

**LOST IN THE HAYSACK: A LECTURE ON MESEMBE
EDET'S WOMEN IN THE HIS-STORY OF PHILOSOPHY
AND THE IMPERATIVE FOR A HER-STORICAL
PERSPECTIVE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN
PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

The author uses the conversational method in this essay to examine Mesembe Edet's work on "Women in the His-Story of Philosophy and the Imperative for a 'Her-storical' Perspective in Contemporary African Philosophy." It scrutinizes the dangers of a singular, male-dominated narrative in the development of African philosophy. The author interrogates the dominance of a his-storical narrative that restricts the field's progress, logical integrity, and consistency, as well as questioning whether there are few women in African philosophy who have produced philosophical works. The conversation transcends mere advocacy for fairness or gender epistemic equality, arguing that a her-storical perspective is fundamental for African philosophy's coherence, future, and epistemic inclusiveness. While Edet critiques the exclusion of women's voices in African philosophical anthologies and compilations, this article suggests that his emphasis limits the necessity of a her-storical perspective to themes of empathy and equity. By engaging with Edet's arguments and ideas, this article contends that a her-storical perspective is central to the consistency of African philosophical methodological claims and reasoning, rather than merely serving as an ethical or compensatory factor. The essay's structure focuses on a close examination of Edet's claims, a critical analysis of the politics of pronouns, and an evaluation of significant

guiding questions that underscore the theoretical consequences of epistemic gender inclusivity in African philosophy.

Keywords: African philosophy, His-story/her-story, Epistemic injustice, Politics of pronouns, Reason/okwucentricism.

Introduction

It was an honour to deliver this lecture as a philosopher of African descent and, more importantly, a woman. I often wonder if Chimamanda Adichie's danger of a one-sided story as a literal piece applies in the same momentum to the narratives on the gradient development of African philosophy propelled by masculinity. Could the his-storical perspective of African philosophy pose dangers that hinder African philosophy from blooming, or even dangers that mock the elevated African philosophical method and logic? I want to say that a her-storical perspective is not a matter of simple fairness, tolerance, and intellectual empathy. Some people may view it as a consideration for gender equality. Although these matters may not be neglected, their imperativeness points to something beyond simple fairness, tolerance, and intellectual empathy for gender equality in knowledge production.

The importance of a her-storical perspective has a normative consequence on African philosophy, its future, and the consistency of its claims. Theoretically, the method and logic in African philosophy offer a way out, but only if the issue here can be resolved theoretically. However, as can be seen in Mesembe Edet's argument, the narratives so far, the anthologies, and articulations of African philosophical development up until the contemporary period have never given voice to women's contributions to development. The title of the text is "Women in the his-story of Philosophy and the Imperative for a 'her-storical' Perspective in Contemporary African Philosophy." The article was published in *African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women*, a book edited by Jonathan Chimakonam and Louise du Toit, in 2018. It is a text of about ten pages. However, observing how intense the content is does not require incredible insight. Edet laid the cards but left the argument for the imperativeness of a her-storical perspective at the level of intellectual empathy and compensation, or rather, gender equality. Hence, the task I set out in

this article involves an exploration of his article, as well as an engagement with it in a conversational manner. In the following pages, I will introduce the title of the article and the positioning of the pronouns ‘his’ and ‘her.’ Furthermore, I will raise some guiding questions for the engagement with the text, followed by an overview of his critique of the his-storical perspective of African philosophy. In the last part of this paper, I will highlight his argument from a her-storical perspective as well as return to the initial questions for a critical appraisal of Edet’s arguments and the topic in general.

The Pronouns ‘His and Her’

The use of the pronoun ‘his’ in history and ‘her’ in her-story [History] is not an isolated case. Besides languages that are not gendered, most languages of the world derive the feminine expression from the male. According to Marie Pauline Eboh:

[E]pistemological reflections show that words and concepts are male-insulated from within and male-coated from without. This is an entangling mesh... The issue at stake is not just language. We pick on language only because it reflects societal *modus operandi*, and gives an insight into the mind of men, because thinking and acting are but two facets of the same reality. (EBOH 2000, 104)

Hence, the word ‘his-story’ is male-insulated. It is not simply a question of language; rather, the female perspective is always entangled in the androgynal circle of referencing. It is taken for granted that ‘his-story’ is generic and represents a comprehensive narrative of events, past and present. However, because it is perceived to be the ‘normal’ and *modus operandi*, the female perspective becomes insulated and lost. This is not a simple unintended outcome but a constant replication of the male view of the world as representative of every other existential reality. According to Olajumoke Akiode, this representation of existential reality occurs in a “blanket and absolute manner that leaves no room for the disaggregation of the African project” (AKIODE 2018, 58).

