach to understanding reality, is another example of African philosophical thought (Abimbola, 1997). The study of African philosophy is crucial for reclaiming Africa's intellectual heritage and challenging dominant Western narratives. By engaging with African philosophy, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of African cultures and societies (Wiredu, 1995).

This study employs a critical analytical method, interrogating Gadamer's notion of culture as the foundation of philosophy and examining the ways in which hermeneutics can facilitate a nuanced understanding of African philosophy. This study is grounded in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which emphasizes the importance of understanding and interpretation in the human sciences. Gadamer's concept of "fusion of horizons" provides a framework for understanding the interplay between culture and African philosophy.

The objective of this study is to investigate the mediating role of hermeneutics in bridging the cultural and philosophical dimensions of African thought, and to evaluate the implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics for understanding African philosophy. This study focuses on the interplay between culture and African philosophy, with a particular emphasis on the mediating role of hermeneutics. The study will examine the concept of hermeneutics and its relevance to African philosophy, and will investigate the ways in which hermeneutics can facilitate a nuanced understanding of African philosophy.

In exploring the concept of hermeneutics and its relevance to African philosophy, this study will draw on the works of scholars such as Okere, Okolo, and Serequeberhan, who have demonstrated the importance of hermeneutics in understanding African thought. The study will

also examine the ways in which Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can provide a framework for understanding the interplay between culture and African philosophy. Overall, African philosophy is a rich and diverse field that offers valuable insights into the human condition. By embracing hermeneutics and other approaches, we can deepen our understanding of African thought and its relevance to global conversations (Nsiah, n.d.).

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE

African philosophy is a critical thinking by Africans on their experiences of reality, encompassing ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. It seeks to understand the world and human existence from an African perspective, drawing from traditional African thought, culture, and experiences (Wiredu, 1995, p. 12). This understanding is not merely a reaction to Western philosophical categories but a reflective engagement with indigenous African worldviews, values, symbols, and practices that shape African life. African philosophy, therefore, attempts to articulate rational explanations of African reality while simultaneously challenging misconceptions that African societies lacked philosophical depth before colonialism. Through its systematic inquiry, African philosophy becomes a medium for articulating African identity, cultural uniqueness, and universal human concerns from an African standpoint.

The debate surrounding African philosophy has led to the identification of several trends, including Ethno philosophy, philosophical sagacity, Nationalist and ideological philosophy, and Professional philosophy. Each trend reflects a particular methodological orientation and historical phase in the development of African philosophy. Ethno-philosophy, for instance, emphasizes collective worldviews embedded in proverbs, myths, and communal practices. Philosophical sagacity focuses on the reflective insights of wise individuals within communities who transcend folklore to offer critical reasoning. Nationalist-ideological philosophy emerged during the independence era, where leaders and intellectuals such as Nkrumah and Nyerere articulated political and cultural philosophies to guide nation-building. Professional philosophy, often associated with academically trained African philosophers, insists on rigorous critical methods comparable to global philosophical standards. However, these trends have been marred by controversy, with some critics dismissing African philosophy as mere cultural beliefs (Okolo, 1991, p. 202). Such critics argue that ethnophilosophy lacks individuality and rationality, while others contend that philosophical sagacity and nationalist philosophies do not fully meet the methodological demands of professional philosophy. These debates reflect broader questions about what counts as philosophy and whether African cultural expressions can be categorized as philosophical in the same sense as Western traditions. Nevertheless, the ongoing controversies have enriched the field by encouraging deeper inquiry into African modes of reasoning and interpretation.

Hermeneutics, as a philosophical approach, emphasizes understanding and interpretation, providing a framework for examining African philosophy in its cultural context. Hermeneutics becomes particularly useful because African philosophy draws heavily from oral traditions, symbols, rituals, and communal narratives that require interpretive engagement. Through hermeneutical analysis, African experiences, proverbs, customs, and cosmologies can be

systematically understood in ways that reveal their philosophical depth. The works of scholars like Theophilus Okere, Okonda Okolo, and Tsenay Serequeberhan demonstrate the relevance of hermeneutics in African philosophy, highlighting the importance of interpretation and understanding in uncovering the meaning and significance of African thought (Okere, 1983, p. 56; Okolo, 1991, p. 215; Serequeberhan, 1991, p. 10). These scholars show that African philosophy cannot be understood purely through external theoretical frameworks; rather, it must be approached from within African cultural matrices. By interpreting African cultural forms philosophically, hermeneutics bridges the gap between tradition and modernity and provides a method through which African philosophy can engage in global intellectual discourse.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, in particular, offers a robust framework for understanding African philosophy. His concept of "fusion of horizons" provides a framework for understanding the interplay between culture and African philosophy (Gadamer, 1975, p. 306, as cited in Nsiah, n.d., p. 5). Through this concept, Gadamer argues that understanding occurs when the interpreter's horizon merges with the horizon of a cultural text or tradition. Applying this to African philosophy means that African cultural expressions, oral traditions, and indigenous beliefs must be engaged not as isolated artifacts but as dynamic expressions of African life, which invite dialogue between past and present. Gadamer's approach encourages African philosophers to reinterpret traditional practices in ways that address contemporary social, political, and moral challenges. It also provides a framework for cross-cultural dialogue, where African and non-African audiences can meaningfully engage with African thought without reducing it to exoticism or cultural essentialism. In this sense, the fusion of horizons supports the universality of African philosophy and challenges the notion that African intellectual traditions are closed systems accessible only to insiders.

