

Socrates and *Orúnmilà* in Intellectual History: An Exercise in Intercultural Philosophy

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Abstract

*The acrimonious debate on the non-philosophical and non-scientific character of classical African intellectual tradition has not only spread for so long but has become an almost dominant locus. But in the face of the multicultural relations that currently map and shape the contours of human identity in recent times, it is now fashionable to appraise cultures and identities not in isolation or with reference to uniqueness but in terms of confluent epistemologies, mutual and inter-related intellectual historical identities. This trend toward networking global intellectual history is laudable as globality narratives on knowledge production fundamentally entail harmony, shared life-world, humanity imaginaries and essences as core moral-epistemological values. It is against this background that this article engages in an intercultural analysis of *Orúnmilà* in classical Yorùbá-African thought, and Socrates in classical Greek thought, to discover the areas of Afro-European thought confluence in the philosophies of these two historic figures. Consequently, this article uncovers the historical and textual evidences in the oral literature of the Yorùbá that validate the ancient philosophical thoughts of *Orúnmilà* as no less sophisticated vis-à-vis that of Socrates in ancient Greek philosophy. This article argues that the classical philosophies of both Socrates and *Orúnmilà* are mutually sympathetic with fundamental lessons for developing contemporary intellectual canons of intercultural philosophy.*

Keywords: Orúnmilà, Orúnminology, Socrates, Yorùbá philosophy, Greek philosophy, Ifá, intercultural philosophy

Introduction

Global intellectual culture has been largely characterised by a deep historical sense of Eurocentric hegemony. Over the course of time, Western philosophy, especially Greek intellectual tradition, has been regarded as a prism and blueprint of intellectualism with much vilification of traditional African philosophy as mythology and folk wisdom of less global attention. Greek philosophy prides so high in Alfred North Whitehead's (1979:39) writing that he characterises European philosophical tradition as "a series of footnotes on Plato." This revered representation of Greek civilization as the most resounding in terms of intellectual accomplishment, where Socrates is a prominent figure, is eloquently captured by Sanya Osha (2018:104) thus:

On the basis of the pure rationality of ancient Greece and the hegemony

it represents in global intellectual culture, Sophocles becomes the exemplar of comedies and tragedies; Greek's culture is then considered the apogee of artistic perfection; Herodotus and Thucydides are regarded as historians' par excellence; Homer becomes the standard bearer for bards engaged in epic poetry; and [Socrates], Plato and Aristotle are crowned as the ultimate rhetoricians. In short, the whole of ancient Greek culture and civilization are anointed the most accomplished ever seen.

The dominance of ancient Greek thoughts and Western philosophy, broadly, in intellectual history is not accidentally frivolous. It is strategically designed to be so by the hegemonic voicing of such intellectual tradition, while denying the possibility of an indigenous African cerebral tradition. From Homer, Thomas Hobbes, Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, to Thomas Jefferson, so much denigration and silencing of Afro-indigenous contributions to intellectual history have been voiced.

Hegel was intrepid enough to conclude that "Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit ... Egypt... does not belong to the African Spirit" (Hegel, 1956:99). Much as Theophile Obenga, an Egyptologist, tries to show that Hegel's analysis of the place of Africa in his philosophy of history is invalid, he admitted that "this view of the Hegelian philosophy of history has become almost a common opinion and an academic paradigm in Western historiography. A popular narrative in Western intellectual discourse is the assuming belief that great breakthroughs, discoveries, and civilization cannot be produced by African (Black) people. This also implies that Africans have never made any kind of contribution to world history" (Obenga, 2004:33).

The foregoing has been the prime reason, among many others, for the lack of dignity and worth for the intellectual achievements of the "man of colour" (Fanon, 2008). While many scholars, both of African (Nabudere 2011, Obenga 2004, Onyewuenyi 1993, Asante 1990, Diop 1974) and non-African descents (Bernal 1987-2006, James 1954) have contested the Eurocentric domination of global intellectual space by advocating Afrocentrism as alternative and unique epistemic options, my attempt in this paper is not to tread this path. Rather, I am motivated to contributing towards networking global intellectual history by engaging in an intercultural comparative study of *Oṣúnmílà* in classical *Yorùbá*-African thought, and Socrates in classical Greek thought. This derives from my intellectual conviction on this subject which Archie Bahm's (1977:3) emphasises that "nothing in philosophy is older than comparative philosophy...all philosophy is comparative..." The

fundamental aim of my comparative venture is not to reinforce hegemonic and unique epistemologies; rather it is to discover the areas of Afro-European thought confluence in the philosophies of these two historic figures. On the supposition that globality narratives on knowledge production fundamentally entail harmony, shared life-world, humanity imaginaries and essences as core moral-epistemological values, I shall explore in this essay, through the heuristic and comparative methods, the philosophic commonalities and differences in the thoughts of *Oṛúnmìlà* and Socrates as grounds for promoting the rational capacities that unite the human race across board.

Following this introduction, the next section of this essay provides a discussion of Socrates, his salient philosophic ideas and method. The section that follows employs the same approach for *Oṛúnmìlà* by bringing to the fore, his undervalued ideas and thoughts on thematic issues of philosophic relevance. In the fourth part, the cerebral connections between these ancient sages of philosophy will be foregrounded. That section will exhume the common denominator that cuts across all humans. In the fifth part, this common denominator is employed to give some leverage to the discourse on multiculturalism and how its evolving canons can be a pivot for improving global relations without an attenuation of rooted identities. The concluding part of the article motivates direction for some future researches on the subject of discourse.

