

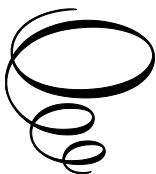
Lessons on Indigenous African Philosophy

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By

Marcel Nyuysemo

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In loving memory of my mom, Mama Theresia Biy

“You are not the darkness you endured. You are the light that refused to surrender.”

—John Mark Green

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PREFACE

African philosophy has finally taken the place it deserves in the world of ideas. This is remarkable progress given that there was a time when some Western thinkers, out of cultural bias and racial prejudice, used to defend theses in favour of the non-existence of philosophy in Africa. In our century, the debate about the existence and non-existence of African philosophy has become obsolete, and reference is only made to it as a regrettable moment in history. African philosophy has been conditioned by historical moments of slavery and colonialism to seek a cultural renaissance and reaffirmation of an identity that has been through a crisis. From the originality and authenticity of the pre-colonial era to the identity crisis of the colonial era, the post-colonial discourse on Africa is that of a cultural renaissance where the identification of a philosophy with a way of life is more than just an apologetic endeavour: it is a return to the African being to philosophise authentically. Even if an attempt to return to the pre-colonial conditions of originality has been made difficult by the intrusive and corrosive influences of the colonial system of capitalism that has divided Africa into classes that have become fertile grounds for conflicts, an authentic system of African philosophy inevitably seeks a certain level of reconnection with the pre-colonial natural state of Africa. Given the colonial era's identity crisis that gave rise to alienation as Africans lost their being in the quest to take up the being of another posed as the model, the work towards the revalorization of the African philosophical culture in the post-colonial era is finally bearing fruits.

Gone are those days when our syllabuses used to promote the colonial bias and racial prejudice of introducing African philosophy with the debate of the existence and non-existence of that philosophy. That debate used to make our systems of thought look like a child's play. Like a child who has a mouth and can eat but needs to prove to someone that he has a mouth and can eat, learners of African philosophy were made to start the African philosophical journey by doubting if they were philosophising or if they

could even have the “privilege” to philosophise as Africans. This was a reinforcement of the colonial imperialistic ideology whereby even the free, unprejudiced, rational, conceptual and critical activities of philosophy were used as weapons to maintain the colonial status quo of the dominator and the dominated. In 21st-century Africa, even if the level of infrastructural development is not where it is supposed to be, it can be said, without an inferiority complex, that the level of philosophical reflection is where it should be. This is because our own theories of African philosophy date back to the ancient Egyptian era. Yet, due to the colonial realities that made Africa an arena for the imposition of foreign ideas to the detriment of African ideas, we all, in one way or another, ignored our own philosophers and our own philosophy in favour of philosophy from elsewhere. The era of cultural renaissance in philosophy is not just about recent theories of African philosophy. It is also about giving the less contemporary African theories of philosophy the place they deserve in the history of African philosophy.

It is a delightful endeavour to read through the philosophical ideas of past and present African authors and rediscover the philosophical patrimony we had long ignored. Of greater delight is that many authors had long shifted attention from the fruitless “debate” to the philosophy that was supposed to be projected not for recognition and acceptance by someone else but for the self-fulfilment of participating in the development of ideas in human history. Students and teachers of African philosophy now read with passion and admiration the great works of philosophy by African authors that history was ignoring. The African affirmation of a philosophical identity even conforms with current debates on the pluriversality and not the universality of knowledge. This means that there is a growing global challenge of universal norms of thought, even by those who historically impose those norms on people of other cultures. The hitherto criticised and rejected paradigm of a culture-based philosophy has become fashionable in an era where the truth is no longer considered a discovery. Our mere readiness to know the truth is no longer the right attitude. Our very readiness to apply universal norms to know the truth is no longer enough. Rather, the subject of knowledge has to construct the truth within a cultural or linguistic framework that gives specificities and

not universality to theories. In this light, the truth is no longer an entity to be known through one universally accepted method; the truth is a construction of many cultures from diverse angles; the truth is intercultural. The global debate has finally returned to what many African philosophers used to do and were heavily criticised and, at times, racially abused. It is clear that the African culture gives an angle to the truth in an era of complexity whereby a single approach no longer offers satisfactory results. It is the era of multiplicity of approaches that have to coexist without destroying each other. It is the era that Africa has always longed for. Hence, it is an African era of cultural renaissance.