African philosophy is not just about abstract concepts; it's about lived experiences and cultural practices. For instance, the concept of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and community, is a key aspect of African philosophy (Balogun, 2013, p. 108). Ubuntu illustrates African ethics rooted in relationships, compassion, reciprocity, and collective well-being. It counters excessively individualistic frameworks by emphasizing that personhood is realized through others often summarized as "I am because we are." Ubuntu has been applied in contemporary fields such as conflict resolution, restorative justice, peacebuilding, and leadership studies. Similarly, the Yoruba concept of Ifá, which represents a holistic approach to understanding reality, is another example of African philosophical thought (Abimbola, 1997, p. 20). Ifá is a rich epistemological system involving divination, cosmology, and moral guidance. It embodies a sophisticated logic of interpretation and decision-making, demonstrating that African thought includes systems of knowledge that are both rational and spiritually grounded. These examples show that African philosophy is deeply embedded in the daily lives, moral practices, and metaphysical conceptions of African peoples, making it both practical and theoretical.

The study of African philosophy is crucial for reclaiming Africa's intellectual heritage and challenging dominant Western narratives. By engaging with African philosophy, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of African cultures and societies (Wiredu, 1995, p.

25). African philosophy thus becomes a tool of decolonization—allowing Africans to reinterpret their histories, values, and identities outside the frameworks imposed during colonialism. It also challenges the epistemic injustices that have marginalized African intellectual contributions in global scholarship. By acknowledging African philosophical traditions, scholars contribute to a more inclusive global philosophy that recognizes multiple centers of knowledge. Furthermore, African philosophy offers insights into modern issues such as governance, human rights, environmental ethics, and social justice, demonstrating its relevance beyond historical or cultural analysis.

Overall, African philosophy is a rich and diverse field that offers valuable insights into the human condition. By embracing hermeneutics and other approaches, we can deepen our understanding of African thought and its relevance to global conversations (Nsiah, n.d., p. 10). The interpretive perspectives provided by hermeneutics not only illuminate African traditions but also highlight how African experiences can contribute to universal philosophical debates. Through its methodological diversity and cultural grounding, African philosophy continues to evolve, offering pathways for reflection, dialogue, and transformation.

Dialoguing Between Culture and African Philosophy through Hermeneutics

The dialogue between culture and African philosophy through hermeneutics is a complex and multifaceted topic. Hermeneutics, as a philosophical tool, plays a crucial role in investigating what constitutes reasoned thought and what does not. It interprets the grounds on which beliefs are held and evaluates the validity of those grounds (Schwandt, 2001, p. 112). This evaluative dimension is particularly important in African philosophy, where culture, tradition, and lived experience form a substantial part of philosophical reflection. African philosophy is deeply rooted in communal ways of knowing, oral traditions, symbolic systems, and long-standing cultural practices. However, these elements cannot automatically qualify as philosophy unless they undergo critical interpretation. Hermeneutics provides this interpretive bridge by subjecting cultural materials to systematic analysis, thereby transforming traditional wisdom into reflective philosophical discourse.

Philosophy grows from culture and traditions, but culture and tradition themselves do not germinate into philosophy without the context of hermeneutics. African culture is rich in values, myths, folk tales, songs, rituals, and social norms, each carrying layers of meaning. Yet these meanings often remain implicit or unarticulated unless brought into dialogue with hermeneutical reflection. By applying philosophical hermeneutics to African culture, symbols, poetry, songs, and traditions, individuals can develop a philosophy that is uniquely African. This process does not distort culture; rather, it uncovers its conceptual structures, rational implications, and moral insights. Hermeneutics therefore refines cultural knowledge and elevates it into philosophical significance.

Hans Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of prejudice and tradition in understanding. He argues that prejudice-free knowledge is impossible and that tradition serves as the condition of one's knowledge (Gadamer, 1975, p. 306). Gadamer's insight is particularly relevant to African philosophy because African traditions are often dismissed as uncritical or pre-philosophical. However, Gadamer shows that tradition is not a barrier to knowledge but a

necessary horizon from which understanding begins. Tradition is not a static entity, but a dynamic force that shapes our understanding and is open to critique and change. In the African context, this dynamism is evident in the way communities reinterpret ancestral customs to respond to contemporary challenges. For example, concepts such as Ubuntu, communalism, moral responsibility, and kinship obligations continue to evolve through intercultural encounters and societal changes.