Socrates and his Intellectual Contribution to Philosophy

Biographical profiling of Socrates informs that he was born in 486 B.C (Cayne, 1992). During this time, people of different races populated the city of Athens where he lived (Kenny, 2006:13). Socrates, though popularly known as a philosophic sage, excelled in other facets of life besides his vocation in philosophy. He was a soldier in the war he witnessed between Athens and Sparta. In the instructive words of Anthony Kenny:

Among those who served in the Athenian heavy infantry was Socrates the son of Sophroniscus, who was thirty-eight when the war began. He was present at three of the important battles in the earlier years of the war and won a reputation for bravery. Back in Athens in 406, he held office in the Assembly at a time when a group of generals was put on trial for abandoning the bodies of the dead at the sea-battle of Arginusae. It was illegal to try the generals collectively rather than individually, but Socrates was the only person to vote against doing so, and they were executed (Kenny, 2006:25).

Apart from being a war veteran, he held political offices as well as taught philosophy. His teachings have considerable influence on Plato's and

Aristotle's philosophies. In spite of being renowned as a teacher of great repute, Socrates had no personal writings of his. Ideas known today in philosophical literature as Socrates's are the approximate representations of his views recorded by his students and contemporaries such as Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon and Aristophanes (Oluwole, 2014). This difficult situation of having a clear and accurate framing of historical Socrates and the views accredited to him by the writings of his students and contemporaries is termed the Socratic Problem¹ (Santas, 1964).

There is a very important tradition about Socrates that is pertinent for the purpose of drawing semblance with *Ojúnmilà* in the latter part of this article. It concerns the reputation for wisdom. Socrates is known for asking more questions than providing answers to such questions. In paradoxical and gadfly manner, he claims to have no answer to the fundamental questions he raises in dialectical conversation with others. In fact, Socrates once said, "I know you won't believe me, but the highest form of Human Excellence is to question oneself and others" (Luce, 1992:12). Life must be given self-critical appraisal both in terms of one's own perception of realities and attitudinal dispositions because for Socrates, "an unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato *Apology*: 28 [37e - 38c]).

Historically, "in classical Greece, great attention was paid to the oracles uttered in the name of the god Apollo by the entranced priestesses in the shrine of Delphi. When asked if there was anyone wiser than Socrates, a priestess replied that there was no one" (Kenny, 2006:26). Upon hearing this verdict, Socrates proceeded to engage those who had reputation for knowledge and wisdom in Greece (Stumpf, 1979) only to concede that indeed the entranced priestess was correct. All these people did not recognize the limits of their knowledge and what is beyond them but "he alone realized that his own wisdom was worth nothing" (Kenny, 2006:26).

Unlike his Athenian philosophical predecessors who were more interested in finding the foundational principles, origin and stuffs of the universe, Socrates was concerned with protesting against the way and forms in which the divine origin of moral laws have been formulated and misinterpreted. His interest was to assist Athenians to understand and correctly cognize the dictates of G/god. He, therefore, questioned political and religious authority in Athens and taught Athenian youths the art of critical reasoning. Since "a society is a battle place of ideology" (Harris,

1 The Socratic problem entails that in the absence of verbatim recording of the views of Socrates, possibility of exaggerations, biased interpretations and false claims cannot be ruled out in what is called 'Socrates's view'. In spite of this, the works of Plato, Aristophanes and Xenophanes have some basic views of the historical Socrates than many contemporary commentaries. In this article, Plato's *Apology* together with other commentaries shall be reference points.

1988), the ideology in Socrates' teachings influenced the political life in Athens. As a consequence, Socrates was accused by the Athenian authority of corrupting the youths in Athens with the use of propaganda and "supportive rhetoric" (Harris, 1988:129). The aftermath of the accusation was the sentence to consume the hemlock. He died from hemlock administration at the age of 70 (Russell, 1962). The foregoing analysis merely attests to the fact that no philosopher tinkers in a vacuum. Hence, the remainder of this section will engage with the philosophical output of Socrates, commencing with his method.

Socrates's most important contribution to Western thought is perhaps his dialectic method of inquiry, known as the Socratic method or method of 'Elenchus', which he largely applied to the examination of key moral concepts such as Good and Justice (Kenny, 2006:21). The Socratic Method is a negative method of hypothesis elimination, in that better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those which lead to contradictions. It was designed to force one to examine one's own beliefs and the validity of such beliefs. The method has implications for his foray into other areas of philosophy. In other words, the development and practice of this method is one of Socrates's most enduring contributions, and is a key factor in earning his mantle as the father of political philosophy, ethics or moral philosophy, and as a figurehead of all the central themes in Western Philosophy.

The Socratic Method works through a series of questions posed to help a person or group determine their underlying beliefs and the extent of their knowledge. Perhaps it was this method that he employed against those who had reputation for knowledge in Greece before his admittance that "he alone realized that his own wisdom was worth nothing" (Kenny, 2006:26). The assertion that for Socrates, wisdom has no worth is not synonymous with the Sophists, especially Georgia's conviction that "nothing can be known" (Omeregbe, 1999:7). Textual evidence in Plato's *Apology* reveals that Socrates did not say he knew nothing at all. On the authority of Plato, he was quoted to have said: "How beautiful will it be at my age to leave Athens and become a rover at my age" (Plato, *Apology*, 1997b:296). Evidently, Socrates was convinced that his divine mission was to assist the Athenians to know how to arrive at the definition of virtue, recognize instances of it and live by it. Socrates neither said that everybody is ignorant nor that nobody can possess knowledge as the sophists defended.

