

African Philosophy

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African philosophy's development in the twentieth century is both relatively recent, traceable to some seminal texts, and ancient, drawing on cultural forms that stretch back in time and space. This seeming contradiction can be understood if we realize that philosophy itself is ambiguous. It designates on one hand a set of reflective practices rooted in culture and reason, which rigorously and critically explicate a life-world, and on the other a discipline in the university, with a set of codes, standards, recognized practitioners, and customs. More than almost any other site of philosophy, African philosophy has struggled with the similarities and differences between these two senses of philosophy. For some, there can be no philosophy without the disciplinary structures, which makes African philosophy recent and derivative. For others, there can be no disciplinary structure without critical engagement in a life-world, which means that African philosophy may well exist in traditional Africa, and indeed may form the basis or model for philosophy in the rest of the world.

African philosophy is not so much an area or topic within philosophy as it is a set of culturally original questions about the full range of philosophical issues. African philosophy deals with metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, as well as with the problems and opportunities of intercultural philosophizing, and does so in ways that cover the gamut of the analytic/continental divide in Western philosophy. The best we can hope to do here will be to hit some high points, and direct the reader to more complete introductions for further information.

The central concern in African philosophy in the twentieth century, often to the frustration of its practitioners, is over the existence and nature of African philosophy. Historically, it is clear that the academic study of philosophy has its roots in various colonial versions of philosophy, and yet many African philosophers argue that African philosophy is not limited or reducible to that history, but can be found in indigenous places. Questions about African philosophy's existence by non-Africans have often amounted to an implicit dismissal of Africa, as those questions come with the presumption that there is no philosophy in Africa, and the onus is on those who claim there is to prove it. Taken most charitably, these seemingly dismissive questions may be understood as the perennial impulse of philosophy anywhere—the move back to sources, roots, beginnings, or the things themselves. In other words, one might take the requirement for the investigation into the possibility and identity of African philosophy as an implied insult or challenge to be answered or ignored, or as an opportunity to exercise a fundamental philosophical impulse, which is to self-critically examine the foundations or starting-points of truth, meaning, existence, and value. While the challenge is often present, many African philosophers have chosen the philosophically creative path.

More so than other philosophical traditions, African philosophy struggles with a central tension within its very name. On the one hand, philosophy has tended to contemplate universals, regarding them either as the foundation or beginning point of thought or as the goal of thought, and seeing them as a non-negotiable requirement of philosophy (of course, some philosophers in the twentieth century have been suspicious of universals); on the other, the term 'African' designates a particularity (albeit a problematic, possibly constructed or imposed category). The problem is not as easily dealt with as in 'British philosophy' or 'Chinese philosophy', where there is a history of textuality that allows the philosopher to refer to a historically specific set of ideas and issues that have been part of a conversation over time. African philosophy has comparatively few texts before the middle of the twentieth century, and fewer sustained conversations among those texts. British philosophy tends not to philosophically reflect on the question of what it means to be British, while African philosophy does tend to philosophically reflect on the question of what it means to be African. So, a great deal of African philosophy in the twentieth century has focussed on addressing metaphilosophical questions.

This tension has governed some of the important questions that African philosophy has grappled with over the century. Is there something both uniquely African and fundamentally philosophical within African culture or tradition? If there is, what is it? If there really is a tension here, can it (or should it) be resolved? Is it by finally privileging one or the other side of the tension, for example, by arguing that African philosophy fundamentally resides in some universal feature such as reason, or conversely

that reason itself is always fundamentally particular and located, related to race, culture, history or politics?

There is another significant tension. One might distinguish between African philosophy as a spatial or a platial activity. African philosophy is spatial when it thinks of itself as analogous to a country on a map, and sets out to reclaim intellectual territory that was appropriated in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century by European thinkers (indeed, Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests this metaphor in the title of his well-known book, *Decolonizing the Mind*). It defines its borders, establishes citizenry, and defends the 'country' against invaders. African philosophy is 'patial' when it focuses on phenomenological analysis, that is, when it explicates the meaning of an African life-world for Africans. A platial understanding works out what it means to live in a country (that is, what it means to connect practice and thought in an African context). To the extent that one fights the defensive battle imposed or implied by European thought as it dismisses African philosophy as illegitimate, one is engaging in spatial thought. While these battles may be necessary, what makes African philosophy a vital and urgent pursuit for many people is not the spatial response to an external challenge, but rather the explication of meaningful lived experience.