African philosophy emerges from the hermeneutic approach to African cultures, myths, fables, proverbs, legends, songs, poetry, and symbols. These materials possess multiple meanings that can only be understood through hermeneutics. Proverbs, for instance, serve as condensed expressions of communal wisdom, offering ethical guidance and metaphysical insights. Myths and legends explain the origins of moral norms, cosmological structures, and human relationships. Songs and rituals encode symbolic messages about identity, spirituality, and social order. When these cultural elements are critically interpreted, their philosophical dimensions become visible. Philosophical hermeneutics unmask the prejudices and dogmatic prescriptions associated with traditions and cultures. It does not merely affirm tradition but interrogates its assumptions, clarifies its concepts, and exposes potential contradictions. This is essential in African philosophy because tradition can sometimes harbour practices that conflict with contemporary human rights, gender equality, or social justice. Through hermeneutical critique, African philosophy can retain what is valuable while discarding what is oppressive or outdated.

Recent literature on African philosophy and hermeneutics includes works by Kwasi Wiredu, Theophilus Okere, and Okonda Okolo, among others (Wiredu, 1980; Okere, 1983; Okolo, 1991). These scholars emphasize the importance of critical and creative hermeneutic approaches to African cultures and traditions. In his work, Okere argues that African philosophy must derive from African cultural experience, but such derivation must be mediated by hermeneutics to avoid superficial description. Okolo stresses that philosophical interpretation should transcend mere celebration of culture and engage with its deeper theoretical implications. These contributions highlight the indispensable role of hermeneutics in transforming African traditional knowledge into rigorous philosophical inquiry.

For instance, Wiredu advocates for conceptual decolonization, which involves re-examining current African epistemic formations to subvert unsavoury aspects of indigenous traditions and undermine unhelpful Western epistemologies (Wiredu, 1996, p. 12). Conceptual decolonization is itself a hermeneutic project because it requires interpreting African and Western concepts, identifying their meanings, and evaluating their relevance to African realities. Wiredu's approach calls for retaining the rational and beneficial aspects of African traditions while critically engaging Western philosophical influences. This dual process fosters intellectual liberation and promotes a more authentic African philosophical identity.

Other notable works include those by Christian B. N. Gade, who argues that the ethnophilosophical approach to African philosophy is problematic, and Edwin Etieyibo, who explores the Yoruba philosophical tradition (Gade, 2017, p. 25; Etieyibo, 2015, p. 10). Gade's critique of ethnophilosophy highlights the danger of treating collective beliefs as ready-made philosophy without critical interpretation. He contends that philosophy requires individual

reasoning, argumentation, and conceptual clarity. His critique strengthens the argument for hermeneutics, which moves beyond simple documentation of cultural beliefs toward interpretive and analytical engagement. Etieyibo's work on Yoruba philosophy demonstrates the richness of African indigenous thought and illustrates how hermeneutics can help articulate its metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological foundations. His research shows that the Yoruba worldview, especially through Ifá divination, embodies logical structures, moral theories, and cosmological explanations that deserve philosophical examination.

More recent studies have continued to explore the role of hermeneutics in African philosophy, including works by Jonathan O. Chimakonam, Moges Alemu, and Afe Adogame (Chimakonam, 2020, p. 15; Alemu, 2021, p. 20; Adogame, 2022, p. 30). Chimakonam's contributions in conversational philosophy emphasize that African philosophy thrives through dialogue, critique, and joint interpretation. Hermeneutics is central to this conversational method because conversation requires understanding, listening, and interpreting the other's horizon. Alemu's work deepens the discussion by applying hermeneutics to African religious and social systems, showing how interpretive analysis can illuminate African moral foundations. Adogame explores the intersection of African indigenous religions, Christianity, and modernity, illustrating how African cultures undergo reinterpretation in global contexts. Each of these scholars underscores that hermeneutics is not merely an academic method but a lived practice that shapes how Africans make sense of their world.