The ideas of Socrates on ethics are deducible from his emphasis on virtue (Warburton, 1999). Socrates perceives virtue as the wisdom of G/god, and justice as the greatest good. Indeed, for him, "moral excellence was more a matter of divine bequest than parental nurture" (Taylor, 2001). Socrates sees

virtue as “the most valuable of all possessions; the ideal life is, therefore, the one that searches for Good. Truth lies beneath the shadows of existence, and it is the job of the philosopher to show the rest how little they really know” (Taylor 2011:15). For Socrates, virtue is knowledge. For Socrates, this implies that knowledge is both a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue. Socrates holds that wrongdoing was a consequence of ignorance and those who did wrong knew no better (Omeregbe, 1999:21). This is owing to the conviction for Socrates that virtue and good actions follow from knowledge. If a man knows what is evil, he will not do it, for no one ever does evil knowingly. If a man does evil, he does it out of ignorance. It needs to be expiated, the idea that by knowledge, Socrates means deep personal conviction. What he meant in other words, is that if a human is really deeply convinced that something is evil, s/he will not do it and if s/he is really deeply convinced that something is good, he would do it.

Socrates emphasises the unity of virtues. To have one virtue, say for instance, courage is to have all other virtues. This understanding of virtues as coextensive in Socrates’s thought does not mean being virtues is about having good intentions. Rather, it is having the ability to do the right thing at the appropriate time. Virtuousness is a constitutive means of achieving happiness.

At the epistemic level, Socrates believes that admittance of ignorance is a precursor to knowledge. While being against epistemological absolutism, Socrates boldly declares self-ignorance thus: “I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either” (*Apology* 6 [21b - 21e]). He has avowal of ignorance, which is a call for modesty in human claims to knowledge. Wisdom in Socrates’s view, exclusively belongs to the god and it is different from human knowledge. True wisdom entails accepting how limited humans are in knowledge.

With the main thrust of Socrates thus articulated, we turn to make a similar exposition of *Oṛúnmìlà*’s ideas as well shortly.

Oṛúnmìnology: The Philosophy of Oṛúnmìlà

In this section, I seek to discuss what I called ‘*Oṛúnmìnology*’. *Oṛúnmìnology* is an instance of Afrikology, which according to Dani Nabudere (2012:78) is “an epistemology of knowledge generation and application that has roots in African cosmology and worldviews.” Unlike Afrikology that draws its inspiration from Egyptology, *Oṛúnmìnology* is the philosophy rooted in *Oṛúnmìlà*’s reflective thoughts as chronicled in the *Ifá* corpus. Just as what

the world knows about Socrates may be gleaned from the writings of his disciples, the same may be said of *Oṛúnmìlà*, whose thoughts have been compiled within the verses of the *Ifá* literary corpus. He is depicted in an *Odù Ifá* as an extraordinary persona. A very brief glimpse of his personality is therefore pertinent.

An *Ifá* tradition has it that *Oṛúnmìlà* was sent along with other *Òrìṣàs*, (i.e. deities), to *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* by *Olódùmarè*, God, to establish the world. By being branded as a deity with *ìmò ìjìnlè* (i.e. deep knowledge and wisdom of things), his special mandate was to use this wisdom to organise the society and deliver unto humankind the divine message of *Olódùmarè*. But then he was mocked for lack of children. This tradition is documented in *Odù Ìwòrì Méjì* rendered in the English thus:

It is the apá tree that grows in the forest, lighting the wizards' fire

It is the orúrù tree that is clothed in blood from top to bottom

It was on the earth that I pressed the marks of Ifá

Before I used the divining tray

The slender palm tree atop the hill

Which branches this way and that in sixteen heads

Performed divination for Oṛúnmìlà

When they said that Baba would never have children in the city of Ifẹ̀

The question of lack of children caused *Oṛúnmìlà* to laugh but he performed divination. He soon gave birth to eight children, each of whom became an important king of Yoruba city-states [most of which still exist today, the *Odù Ifá* explains how the titles of the kings and other important positions of these cities are contractions of the original names of *Oṛúnmìlà's* children].

One day, *Oṛúnmìlà* summoned his children for a festival. They all came to join him and paid their respects, but the youngest child challenged *Oṛúnmìlà's* authority by coming to the festival with the same symbols of authority which his father wore and refused to bow to him. *Oṛúnmìlà* was incensed by this rejection of his authority, so he withdrew to the foot of a particular kind of palm tree and climbed up into heaven. As a result, the earth fell into chaos, women could not get pregnant, those who were pregnant could not deliver, the sick did not recover, the rain stopped falling, the rivers dried up, the crops failed, and even the animals started behaving strangely. Everything was falling apart.

The people begged *Oṛúnmìlà's* children to convince him to come

back, and they went to perform divination. *Oṛúnmìlà*'s children made the prescribed sacrifice and went to the foot of the palm tree their father had climbed and began to implore him to return to earth, reciting a litany of his praise names. However, *Oṛúnmìlà* had made up his mind not to return to earth. But pitying his children, he told them to stretch out their hands so he could give them something to ease their distress. He gave them the sixteen *ikin*, the palm nuts used in *Ifá* divination, telling them, "All the good that you want in this world, this is the one you must consult". When they returned to *Ilé-Ifè*, things started to go well again and they attained all the good things they were seeking.