Going further, Edet defined [history] as a critical narrative or study of past human activities that “produced sufficient effects on the

subsequent course of events or other human beings in the course of events” (EDET 2018, 156). For him, it is not a simple analog of past events; rather, scholars in the field tend toward a critical analysis of those events while attempting to interpret them in the light of contemporary knowledge of a kind related to the past event. In that light, he underlines that the main problem in contemporary African Philosophy, despite the bubbling rigors of formal philosophical activities, is the “absence of a comprehensive presentation of the [history]¹, in which both the male and female epistemic viewpoints are accommodated” (EDET 2018, 155). Significantly, the use of history to represent the field remains unavoidable. Even when one talks about her-storical perspective, it boils down to the her-storical perspective of his-story. This emphatically makes Eboh’s argument against the androgynous web very significant in understanding the entanglement and insulation of female epistemic production in male production of knowledge. In this regard, Edet noted that “history is gender-blind,” and he continues, “this gender-blind *his-storic* deterministic conceptions of [history], particularly [history] of philosophy, necessitates the development of her-story” (EDET 2018, 157).

Acknowledging Robin Morgan (2014), he drew attention to the origin of the idea behind the concept ‘her-story’ and, hence, argues that “Her-story is [history] written from a woman’s perspective ...” taking seriously “the creative work that women have done in the development of knowledge” (EDET 2018, 157). The idea of her-story as his-story is an entanglement. In other words, it does not still make much difference, at least in this linguistic and conceptual manner, if her-story is his-story. Is the linguistic change evident in the use of the pronoun ‘her’ to replace ‘his’, bringing any concrete mind transformation to the relevant consideration? I do not think so. Of course, Edet knew that simple linguistic change was not the core of the matter. Thus, he writes:

¹ Bracketed by me to point out that, regardless of the attempt to use the feminine pronoun i.e. ‘her’, to replace ‘his,’ the use of ‘history’ for the field as insulating as it is, in the way meant by Pauline Eboh may never be avoided. It is indeed an unavoidable androgenous web.

Her-story is a neologism coined as a pun on the word 'history' as part of a critique of conventional historiography, which is traditionally written as his-story, that is, from the masculine point of view. Even if the term is comic, it needs to be taken very seriously as it is a term pregnant with implications and consequences for academia, especially philosophy, the field where concepts are fundamental, indeed, concepts are everything. (EDET 2018, 158)

Interestingly, Edet argues that even if the pronoun suppletion is comic, it is heavy with implications for philosophy, where concepts have fundamental significance. Hence, I agree that the use of the pronoun 'her' in place of 'his' to highlight a her-storical perspective is more than a neologism, it is a critique of 'an epistemic lopsidedness' (See CHIMAKONAM 2018a) and a rejection of masochist African philosophy, which not only promote colonial residues but also challenges the whole idea of African philosophical, methodological claims. Jonathan Chimakonam observed that "an epistemological edifice loses normative content if it marginalizes or devalues some voices or if it becomes impossible to evaluate it. And it becomes lopsided or non-complementary if it trims off other relevant perspectives like the female gender" (CHIMAKONAM 2018a, 14). Therefore, the normative imperativeness of recognising and including female voices in the narrative and acknowledging their roles is not simply compensatory; rather, it gives normative credibility to the epistemic authority of African philosophical claims.

Furthermore, and consequently, the her-storical perspective suggests at the surface a story of the evolution of African philosophy as told from the female (her) perspective. However, this is not the same as 'her' being in the story of African philosophy told by 'him' or 'her'. This is also a concern.

To understand the problem of the exclusion of women's contribution to African Philosophy, some questions must be asked, namely, how are the voices of African women philosophers lost in the haystack of masculinized narrative? And why is that the case? Edet may have navigated through these two major questions. However, his ten-page condensed article fails to respond clearly to them in different

ways. Nonetheless, to dissect the article, I wish to provide a terrain of questions that will aid in exploring the depth and breadth of his claims. How does Edet understand philosophy and, in particular, African philosophy? Who is an African philosopher in his view? What are the background factors underlying the biases against women? What are the implications of using the term herstory in the academic discipline of the his-story of African philosophy? How old is the text, and has there been any positive development on the subject since its publication? What are the reasons for the absence of women's voices within the discipline of African philosophy? Are there truly few women in African philosophy, past and present?

