

# A CRITICAL TAKE ON THE DEBATE ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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## Abstract

The contemporary debate on African philosophy took off from a derogatory standpoint. It was a response to the racially discriminatory claims made by European philosophers and anthropologists against Africans on the supposed inability of Africans to engage in sublime thinking. Numerous European scholars wrote extensively about the supposed intellectual inferiority of the African race. The peak came with the publication of *Bantu Philosophy* by Placid Tempels in 1946. Tempels admitted that indeed, there was immanent philosophy in African worldview. However, it was unknown to be the African mind. It required the Western mind to make it known to the world and to Africans. Numerous African scholars reacted to him, many toeing the line of ethno-philosophy he claimed Africans had, albeit unknowingly. Most of the African scholars missed the fundamental question of the position of African in the development of the formal philosophic enterprise. This work runs a detailed critique of these reactions from the backdrop of the copiously attested foundational role of Africans in the establishment of philosophy as a formal enterprise.

**Keywords:** AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

## 1.0 Introduction

It is a fact of history that first European philosophers were educated by African philosophers. It is also a fact of history that after the colonization of the African continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the West claimed the ownership of the philosophical heritage. It is also a fact that the African was ranked so low that the West questioned their capability to philosophize. But Africans rose to challenge the derogatory narrative in mid twentieth century. Numerous African

scholars came up with indigenous philosophies of many sub-Saharan African societies. Tempels' exposition of the ethno-philosophy of the Bantu was thoroughly critiqued and deeply elaborated upon by African scholars.

African responses to the notion of African philosophy took so many perspectives. Many African thinkers focused on ethno-philosophy and thought it to be the unique African contribution to the world of

philosophy. Some however, considered ethno-philosophy to be un-philosophical. African philosophers of the mid twentieth century generally seemed to be ignorant of the pre-European era of philosophy in Africa, precisely in Egypt. It appeared that these thinkers accepted that philosophy is a Western heritage but wanted to show the West that Africans had their own brand of philosophy – ethno-philosophy. It was largely a response to Western bias on Western terms. African philosophy is much larger than that. It far predates Western philosophy. As would be shown in this work, Western philosophy is actually African philosophy.

## 2.0 The Question of African Philosophy

The question of whether Africans were capable of philosophy dominated nineteenth century intellectual discourse in Africa. Africans literally had no audible intellectual voice from the 19<sup>th</sup> to almost mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The West dominated the intellectual and literary scene. The West also literally dominated the world. They called the shots in global politics. They had colonized almost the whole of Africa and defined its peoples as they deemed fit. Africans were seen as a people without tangible history [1], people with base culture [2]; people without civilization [3]; a people without knowledge of God [4]; a people without philosophy [5] and in fact, a people without learning [6]. Simply speaking, the humanity of Africans was called to question by the West. Europeans saw themselves as a superior race and generally saw Africans as a people slightly above monkeys in the hierarchy of being [7]. Many European literary outputs of

the period did in fact refer to Africans as apes.

Under the weight of this heavy intellectual and racial bias, Africans were perceived as a people at the lowest ebb of humanity who literally needed to be saved. Indeed, many missionary expeditions were in fact sent into Africa, ostensibly to save her people from perdition. Africa was called the “dark continent”[8]. Could this supposedly subhuman race be capable of such elevated intellectual culture as philosophy?

Many Europeans including Tempels thought that Africans were not capable of philosophizing. Even though he espoused African ethno-philosophy in his *Bantu Philosophy*, Tempels did not think that Africans were philosophically conscious. He philosophically examined the principle of being among the Bantu, not to appreciate the philosophical capability of Africans but as a man on a civilizing mission who wanted to sift out philosophy from the primitive worldview of savages and render same in a philosophical language which he considered Africans incapable of [9]. Despite Tempels’ neo-colonial intentions, the publication opened a floodgate of intellectual enquiries on the African social psyche and culture. The publication had the unintended consequence of proving that Africans did in fact have some philosophies. They were capable of philosophy.