This essay will be more platial than spatial, although I do not wish to suggest that the spatial project is illegitimate. African philosophy, I will assume, is fundamentally defined and unified not by its geography, nor by the identity of its practitioners, its concepts or claims, or its history, but rather by its questions, and more particularly, by working out adequate questions. It is not that these other things are unimportant to the

African philosopher, but that none of them provide a positive basis for creative work in African philosophy. African philosophy in the twentieth century has not tended to cluster in schools, apart from those which trace their heritage back to the forms of philosophy brought by colonial powers or inculcated by the graduate schools of particular African philosophers. All these other ways of defining African philosophy are finally contingent on the kinds of questions that have mattered to those for whom African existence matters. The circularity of this statement points to the fact that African identity is being worked out at the same time as is the content of African philosophy, and in relation to it (not only to it, of course, but reflective and philosophical thought is certainly one way of establishing and exploring what it means to be African). I take this circularity to be hermeneutical, and at the core, not only of African philosophy, but of all philosophy. The key, then, is in the recurring questions. I will outline some of the key questions that have currency in the field, recognizing that in each case, what makes African philosophy vibrant is the contesting of these questions.

Where is Africa?

The question 'Where is Africa?' is not simply a request for geographical location. Africa has existed in the desire and imagination of the world, both African and non-African, for hundreds of years. A common response to those who wish to discuss African philosophy is that there is no one Africa, but many, made up of various interlacing and conflicting groups such as tribes, nations, countries, and linguistic groups. How could there be an African philosophy? And yet, despite this skepticism toward the usefulness of 'African' as a category, it persists.

There are reasons for this persistence. Africa since the Enlightenment had been regarded as a place incapable of philosophy. In the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel used Africa as the foil against which all reason could be contrasted. It was not the Akan or the Kikuyu in particular that were regarded as incapable of reason, but all (sub-Saharan) Africans. To be unified in rejection in this manner meant that it made sense to see a common resistance to this theorized and pervasive racism. To the extent that African continues to be seen as a unified and coherent category by the rest of the world, if only in rejection, it continues to make sense to resist the reductionist move which would locate philosophy primarily in ethnic groupings. V. Y. Mudimbe (Mudimbe 1988) has articulated this by arguing that Africa has been a construction of Europe, in the sense that Europe needed its 'other' on which to project its fears and aspirations, and Kwame Anthony Appiah has also taken up the question of the meaning of Africa, specifically in terms of race (Appiah 1992))

'Where is Africa?' is also a question of boundaries. Hegel called North Africa 'European Africa', and for some today, northern Africa has more in common culturally and intellectually with the Mid-East than with the rest of Africa. Where, intellectually, does Africa end and the rest of the world start? What is the intellectual relationship between Africa and its various diasporas? Is there such a thing as a 'pure' culture in Africa, which allows us to identify truly African concepts or cultural artifacts and can possibly ground and guarantee a truly African philosophy? 'Where is Africa?' requires us to also ask 'What is Africa?'

To ask where Africa is, is also to ask where it is in the development of disciplinary knowledge. For many, African philosophy is necessarily rooted in the traditional belief systems of African ethnic and linguistic groups. This means that anthropology, not philosophy, has been the first source of African philosophy (even among indigenous scholars), as it articulates and analyzes local thought. But it also means that Africa has tended to be the object of analysis, the site for the application of Western methods of social scientific analysis. As well, Africa has been the focal point for a variety of interdisciplinary studies which draw at least in part on philosophy. These include Black Studies, African-American Studies, Afrocentrism, Cultural Theory, Postcolonial Studies, and Race Theory. For some, African philosophy has included African spirituality, religion, cultural tradition, and activism, while for others, African philosophy is only philosophy if it is modeled closely on European forms of disciplinary methodology. Locating African philosophy in the disciplinary and interdisciplinary matrix can be difficult, but the pursuit of a pure disciplinary definition of African philosophy that fails to recognize linkages, debts, dynamic movement, and the history of discipline development is too restrictive. This, though, does not mean that just anything can be called African philosophy.