The philosophical journey from ancient Egypt to the rest of Africa is marked by the constant quest to 'decolonise' the African mindset. This is achieved not in the turn of events in the global debate that challenges universality but in the firm engagement to continue philosophising as Africans. From ethnophilosophy through the other trends and branches of African philosophy, we are finally presenting African philosophy in a way we never thought it could be presented due to the cultural bias and racial prejudice that we lived in for a long time. This is the time for the revalorisation of the African philosophical identity after many historical moments of turbulence. From ethnophilosophy that presented the African philosophical identity based on African cultures, the idea was to prove to the Western thinkers that Africans could also philosophise in a specific way that may not respect the canons of Western philosophy. The wave of reactions for and against ethnophilosophy proved that the stage had been set for the world to start doing the groundwork for the pluriversality that has reached higher heights in our era. Despite the critique, ethnophilosophy became a stepping stone to the revalorisation of an African system of philosophy. Despite the collective consciousness that it portrays and the apparent dogmatism in the presentation of culture as a mark of identity of a philosophical system, further works by African philosophers, after the inaugural work of Placide Tempels, make ethnophilosophy a reference point for future developments in African philosophy.

The critics of ethnophilosophy are not to be seen as impediments to the cultural renaissance of Africa. They constitute a moment of the divergence

of views on an African orientation of philosophy. This is because Western philosophers borrowed the wisdom of ancient Egypt, and ancient Egypt is African, which implies that Africa contributed enormously to what we know today as Western philosophy in its seed. The problem arises at the level of using this philosophy to dominate people of other cultures and the projection of this philosophy of the West as a model to be copied and reproduced by other cultures. This attitude of trying to use philosophy to rid other cultures of their philosophical identity is decried. This domineering attitude then revalorises ethnophilosophy. After all, if philosophy were a universal enterprise, there is no way that some cultures would have exclusive rights to use it as a tool to dominate other cultures. Even if Western philosophy borrowed ideas from ancient Egypt, when the return of those ideas to Africa aided in domination and alienation, the rejected ethnophilosophy became a weapon for African thinkers to defend their own philosophical identity. It is because of this use of philosophy as a tool of domination by the West that ethnophilosophy is not just a response to those who doubt the existence of philosophy in Africa; it is an affirmation of an identity whose place is now cemented in the pluriversity of ideas where no culture has monopoly of universality.

Philosophical sagacity, then, seeks to use culture in a more critical and individualistic manner than ethnophilosophy. To avoid ethnophilosophy's collective and dogmatic limitations, sage philosophy seeks authenticity and originality in wise African men and women of every community who can reject the collective views of their culture and reformulate a more critical indigenous system of philosophy. Even if there are universal elements of critical and conceptual analyses to be respected, there is something ultimately African in the systems of thought on the continent rooted in traditional life. That is why nationalistic philosophy seeks the best social system for Africa that considers the communal realities of traditional Africa. Real-life situations constitute an essential element in the presentation of lessons in the C.B.A. (Competence-Based Approach). In an era where our pedagogy has to make every lesson a solution to the daily life problems faced by learners, the diverse realities of the African continent fit squarely in the theories of African philosophy, seeking roots in that lifestyle that we may ignore but which is an essential part of

Africans. That is why indigenous African philosophy, in itself, is an application of the Competence-Based Approach as the learner has to accept the realities of his society and then seek ways of solving the problems of that society. In nationalistic philosophy, like in many other systems of African philosophy, we can return to the purely traditional setting or blend traditional values with foreign values, each of which has consequences and limitations.

To show proof of the skills acquired from each lesson, there is a need for evaluation. In philosophy, the main skill is critical-mindedness, or the ability to think through issues by systematic questioning to know each theory's strengths and weaknesses before taking a stand or seeking compromise. This is achieved in philosophy essay writing, the methodology of which is highlighted here but developed elsewhere. Highlighted here, too, is the methodology for textual studies. This is about teaching and learning philosophy through texts. It is a dialogue with authors of the African philosophical landscape. This dialogue between the author and a textual analyst involves reading a passage and getting the philosophical message therein to evaluate the author's thesis objectively. The procedure provides skills of coherence and consistency in conceptual analyses. The postscript gives the methodology for analysing passages by the various authors whose views are used in the lesson. This allows us to get to know our African philosophers and their views. Their works constitute the philosophical patrimony of Africa going through cultural renaissance.