Nonetheless, the dialogue between culture and African philosophy through hermeneutics reveals the transformative power of interpretation in constructing African philosophical thought. Hermeneutics enables African scholars to examine cultural materials critically, uncover their deeper meanings, and respond creatively to new intellectual challenges. Through this process, African philosophy becomes both rooted in tradition and open to innovation. The ongoing contributions of classical and contemporary African philosophers demonstrate that hermeneutics remains a vital tool in articulating a philosophy that is authentically African, intellectually rigorous, and globally relevant

Significance of Language and History in Hermeneutics

Ancient philosophers argue that words can conceal and words can reveal. It is the mission of hermeneutics to interpret and bring to human understanding these meanings that are concealed or revealed in words, text, or objects. These words or texts are encapsulated in language, which functions as both the medium of expression and the medium of interpretation. No text, symbol, or cultural object speaks outside language, for even gestures and rituals require interpretive frameworks grounded in linguistic structures. Hermeneutics therefore becomes a methodological bridge that enables interpreters to discern layers of meaning embedded within language. Also, by the fact that objects or texts of interpretation are situated in history, there is an important interplay of language and history in hermeneutic process and methodology. Wacterhauser writes: "Hermeneutical theories of understanding argue that all human understanding is never without words and never outside of time. On the contrary, it is what is distinctive about human understanding that it is always in terms of some evolving linguistic framework that has been worked out over time in terms of some historically conditioned set of

concerns and practices” (Wachterhauser, 1986, p. 6). This statement underscores a central hermeneutical principle: understanding is unavoidably situated, temporally shaped, and linguistically mediated.

In the African philosophical context, the significance of language and history is even more pronounced. African thought systems, whether expressed in oral traditions, rituals, proverbs, myths, or artistic symbols, are deeply embedded in historical experiences such as colonialism, communal life, political struggles, and cosmological worldviews. Interpreting these expressions requires acknowledging the historical forces that shaped them, as well as the linguistic forms through which they were articulated. Without sensitivity to the cultural-historical background, one risks misunderstanding or oversimplifying African philosophical insights. Thus, hermeneutics becomes a crucial methodological tool that bridges African cultural expressions and philosophical reflection by situating meaning at the intersection of language and history.

But Gadamer, H.G. (1996, p. 360) amongst other philosophers emphasized the important role of history in interpretation. Gadamer’s hermeneutics argues that understanding is not an escape from history but a conscious engagement with it. His idea of “historically informed prejudices” refers not to negative biases but to the pre-judgments and fore-structures of understanding that shape how interpreters approach texts. He points out that historically informed prejudices are a basic condition of understanding. Highlighting his standpoint, he posits that a person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he himself is conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences that power of the prejudices will fail to see what is manifest by their light. This means that individuals who deny their historical situatedness become blind to the insights history provides. In hermeneutics, one must therefore acknowledge one’s position within a tradition to genuinely engage with meaning.

Gadamer’s insistence on historical consciousness has important implications for African philosophy. African societies possess rich historical experiences that shape how knowledge is formed and transmitted. The trauma of colonialism, the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems, the evolution of communal ethics, and the influence of modernity all shape African philosophical discourse. Interpreting African texts or cultural expressions must therefore account for these historical contexts. For example, the interpretation of the concept of Ubuntu must consider precolonial communal structures, colonial disruptions, and modern ethical reinterpretations of the concept. Without such historical awareness, interpretation becomes superficial or distorted.

Pointing further to the role of language and history in hermeneutics, Gadamer puts that “Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs” in interpreting (Gadamer, 1996, p. 389). This reflects his view that language is not merely a tool of communication but the very horizon within which meaning appears. We do not stand outside language; rather, language forms the space in which thought, culture, and interpretation take place. In addition, Gadamer emphasizes the act of translation as central to understanding. He further points out that in order to be able to express a text’s meaning and subject matter, we must translate it into our own language (Gadamer, 1996, p. 396). Translation here does not only mean converting words from one language to another; it means interpreting meaning through one’s conceptual

and historical framework. Every act of understanding thus becomes an act of translation, shaped by the interpreter's linguistic horizon.

This becomes especially significant in African philosophy, where many concepts are embedded in indigenous languages whose meanings are difficult to fully capture in Western languages. Terms such as "Ubuntu," "Ujamaa," "Nkrabea," "Ọfọ na Ogu," "Ifá," or "Maat" carry cultural, ethical, and metaphysical nuances that risk being lost when translated without hermeneutical sensitivity. Gadamer's view supports the need for careful interpretation of African linguistic worlds, ensuring that philosophical insight arises from an authentic engagement with language rather than superficial translation.

Although an in-depth analysis of these philosophical arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that Hans Gadamer, amongst other philosophers who wrote works on hermeneutics, is a major thinker in hermeneutics and that is why he is often cited when issues on hermeneutics arise. His contributions established hermeneutics as a universal theory of understanding applicable to literature, history, culture, and philosophy. This universality enables scholars of African philosophy to apply hermeneutical principles to African texts and traditions with methodological rigor.

Contemporary researchers have continued to explore the significance of language and history in hermeneutics, including works by Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Thiselton (Ricoeur, 2004; Habermas, 2003; Thiselton, 2009). Ricoeur expanded hermeneutics by integrating narrative theory, showing how stories reveal human identity and history. His work deepens discussions on how historical memory shapes interpretation. Habermas offered a critical perspective on hermeneutics, emphasizing the importance of power, social structures, and communicative rationality in understanding. Thiselton contributed significantly to biblical and philosophical hermeneutics, highlighting the interpretive challenges that arise from linguistic and cultural distance.