It is pertinent to note that there were even philosophers of African origin who opposed the concept of an African philosophy. These scholars adduced varying arguments to justify their objections. For some, philosophy is a universal enterprise that

ought not to be regionalized. Some others maintained the so called superiority of the Western standards and adduced that for an enterprise to be called philosophy, it must be done the way it is done in the West. Yet, some scholars queried what could be termed as “African philosophy”? Should it be a philosophical work done on African themes irrespective of whether the author is an African or not; irrespective of where the work was done? Could it be any philosophical work on the African continent whether on African theme or not; whether the author is of African origin or not? Is African Philosophy any philosophical work done by an African on any theme whatsoever from wherever in the world?

What really is “African philosophy”? Who is an African philosopher? An African who philosophizes? Anyone who philosophizes on African themes?

No matter the questions are viewed, the fact remains that these questions never arose until Placide Tempels published his *Bantu Philosophy* [10]. The debate on African Philosophy continues, and is crystallizing into definitive patterns.

### 3.0 Regionalization of Philosophy

A very important question is the issue of the regionalization of philosophy. Could philosophy really be regionalized? Philosophical postulates are largely universalistic in character. They apply to all humanity irrespective of skin hue or location on the Earth planet. So, why regionalize an enterprise that is universalistic in nature?

Demanding an African version of the philosophic discipline is perceived as an exercise to *racialize* an enterprise that is

otherwise, race neutral. Why append race to philosophy? Do we have African mathematics, African biology, African physics or African geology? Why regionalize philosophy?

It would be better rather to talk of the history of philosophy in the West, history of philosophy in Asia or history of philosophy in Africa. The question of African Philosophy comes up in the first place because Europeans wanted to justify their atrocities in Africa by painting Africans as a subhuman race that is incapable of philosophizing.

### 4.0 The Impacts of Slavery and Colonialism on the African Psyche

Slavery was not unknown on the African continent. Like as in any other continent in the world, Africans in times past routinely kept slaves as domestic servants. There was no attachment of racism to it. The slave was not seen as subhuman or beast of burden but a member of a lower caste in the society. Much later, trans-Saharan slave trade thrived but the impact was minimal. However, the contact of sub-Saharan Africans with Europeans triggered off an intercontinental slave trade that left far reaching negative consequences on the African psyche.

The discovery of America and the enormous economic opportunities it presented put enormous strain on the availability of manpower in its agrarian economy. There was a serious dearth of manpower. European slave merchants had discovered the enormous physical strength of African youths. Thus was birthed the trans-Atlantic slave trade that spanned over three centuries. It was a destructive phenomenon for Africa.

Africa was drained of its tremendous human resources. Unlike slavery as was practiced in Africa, African slaves sold in America were not accorded full human status. They were treated like sheer beasts of burden. This created a general impression among Caucasians that Africans were an inferior race. The Caucasians presented themselves as the greatest race ever. It was natural that they ascribed the best of human endeavors to themselves. Hence, they appropriated the philosophical heritage to themselves.

What slavery could not do to the African psyche, colonialism accomplished. European nations gathered in Berlin to share Africa among them and set out to appropriate it. European languages, European religion, European worldview and European culture were forcefully imposed on Africans while elevating the European way of as the superior way of being in the world. Successive African generations came to willingly jettison everything African. African cultural heritages were jettisoned. But then, the African culture could not disappear entirely. Despite the onslaught of the European cultural influence, the impacts of the traditional way of life still hovered in the African subconscious mind. The result was a crisis of identity in the African personality. The African personality became unsure of whom it was.

African thought pattern was increasingly repressed as subsequent generations were being raised even to think like Europeans. The educational system imposed by the colonial governments largely reinforced the myth of African inferiority. Queer as it may seem, Africans who mostly dwelt in the tropics took to European architecture and

adopted European way of dressing meant for the European mostly cold climate, the African hot sun notwithstanding!

### **5.0 The Question of Identity in African Philosophy**

Africa as a continent is culturally facing identity crisis. So many extraneous ideologies have been forcefully imposed on the continent as a result of colonialism and neocolonialism. It is hard these days to decipher the uniquely African worldview. The continent has come under the influence of so many conflicting worldviews that it is culturally at the proverbial triangular crossroads [11]. There is the Judeo-Christian influence on contemporary African worldview from the West. There is the Arab-Islamic influence on African culture from the Middle East. Of course, there is the traditional African worldview which remains rooted in the African subconscious psyche despite the cultural onslaughts from the Western and Mid Eastern worldviews.