During the dialogue with philosophers through textual studies, we listen to the author and analyse his views within the framework of the pedagogic norms in place. In the course of such dialogue with African philosophers, we come to understand that there is African metaphysics based on the hierarchy of forces that interact in such a way as to make humans negotiators and collaborators of other beings in a universe where everything is not open to the empirical transparency of scientific culture. This is possibly the universe of paranormal science where witchcraft and other paranormal phenomena regulate life in such a way as to condition a man to act accordingly or become a victim of invisible forces. African epistemology gets intertwined with African metaphysics because the

African way of knowing considers the hierarchical nature of beings in the African universe. In this case, empiricism and rationalism need to go together, which does not exclude the reality of African causality that transcends rational and empirical principles to seek supernatural sources for all visible and invisible phenomena.

In the course of dialogue with African philosophers through texts, the African society creates its own mechanism for judgment of right and wrong based on cultural specificities and yet with a possibility to have inter-cultural norms of moral judgment when human interest is the same and supreme in all cultures. For the African who is nostalgic for the pre-colonial era, the Ubuntu becomes an orientation for an African theory of morality whereby what is right is judged by the community interest that it upholds, and what is wrong is judged by the community interests that it destroys. When the foundation of morality is made good, African politics emerges with traditional democracy, which uses consensus as a principle considered more democratic than majority rule. Western liberal democracy has failed to guarantee individual and collective happiness in Africa as it breeds conflict and rivalry between sons and daughters who need to work together for the good of Africa. Africans, in general, and African philosophers, in particular, delightfully accept the challenge to take their political destiny into their hands and to move on from the sad colonial page.

We are very delighted to think through these issues of African philosophy as they constitute our cherished philosophical identity that is now inalienable. It goes without saying that African philosophy has been through its worst moments in the colonial era, and things can no longer get any worse; things can only get better. The affirmation of an African philosophical identity remains a battle to be fought and won daily through individual and collective efforts. At the individual level, the now ‘decolonised’ mindset of Africans implies that we can proudly project our philosophy not to anyone for recognition but to ourselves for fulfilment and for the legacy of ideas that become our history. At the collective level, the regain of consciousness for cultural renaissance and reawakening will gradually build an African society that will no longer accept the position of “marginal states”. No state will be marginal in the same way that no

view will be marginal, no matter the origin and location of the person giving the view. That is the delight of Africa in a pluriversal, and no longer universal, landscape of philosophy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to God Almighty for the inspiration and energy to accomplish this task of lessons and passage analyses in African Philosophy. At a very difficult moment of my life, God gave me the strength and hope in writing. All throughout the conception and realisation of this project, I faced health challenges that were overwhelming enough to make me give up; but God gave me the courage and determination to complete the task. I am grateful.

For the unconditional love and support I had from my family in the course of the conception and realization of this project of African Philosophy, I express sincere gratitude to my lovely wife, Kojika Christa Fonyuy, my beloved kids, Nyuysemo Neil – Royce, Nyuysemo Irvin – Ryan, Nyuysemo Albion – Dexter and Nyuysemo Ines – Maelle: their love and support are priceless beyond anything that words can express. May God bless my aunt, Sister Valeria Ngo, for standing by me and encouraging me to give my best in this project! I am grateful.

For the training in philosophy, I am grateful to my secondary school teachers in G.B.H.S Kumbo (Lord Njong Celestine Sewong and Mr. Ngum Moses of blessed memory), all my lecturers in the University of Yaoundé 1 as well as trainers at the Higher Teachers' Training College (E.N.S.) Yaoundé, for the spirit of research and love of methodology. I am thinking particularly of Professor Godfrey B. Tangwa, Professor Lucien Ayissi, Professor Ndzomo Moele, and Professor Ngalim Valentine: their rigour and exigencies helped to shape my ideas in the production of academic work.