These contemporary research, include those by Cynthia R. Nielson (2023), Calro DaVia and Greg Lynch (2024), and Carolyn Culbertson (2024). These contemporary scholars continue to explore how hermeneutics intersects with social identity, intercultural dialogue, gender, ethics, and political theory. Their work expands the scope of hermeneutics by demonstrating how language and history shape not only textual interpretation but also human relationships, social realities, and global philosophical exchanges. By integrating modern issues such as migration, multiculturalism, and decolonization, these scholars highlight the evolving relevance of hermeneutics in contemporary thought.

The significance of language and history in hermeneutics obviously lies in their constitutive role in shaping human understanding. Language serves as the universal medium through which meaning appears, while history provides the horizon that conditions interpretation. Together, they form the fundamental framework within which hermeneutics operates. In the context of African philosophy, they are indispensable tools for retrieving, interpreting, critiquing, and rearticulating African cultural knowledge in a manner that is both authentic and philosophically robust.

Critical Approach of Hermeneutics

The critical approach of hermeneutics is a distinctive feature of the hermeneutic tradition, as exemplified by philosophers such as Derrida, Jardine, Kearney, Habermas, and Gadamer (1996, p. 360). While hermeneutics traditionally concerns itself with understanding and interpretation, its critical dimension extends beyond passive interpretation to include a reflective engagement with the very conditions that make interpretation possible. This approach does not simply receive the meanings that texts or traditions provide; rather, it questions, evaluates, and interrogates the frameworks that shape those meanings. It is this capacity for critique—rooted in reflexivity, self-awareness, and sensitivity to power—that distinguishes critical hermeneutics from simple interpretive methods.

According to Jardine (1999, p. 116), an interest in tradition and ancestry does not necessitate the repetition of traditions, but rather incites a critical evaluation of these traditions in light of the particularities and intimacies of our lives. This means that traditions are not to be followed uncritically or preserved untouched; instead, they are to be interpreted through the lens of contemporary lived experiences. Such interpretation recognizes that traditions are dynamic, not static, and that the meaning they carry may evolve as society changes. Jardine's insight underscores a fundamental hermeneutic principle: tradition serves as both a guide and a subject of critique. It offers the backgrounds that shape understanding, but it also becomes the object of critical reflection so that it aligns with present concerns and ethical demands.

Gadamer (1976, p. 94) emphasizes the importance of this critical approach, positing that hermeneutics exercises a self-criticism of thinking consciousness, translating all its own abstractions and knowledge of the sciences back into the whole of human experience of the world. In other words, the critical task of hermeneutics lies in its ability to bring abstract theories—whether philosophical, scientific, or linguistic—back into contact with the concrete lived world from which they originate. Gadamer's argument affirms that knowledge cannot remain detached or purely theoretical; it must continually be assessed in terms of its relevance to human experience. This grounding in lived reality prevents hermeneutics from becoming overly academic or detached from the concerns of everyday life.

This critical dimension is essential to hermeneutics, as it enables individuals to reflect on the influence of traditions and history on their interpretive position. Without reflection on these influences, interpreters run the risk of mistaking inherited assumptions for objective truths. Hermeneutics therefore pushes interpreters to uncover and challenge the hidden biases and presuppositions that shape their perspectives. By doing so, hermeneutics fosters a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between the interpreter, the text, and the context. This reflective process is not merely intellectual but ethical, demanding honesty, openness, and humility.

Eisner (1998, p. 3) aptly describes criticism as “an art of saying useful things about complex and subtle objects and events so that others can see and understand what they did not see and understand before.” This characterization resonates strongly with the aims of critical hermeneutics. To illuminate what is hidden or overlooked requires sensitivity to nuance, attentiveness to unfamiliar perspectives, and the interpretive creativity necessary to draw meaning from ambiguity. In this sense, the aim of critical approach in hermeneutics is to

illuminate a situation, making it possible for others to gain new insights and understanding. This is achieved through the use of language, which serves as a medium for conveying meaning and facilitating understanding (Gadamer, 1996, p. 389). Language becomes not merely a tool but a horizon of meaning within which critique itself unfolds.

Schott (1991, p. 209) argues that a hermeneutic philosophy of interpretation must adopt an overtly critical position, acknowledging the complex interplay between tradition, history, and context. In Schott's view, interpretation cannot be divorced from power dynamics, gendered assumptions, cultural hierarchies, or ideological frameworks. A critical hermeneutics therefore exposes how interpretations are shaped by asymmetries of power and encourages the recovery of marginalized perspectives. By identifying and challenging these power structures, critical hermeneutics becomes a liberating intellectual tool.