If we have asked the question ‘Where is Africa?’, and have answered that not only in geographical but also intellectual terms, one of the results is to try to map the territory. Henry Odera Oruka, for instance, mapped the ‘trends’ of African philosophy. These were not exactly schools of philosophy—they were not that organized (Oruka does have another list of schools, less well known, which partially overlap with his trends).

They were, rather, answers to the question of particularity (“African”) and universality (“philosophy”) which had found currency. Initially there were four:

1. Ethnophilosophy: This approach to philosophy regarded the collective traditional wisdom or the generally held ontological assumptions and worldview of African ethnic groups or tribes as having the status of philosophy.
2. Sage Philosophy: This was Orika’s own substantive contribution. Through interviews, he identified the ‘philosophical sages’ within a culture, those who were more than repositories of cultural wisdom (these he called ‘folk sages’), and brought a critical edge to that wisdom.
3. Nationalistic/Ideological Philosophy: Orika recognized that political figures such as Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere and others dealt with philosophical issues even as they engaged in emancipatory projects and nation-building.
4. Professional Philosophy: This category includes those trained in Western techniques or in Western universities. Thus, it is a category that describes the identity of a group of philosophers, rather than a specific style of philosophy, although most explicitly worked European traditions, occasionally with little attention to the particularity of Africa itself.

Toward the end of his life, Orika added two more trends:

5. Literary/Artistic Philosophy: Literary figures such as Ngugi wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Okot p’Bitek, and Taban lo Liyong all reflected on philosophical issues within essays, as well as fictional works.

6. Hermeneutic Philosophy: This was the analysis of African languages for the sake of finding philosophical content. The work of Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo, as well as the work of Kwame Gyekye, would fit here. The term 'hermeneutic' has been used by a number of other philosophers (Okere 1983, Serequeberhan 1994) to mean something closer to the contemporary European sense—the philosophy of interpretation, in an African context.

Other taxonomies of African philosophy were also advanced. Smet and Nkombe suggested four categories: 'Ideological philosophy', or the reaction to theories and prejudices which, in the past, supported the slave trade and later justified colonization; 'traditional philosophy', or the reaction to the myth of the 'primitive mentality' of Africans which, through hermeneutical restoration, speaks of asserting the existence, solidity, and coherence of traditional African philosophies; 'Critical philosophy', or the reaction to and questions about theses or projects of the two preceding trends; and 'synthetic philosophy', or the assumption of preceding trends and the orientation of the data collected toward a hermeneutical, a functional philosophy or a search for new problematics. V. Y. Mudimbe distinguished between African philosophy in the broad and the narrow sense. Defined broadly, ethnophilosophy and ideological-philosophical thought addresses African social life in the past and the present, respectively. Defined narrowly, Mudimbe saw four stages of development in African philosophy, beginning with those who reflect on the possibility of African philosophy and ending with those who engage in philosophical hermeneutics (Mudimbe 1983).

These taxonomies, and others, give direction to a developing field, while also become contested sites. They inevitably prioritize some activities over others, and in some cases suggest a historical or conceptual development (sometimes culminating in the thinker's own approach to African philosophy).

Who is African?

A perennial concern in African philosophy has been the nature of African personhood and identity. Is being African in some way unique, qualitatively different from other ways of being human, or is one human first and African (or some other particularization) second? What is African identity—who counts as African, and what does being African entail? Is race a necessary and central feature of Africanity, or is it contingent and incidental? Who can speak for Africa? And finally, can African philosophy theorize other identity categories, such as feminism?

Many philosophers trace the beginning of African philosophy in the twentieth century to the publication of Father Placide Tempels' book *La Philosophie Bantu* in 1945. In fact, Tempels was reacting to the prevailing belief about Africans, argued in earlier works by anthropologists such as Lucien Levi-Bruhl, and by his own Catholic church, that Africans were incapable of rational thought, and hence were less than human. Tempels responded by arguing that there was a coherent and interesting philosophy among the Bantu (more specifically, the tribes of the inner Congo, where he worked). His work was heralded by many early on, and inspired other works of African philosophy, such as that by the Rwandan Alexis Kagame. It did not take long, though, for

African scholars to recognize the political naïveté of Tempels' work, and its tendency to reify a static view of culture which did not reflect African experience.

But while Tempels' work may be seen as the starting point for the academic study of African philosophy, questions of African identity began long before his work. Leopold Sedar Senghor and others championed *negritude*, for instance, or the idea that African identity was different but equal to that of Europeans, and consisted in emotional rather than abstract reason.