For the love and support from my classmates, colleagues, friends, ex-students and current students of Philosophy in the numerous schools I have taught in, and for the encouragements from all those who believe in my worth in philosophy, I am grateful.

INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Family of situations: The Critical Mind

Examples of Situations: Identity Crisis, Back to the roots of African thought

Category of actions: Affirmation of the Self, Cultural Renaissance

Examples of Actions: Affirming the African Philosophical Identity

Lesson 1: Origin, Definition and Development of African Philosophy

Engagement Task: Look around you and identify some of the things that give meaning to your existence as an African student of philosophy. Is it only the mind that all humans have that gives meaning to your existence? Or do other aspects of your lifestyle and your environment that are specific to Africa condition your mind in giving meaning to your existence?

Justification: The African philosophical identity is worth preserving and worth affirming especially by African students of Philosophy in the era of cultural renaissance.

Problem-Situations

As an African learner of philosophy observing cultural differences between the various peoples of different places in the world, do you think there is something specifically African in a way of philosophizing, interpreting the world or making sense out of existence?

As an African learner of philosophy who has heard that Philosophy is also conceived as a universal activity common to all rational beings, do you think that Africans are part of the universal activity of philosophy that does not know geographical locations?

Lesson Presentation

Origin of African Philosophy

The colonial experience is not the defining element of African philosophy. The distinction of discourses on Africa into the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial discourses does not in any way imply that African philosophy is defined by the colonial experience. Before, during and after the colonial experience, there was, there is and there will always be an African philosophy that has gone through periods of originality, crisis and renaissance. African philosophy has its origin in African problems, in the essence of African people, in the way African thinkers interpret the world.

We can say that African philosophy finds its origin in the roots of African life.

Historically, the origin of African philosophy can be traced back to ancient Egypt which is also considered as the cradle of civilization. African students of philosophy need to clear away the misconceptions of linking ancient Egypt to non-African geographical spaces. It is in this light that Brian Brown notes that “The human remains that have been found in Neolithic graves in Egypt prove that the Egyptians of the Neolithic period in Upper Egypt were Africans, and there is good reason for thinking that they were akin to all the other inhabitants of the Nile Valley at that time. When the great geological change took place that turned into a river valley the arm of the sea that extended as far as Esnâ, and the Nile deposits had formed the soil of Egypt, their ancestors migrated from the south to the north and occupied the land made by the Nile.”¹ This point challenges the famous “Greek miracle” attributing the birth place of Philosophy to ancient Greece. This is because Ptahhotep, the ancient Egyptian thinker lived around 3550 B.C. long before the “Greek miracle” that is said to have given rise to philosophical reflection around 600B.C. Long before ancient Greek philosophy saw the light of day, an ancient Egyptian thinker wrote the maxims among which is the fifth maxim which goes thus: “If thou be a leader, as one directing the conduct of the multitude, endeavour always to be gracious, that thine own conduct be without defect. [...] One that oversteppeth the laws shall be punished.”² Thales and other ancient Greek philosophers travelled to ancient Egypt to study the wisdom of the ancient Egyptian thinkers like the wisdom of Ptahhotep cited as instructions or maxims that were supposed to serve as rules of conduct long before the “Greek miracle” occurred to give rise to Western philosophy. From the foregoing, it is clear that the historical roots of African philosophy are found in ancient Egypt.

¹ Brian Brown (ed.), *The Wisdom of the Egyptians*, New York: Brentano's, 1923, pp. 4 – 5.

² L. Cranmer – Byng, S. A. Kapadia (ed.), *The Wisdom of the East Series: The Instruction of Ptah –hotep*, translated from the Egyptian with an Introduction and an Appendix by Battiscombe Gunn, London: John Murray, 1912, pp. 43 - 44.