The cumulative effect of the scenario painted above is identity crisis. To worsen the situation, the West chose to define Africa for Africans. The West conjured its own image of the African. The African was always reminded by the West in subtle and overt ways that he was culturally inferior to the West. The identity crisis was worse pronounced in individual African personalities. The francophone policy of assimilation sought to produce a Frenchman in the African personality. The Anglophone education sought to produce a miniature English gentleman in the African personality. These personalities though Africans no longer saw themselves

culturally as Africans. They simply couldn't fit well into the African society.

One of the attempts by twentieth century African scholars to address the identity crisis was the concept of negritude. African scholars like Senghor Leopold sought to make a case for Blackness and the supposedly emotive African way of being in the world. As faulty as the postulates of negritude were, it marked the watershed in the quest of contemporary Africans to define themselves with full African authenticity. Negritude could not stand the force of the logic of Soyinka's scathing critique. Negritude was essentially a plea for acceptance. It was Eurocentric. According to Soyinka, a tiger does not proclaim its tigrity [12]. Africans need not be apologetic about being Africans. Africans have to define themselves in uniquely Afrocentric terms. There is nothing wrong with Africans being Africans. Africans need not explain their being to any race.

### 6.0 The African Origins of Philosophy

Contrary to the claims of present day Western world, philosophy had thrived for well over 2500 years before the first European ever philosophized [13]. Waset, the first philosophy academy the world ever had. It thrived for so long. It is queer to question the existence of African philosophy when philosophy as an academic discipline originated in African. The philosophic culture spread to Europe from Egypt in a well documented history.

Thales, the first ever recorded European philosopher spent over a decade in Egypt, studying philosophy [14]. Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Democritus and

indeed all the pre-Socratics down to Socrates, were proudly educated in Egypt. In fact, Diodorus Siculus did state in his *Library of Histories* that these Greek philosophers took pride in flaunting their Egyptian education [15]. It was not just philosophy that spread to Europe from Africa, but science and scientific medicine.

There were notable philosophers that philosophized long before the first Europeans were granted immigration permissions to study philosophy in Egypt. Among them was Hermes Thoth, the first recorded philosopher ever. He is said to have philosophized around 3000BC. So many philosophical works are attributed to him. While Manetho put the number of works attributed to Thoth at 36,526, Clement of Alexandria put it conservatively at 42. There was Ptahhotep, a prolific philosopher that has fragments of his writings surviving to this day. There were Imhotep, Amenhotep, Duauf, Amenemhat, Merikare and Akhinaten to mention but a few [16]. Of course, there was Antef I, on whose tomb is found the inscription "seba" which is the ancient Egyptian word for philosophers. The word appropriately meant "the wise" [17]. Egyptian philosophy did not just flourish in the ancient days and disappeared. It continued to flourish until Alexander the Great invaded Egypt in the company of his teacher in c.332BC. Aristotle seized the opportunity to loot Egyptian libraries and ascribed to himself, the collective intellectual heritage of generations of Egyptians spanning almost three thousand years. Aristotle no doubt is the biggest intellectual fraud in history. He was the greatest plagiarist ever!



The Egyptians that achieved these feats were Blacks. As testified by Herodotus (450BC), these Egyptians had woolly hair and were dark skinned [18]. Isocrates and Diodorus also testified that Egyptians were dark skinned [19]. They were the aborigines of Egypt. They continued to retreat southwards as the Arabs and Albanians overran Egypt. Ancient Egypt itself was colonized by Ethiopia. The African origin of Egyptian civilization is not in doubt.

How then could the people who borrowed philosophy from Africa be questioning the capacity of Africans to philosophize? That is sheer arrogance of history.