However, there is a more secular explanation that passes *Oṛúnmìlà* as a human being who was born at *Ilé-Ifè*. Ola Longe shares this perspective when he demarcates *Oṛúnmìlà* from *Ifá*. For him, the *Ifá* corpus "...was originated and codified by *Oṛúnmìlà* who lived in *Ilé-Ifè*, several centuries ago" (Longe, 1998:15). Elsewhere, it has been proposed that *Oṛúnmìlà* was born and raised in *Oke-Igeti* [(Oluwole, 2014:43); Emmanuel, 2000:56)]. Obviously, it does not require too much reflection to discern that just as there is the Socratic Problem, there is also the *Oṛúnmìlà* Problem, I will return to this shortly. For now, it should be understood that regardless of the problem surrounding the personality of *Oṛúnmìlà*, there is the dominant but accentuated error which demands the need to dichotomize the personality on the one hand from the corpus on the other hand. This is important because of the trend involving the "use of *Ifá* and *Oṛúnmìlà*" (Balogun & Fayemi, 2008:37); (Abimbola, 1976:3) as though they are synonymous. For this reason, Kola Abimbola explains the ground for the interchangeable use of the name as well as the proper characterization of each term thus:

Ifá, who lived for hundreds of years, and visited many parts of the world, bequeathed the *Ifá* divination system to humanity. Another name of *Ifá* is *Oṛúnmìlà*. The word *Ifá* however, is used to refer to the *Orisa* (divinity) himself, his instruments of divination as well his system of divination and literature. The name *Oṛúnmìlà* refers solely to the divinity himself... *Ifá* priests and priestesses were counselors, physicians, historians and philosophers of ancient *Yorùbá* land (Abimbola, 2006:119).

Nevertheless, the synonymy between the terms, this article will admit that the *Ifá* corpus is a product of *Oṛúnmìlà* and his disciples regarding a wide array of topics of interest, with a distinct method and varied philosophical outputs. In this regard, Sophie Oluwole reveals that there are oral traditions which identify the originator of *Ifá*, as an exceptionally wise man whose fame brought him several disciples and apprentices from far and wide (Oluwole, 1994). *Ifá* chose

only 16 of them and their names coincide with the elder 16 *Odù* (book of) *Ifá*. The younger 240 *Odù* could therefore be reasonably regarded as members of the later generation of disciples and apprentices trained by the first 16 and others. Each *Odù* has 16 verses (in modern language, chapters). Each verse generally occurs as poetry intermittent with prose (Oluwole, 1994:7). The pertinent question here is: which of the ideas, beliefs, and doctrines contained in the 256 books with over 4000 chapters were actually expressed by the historical *Oṣúnmilà*? This is what Sophie Oluwole (2014) rightly called the ‘*Oṣúnmilà* problem’, has a greater dimension than Socratic problem because none of *Oṣúnmilà*’s immediate disciples or their descendants wrote anything. It is therefore important to engage *Oṣúnmilà*’s thought, through a heuristic exploration of *Ifá* corpus, an oral tradition of the Yoruba that is now largely documented.²

I commence with epistemology as documented in the corpus. There are concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ in the *Ifá* corpus; an understanding of these concepts will show that *Oṣúnmilà*’s philosophy is penetrative and sophisticated even when it has not received much attention from the concurrent academia. This is demonstrated for instance, in *Odù Okanran-turupon* thus:

It is through learning Ifá that one understands Ifá

It is by missing one’s way that one becomes acquainted with the way

It is the road that one has not walked before that makes one wander here and there.

The foregoing *Odù* is targeted at the idea of trial and error, which is characteristic of the method of science. To attain higher truths and knowledge of things, one has to be prepared to make and overcome the initial errors or gaffes. However, proper guidance and tutelage is still required for the successful attainment of knowledge. *Oṣúnmilà* is not oblivious that an improper guide or tutor can mislead a learner. This outlook is even more obvious in *Odu Irete-Ogbe*, where *Oṣúnmilà* expatiates: “*If we teach a person to be wise, he will be wise, if we teach a person to be stupid, he will be stupid.*”

Furthermore, the insistence on absolute and unshakeable truths is disregarded as ignorance within the *Ifá* corpus. Hence, *Oṣúnmilà* takes a fallible outlook in his epistemology. Specifically, in *Odù Ìwori Ogbè*, *Oṣúnmilà* and his disciples announce:

As today is seen, tomorrow is not seen likewise

2 The orature of *Ifá* where the thoughts of *Oṣúnmilà* can be found include classical texts such as: Wande Abimbola’s *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, Abosede Emmanuel’s *Odun Ifá: Ifá Festival*, and Ayo Salami’s *Ifá: A Complete Divination*.

That is why the babaláwo performs divination every five days.

Knowledge is so wide an area of human thought such that no one can be its sole custodian and the possessor of all-encompassing wisdom. In *Oṛúnmilà*'s words, "Anyone who says 'I am all wise, I am all knowing' deceives nobody but him/herself. For it is only in a community of fools that such a self-conceited person is paraded as a sage" (Oluwole, 2014). The detestation against epistemological absolutism can be further distilled in a popular *Ifá* verse where *Oṛúnmilà* is implicated in instructing human limitation and eagerness to learn new facts of reality as an intellectual virtue. The verse reads thus:

He who knows this may not know that

The truth of this principle is illustrated by Oṛúnmilà

Oṛúnmilà went to learn from Amosun, his own offspring/disciple.