Since the grandeur of ancient Egyptian civilisation and philosophy do not raise as many controversies as the “Africanity” of the ancient Egyptians, proving that the ancient Egyptians were Africans automatically proves that African philosophy started in ancient Egypt long before the ancient Greek origin of Western philosophy. This task is accomplished with delight by the Senegalese Egyptologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, who insists on the use of totems in ancient Egypt as one of the proofs that the ancient Egyptians were black since the use of totems persists in contemporary Africa and the practice was foreign to ancient Greek tradition: “Without venturing into philosophy, it was impossible to deny that the ‘taboo’ character of certain animals and plants in Egypt corresponds to totemism as it exists throughout Black Africa. By contrast, such ‘taboos’ were alien to the Greeks and other Indo-European populations unaware of totemism.”³ If the proof of the ancient Egyptian origin of civilization is anything to go by, then the African philosophy student has to acknowledge the ancient Egyptian origin of African philosophy as a narrative that gives African philosophy a specific origin different from that of Western philosophy. Without going into other intricacies beyond the scope of this book, it is of utmost importance for the African Philosophy student who has been introduced to Western philosophy to know the historical specificities of African philosophy so as to avoid the misconception of limiting the origin of African philosophy to colonial accidents which do not and should not define the philosophical essence of Africans.

Definition of African Philosophy

Two definitional approaches can be proposed to African philosophy based on two trends of African philosophy: the ethnophilosophical trend and the critical trend. Given that the definition of philosophy itself is problematic because no single definition is universally accepted, the definition of African philosophy also takes into account the controversy involving the adjective “African” to be attached to philosophy. According to the ethnophilosophical trend initiated by Placide Tempels, the adjective “African” gives specificity to a way of interpreting the world which is

³Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook, New York: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974, Chapter VII, P. 134.

typically African and which is inseparable from African cultures that give meaning to African existence. This definition implies that the universality in methodology and object of philosophy is put to question by the unique cultural elements which make the African philosopher's mode of philosophizing essentially different from that of other peoples of the world, especially the Western world posited, through cultural bias and racial prejudice, as the symbol of the universal spirit of philosophy. As Tempels puts it, "What has been called magic, ancestor-worship, animism, or dynamism—in short, all the customs of the Bantu—depend upon a single principle, Knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings."⁴ This makes African philosophy the search for the essences or inner nature of things through the light of African culture. In this light, the universality of philosophy is challenged by the specific cultures of the philosophers who find meaning in life only through that which is in one way or the other related to their environment of belonging. Ethnophilosophy proposes a definitional approach to African philosophy as a specific way of interpreting the world based on culture which is unique to the African people.

On the other hand, the approach of critical philosophy, represented by philosophers such as Towa and Hountondji, sees philosophy as a universal activity that should not be reduced to ethnology or the description of the facets of a culture. As a universal activity, philosophy does not know geographical locations. That's why Paulin Hountondji thinks that African philosophy refers to the works of African authors with philosophical intentions. Hountondji wonders if the term "philosophy" should maintain its meaning when it is qualified by the "African" adjective or if the meaning of the term changes because of the addition of the "African" adjective. Hountondji insists that the meaning of the term "philosophy" does not change according to geographical zones. This means that there is no specific African way of philosophizing; there is a universal way of philosophizing on different contents; the only difference is at the level of the problems solved by African philosophers which may be different from the problems solved by other philosophers in other parts of the world. Yet

⁴ Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. A. Rubbens, Paris: Présence africaine, 1959, Chapter One, p. 33.

this difference in content or philosophical problems treated does not in any way change what Hountondji calls the “unity of principles of philosophy which refers to the same style of questioning.”⁵ In this way, African philosophy would be the use made by the African of the universal faculties of thought to solve African problems. The specificity here is at the level of African problems and not the method of philosophizing. The ‘Africanity’ in African philosophy is not a specific way of thinking but an application of universal faculties to specific African problems.

Therefore, the problem for the African philosophy student on the definition of African philosophy should be about situating the difference made by the adjective ‘African’ added to philosophy. This is to ensure that the definition situates the specificity of Africa when it comes to philosophizing. This specificity can be in the method, source or content of philosophy. Munyaradzi Mawere and Tapuwa R. Mubaya give five implications to the prefix “African” attached to Philosophy:

“Firstly, that there is African philosophy traceable to a particular geographical space. It affirms the existence of a philosophy in Africa.”⁶ This destroys the Eurocentric denial of the existence of African philosophy.