### **7.0 The Scientific and Philosophical Achievements of Egypt**

Egypt contributed immensely to the global scientific heritage in sculpture, art, architecture, geometry, algebra, agriculture and military engineering. The world owes philosophy to Egypt. Irrigation originated in Egypt. Egyptians used irrigation to redistribute the Nile across their extensive farmlands. What is known today as Pythagoras theorem was actually a geometrical formula Egyptians used in constructing pyramids. Pythagoras spent twenty three years studying philosophy and science in Egypt. He came back to Europe to apply the formula only for the European who never witnessed the construction of a pyramid to name the formula after Pythagoras. But it is a fact that Pythagoras paid Egyptian priest mathematicians three silver goblets to be thought the formula that was eventually named after him [20,21, 22]. Same thing happened with the word

“philosophy” which Europeans claimed was coined by Pythagoras.

If philosophy had been practiced in for thousands of years before Pythagoras was born, does it mean that the Egyptians did not have a name for what they practiced? Even the history of Western philosophy acknowledges that Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes all philosophized before Pythagoras; does it also mean that these scholars did not also have a name for the trade they engaged in?

The truth is that philosophy/philosophers for thousands of years had always been known as “seba”, which means “wisdom; the wise”. The Ndu Ntr (Ancient Egyptian) word was translated into Coptic as “sebos”. It was later translated into Greek as “Sophia”. The meanings remained unchanged – wisdom; the wise. The Greek merely prefixed the term with “philos”, which means “love; lover”, to call it philosophy. Even in Pidgin English, “seba” is still rendered as “sabi”, connoting the same wisdom [23].

The contributions of Egypt to science and philosophy are too numerous to be exhausted here. Even the idea of a supreme God is of Egyptian origin. Egyptians built the first war machines and the first missiles.

### **8.0 The Decline of Egyptian Civilization and the Great Greek Plagiarism of Egyptian/African Philosophy**

The downward spiraling of Egyptian civilization started with the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great of Macedonia, a notorious plunderer. He destroyed the established order in Egypt, suppressed the Egyptian way of life and imposed Greek culture. He and his teacher,

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Aristotle plundered Egyptian libraries as booties of war. That was the watershed of the dominance of foreign culture in Egypt. The Greeks poured into Egypt in droves. The Egyptian priestly class was suppressed as many of them refused to philosophize for the invading aliens. Philosophy as practiced in Egypt was not an all comers affair. It was for the initiates and the initiates alone. Hundreds of philosophers went into exile. The philosophic culture degenerated.

The Romans would later supplant the Greeks in Egypt. Emperor Justinian criminalized the Egyptian Mysteries and went after the few priests who managed to uphold the Mysteries during the Greek era. After Christian emperors took over Rome, the instruments of the state were deployed to hunt down Egyptian Mystery priests and burn them at stake. Unfortunately these priests were the custodians of philosophy.

The story was not different when the Islamic Arab overran Egypt. The suppression of the Egyptian culture continued unrelenting to this day. Thousands of books were burnt. There were concerted efforts to wipe away the aborigine greatness of ancient Egypt from historical consciousness. There was a massive deliberate defacement of history.

### **9.0 Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy**

Since the publication of Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* there have been widespread reactions to the questions raised in the publication, chiefly, the question of African philosophy. Various scholars adopted various approaches in their responses to the question of African philosophy. They are

crystallized as trends in African philosophy. The trends are listed as follows:

- a. Recovery
- b. African Professional Philosophy
- c. African Nationalistic/Ideological Philosophy
- d. Sage Philosophy
- e. Hermeneutic Approach to African Philosophy
- f. African Ethno-Philosophy

### **9.1 The Recovery Approach to African Philosophy**

This author posits the recovery approach to the study of African philosophy. All philosophy is African philosophy. Philosophy is African culture exported to the West. The African origin of philosophy is not in doubt. Rather than focusing on African ethno-philosophies, African professional philosophers should challenge the misleading Western claims to the ownership of the philosophical heritage. Africans should endeavor to recover their stolen philosophic legacy.

The whole debate on African philosophy originated as a counterclaim to the Western presumption that philosophy originated among the Greeks. This assumption has been abundantly proven to be a blatant lie. It is a clear case of appropriation of African cultural heritage by Europe. But what is worrisome is that the West has succeeded in convincing even Africans that philosophy belonged to the West to the point that even Africans are doubting if they were ever capable of philosophy. It is a clear case of successful manipulation of history. Western philosophy is African philosophy. Africans

should challenge the West to produce their own genre of philosophy.