The thrust of the above is that rationality, age, or experience does not provide a sufficient basis for any claim to infallible knowledge. This is the paradoxical self-acclaimed ignorance of *Oṛúnmilà*, especially when one takes into cognisance the deification of his historical personality in Yoruba pantheon to a god of wisdom.

Whilst tinkering on truth, *Oṛúnmilà* boasts of some witty ideas which also attests to the widespread locus that not many are comfortable with a true reality. In *Odù Qwọnrin Dagbon*, we read:

Truth is a sacred water from Ilé-Ifè

There are not many who drink from it.

However, just like Socrates, *Oṛúnmilà* also perceives a connection between truth and virtue. This is striking once we pay attention to the role of character (*ìwà*) in his teachings. In a fair rendition in the English Language, *Oṛúnmilà* and *Qsa-Otura*, in the *Odù* bearing the latter's name dialogue thus:

Qsa Otura says "What is Truth?" I say "What is Truth?"

Oṛunmila says "Truth is the Lord of Heaven guiding the earth"

Oṛunmila says "Truth is the Unseen One guiding the Earth. The wisdom Olódùmarè uses"

Qsa Otura says "What is Truth?" I say "What is Truth?"

Oṛunmila says "Truth is the character (ìwà) of Olódùmarè. Truth is the word that cannot fall. Ifá is Truth. Truth is the word that cannot spoil. Truth surpasses all. Blessing everlasting"

He was the one who cast Ifá for Earth

They said they should come and speak the truth

“Speak the truth, tell the facts;

Speak the truth, tell the facts;

Those who speak the truth are those whom the gods will help.”

The foregoing is basically on truth and truth is an epistemic issue, as shown in the dialogue between *Oṛúnmílà* and *Ọsa Otura*, one of his disciples. More so, the *Odù* points out that the dialectical method can also be found in the classical reflections of *Oṛúnmílà*, as is the case with Socrates. Closely knitted with it is the complementary method, which is evident in the *Yorùbá* saying that “When the right washes the left and the left washes the right, a cleaner hand will emerge”. In the foregoing *Odù*, it is the complimentary method of give and take through dialogue that examined the notion of truth. The same method also implies that no one based on age should be rendered useless. Complementarity is redolent in the outlook provided by *Oṛúnmílà* in *Odù Ọyèkú Méjì* where it is documented that:

A child is not tall enough to stretch his hand to reach the high shelf

An adult’s hand cannot enter the opening of the gourd

The work an adult begs a child to do

Let him not refuse to do

We all have to work to do for each other’s good.

Oṛúnmílà’s contributions to the notion of self-critical awareness are not to be easily wished away in the light of its connection with the notion of truth as character, *ìwà*. This necessarily implies his moral philosophy too. In *Odù Èjì Ogbè*, we glean:

Coming into the world is easy

Later, when returning, the last gasps are difficult

There is no comforter

No one to whom we can complain, what remains is the work of one’s hands

Good character is what Èḷẹ̀dùmarẹ̀ likes

The foregoing *Odù* beckons on the cultivation of improved morality and character through critical self-awareness and examination. Even though the recognition of the difficulty of cultivating improved character is acknowledged, *Oṛúnmílà* still admonishes this in *Odù Ogbè-Yońú* which is rendered in the English thus:

Nothing comes from getting angry

Patience is the father of character

*An elder who has patience has everything
This is why divination was casted for orí (destiny), and likewise for
character (ìwà)*

It is only cultivating character that is difficult

There is not one bad orí in Ilé-Ifè

It is only cultivating character that is difficult.

Elsewhere in *Odù Ireṭe Mèjì*, we find:

The mind (inú) of this person should be open

*That he should not have two minds (inú méjì) [have second thoughts]
about someone.*

Ifa says that life should be easy for this person.

It is clear that from the exploration of some of these *Odùs*, the rendition that *Oṛúnmilà* is wholly mythical entity loses substance. Oluwole (1994:9) had shared a similar conviction when she pens: “The mythic origin of *Ifá* does not therefore necessarily detract from the belief that *Ifá* once lived as a man of great wisdom, a consulting oracle of a sort.” *Oṛúnmilà*’s contribution through the complimentary method with his disciples has inspired Ola Longe to aver that, “Ifa is recognized by the Yoruba as the repository for Yoruba traditional body of knowledge, embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folklore” (Longe, 1998:11-4). Similarly, Oluwole concurs that the *Ifá* literary corpus is a “concrete example of Africa philosophy” (Oluwole, 1994:7). For this assertion to be taken as canon, an attempt to compare and contrast the ideas of Socrates and *Oṛúnmilà*, in an effort to disinter how the philosophy of the one is not vitiated by the philosophy of the other is paramount.

Socrates and *Oṛúnmilà*: Juxtaposing Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy³

Having exposed the personalities and ideas that are suggestive of philosophy in each of Socrates and *Oṛúnmilà* historically, it is important for us to examine the striking similarities and differences between these minds.

It is not incidental that whereas Socrates is acclaimed the wisest man in the Greece of his epoch, *Oṛúnmilà* is reputedly known as the “father of

³ The usage of the phrase ‘Patron Saints’ to depict *Oṛúnmilà* and Socrates, respectively, is not original to this paper; it is used by Sophie Oluwole (2014). According to this description, instead of using *Baba Ifá* (father of *Ifa* Corpus) to represent *Oṛúnmilà*, and father of Greek wisdom to define Socrates, Oluwole chooses the catchy phrase – ‘Patron Saints’. This choice is in accordance with “the practice in the early Christian Church by which prominent philosophers [...] were later canonized as saints, and more particularly with the suggestion of Erasmus to include Santa Socrates, *Ora pro nobis* [...] in the liturgy of the Catholic Church” (Oluwole, 2014: XIV). I have found this canonisation useful; hence adopted in this paper.