Overview of the Text

Aside from the introduction, where the author attempts to clarify his objectives and the background, the text starts with tracing the origin of the term [history]. Edet, referencing (ERIM 2004, 6), traced the term to the Greek word '*historia*,' meaning 'knowledge obtained by inquiry into the past' (EDET 2018, 156). Whether in Western philosophy, or Asian African traditions, this inquiry into the past, in this context, philosophy, women, and their voices have been rendered invisible, inaudible, and, I will add my voice to that of Louise du Toit, ignored. To render invisible, inaudible, and to ignore are distinct categories of epistemicide and violation of an agent's right as an epistemic agent in time and space. Epistemic agency relates to what Fricker identified as the status of someone as a knower (FRICKER 2007; see also CHIMAKONAM 2018a). Furthermore, inquiring into the past concerns activities of human beings, which are primarily the biographies of great men and their ideas, told by some men who were mostly not there. I remember a seminar class I took in Aristotelian philosophy. I wrote a paper on Aristotle's theory of action, using some actual and contemporary examples. The professor, who is supposedly an expert in Aristotelian philosophy, marked my paper down. His reason was neither argumentative nor a result of a logical gap in my reasoning. Rather, he was bold in telling me that "Aristotle did not say that or mean that." The professor was not much older than I. My religious formation as a nun occupied about nine years (calculating from the time I took my senior certificate exam), and nine years would have been enough to put me at the same academic level as his. Of

course, he is an expert in the Greek language and ancient Western philosophy. My argument against him was that I would not drag the case if he had provided a Greek translation of a portion, an old text, or an interpretation that suggests Aristotle did not intend to say or mean what he was quoted as saying. Between us was interpretation and understanding; it was reasoning from different epistemic agents' points of view. My argument had no philosophical or logical error; his point was simply, "Aristotle did not say that."

There might be some other background to our relationship that goes beyond student and professor, that includes foreignness and gender. I would not delve into that. The point is that the story of a man and his ideas is often told by a man who was not there and who rejects that same story when told by a woman who was also not there. It is about engaging with an idea by a woman with a different epistemic stance. This incident might have taken place within another epistemic space. However, it does happen in Africa as a geographical space and as an academic space. Edet referenced Erim O. Erim, and affirmed his claim that history is the "*biography of great men or narrative by a man who was not there*, lacking essential intellectual authenticity or scientific integrity." (EDET 2018, 158, Cf. ERIM 2004, 4). Edet, thus, rightly remarked that her-story in African Philosophy would be a cure for ostensible her-storycide caused by the masculinist canon in Western philosophy. The Western masculinist canon ignored and rendered invisible knowledge in other epistemic spaces outside of the West, raising questions such as what philosophy is and who is a philosopher. However, women and knowledge production have suffered the same cognitive injustice globally.

That brings my focus to Edet's definition of [formal] African philosophy, "a product of critical reflection carried out in the light of *pure reason* ²and with some training has constituted an organized corpus of knowledge on specific African experiences and on universal issues by African authors, indigenous and expatriate" (EDET 2018, 159). Before, commenting on this definition of African philosophy, I will compare it to Chimakonam's definition of African philosophy as "the location of wonder in the African place; it is the rigorous and critical application of the tool of *reason* such that a culturally inspired

² emphasis by me

methodic [ambience] accounts for the systematicity of its discourses” (CHIMAKONAM 2018a, 9, my emphasis).

My attention is drawn to the commonalities, which in some ways reflect Western gender biases inherent in African philosophy’s marginalisation of women. The commonality is the use of the term ‘reason.’ Whose reason and which reason? Reason is not only racialised but also gendered.³ Edet, in the current article, did not provide a working definition of ‘reason,’ or pure reason, but the expression “pure reason” is infamous and probably contains elements of Kant’s elevation of pure reason as universal and objective, even when it lies at the “core of hegemonic western thinking” (DE SOUSA SANTOS 2016, 163). In contrast, Chimakonam, in another article, defined the reason that emerges from okwucentricism as “self expression” ... “which is a linguistic activity and any entity capable of this manifests rationality,” arguing that “rationality is embedded in language and every language is rational because it takes an intelligent culture to develop a language in the first place” (CHIMAKONAM 2018b, 14–15).