And, there were other proposals on African identity after Tempels as well. For instance, many thinkers followed Tempels in emphasizing the irreducibly communal nature of individual African existence. This often goes by the name 'Ubuntu' ('Muntu' = 'a human being', 'Ntu' = 'human'), and has been described by, among others, Jahnheinz Jahn (Jahn 1961) (and championed in other terms by John Mbiti). Others (e.g., Kwame Gyekye (Gyekye 1995)) have focused on the composition of the person and the relationships between parts such as mind, soul, and body. But the question of personhood has also taken a more existential form. Some writers have asked what it means to exist as African (Mbembe 2001), and whether that means to fundamentally exist culturally, racially or otherwise, rather than focusing on the composition of the self and its relation to community.

Beyond these metaphysical and existential approaches, though, the social construction of identity has also received some attention, although less within Africa than in the African diaspora. The role of culture in the formation of identity is certainly critical, and the most discussed version of identity construction. Race has received some

attention (Appiah 1992; Eze 1997), although less than in African-American philosophy. Feminist approaches, while they exist in twentieth century African philosophy, have not yet received the attention they have in other traditions (such as African-American and Asian philosophy). And, for many sub-Saharan African philosophers (unlike postcolonial theorists, for instance), the category of “African” has remained relatively pure, that is, it has not been seen as a hybrid, shifting, or provisional category with other identity markers such as other ethnicities. This suggests that ‘African’ as a category stands in tension, as a particularized identity category, but one which as yet is relatively unwilling to take other possible particularizations seriously.

Where does African philosophy come from? To what extent must African philosophy engage traditional thought and culture to be truly African?

The perennial issue of the origin and foundation of African philosophy takes several forms. First, it is a question about sources. Are there texts, and what counts as a text? Do cultural forms such as proverbs, songs, tales, and other forms of oral tradition count as philosophy in themselves, or are they merely the potential objects of philosophical analysis? Does the wisdom of sages count as philosophy, or is that wisdom at best merely the object of philosophical analysis? Is African philosophy African because it draws on tradition in some way? To take another line of inquiry, if we think of African philosophy as a discipline, where does disciplinarity come from, and what is its justification? Is African philosophy really a form of anthropology? Does it have more in common with literature, religion, or politics than with Western philosophy?

The first question is best framed in one of the most fundamental controversies in African philosophy, which is over ethnophilosophy. Originally a term coined by Paulin Hountondji (Hountondji 1983), it referred to philosophy that was basically the shared wisdom of a people. Hountondji used the term dismissively, to distinguish his own approach to philosophy from that of Marcel Griaule, Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti and others who located philosophy within traditional communal wisdom. He held that African philosophy was still a future (or at least a recent) project, and would develop in tandem with and based on scientific advancement.

There were many reactions to this position. First, some people simply continued to believe that African philosophy was the anonymously held and uncritical world-views of communities, along with their description and analysis. Second, others (Hallen 1997) used Quinean linguistic philosophy and phenomenology to argue that there was philosophical content in the shared world-views of traditional Africans, and that it was accessible by closely analyzing language. Third, some attempted to locate specific philosophical beliefs or statements in traditional African culture, in folk tales, proverbs, dilemma tales, and so forth (for instance, Kwami Gyekye, Gerald Wanjohi). Fourth, writers such as Claude Sumner argued that the textual history was deeper than it seemed, and that there were in fact philosophical texts in traditional Africa. Fifth, some (Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo's 'cultural inquiry' (Karp 2000)) suggested hybrid or more sophisticated approaches that draw on the cultural insight of ethnophilosophy while giving it a more rigorous form. Sixth, others (for example, Odera Oruka) argued that there was an intermediate position between ethnophilosophy and academic philosophy. There was philosophy in traditional Africa that was not simply folk wisdom (located in

the sages), but it often required the mediation of a trained philosopher to bring it to the surface. And, seventh and finally, there was a group of people who agreed with Hountondji, and therefore downplayed folk wisdom. Philosophy, for them, was rigorous textual and explicitly critical analysis, and traditional world-views in Africa were no different than Western folk tales, and no more philosophical.