Ifá wisdom". It needs not elaboration at this juncture that both Socrates and *Oṛúnmilà* had disciples, and engaged others or taught in dialogues using allegories and myths. They expressed themselves in intoxicating mixture of poetry and prose, and proposed principles on metaphysics, ethics and epistemology with implications (especially in the case of *Oṛúnmilà*) for gender, mathematics, physics, botany and medicine" (Makinde, 2007:72).

In addition, it is owing to the style of their languages that makes it difficult to separate their literary secular claims from their religious doctrines, as well as their metaphors and jokes from serious thinking. Each of them survived within the classical age when every human thought and knowledge belonged to the system known as philosophy and there was no compartmentalisation of knowledge. Neither propounded a metaphysical or epistemological doctrine as absolute, especially on the nature of reality and knowledge. Both of them recognized the limitations of human reality in the attainment of absolute truth. Both ancient thinkers were concerned with the good life of individuals as well as that of the society.

Another striking semblance between these intellectual personae is the dearth in written work. Neither Socrates nor *Oṛúnmilà* wrote. The contributions of Socrates to the philosophical enterprise are based on writings by his students and peers. His philosophical works can be seen in Aristophanes' *Clouds and Birds*, Xenophon's *Symposium* and *Memorabilia*, Plato's *Republic*, *Protagoras*, *Apology*, *Parmenides*, among others. Like Socrates, *Oṛúnmilà* did not write any book, but his philosophical works are captured in the oral tradition of the *Yorùbá* people known as *Ifá*. *Oṛúnmilà* is known as the father of *Ifá*, '*Oṛúnmilà* baba *Ifá*'. *Ifá*, it should be restated at this juncture, is not a mere divination system but a literary compendium of the *Yorùbá* intellectual and cultural heritage. It is the storehouse of *Yorùbá* history, mythology, knowledge and thought-system. As a symbolic personality of wisdom, many people wanted to learn at his feet. According to Oluwole (1994), *Oṛúnmilà* only chose sixteen apprentices who documented his thought in 16 major Odu (books). Later generations of *Oṛúnmilà* disciples produced 256 Odu (books) which are subdivided into several verses. The crucial question here is: Which of the ideas, beliefs, doctrines and statements contained in the 256 books with over 4000 chapters were actually expressed by *Oṛúnmilà*? This is the *Oṛúnmilà* problem. Not until recently that scholars like Wande Abimbola, Abosede Emmanuel, Ayo Salami, etc. began the documentation of the *Ifá* oral tradition, it had remained in the oral form, known as oral tradition. It is therefore safe to infer that their philosophical thoughts were concealed in oral tradition. And precisely because of this, there is the persistence of "the Socratic problem" and "the *Oṛúnmilà* problem" in each philosophical tradition, as I had relayed

hitherto. This problem is expressed in terms of the dilemma regarding what these philosophers actually said with exactitude. The understanding of their thoughts and ideas is, at best, inferred from what “others said they said”. But most importantly, both sages detested and consequently condemned the state of ignorance and lack of self-knowledge.

Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà* believe in human beings having knowledge of their own experience but they give credence to the gods as having the greatest knowledge. Socrates claims that the gods have the greatest exclusive wisdom which is different from that of man. Similarly, *Oṛúnmìlà* gives credence to “Ifa” as the keeper of wisdom.

The Socratic dialectical method involves him trying to help people give birth to the knowledge in them, hence making him a mid-wife. The *Oṛúnmìlà* method on the other hand is like that of a student-teacher conversation (complimentary) as seen in *Ọsa-Otura* where *Oṛúnmìlà* was explaining the nature of truth. This method also involves a cross-fertilization of ideas between different people for the purpose of solving problems. The Socratic dialectical method according to Aristotle is regarded as the essence of scientific method, hence its survival and continued relevance in contemporary times. This cannot be said of the method of *Oṛúnmìlà* as they have seen suffered continued neglect for centuries.

Socrates emphasised that knowledge is virtue and prescribes that we seek knowledge so as to become virtuous and also emphasized that it is the lack of knowledge that causes wrongdoing. *Oṛúnmìlà* on his own part emphasized the need for us to seek and teach each other wisdom rather than spending our early life in stupidity and buffoonery. He also maintains that we should consult the wisdom of ancient thinkers when perplexed about what to do.

Having examined the similarities between these two philosophers, it is imperative to also consider cases of radical departures between them too. It is insightful to commence with the claim that Socrates is a philosopher of world repute, and his philosophy is taught and included in the curriculum of Western philosophy in universities across the world, Africa inclusive. *Oṛúnmìlà*, on the other hand is a bolt from the blues, an obscure intellectual figure, who is conventionally depicted as a mythical personality in *Yorùbá Ifá* divination system. He strikes no intellectual recognition in African philosophy in the African and Diaspora space, and he is not included in the curriculum of ancient African philosophy whether within the interstice of African universities or outside. His thought is considered not qualified as knowledge. Oluwole (1994, 2014) has been very critical and perceives this neglect and non-inclusion of *Oṛúnmìlà* in the curriculum of ancient African

philosophy as unjustified and as a product of an unquestioned and uncritical acceptance of ancient Greek cum Western intellectual superiority over Africa.