“Secondly, that the prefixing confirms the denialist position of African philosophy, that is, it acknowledges the existence of a camp that rebuts and outrightly denies rationality and the existence of an African philosophy independent of Western philosophy. This is because where there is no denial of such a philosophy as we see in science in general, there is no need to affirm and distinguish this philosophy from that philosophy.”⁷ African philosophers have to go beyond this debate to affirm their Philosophy without expecting recognition from a supposed “master of philosophy”.

⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *Sur la “philosophie africaine”*, Yaoundé: Editions Clé, 1980, pp. 52 – 53.

⁶Munyaradzi Mawere and Tapuwa R. Mubaya, *African Philosophy and Thought Systems: A Search for a Culture and Philosophy of Belonging*, Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing CIG, 2016, pp. 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“Thirdly, the prefixing confirms that philosophy is not universal as we see in science. Instead, African philosophy, though might be overlapping with other philosophies, is distinctive in terms of both essence and methodology.”⁸ Hence the Western world no longer sets the canons of philosophy for other people of the world. In Africa, philosophy has to be ‘decolonised’ to give rise to a free unprejudiced inquiry into the meaning of existence and the interpretation of the world according to Africans.

“Fourthly, the prefix ‘Africa’ implies that philosophy is attached to race.”⁹ Hence the affirmation of the black identity as recommended by Negritude also leads to an affirmation of a philosophical identity specific to African people.

“Fifthly, the prefixing of philosophy implies the possibility of us having a pluriversal rather than universal philosophy in much the same way that we have pluriversal epistemologies and ontologies.”¹⁰ The concept of the universality of philosophy then loses its meaning in the plurality of philosophies specific to the various peoples of the world. In this way, Philosophy will be the co-existence of different ways of interpreting the world and not a unique way of questioning imposed on everyone.

Development of African Philosophy

African philosophy has come of age. After going through many zones of turbulence, African philosophy has finally been emancipated from Western dominion in which it has been engulfed for a long time. The reasons for this situation are not too far to fetch. The historical moments of colonialism and slavery relegated Africa to the background of philosophy dominated essentially by Western authors. Today, just the emphasis on African philosophy on our syllabuses is a sign that gradually we are “decolonising” the African mindset to affirm its place in the world of ideas. African philosophy has developed from Ptahhotep in ancient Egypt to the current era that can be termed the era of cultural renaissance in Africa that has to face the pluridimensional and no longer the universal

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

world of ideas. According to Theophile Obenga, “Philosophy in the ancient times of Pharaonic Egypt was, then, a kind of pedagogy fielding the wise teachings (sebayit) of the old sages, who were scholars, priests, and officials or statesmen at the same time.”¹¹ Philosophy flourished in Egypt from about 3400 B.C. to 343B.C. At this time, in addition to traditional conceptions of the universe, it was about rules of conduct or maxims that could guide human action to be exhibited in lifestyles for personal and collective fulfilment.

Then in the Greco-Roman era, many brilliant intellectuals were made to write in favour of the church dogma to propagate the dominant church doctrines of the time. According to D.A. Masolo, “Among the Christians, such supporters, often converts, came to be known as the apologists, and their writings can be said generally to characterise the works of such African thinkers of the time as Origen (ad 185–253), Tertullian (ad c.155–c.240), and, above all, St Augustine (ad 354–430). Plotinus (ad 204–70), born in Egypt, also belonged to this period and school. However, historians are often quick to point out his Greco-Roman ancestry.”¹² Because of the influence of the Greek and Roman traditions at the time, most African philosophers of this era are considered Western philosophers. Still, they are philosophers of African descent and constitute a stage in the development of African philosophy. Saint Augustine of North Africa became one of the great philosophers who put forward rational arguments to defend church doctrines.

In the 19th century, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) of Liberia was already defending the black race. He held that the Negroes had a culture and a philosophy that they could be proud of. He was a pan-Africanist par excellence who believed that, with the help of Africans educated in the Western world, Africa could have one of the most prominent progressive civilizations in the world. As early as 1865, Byden was already fighting for “A system of compulsory elementary education for the masses and a

¹¹ Théophile Obenga, “Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy” in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004, pp. 33.