Though Chimakonam’s reason does not discriminate but recognizes the rights of the *other*, it still retains the attributive lordship over other human activities. He writes that the reason that emerges from Okwu as the raw material of thought ‘confers equality’ and awards the character of universal to all as a common attribute” (CHIMAKONAM 2018b, 15–16). The ability to confer and award suggests the Western idea of reason as a judge who sits somewhere, reigning over, conferring, and rewarding the other epistemic contexts and agents. I cannot argue for sure whether the other in this excerpt includes women, but what I can argue is that it represents in salient terms the supremacy accorded to reason over feelings and emotions, where these human activities have been feminized, leading back to Hegelian fragmentation of reality, when he projects man as pure objectivity and reason; and woman as feeling and subjectivity. Women, for Hegel, remain at the level of opinions and emotions even if they are educated (HEGEL 1977; 1979). Within what De Sousa

³ Gendered Reason is a research article that I am working on. It critiques masculinized reason, present in African Philosophy, of course, as a colonial inheritance within the framing of reason as philosophy or its centrality to philosophy.

Santos (2016) calls Western metonymic reason, a woman is never intelligible outside of man, and she is considered within that totality called man. Man is the determining factor. A woman's work is only philosophical if it satisfies the dominant masculinised idea of reason and objectivity.

I agree with Chimakonam that reason is an activity. However, it is not that which sits in judgment, rewards, accords, or confers equality or recognition. Rather, it is an effort to make participating epistemic agents, man or woman, regardless of epistemic space, see what an agent saw in making a particular kind of claim, presentation of thought, or knowledge (IDIKA 2018; Cf. DAVIDSON 1963).

Whereas Edet critiqued gender-blindness and privileged male representation not only in the West but also in oriental philosophy, which accounts for his awakening call on African philosophy, however, it might have escaped him that Asian and African philosophy tend towards Western hegemony, not because of the obvious invisibility of women but because of what Chimakonam in one of his lectures in 2022 on 'Superalternism' identified as "antecedent cognitive condition," which, I argue, systematically essentialised women as simply emotional and affective. Edet cited Omorogbe's wording that African Philosophy has its philosophers instanced in Socrates, Plato, Descartes, and Hegel, basically attributing philosophy to men alone. Good enough, Edet acknowledged this lack of scientific integrity, arguing for a balanced perspective in African philosophy. Specifically, he identified works, anthologies, and ongoing projects in the history of African philosophy (OMOROGBE 1985; ONYEWUENYI 1993; MOMOH 2000) that nevertheless excluded women's thoughts and voices (EDET 2018).

Barry Hallen's 2002 work explores themes and scholars in African Philosophy. The collection, which spans 133 pages, focuses solely on men, but notably, the works of Sophie Oluwole, listed in the bibliography, are not discussed. The same is true with Wiredu's *Blackwell Companion to African Philosophy*, in which Nkiru Nzegwu contributed two Essays. In the Anthology edited by Chukwudi Eze (1998), there were forty-three male authors, as against five female authors. These raise questions that this article will return to: why is Sophie Oluwole the only work listed by Hallen? Were other works by African women scholars unavailable? What were Hallen's selection

criteria? In Wiredu's work, how wide were the announcements and calls for papers? How is it possible that only Nzegwu contributed? The same question raised in Wiredu's edited Companion to African Philosophy could be asked about Eze's Anthology. These, I argue, are not arbitrary. Hence, it reinforces the concern over epistemic equality in African philosophy. Are there few women in African philosophy, or are there few women in African philosophy who have written works that fall into the category called philosophical?

Edet further critiqued that, despite the comprehensive structure of Chimakonam's entry on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy on the History of African Philosophy, he was also guilty of her-storycide. In his thirty-three-page entry, Chimakonam mentioned only two women, Jennifer Lisa Vest and Sophie Oluwole. He pointed out that "in a listing of about eighty-nine items of 'references and further reading,' Sophie Oluwole's *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (2009) and Vest's *Perverse and Necessary Dialogues in African Philosophy*' (1999) are the only works authored by women" (EDET 2018, 158 – 161).