While there is controversy surrounding the exact personality of *Oṛúnmìlà*, there is no scepticism on the historical personality of Socrates. In the face of the varied traditions regarding the personality of *Oṛúnmìlà*, evidences abound concerning the physical features, life-time as well as events that shaped Socrates. These are not too hard to glean in Western texts on ancient Philosophy. From these texts one can deduce that, "Socrates lived all his life in Athens" (Kenny, 2006:25). It is not true to say that he was not an itinerant teacher. But *Oṛúnmìlà* was an itinerant teacher who moved from one settlement to the other and developed the art of divination as a system of documenting important elements of human experiences. When there are numerous traditions that portray Socrates as an extremely poor individual, that he was hardly capable of providing for his family, *Oṛúnmìlà* was reported as being prosperous enough to feed the large group of his associates.

Generations of thinkers in the Western world after Socrates have continued to criticize, review, add and subtract from the philosophical leagues and traditions of Socrates with great interests and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, this is not the case with *Oṛúnmìlà* in African philosophy. In spite of factors such as the imperial politics of knowledge production and dissemination, bastardisation of African languages, and intensive Western orientation of philosophy in Africa that can account for this neglect, it is incontestable that the "overwhelming influence of Christianity and Islam in contemporary African living" (Fayemi 2012:317) is prime. Instead of discovering, reconstructing and reviewing the intellectual legacies of *Oṛúnmìlà*, generations of African thinkers/descendants have condemned, despised and repudiated his thought system perceiving it as a residue of barbaric mysticism, which ought not to be revisited in the current age.

The philosophies of Socrates have in no small means contributed to the development of philosophy in Europe, while those of *Oṛúnmìlà* have the potentials of doing so if given serious attention. A cursory look into their philosophical works reveals that they held very similar ideas but a major distinguishing factor is the language. While the ideas of Socrates have been interpreted long ago, the works of *Oṛúnmìlà* and other ancient African philosophers have just been translated in contemporary times and are laden with meanings.

With the historical and philosophic underpinnings of each of Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà* foregrounded and juxtaposed, it is not otiose to demand the practical utility and relevance of this insight. In a fast-paced world that currently maps our existence wherein identities are more conflated and mixed,

what can we learn from two sages that seem so aloof, racially, temporally and culturally? Does it say anything about a common denominator – rationality among the *Homo sapiens*, irrespective of place of origin? How does this affect the quest for a multicultural world? Does the demonstration of the common denominator (rationality) between Socrates and *Oṛúnmilà* say anything to support the thesis of the multiculturalists? Perhaps to know whether there is any connection, it is important to tell what exactly the term ‘multiculturalism’ connotes.

Socrates and *Oṛúnmilà* within the Domain of Multiculturalism

From the discussion thus far, rationality is a feature of the human race not limited to one group nor lacking among some others. The dearth in rationality has been one of the justifications put forward for colonialism. It is in line with this reasoning that Claude Ake reports that:

...more emphasis was placed on the justification of colonialism as a service to the colonized people. What service? Essentially the service of civilizing them. That is why colonialism was ‘popularly’ referred to by colonizers as a civilizing mission. According to the theory, the civilization of the native, includes among other things, bringing them Western Education, the benefits of Western technology, bringing them into the stream of human history, getting them to discard their ‘barbaric culture’ and generally redeeming a way of life captive to ignorance, poverty and disease (Ake, 1981:83).

However, the preceding sections have served to sharply show that this ‘barbaric culture’ is a product of human intellect too. To be adjudged by one as barbaric is a failure to understand diversity and radical uniqueness that does not conform to the culture one is accustomed to. It is the failure to see the uniqueness and originality of the African culture and structure that informed the ‘barbaric’ warrant as well as the Eurocentric denigration of the Africans. Hence, as a consequence, it cannot be de-emphasized the way and rate at which the African states have had their indigenous pattern and pace of politico-economic development within each ethnic kingdom truncated. This is what Ifeanyi Menkiti means when he writes:

...in the case of Africa, the kingdoms simply ground to a halt, and what replaced them were territories created by an act of imperial will, not something that organically evolved. This dissolution of peoples by imperial will, and the subsequent attempt to impose on the space, which was formerly occupied by the dissolved peoples, a new order of governance patterned after European national needs and political understandings, lies, it has been argued, at the base of Africa’s current problems of state malfunction (Menkiti, 2002:36).

Much as the foregoing is tempted to revive the discourse on colonial subjectivity and inferiority of Africans, multiculturalism as a platform for fostering people of diverse cultures and traditions, lays emphasis on what unites the human race rather than what divides it. What then is multiculturalism? In the words of Caleb Rosado we glean that:

Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society (Rosado, 1996:3).

It is important to take a critical look at some of the key implications that present themselves in the above quotation. The first is recognition of the rich diversity in a given society or organization. For the longest time racial/ethnic minorities, the physically disabled, and women have not been given the same recognition as others (Rosado, 1996:4). It is also established that “the one-sided approach to history and education has been a testimony to that fact” (Swan, 1995:182). Multiculturalism also entails acknowledging the validity of the cultural expressions and contributions of the various groups (Rosado, 1996:4).