¹² D.A. Masolo, “African Philosophers in the Greco-Roman Era” in Kwasi Wiredu(ed.), *A companion to African Philosophy*, p. 51.

provision for the higher intellectual wants of the natives, to fit them gradually to fill, without discredit, offices which in the civil, ecclesiastical and commercial operations of the country must more and more devolve upon them.”¹³ Blyden was a proponent of what has come to be known as the “Pan-Negro” movement which defends the pride of the black race, a small scale version of Pan-Africanism that seeks to restore the pride of Africans.

In the 20th-century, the American-Ghanaian sociologist and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) continued with the fight for the pride of the “Negro” through ideas that had an impact in later developments in African philosophy up to the post-colonial era. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote extensively on the restoration of the rights of the “Negro” during and after the historical moments of slavery and slave trade, considered sad moments for Africa. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois announced the guiding principle that was supposed to take Africa to respectable positions in the world: “A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems.”¹⁴ This statement is a forerunner to the ideologies of other post-independent thinkers especially the nationalistic thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere whose ideas are plans of action for the complete emancipation of Africa from the continuous dominance of the colonial masters. This introductory lesson can then usher us to the discourses on Africa.

Lesson Summary

Technically, African philosophy has its origin in African problems and conditions of the African environment. Historically, African philosophy has its origin in ancient Egypt in the works of ancient Egyptian masters like Ptahhotep. African Philosophy can be defined as a specific African way of interpreting the world according to African culture or the use by

¹³ Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 192.

¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Brent Hayes Edwards, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 12.

Africans of the universal faculties of thought to handle African problems. Yet the adjective “African” implies a difference that goes with geographical location, race, denial of universality and affirmation of co-existence of different ways of interpreting the world and making sense of existence. Finally, African philosophy has evolved through stages from ancient Egypt through the Greco-Roman era, the views of Blyden and Du Bois up to the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial discourse on Africa to be treated in the next lesson.

Evaluation

Multiple Choice Questions

1. The epithet “African” attached to “philosophy” implies that:

A. The denial of the existence of African philosophy is justified. B. The existence of African philosophy is justified by cultural bias and racial prejudice. C. Philosophy is no longer universal. D. Africans have a specific way of interpreting the world and making sense of existence.
2. Which of the following pairs respectively corresponds to the geographical space of the historical origin of African philosophy and one of the earliest authors of African philosophy?

A. Ancient Egypt and Ptahhotep. B. Liberia and Blyden. C. Ghana and Du Bois. D. Congo and Tempels.
3. It seeks specificity in the definition of African philosophy and it seeks universality in the definition of African philosophy respectively:

A. Critical philosophy and Ethnophilosophy. B. Ethnophilosophy and Critical philosophy. C. Ethnophilosophy and “Pan-Negro” philosophy. D. Ethnophilosophy and Sage philosophy.
4. Tempels and Hountondji respectively conceive African philosophy to mean:

A. An African way of thinking and the use of culture to philosophise. B. The philosophy books by African authors and the use of culture to seek

innermost knowledge of beings. C. The use of culture to get knowledge of the inmost nature of beings and the philosophy books by African authors. D. Applying universal faculties to African problems and a specific African way of interpreting the world.

5. Which of the following is not an aspect of the “Africanity” of African philosophy?

A. Culture. B. Problems. C. Content. D. Mind.

Essay Questions

1. To what extent can it be asserted that African philosophy has its historical origin in ancient Egypt?

2. Philosophical reflection is more pluriversal than universal? Do you agree?

3. Ancient Egypt is the cradle of African philosophy. Discuss.

4. African philosophy does not need to seek recognition from other peoples of the world. Critically assess the relevance of this statement.

5. Does African philosophy originate from the “Greek miracle”?

Lesson 2: Discourses on Africa

Engagement Task: Look around you and observe the African person carefully. What do you think the African has benefitted from colonialism that has enhanced his personality? Do you think the colonial experience has done more harm than good to Africans? Do you think Africans would have been better if they had not gone through the colonial experience?

Justification: Correcting the errors of the past about the evil effects of colonialism on the African mindset to “decolonise” African philosophy.