Some of the responses to Hountondji were extended and elaborate. The most notable of these was Henry Odera Oruka's sage philosophy project in Kenya (although it should be noted that Oruka's work was much more than just a response to Hountondji). Oruka originally wanted to demonstrate that philosophy existed in traditional Africa, and as such wanted to address both Western thought, which made no place for African philosophy, and Hountondji who tended to downplay traditional forms as philosophy. Oruka interviewed sages from traditional groups, and divided them into two groups—folk sages, who embodied community wisdom, and philosophical sages, who held a critical stance toward that wisdom. Oruka argued that the fact that he could find philosophical sages meant that both the West and Hountondji were incorrect, that in fact philosophy existed in traditional Africa.

This controversy leads us into the second question, which concerned the relationship of African philosophy to the disciplines. For many people, for instance, African philosophy is simply the study of systems of knowledge and belief, and as such is ethnography. These traditional systems were studied by anthropologists and ethnographers of various sorts before philosophers began addressing them. However, the history of anthropology in Africa during the twentieth century has been mixed. Earlier in

the century, writers such as Lucien Levi-Bruhl attempted to identify the ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ mind and place it in relation to more developed European thought. It was a vestige of nineteenth century scientific racism, but it persisted in the work of some early anthropologists.

Beyond the longstanding ties to ethnography, African philosophy has one of the most porous boundaries with other disciplines of any philosophical tradition. Philosophers who draw from other disciplines such as politics, art, religious studies, linguistics and history seem to be the rule rather than the exception. These ties to disciplines that focus more on material culture and practices suggest that African philosophy requires the resources of culture itself (traditional or otherwise) in order for it to be ‘African’ philosophy. Even something as abstract as logic may be rooted in culture, and yet nevertheless have philosophical implications. The key, as I have already suggested, is not in the objects of investigation, but in the questions asked about those objects.

How can and does Africa relate to the West, to other philosophical, cultural, scientific and religious traditions, to colonizing countries, to its diaspora?

African philosophy seems to inevitably be a philosophy of cross cultural conversation and encounter. At the most basic level, the conversation is between different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious traditions within the continent. There is, secondly, the sustained conversation between African philosophy and European philosophy, a conversation that for some time has been rather one-sided. Thirdly, there is the ‘conversation’, or encounter, which occurred between African cultures and other cultures.

Fourth, there is the conversation that result from the history of slavery and emigration, that is, the conversations between African philosophy and the philosophies of the various African diasporas.

The term ‘conversation’ seems odd in this context. Can the history of slavery and exploitation really be thought of as a conversation? The term seems far too mild, and too liable to suggest an equal exchange. I use the term ‘conversation,’ though, to cover all meaningful exchange, ranging from mutually equitable and beneficial to brutal and even genocidal. The term is not meant to diminish or obscure the extreme pain and injustice that some encounters have caused, but rather to suggest that even in the most extreme circumstances, modes of existence are made manifest for all parties involved. Even if those modes are not on one’s own terms, a version of a life-world is made available. Even genocide requires a ‘response’, a term of conversation. This is one of the central insights of Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony*. (Mbembe 2001)

The fact of colonialism in Africa has meant that the major intellectual engagement of African philosophy has been with various strands of European philosophy. Many find this regrettable, wishing that there could be a richer conversation with other world traditions, but that has yet to develop. Even among African philosophers, little work has been done on intercultural dialogue apart from those with Western thought (to be fair, other world traditions of philosophy have not particularly sought out African philosophy for conversation either). Nevertheless, European forms of philosophy have often been replicated in Africa, and it is not uncommon to see the styles of philosophy dominant in

colonial powers mirrored in the former colonies. This is also true for religious philosophy, particularly Catholic versions of African philosophy.

The question of the basis for cultural communication, specifically the issue of whether there are cultural universals, has been a live one in African circles. Kwasi Wiredu (Wiredu 1996) argued that such universals must exist since cross-cultural communication exists, and he roots their existence in the biological similarities of all humans. But the question of cross-cultural relationship can be taken historically rather than synchronically. Chiekh Anta Diop argued that if one carefully traced lines of influence in ancient Greek thought, one would find African sources. This line of thought was anticipated in a better known though less rigorous manner by American George James, and further developed by Henry Olela and Martin Bernal. While Wiredu strives to establish epistemological similarity, Diop and others strive to establish an epistemological debt.

