

## Diversifying the Curriculum: African Philosophy.

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"The future philosophy of the world must then take into account the great speculative systems of all humanity." Théophile Obenga.

"[a] principal driving force in postcolonial African philosophy has been a quest for self-definition." Kwasi Wiredu

### I. European Philosophers on Africa.

#### Olufemi Taiwo

"Anyone who has lived with, worked on, and generally hung out with philosophy as long as I have and who, and this is a very important element, inhabits the epidermal world that it has pleased fate to put me in, and is as engaged with both the history of that epidermal world and that of philosophy, must at a certain point come upon the presence of a peculiar absence: the absence of Africa."

#### Hegel

The Negro," Hegel wrote, "exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state"

"The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas--the category of Universality

#### Hume

"I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There was no evidence of any scientific or artistic accomplishments by non-white individuals."

#### Kant

"this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid"

### II. Precedents:

#### 1. Egypt

The Moral Teachings of Ptah-hotep cr 2400 B.C.E.

## 2. Abyssinia

Zar'a Ya'aqob (1599-1692) Hatata

He emphasized the role of reason (hatata).

## 3. North Africa

Islam

## 4. Anton Wilhelm Amo (1703-59)

became a respected philosopher and teacher at the universities of Halle and Jena in Germany after studying there. Write two works: A critique of Descartes's theory of mind, which is still available; the other work is on the rights Africans in Europe, which has been lost.

### III. Origin of current debates.

Placide Temples. *Bantu Philosophy* (1945) Temples made the claim that the practices, beliefs, language, and institutions of the African people were based on a rational system of thought. Thinking that they themselves were not able to do, he thought he could provide an account.

Amongst his findings is the idea that the Bantu has a dynamic theory of matter, from which he derived both a general underrating of the causal interconnection of everything that exists and the foundations of Bantu ethics which turns out to be a form of consequentialism.

### IV. The development of Philosophy after Temples: Approaches to contemporary African Philosophy

1. Challenge: What are the appropriate means of extracting the indigenous philosophical tradition from the culture of African people?

The African philosopher, to live up to his name, is therefore faced with the dual challenge of honoring the traditional techniques of philosophy and at the same time manifesting the cultural ethos of the indigenous African culture —the very cultural context of his reflection. Kolawole Owolabi.

#### 2. How are culture and philosophy related? Three Approaches

a. Ethnophilosophy: Philosophy as description of culture. Temples' work was rejected by philosophers such as Paulin Hountondji as a mere political diversion. According to him, Temples' book was a mere description of the beliefs of a group, based on questionable assumptions regarding the unanimity of the African soul and the collective consciousness of the African people.

Still, the book had some influence and other intellectuals tried to follow suit by describing aspects or the conceptual framework of various cultures. Prominent among them was the work of Alexis Kagame. He thought that the structure of the Bantu languages themselves could provide important philosophical insights. He focused on metaphysical questions, such as the nature of existence and time. One interesting finding is that for the Bantu, the verb 'to exist' is always preceded by a prefix which locates what is said to exist in space and time. So there can be no abstract concept of 'existing', as for instance "god exists", which is not located, or specified.

Others have also noted the empirical, experience based nature of African thought, concluding that

Metaphysically, the most significant consideration is that African ontologies tend to dispense with such dichotomies as those between the natural and the supernatural and the physical and the spiritual. In the absence of such dualisms, the world order, from an African standpoint, becomes a fundamentally homogeneous order of things, in principle, susceptible to the same principles of explanation. (Wiredu and Hallen)

b) Linguistic analysis.

Kagame's work on the philosophy of being in the Bantu language spoken in Rwanda is primary example of the second approach. Other philosophers, such as the Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, both from Ghana, have at times extracted philosophical propositions from their Akan language. This approach is generally one aspect of a more general attempt to relate culture and philosophy.

c) Formal Philosophy.

Some of the best work has been written by philosophers who take as the source for philosophical reflection some key elements of the various oral traditions, such as myths, proverbs, and even institutions, to extract from them a conceptual framework. This is, one can argue, preparatory work for the task of subjecting such frameworks to critical analysis, thus transforming what is a more or less traditional view of the world into a philosophically adequate theory.

A key issue this approach is the interpretation of proverbs. Proverbs are often paradoxical statements with no apparent meaning. However, if one considers the social context in which they are used in a culture, their functions, such as giving

advice, judging, etc., then it is possible to understand their intended meaning. Proverbs have particular importance in oral traditions, for they tend to be easily remembered and hence transmitted from one generation to another. Gyekye in Ghana and Gbadegesin in Nigeria have done much work that is worth noticing.

#### V. Example: Akan ethics and Social Theory

As an example we may look the ethical and political theories extracted by Gyekye from proverbs and other sources of the Akan culture in Ghana.

##### Ethics.

Gyekye contends Akan ethics is not founded in, or derived from, religion. Traditional Akan life is humanistic, and Humanism, understood as the "doctrine that sees human needs, interests, and dignity as fundamental, constitutes the foundations of ethics.

The principle of right action of the Akan system is a form of consequentialism, perhaps closely associated with the ethics of care. As Gyekye puts it, "the sole criterion of goodness is the welfare or well-being of the community." What is morally good is what promotes social welfare, solidarity, and harmony in human relationships.

##### Communalism.

As might be expected, the moral foundations of Akan ethics imply a communal social theory. On the one hand, Akan humanism emphasizes the needs, interests and dignity of the person; on the other, their concept of the good emphasizes the well-being of the community. Akan communalism attempts to synthesize these two views: the needs, interests and dignity of the individual, and the good of the social whole.

As Gyekye sees it, the good of all determines the good of each. The question then is, How does Akan society maximize the interests of each individual member of society? This is the problem of distribution of burdens and benefits.

Recognizing that different individuals have different capacities and talents, but also different needs and interests, which have to be accommodated as much as possible, Gyekye concludes that the principle of justice of Akan communalism is: "From each according to *whatever contribution* one can make to each according to one's *basic needs*."

#### VI. A final thought: Why Myths?

From state of nature narrative, to twin-earths, brains in vats, and hapless individuals in desert islands, philosophers often appeal to striking images to assist our intuitions. Myths can play a similar role.

The Judeo-Christian myth of the creation of the universe. Two principles can be derived from it:

- a) Nature as men's dominion: God gave the earth and everything in it to men.
- b) Need to work: realize this dominion by the sweat of one's brow.

Locke's Theory of Property (Chapter 5 of the *Second Treatise on Government*) begins with the idea that scripture and reason lead to the same conclusions: We own the Earth, and we appropriate it by means of our labour.

Other cultures find this incomprehensible. Their creation myths are different. Diversifying the curriculum may contribute to understanding the foundations of our theosophical commitments.

### **VII. Some Useful Texts.**

Appiah, Kwame A. *In my Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: the Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Hallen, B. and J. Olubi Sodipo. *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft : Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*. Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1997.

Taiwo, Olufemi. "Exorcising Hegel's Ghost: Africa's Challenge to Philosophy." *African Studies Quarterly* 1, No 4 1998

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals And Particulars : An African Perspective*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1996.

Wiredu, Kwasi. "How not to Compare African Thought and Western Thought." Mosley, Albert G., editor. *African Philosophy. Selected Readings*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995.