Problem-Situations

Given the continuous influence of the former colonial master in the socio-political and economic affairs of Africans, it is crucial to ponder over the fate of the modern African in the post-colonial era. Must African philosophy bear the marks of a sad colonial past? What are the conditions for the possibility of a post-colonial philosophical discourse on Africa? In other words, what can be done for African philosophy to affirm an identity not defined by the colonial experience?

Given that Africans have to embrace modernity without losing their identity, is there anything philosophically useful from the colonial experience that can contribute to an African system of philosophy?

Lesson Presentation

Three philosophical reports can be given about Africa, each report corresponding to one of the three critical moments of African history. These key moments have given rise to the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial discourses on Africa. Each discourse corresponds to a philosophical experience worth studying.

The Pre-colonial Discourse

The pre-colonial discourse is a philosophical report on Africa before the coming of the colonial masters. This discourse represents the Africans in their state of originality, the traditional state where any foreign influence does not threaten their identity. Colonialism is the belief or theory that

superior or more powerful nations have the right to control the weaker ones. Colonisation is the act by which stronger nations control the weaker ones.

The pre-colonial discourse can be understood from the following angles:

Religion: The religion of the pre-colonial discourse on Africa is African Traditional Religion. African traditional religion seeks to establish a relationship between the African and the supernatural world of deities. This traditional religion of Africa is understood by the hierarchy of being in Africa (see *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*). In this hierarchy, God is at the summit, followed by the divinities, spirits and the ancestors who belong to the invisible or supernatural realm of existence. Then, at the physical realm, we have man, followed by other animals, followed by plants, and at the foot of the hierarchy, we have non-living matter. The essence of African traditional religion is to find a way for man to communicate with God and the spirits. This communication is done through rituals, sacrifices, libations and incantations, which can seek blessings for the land, appeasement for abominations, and appreciation for blessings in the land.

Politics: The system of rule is marked by traditional African democracy, also known as government by consensus. Technically, the government by consensus is a system of democratic kingship whereby the ruler of every kingdom is not a dictator; he does not make decisions alone; he has to rule for the people, and his reign only makes sense when he fulfils the aspirations of the people who made him king. In fact, the king works with a Council of Chiefs or a Council of Elders, with whom he deliberates before any significant decision is taken for his community. During such consultations, everyone must not agree. Still, everyone goes back home happy because they arrive at a compromise whereby those who disagree are convinced to understand the importance of the decision for their community. In this system of traditional democracy, there is no winner and no loser; everyone works together for the success of the king, who is there because of the people. (See *African Political Thought*).

Social Life: The lifestyle in Africa is dominated by communalism. This is a mode of life based on the spirit of brotherhood and solidarity such that we are all brothers and sisters from different mothers. The ‘we’ and ‘us’ have priority over the ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’. In this mode of life, altruism has priority over egoism. It is about others first and self last, and not about self-first and others last. This spirit is illustrated by community labour, sharing joys and pains and obtaining collective happiness as the essence of African life. (See Nationalistic Philosophy).

Morality: The reign of Ubuntu morality in Africa at this time implies that right and wrong are judged by the communal impact of our actions. This means that an act is considered good or right only as long as it promotes the welfare of other people, and an act is considered wrong or evil when it fails to encourage the interest of other people or works contrary to the interest of other people. Morality is used here as an instrument of social harmony to promote the community’s welfare. A morally healthy African society at that time was that which enabled the common good or general interest as the parameter for judgment on right and wrong. (See Morality in African Thought.)

The Colonial Discourse

The clash of cultures marks the colonial discourse: the Western culture versus the African culture. This clash of cultures has positive and negative philosophical consequences. The philosophical consequences imply that we are interested in concepts and not historical narrations. The focus is on argumentation and not on cataloguing or listing the things that the former colonial masters did or did not do for Africa. The focus is to provoke philosophical reflection in the learner and not to do a remake of the narrations they may have seen or will see in history lessons.

Positive philosophical impact of colonialism

The introduction of formal education by the colonial masters implies that Africans could now have an intellectual capacity that came with organised learning, teaching with a curriculum, a calendar, a system of evaluation, and the award of certificates at the end of a course. This is an improvement from the pre-colonial condition of informal education that