What were the criteria for choosing references and women authors? Were other contributions by women in African Philosophy, such as Nzegwu, Wangari Maathai, Eboh, Franziska Dübgen, and Anke Graness, among others, not philosophical enough, or are they not African philosophers? Are there truly few women in African Philosophy? Or are there a few works by women worthy of being termed philosophical?

In the last section of the text, Edet drew attention to the importance of her-storical perspective in African philosophy. He first outlined significant questions:

What are the basic questions that engage contemporary African philosophy, and how have women and feminists responded to these questions? Why are their voices, views, and thoughts undermined? Why has it been difficult for their views and experiences to enter the African philosophical historical canon? Is it truly a conscious and a systemic marginalization? How has African philosophy marginalized women in its questions? What are the consequences or implications

of this marginalization for Africa, Africans, African philosophy, and philosophy generally, now and in the future? What can African philosophy learn from women and vice versa? (EDET 2018, 162)

These are pertinent questions calling for answers. Edet not only raised questions on why African Philosophy had rendered the voices of women invisible. He also cast the touch of his interrogation on the women and their philosophical research. He writes:

Why are there so few women in African philosophy? Why are there points of tension? Are women truly averse to philosophy? Is there something about philosophy which makes the field seem unwelcome to women? Is there, as du Toit submits, a rejection of the philosophical genre of intellectual expression by African women intellectuals in preference to some other genre? If this is the case, what may feminist and other philosophers learn from this act of rejection? Very important and urgent is the question, why has African philosophy remained essentially his-storical? How can African philosophy establish and sustain her-storical perspectives in her narratives? (EDET 2018, 162)

Edet never provided direct answers to the questions he enunciated above; rather, he criticized contemporary African philosophy for its failure to acknowledge women's voices to enrich the content of African philosophy. He emphasized Oluwole's argument for the Africanness of African philosophy, referring to her 1991 and 1999 publications, which, according to Edet, are 'fundamental for African philosophy's historiography.' He further argued and questioned, "the justice of any African philosophy narrative that takes into account sage philosophy and the works of Kenyan Henry Odera Oruka, but ignores or disregards the work of Anke Graness" (EDET 2018, 163). Graness had engaged extensively with Oruka's works.

Furthermore, he wondered why Maathai's works on subjects such as empowerment in relation to self-esteem, political action, and development were not considered part of the epistemic structure in

African Philosophy. He further argued that African philosophical historiography underestimates Nzegwu's works on themes of feminism, womanhood, and gender discourses in African philosophy.

At this point, I wish to revisit the questions I raised earlier, as well as those Edet raised in the last section of his article: What makes a text philosophical from the African epistemic space? And why were these authors and texts rendered invisible? On the one hand, the question is whether feminist works are philosophical or whether works identified as Gender studies are philosophical. Where should the line be drawn between African feminist scholarship and African feminist philosophy? This needs further research.

However, Edet maintained that neglect or devaluation of women's voices in African philosophical historiography is a her-storycide. Acknowledging their perspective means creating knowledge systems that emerge from the diverse and complex contexts in which both men and women live, work, and sustain their being. For him, such acknowledgment 'guarantees innovative and transformative narrative that ensures epistemic justice'.

Conclusion

Global expansion of thought is not exclusively intellectually geographical – it is also along the line of gender because its core center is inclusivity. African philosophical method(s), which promote complementarity, context, and relationality, lack methodological and normative consistency if they devalue the perspective of women as they engage with reality and make sense of it. The consequence of rendering the voices of women in African philosophy is not only a cognitive and epistemic injustice, i.e., injustice against their agency as knowers, but also a matter of academic and social justice because it strips women of the proper recognition of their intellectual labor. Edet invites African philosophers to remediate the ongoing injustice against women in philosophical scholarship. However, it also invites women philosophers to investigate answers to some of the questions, whether there are few women philosophers in African philosophy or whether they publish few works, and if so, why? It makes it imperative to establish a new research area on women's contributions to African philosophy. It calls for a clearer and unbiased interrogation of the current philosophical engagement with works by women in

African philosophy. To avoid making some voices inaudible, the question of feminist and gender scholarship and its relationship to philosophical scholarship needs to be clarified. The utmost way to conclude with Edet is that contemporary African philosophy must acknowledge its obligations and responsibilities towards women within African philosophical discourse.

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