Kearney (2003, p. 187) further emphasizes the importance of critical hermeneutics, suggesting that it affords a space for repressed voices to speak out and neglected texts to get a reading. This perspective highlights the democratic and emancipatory potential of hermeneutics. Through critical engagement, hermeneutics opens interpretive space for those excluded from dominant narratives—such as minority cultures, women, colonized peoples, and marginalized social groups. Kearney's insight is especially relevant in contexts such as African philosophy, postcolonial studies, and feminist theory, where hermeneutics serves not only as an interpretive method but also as a tool for reclaiming suppressed knowledge and challenging oppressive structures.

However, some critics argue that the critical approach of hermeneutics can be overly relativistic, leading to a lack of clear moral or epistemological standards (Habermas, 2003, p. 25). Habermas worries that if all interpretations are equally valid and are understood only within their own historical or linguistic frameworks, then hermeneutics risks undermining the possibility of objective critique. He advocates instead for a more rational, communicative grounding of critique that enables evaluative judgments across different traditions and contexts. In this sense, Habermas believes that hermeneutics must incorporate universal norms of rationality to avoid falling into relativism. Others contend that the emphasis on tradition and history can result in a conservative or nostalgic view of the past, neglecting the need for radical critique and social change (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 12). Ricoeur acknowledges the value of tradition but insists that critique must also include a forward-looking perspective capable of imagining alternative futures. Thus, while tradition provides grounding, interpretation must remain open to transformation and innovation.

However, despite these criticisms, the critical approach of hermeneutics remains a valuable tool for understanding the complex interplay between tradition, history, and context. By acknowledging the role of power and ideology in shaping interpretation, critical hermeneutics provides a framework for critically evaluating dominant narratives and promoting social justice (Köhler, 2022, p. 25). This makes it particularly relevant for contemporary issues such as identity formation, intercultural dialogue, institutional critique, and decolonization.

It is interesting to note that researchers have continued to explore the critical approach of hermeneutics, highlighting its relevance in contemporary debates. For instance, Vessela (2020, p. 12) examines the role of critical hermeneutics in understanding the relationship between

tradition and innovation, arguing that it provides a framework for navigating the complexities of cultural heritage and modernity. Nielson (2023, p. 15) explores the application of hermeneutic criticism in the context of social justice and human rights, demonstrating its potential for promoting transformative social change. Their works reveal that critical hermeneutics continues to evolve, responding to new philosophical and social challenges.

Thus, critical approach of hermeneutics is a distinctive feature of the hermeneutic tradition, enabling individuals to reflect on the influence of traditions and history on their interpretive position. While it has its limitations, critical hermeneutics remains a valuable tool for promoting social justice and understanding the complex interplay between tradition, history, and context. Its emphasis on reflexivity, critique, and openness ensures that interpretation remains a dynamic, inclusive, and ethically responsible enterprise.

Evaluation of the Interplay of Culture and African Philosophy

The arguments presented so far on the interplay of culture and African philosophy, rising from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. On the one hand, Gadamer's emphasis on the role of culture and tradition in shaping understanding provides a valuable framework for African philosophy to engage with its own cultural context (Gadamer, 1996, p. 360). His insistence that interpretation is never value-neutral, and that all understanding occurs within a "horizon" shaped by historical and cultural embeddedness, opens important avenues for African philosophers seeking to reclaim indigenous modes of thought. This approach challenges any assumption that African philosophy must conform to imported Western epistemological categories before it can be considered legitimate or rigorous. Instead, Gadamer's hermeneutics affirms that African cultural traditions, languages, and worldviews are themselves meaningful interpretive horizons capable of generating philosophical insights that are both original and significant.

This approach can help to challenge the dominant Western universalism that has often marginalized African perspectives and experiences (Habermas, 2003, p. 25). Western universalism, with its claim to neutrality and universal rationality, historically positioned African ways of knowing as "other," "primitive," or "non-philosophical." By exposing the historicity and cultural specificity of all interpretive frameworks, including Western ones, hermeneutics undermines the long-standing hierarchy that elevated Western categories as the norm while relegating African thought to the margins. African philosophers can use this insight to highlight the epistemic violence of colonial-era philosophy and anthropology, demonstrating that the Western canon is itself culturally situated and not the measure of all rationality.

By recognizing the importance of cultural context, African philosophers can reclaim their own epistemological traditions and challenge the dominant Western narratives that have shaped the discipline of philosophy (Nielson, 2023, p. 15). This reclamation is not merely a cultural or political act; it is an epistemological necessity. African moral traditions, communal conceptions of the self, indigenous democratic structures, oral literatures, and metaphysical insights all contain philosophical resources that Western frameworks have historically ignored or misrepresented. Gadamer's insights enable African philosophy to affirm the legitimacy of these

resources and to develop methodologies that treat African traditions not as objects of anthropological study but as living sources of philosophical reflection.