The task before African scholars is to reclaim history and recover the stolen African legacy. Instead of buying into the Western bias that Thales was the first philosopher ever, students be made to understand that the first recorded philosopher ever was Hermes Thoth who philosophized around 3000BC. Thousands of Africans had philosophized before Thales got the opportunity of travelling to Egypt to spend 15 years studying philosophy. When Thales got there, there were established schools of philosophy replete with teachers and other students. How could Thales turn around to claim to be the first philosopher ever when he was taught philosophy in Egypt? Of course, Thales never made such a claim. Later day Europeans did so to support their racist arrogance and the supposed superiority of the Caucasian race over Africans. Not only were African territories colonized. African history and African intellectual heritage were also colonized. To the question is there an African philosophy?

The answer is that all philosophy is African philosophy. Those who borrowed philosophy from Africa cannot question the existence of philosophy in Africa. African scholars should join the effort to rewrite the history of philosophy in order to reflect the true origins of the philosophic heritage. There is need for recovery. Africa ought to recover what is hers. Philosophy as a formal enterprise rightly belongs to Africa. This is the trajectory of the African philosophy of the future.

## 9.2 African Professional Philosophy

While the debate on African philosophy raged, a crop of sub-Saharan Africans trained in philosophy in Europe presented themselves as the face of African philosophy. Even if Europe doubted that philosophy ever existed in Africa, Europeans cannot doubt that they are philosophers. African professional philosophers refer majorly to the philosophers of African descent who are employed in the faculties of different African universities to teach philosophy. They are philosophers by profession.

## 9.3 African Nationalistic/Ideological Philosophy

At the time African scholars were writing to prove that African are capable of philosophy and did indeed have philosophy, African politicians and activists were busy finagling liberation philosophies to free Africa from the yoke of colonialism. They resisted foreign rule. A few of them developed nationalistic ideologies to challenge the Western paradigm. Notable among them were Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe, K.O Mbadiwe and Obafemi Awolowo – all from Nigeria. Kwameh Nkrumah developed “consciencism” which was a holistic philosophy that challenged the Western paradigm. Julius Nyerere developed the “Újamaa” philosophy which was a home grown socialism. Zik and Awolowo put up snippets of political philosophy that came to be known as Zikism and Awoism respectively.



### 9.4 Sage Philosophy

One of the criticisms against ethno-philosophy which was then regarded as the “African Philosophy” was that it is a communal philosophy. The critics opined that philosophy was always an individual enterprise – a patently false claim. To prove that Africans had individual philosophers, Odera Oruka went about interviewing sages who not only espoused their traditional worldviews but also offered critiques of such worldviews. The idea of sage philosophy was reactionary. It set out to address a bias - that Africans never had individual philosophers – a false claim.

Both the critics and those who responded to the criticisms were apparently ignorant of the existence of individual Black African philosophers of ancient Egypt who philosophized both as individuals and as a community, thousands and hundreds of years before the first ever recorded Western philosopher conceived the idea of travelling to Egypt to study philosophy. *The Maxims of Ptahhotep* survive to this day. Ptahhotep was an African. He had his philosophy individually attributed to him. There were so many others. Philosophy was also communal.

That everything came from water had always been a common community saying before Thales was conceived. Attributing the saying to Thales is akin to the claim that Mungo Park discovered the Niger when he actually met fishermen in the river. Queer. Even in the Genesis account of creation, everything got separated from water. The Pentateuch is of course Egyptian heritage. Moses, the acclaimed author was abundantly

educated in Egypt, and was in fact an Egyptian priest, versed in philosophy, history and magic. Thales could not have completed his studies in Egypt without being taught the Egyptian creation mythology where Nun, the primordial water yielded all things as Re-Atum acted on it. The primordial waters was dark, boundless and turbulent. Moses and the Mosaic writers merely repeated this with Hebraic adaptations in the Genesis creation mythology.