Is reason culturally specific? How are reason and language related?

One of the more extended debates in this area was sparked by the work of Peter Winch and Robin Horton. Winch (Winch 1964) took the position that reason is inextricably linked to language and culture, and therefore (following Wittgenstein) it is possible to consider separate systems to be rational yet incommensurable. Others, including Horton (Horton 1967), argued that there is only one reality, and so there can only be one rationality as well. Societies that do not use the modern Western scientific method are 'closed' societies because they cannot imagine alternatives to their views of the world, and also because there is no real distinction between words and reality. Words are not

reality in the modern society, and Horton argues that this allows the words to take on explanatory rather than magical characteristics. Kwasi Wiredu and D. A. Masolo agree with Horton's commitment to the universality of reason, although both would argue that it is a mistake to compare Western science and traditional African thought.

Although words might not be reality, language itself has been a central concern in African philosophy. This has followed both 'the linguistic turn' in twentieth century analytic philosophy, and the focus on language in continental philosophy, and has been an attempt to identify some unique feature of African life that is both truly African and truly philosophical. As has already been mentioned, some attempt to locate African philosophy in artifacts of language such as tales, proverbs, riddles, and so forth. Others look more deeply into language to find philosophical content. This goes back to Alexis Kagame's analysis of Kinyarwanda, and was done in a more sophisticated manner in Hallen and Sodipo's work on Yoruba.

What is fundamental reality, in an African context?

Questions of the nature of reality in an African context can be wide-ranging, mythological and cosmological, and they can also be detailed, specific, and analytic. An example of the first is Marcel Griaule's work with the Dogon elder Ogotemmêli (Griaule 1965). For 33 days in 1933, Ogotemmêli described an intricate, orderly stratified system of thought to Griaule. Each level of social and metaphysical existence mirrored and integrated the other levels in a logically rigorous manner. Griaule's work flouted the anthropological convention of participant observation to give voice to what he saw as the philosophical core of Dogon thought (a core which, it should be said, bore as strong a

resemblance to contemporary French thought such as that of Bergson as it did to traditional wisdom).

But many philosophers are suspicious of such grand systems, regarding them as insufficiently critical and too prone to influence by outside researchers. Some thinkers have focused more on specific metaphysical beliefs that they argue are either unique to Africa or original to Africa. For example John Mbiti has outlined an African concept of time that differs from Western versions of time. Mbiti argues that in Africa, there is a deep conception of the past (*zamani*) and the present (*sasa*), but little idea about the future. People immediately exist in *sasa*, while they draw on *zamani*, which has its own structure and overlaps with *sasa*. The overlap allows society to regard the living, the recently dead, and the distant ancestors in a kind of continuum. Western time, Mbiti argues, is more abstract. As with other attempts to find a unique feature of African existence, Mbiti's approach to time has been criticized as simply another version of Levy-Bruhl's notion of the primitive.

Others have tried to think about the place that belief in witches, spirits or departed ancestors might hold in philosophy. While some such as Kwasi Wiredu have rejected these beliefs as superstition, others have argued that philosophy must take into account this important feature of traditional African life, and not simply reject it out of hand. Boniface Abanuka, for instance (Abanuka 1994), has argued that ancestors form a central part of an African life by forming the basis for morality and providing the means for asking questions about ultimate reality. Fundamental reality, then, is a question of

hermeneutics rather than metaphysics, as he focusses not on whether ancestors are metaphysical entities but rather on what they mean within African existence.

The question of witches, spirits and ancestors raises an important question in African thought: Is there anything substantive that could be said to be commonly held within African philosophy? Do African philosophers, for example, tend to accept or reject the existence of spirits, or the existence of God? Is there any common starting point? In fact, African philosophy tends to define itself less by commonly held beliefs or metaphysical commitments and more by the question of how philosophical inquiry might be rooted in African cultural experience and production. It is not that African philosophers tend to hold to a belief in witchcraft, for instance, but rather that witchcraft continues to hold significance for many within African culture, and therefore becomes an interesting object of philosophical inquiry. It is a live aspect of culture, and therefore a live question.

How can (and how should) political, social and ethical life be imagined in Africa?