Additionally, Gadamer's emphasis on the importance of historical consciousness can help African philosophers to engage with their own historical and cultural traditions in a more nuanced and critical way (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 12). Historical consciousness recognizes that traditions are neither static nor pure; they evolve through encounters, reinterpretations, and conflicts. For African philosophy, this is crucial because African cultures themselves are products of long histories that include precolonial developments, colonial disruptions, and postcolonial transformations. Understanding tradition historically allows African philosophers to avoid romanticizing the past while still recovering valuable indigenous insights. It also encourages a careful examination of how colonialism, missionary influences, state formation, and globalization have reshaped African cultural identities.

This approach can facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between tradition and innovation, and help African philosophers to navigate the challenges of cultural heritage and modernity (Vessela, 2020, p. 12). African societies today face questions about technological modernity, global capitalism, evolving family structures, and political transformation. Hermeneutics provides a framework for understanding how traditional values can continue to inform ethical and political life without forcing African societies into rigid traditionalism. Instead of a dichotomy between "tradition" and "modernity," hermeneutics encourages a dialogical process where inherited values are reinterpreted in light of contemporary challenges.

By engaging with their own cultural traditions, African philosophers can develop a more authentic and relevant philosophy that speaks to the lived experiences of African people (Culbertson, 2024, p. 10). Philosophical questions about justice, community, governance, human dignity, development, and identity take on different contours when viewed through African experiences of colonialism, communal living, kinship systems, spirituality, and economic realities. Hermeneutics makes it possible for African philosophy to be grounded in these experiences rather than in abstract categories derived from Western intellectual history. However, there is a risk that this approach may lead to cultural relativism, where African cultures are seen as isolated and unchanging, and where critical evaluation of cultural practices is discouraged (Köhler, 2022, p. 30). If hermeneutics is misapplied, it could result in an uncritical preservation of traditions simply because they are culturally inherited. For instance, practices that undermine human rights, gender equality, or social justice might be defended on the grounds of cultural authenticity. Such a stance would impede the capacity of African philosophy to contribute to progressive social change. Therefore, hermeneutics must be used critically, not as a justification for cultural essentialism but as a method for meaningful engagement and reinterpretation.

Furthermore, Gadamer's hermeneutics does not adequately address the power dynamics that shape cultural and philosophical traditions, including the legacy of colonialism and imperialism (Nielson, 2023, p. 15). Gadamer's model assumes a relatively equal dialogical space where tradition and interpreter encounter one another without coercive hierarchies. This assumption is problematic in postcolonial contexts where African cultures have been violently shaped,

suppressed, or restructured by colonial power. Hermeneutics therefore requires supplementation from critical theory, postcolonial theory, and African philosophical critiques that foreground power relations. Only by acknowledging these inequalities can African philosophy use hermeneutics to resist epistemic domination.

To address these limitations, it is essential to engage more explicitly with African philosophical traditions and perspectives, and to use the critical approach of hermeneutics to decolonize philosophy and challenge dominant Western epistemologies (Culbertson, 2024, p. 10). This includes prioritizing African languages, oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and communal forms of rationality as legitimate sources of philosophy. It also requires exposing the colonial assumptions embedded in academic structures, curricula, and research methodologies.

Ultimately, this approach can facilitate intercultural dialogue and exchange between African and Western philosophical traditions, and help to contextualize African philosophy and make it more relevant to the lived experiences of African people (DaVia & Lynch, 2024, p. 20). Such dialogue must be grounded in mutual respect and an acknowledgement of historical asymmetries. Through this process, African philosophy can both contribute to global philosophical discourse and deepen its own internal reflections. By engaging in this critical and nuanced approach, African philosophers can develop a philosophy that is both authentic and relevant, and that speaks to the complex challenges of the African context. This hermeneutical engagement ensures that African philosophy remains dynamic, context-sensitive, and capable of addressing both local and global intellectual challenges without losing sight of its roots.

Conclusion

The complexities of interpretation and the inherent contradictions that arise in the process of understanding texts, events, and cultural phenomena underscore the need for a rigorous, systematic, and philosophically grounded approach to the production of meaning and knowledge. This need becomes even more pronounced when dealing with culturally diverse contexts where traditions, worldviews, and interpretive frameworks differ significantly. Philosophical hermeneutics, as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, offers a valuable and robust framework for navigating these complexities, enabling scholars to explore, decode, and illuminate the deeper meanings embedded within culture, tradition, and textual expressions. Through this hermeneutical lens, understanding is not a mechanical retrieval of objective meaning but an interactive and dialogical process shaped by the interpreter's history, culture, and lived experience. This recognition allows us to appreciate that African philosophy emerges not in isolation but from the unique cultural and traditional matrix of African societies, mediated through the interpretive tool of hermeneutics.