From the foregoing, it is the case that even when Socrates and *Oṣúnmilà* are products of the ancient Greek and traditional *Yorùbá* cultures respectively, and their ideas are not only instructive but relevant for contemporary usage, we may infer that no one culture is essentially backward or ‘barbaric’. The common denominator among all humans that persists across all cultures is rationality⁴ and this is something that unites humankind even when factors such as skin, colour, culture and upbringing are crucial too. And when people of diverse cultures interact, there is bound to be cross-cultural fertilization. It is in this spirit that Friedrich Heckmann upholds that multiculturalism is an interpretation of the concept of culture: there are no ‘pure’ original cultures. Each culture has incorporated elements of other cultures; cultures are the result of interaction with one another; culture is continuous process and change. In this sense, the cultures of immigrants are seen as opportunities for the enrichment of one’s own culture (Heckmann, 1993:245).

The truth and relevance of the multicultural thesis that what unites

4 The fact that rationality is a common denominator should not be taken to mean what constitutes rationality in the thoughts of Socrates and *Oṣúnmilà* is essentially the same. While reason is not the only component of rationality in Orunminology, spirituality, energy and feelings are its necessary complements. In Socrates, such quadruple understanding of rationality is less appreciated as reason is essentially privileged in matters of rationality.

us are much stronger than what divides us is made explicit when emphasis is placed on rationality. Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà* have been juxtaposed in this study to further enhance the perspective of the multiculturalist. In a fundamental sense, multiculturalism is a contestation of hegemonic intellectual dominance of the West against the denigration of the intellectual worth of African intellectual culture. Reacting to the seemingly canonical view that philosophy commenced among the ancient Greeks and the only valid form of philosophy could be found in nowhere else, Obenga reiterates:

It is a mere prejudice to believe that the philosophical epoch of humanity begins first among the Greeks in the fifth century BC. This prejudice implies that other ancient people did not engage in speculative thought. Undoubtedly, speculative thought transcends experience, but it always attempts to explain, interpret, and unify it in order to systematize it. Speculative thought, using aphorisms, allusions, metaphors, negative or positive methods, and dialectics, can be oral or written, and it is necessarily connected with the problems of life (Obenga, 2004:31).

In a related development, Chinese scholar, Fung Yu-Lan perceives philosophy as “systematic reflective thinking on life” (Yu-Lan, 1976:16). Taking cognizance of this concise conception of philosophy, the African is not excluded from the arena of reflective thinking. Since s/he is in possession of a rational faculty, this attests to the existence of a common denominator that cuts across the *Homo sapiens*. This is exactly what Godwin Sogolo has in mind when he harps that:

The mind of the African is not structurally different from that of the Westerner. Also, the contextual contrast between Western thought and traditional African thought, which considers only the former as a suitable material for philosophical reflection, rests on false premises. The truth is that both are similarly marked by the same basic features of the human species. The difference lies in the ways the two societies conceive of reality and explain objects and events (Sogolo, 1993:74).

Having already showed that there are philosophical places of similarities and differences in the reflections of *Oṛúnmìlà*, does this not validate the persistence of philosophy among the traditional *Yorùbá* even before encounter with the West? Does this not nullify the widespread and accentuated admission that there is no critical reflection on life and the actual world in places apart from ancient Greece? Sophie Oluwole (2014:153-4) has argued along these lines to affirm these posers.

In the end, to say that one culture is superior and higher than the other is to neglect the more fundamental question of how rationality has been

variously deployed in various societies to improve human existence. The fact of rationality, which is a human endowment, presupposes that rationality will be deployed in various coordinated ways to advance the interest of societies. Western societies have advanced beyond African societies because of the pragmatic-existential ways rationality has been positively used to organize resources at their disposal and better the lot of their own people. While many African societies need to do more in this regard, it should be noted that rationality is one common feature that unites humanity and which should be given serious attention in the African world. Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà*, two sages of two radically different cultures and traditions have been used as a mould to account for this conviction.

Conclusion

The prime concern of this study was mainly a heuristic unearthing of the similarities and dissimilarities in the thoughts of Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà* ancient Greek and Yoruba societies. This article provides evidences in the *Yorùbá* orature that validates the ancient philosophical thoughts of *Oṛúnmìlà* as no less sophisticated vis-à-vis that of Socrates in ancient Greek philosophy. The similarities and differences in their thoughts are more of degree and less of kind.

From the historical and philosophical exposition of each of these sages, it is clear that rationality is a feature of the *Homo sapiens*, irrespective of skin colour and era of existence. While this essay is redolent of the perspective that the world needs to learn from *Oṛúnmìlà* *Hom* much as they have from Socrates, it does not wish away the locus that this cross-fertilization of ideas of radically different cultures further justifies the groundwork of multiculturalism wherein emphasis on the common denominator of humanity is placed higher and above what exhibits intolerance and divergence. Hence, while it is important to revisit the intellectual contributions of Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà* in a jet age, it does not come as a surprise that rationality is not something unique to some peoples on earth but lacking by others. Rather than emphasising or elaborating over human differences, we concede to *Oṛúnmìlà* that we all need one another in this world and must strive to put our differences aside for an improved social cohesion to ensue.

The classical philosophies of both Socrates and *Oṛúnmìlà* are mutually sympathetic with fundamental lessons for developing contemporary intellectual canons of intercultural philosophy. More ancient thinkers in African oral traditions deserved to be studied, analysed, criticised and their positions should be subjected to philosophical scrutiny vis-à-vis other classical figures in other ancient philosophical traditions - African, Chinese,

Indian, European, Jewish, and Islamic, among others. Such intercultural interrogation of ideas, both classical and contemporary, has potentials for promoting mutual intellectual enrichment of trajectories of thoughts, historical conditions of their evolutions and overlaps in different traditions of philosophy.

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