A central concern in African political philosophy has to do with whether there is an indigenous and unique form of political organization, particularly ones that are both emancipatory and democratic. Various thinkers, most of them heavily engaged in politics, have proposed political systems that are rooted in strong forms of communalism. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, for instance, proposed 'Consciencism', which was a way of understanding the influence of the West and of Islam through the lens of traditional African experience, and later argued for a pan-African political and economic alliance as a means of enhancing common interests that were rooted in historical commonalities.

Julius Nyerere of Tanzania spoke of Ujamaa, or 'familyhood', a form of socialism rooted in African traditional culture. In different ways, both of these were attempts to draw a link between the communalism of traditional Africa and larger scale political entities. Kwasi Wiredu, as well, has argued that consensus government is a form native to Africa, and is rooted in the close relationship between individual and community. Many of these versions of government are rooted in the oft repeated communalist phrase 'I am because we are.'

A second issue related to political organization has to do with the question of how the fact of Africa's colonization and marginalization should be addressed. Some thinkers (for example, Amilcar Cabral) attempted to theorize modern nationhood in Africa with a view to the realities of African culture. Some, such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Tsenay Serequeberhan, have produced volumes on the effects of and responses to colonialism. Fanon in particular makes a case for the necessity of violence to overcome the psychological brutality of colonialism (Fanon 1967).

Various writers have worked in ethics, and not surprisingly the question of the relationship between the individual and the community has been central to much of that work. Most would be classified as applied ethics rather than ethical theory or meta-ethics, as most ethical work in African philosophy has either tried to explicate or schematize specific ethical codes and structures, or applied traditional ethical insights to contemporary problems such as corruption in society. This is one place (along with African theories of personhood) where a great deal has been done to explicate local

beliefs in order to uncover fine distinctions that could contribute to the larger ethical vocabulary.

What is the relationship between thought and practice in Africa? Can and should African philosophy be practical?

A final question that has received a great deal of attention by various African thinkers in the twentieth century has been whether African philosophy is unique because of its attention to African issues or problems. Various thinkers have suggested that the point of African philosophy is to delve into traditional forms of life for solutions to contemporary problems such as issues of governance, political and social organization, and ethics.

Some (for example, Kwame Gyekye) have seen in traditional Africa a response to very specific issues such as corruption in government and society. Others, like Odera Orika, have argued for unique approaches in traditional knowledge to the environment. Still others have seen in African society strong models for conflict resolution, social maturity, and the expression of individual or minority voice within traditional ruling structures. Some argue that the real goal of African philosophy must be to address African problems, although even here a minority demurs, seeing philosophy as the disinterested analysis of ideas whose pragmatic concerns are irrelevant.

The relationship between thought and practice has another side as well. Some have argued, for instance, that there is no such thing as African art because the traditional objects that we might consider to be art do not meet the Kantian requirement that the objects only serve an aesthetic imperative. In other words, something is only art if it has a kind of purity to it, and is considered in itself, rather than in its cultural or social context.

On this criterion, a decorated stool or mask is not truly art because it has a function, either in the economy or in ritual.

Many African philosophers have resisted this reduction, arguing that the abstract Kantian definition of art is really a cultural definition. But the significance of this example, I would argue, extends past the aesthetic, and is in the end a central feature of African philosophy. African philosophers continually want to argue and assume that ideas and their places (whether those places be sources, contexts, or applications) cannot be separated. It matters where ideas come from, who holds them, what cultural context they developed in, and it matters for philosophy, not simply for anthropology or sociology of knowledge.

Looking Forward to the 21st Century

This list of questions is not meant to be exhaustive. It merely gives an idea of some of the major currents of thought in African philosophy in the twentieth century. I have argued that a great deal of effort has been expended in solidifying African philosophy's place in the philosophical world, and that this impulse, while important, does not exhaust the creative possibilities for African philosophy. In the coming decades, we can expect African philosophy to mature, by which I mean that it will find new conversations (other than primarily with Western philosophy); it will find ways of including groups that are currently under-represented (particularly women); it will further develop conversations among scholars themselves, rather than focusing on interpreting traditional culture or

applying Western modes of thought to African issues; and it will include 'patial' rather than only 'spatial' philosophy in the sense I have described. African philosophy stands as both an important critical and reflective moment in world philosophy, and a contribution to the world of philosophy by working out how, in the words of Derrida, philosophy can honour its 'debts and duties.'

Bibliography

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