Gadamer's emphasis on the fusion of horizons reminds us that no interpretation takes place in a vacuum. The horizon of the interpreter meets the horizon of the text, tradition, or event, giving rise to new insights and an expanded field of understanding. Applying this to African philosophy, it becomes evident that African thought must be interpreted from within its own cultural frameworks and through a deep engagement with the lived realities of African people. The hermeneutic process therefore validates African philosophy as philosophy in its own right,

derived from a distinctive set of experiences, practices, oral traditions, and cultural formations that have shaped African existence. African philosophy, then, is not a derivative or secondary mode of thought but an authentic intellectual tradition that gains clarity and expression when examined through an interpretive practice sensitive to its cultural foundations. Every philosopher, regardless of geographical location or cultural identity, is a product of their background. Their philosophical reflections inevitably bear the imprint of their historical, social, and cultural contexts. This simple truth challenges any lingering assumption that philosophy is the exclusive domain of one civilization or cultural group. The notion that some cultures—particularly those outside the Western world—are devoid of philosophy stems from a narrow definition of philosophical thought and from historical biases that privileged written traditions over oral ones. Hermeneutics exposes the limitations of such biases by demonstrating that philosophy does not depend on a particular method of transmission. Instead, it is an intrinsic human activity rooted in reflection, questioning, interpretation, and meaning-making. Therefore, the role of hermeneutics is not only to interpret written texts but also to uncover and elucidate the intellectual traditions preserved in oral narratives, proverbs, myths, rituals, and communal practices.

This perspective directly challenges the flawed assertion that ancient Africa lacked philosophy simply because many African societies did not rely on written records. Such an assumption ignores the centrality and depth of African oral traditions, which for centuries served as repositories of wisdom, metaphysics, ethics, political theory, and social philosophy. It was within these oral frameworks that African societies articulated their conceptions of being, personhood, morality, justice, cosmology, and communal living. Philosophizing—far from being a Western invention—is an inherent aspect of human existence, an ongoing quest to understand reality and humanity’s place within it. Hermeneutics provides the methodological key to unlocking the layers of meaning embedded in these oral expressions, making explicit the philosophical insights that have always been present but often undervalued or misunderstood.

Moreover, hermeneutics helps us confront the historical distortions introduced during the colonial period when African intellectual traditions were dismissed as primitive or irrational. Such dismissals were not grounded in rigorous philosophical assessment but in ideological and political agendas aimed at legitimizing colonial domination. By applying philosophical hermeneutics to African thought, scholars can critically reevaluate these traditions, recover suppressed knowledge systems, and reinterpret African histories and cultures in ways that affirm their philosophical richness. This is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary act of intellectual justice, restoring dignity to traditions that have long been misrepresented.

The application of hermeneutics also reveals the dynamic and evolving nature of African philosophy. African cultures, like all cultures, are not static relics of the past. They are living, breathing, adaptive systems that respond to new challenges, encounters, and historical changes. Hermeneutics allows us to trace this evolution, showing how African philosophical ideas have transformed through interactions with Islam, Christianity, colonialism, modernity, and globalization. It thus provides a method for understanding how old traditions can coexist with new perspectives, forming a coherent yet continually developing body of philosophical

thought. In this sense, African philosophy becomes a conversation across generations, each contributing to an ongoing dialogue about truth, meaning, justice, and human flourishing. Furthermore, hermeneutics offers a path for overcoming the artificial dichotomy often drawn between African philosophy and global philosophy. Instead of positioning African thought as marginal or inferior, hermeneutics highlights its unique contributions to universal philosophical questions. Issues such as communalism, the nature of personhood, moral responsibility, spirituality, the relationship between humanity and nature, and the meaning of justice gain fresh dimensions when viewed through African philosophical lenses. Thus, African philosophy enriches the global discourse by expanding the range of perspectives available for interpreting human experience. Therefore, the application of philosophical hermeneutics is essential for understanding the complexities of African philosophy and culture. It equips scholars with the tools necessary to move beyond superficial or reductionist readings of African traditions and to uncover the rich intellectual heritage that has shaped the African experience. By embracing a hermeneutical approach, we can gain a more profound appreciation for the diversity and sophistication of African philosophical thought. This approach fosters intellectual humility, cultural openness, and a deeper commitment to engaging with African philosophy on its own terms.

Obviously, hermeneutics not only validates African philosophy but also positions it as a vital and meaningful contributor to global philosophical inquiry. By acknowledging the interpretive nature of understanding, recognizing the importance of cultural context, and valuing oral traditions as legitimate sites of philosophical reflection, we can affirm that African philosophy possesses a richness and depth worthy of rigorous study. Through hermeneutical engagement, African philosophy emerges as a dynamic, relevant, and indispensable part of the global intellectual community—one that broadens our understanding of what it means to philosophize and what it means to be human.

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