Thales was no different. He merely repeated the community philosophy he learnt in Egypt. Anaximander, his student had to remind him that the primordial water was boundless [24]. The quality of boundlessness made it capable of yielding all things. So when Thales the celebrated first Western philosopher said that everything came from water, he was neither saying something new nor was he saying something personal to his intellect. He was merely reechoing a communal philosophy. So, where did the West get their individuality criteria for philosophy? Even Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Pythagoras and Parmenides never said anything new or individual to their intellects. They all reechoed extant philosophical traditions in Egypt, having completed their education there. Philosophy was an Egyptian national heritage arduously horned by the priestly class and transmitted from one generation to another. What could be more communal than that?

### 9.5 Hermeneutic Approach to African Philosophy

There is always some philosophy behind culture. Philosophy is always expressed in language. This trend draws inspiration from Heidegger. African philosophers had sought to sift out African philosophy by looking critically at the expressions of culture in the African environment. Philosophy does not take place in a vacuum. It always happens in a milieu; in a culture. There is no expression of culture without a philosophical backing. This is a universal human experience. The case of Africa is no different.

The hermeneutic approach was a paradigm in the spirited attempts by African scholars to convince the West that Africans were capable of philosophy and did indeed have philosophy. If the West denied everything else, it couldn't possibly deny that Africans did in fact have culture. It couldn't possibly deny that those cultures were outcrops of some philosophical paradigms no matter how disagreeable they were to the Western paradigm.

### 9.6 African Ethno-Philosophy

One of the earliest attempts to prove to the West that Africans did indeed have philosophy was the ethno-philosophical approach. The Belgian missionary, Placide Tempels kick started it. It was the presentation of African worldviews, which of course are philosophies in their own right. Tempels detailed the concept of reality or the equivalent of being in the Bantu worldview. It was an undeniable expression of philosophy.

Critics of ethno-philosophy opine that it blurs the boundaries between philosophy

and anthropology. They are of the opinion that philosophy is distinctly different from the expression of culture. They also hold that ethno-philosophies are mere folklores and myths which are clearly not philosophical in genre. They also raise the individuality question. The debate goes on. Myths cannot be equated to philosophy. However, there can't be philosophy without myths. Philosophy arises to challenge myths. Meanwhile not all ethno-philosophies are myths. In ancient Egypt, what we call philosophy today was part of the dominant culture. If Socrates intended to separate philosophy from culture, he would not have been going from one public gathering to another espousing philosophy. Just like the Egypt of his day, Socrates wanted philosophy to become the Greek culture. For this, he was tried and condemned. He challenged the extant culture. He was converting the youths to a new culture just the same way European missionaries converted Africans to the Western culture. There is no complete divorce between philosophy and culture.

### 11. 0. Conclusion

The debate on African philosophy conversely speaking is the debate on the Western intellectual racism against Africa. It is a product of the milieu that saw the West colonizing Africa after successfully enslaving it. It was a search for justifications for the plunder and degradation of Africa. The West was desperate to convince itself that Africans were subhuman or at least inferior humans to the West. Tempels stated as much in his mission statement in the book that triggered the debate. Tempels stated clearly that he was not writing for the

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African audience but for the European missionaries in Africa, colonial magistrates and colonial administrators[25]. He stated clearly that Africans were incapable of expressing themselves in philosophical language. In other words, though Africans had some philosophy, they were not aware of it. The Europeans that triggered the debate saw themselves as a people with the divine mandate to civilized Africa. The inherent racism is barely disguised. It is truism that all peoples always have the adequate language to vocalize whatever they expressed in their culture. It is disrespectful to consider Africans incapable of vocalizing the thoughts they have abundantly expressed in their culture. The debate on African philosophy should be about the recovery of the stolen African philosophic legacy. It should be about calling out the Western plagiarism of African thoughts as expressed in classical Egypt. It should be about calling out the intellectual racism disguised as history of Africa according to the West. It is abundantly proven that philosophy originated in Africa, Western historians should be honest about how the philosophic civilization flowed to the West from Africa. Since, they have proved unwilling to do so; it is the task of every African scholar to straighten the records.

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