

THE CONCEPTION OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY BY WESTERN THINKERS

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Introduction

The term “*African Philosophy*” is to some extent a disputed concept due to its various misconceptions or unintended content by many people. It can be stated that though African philosophers spend time doing work in many different areas: politics, moral, epistemology, etc., the nature of African philosophy seems not yet to be thoroughly explored and clarified. Research has revealed that a crucial disagreement concerning African philosophy is about the term “African” itself, that is, its qualities, values, and application; thus, when one talks about African philosophy, does he refer to the content of the philosophy or to the identity of the philosophers?

On a very practical note, philosophy stands as African on the ideal that it involves the African way of perceiving realities, the African system of thought, and an understanding of the people around us and the world in which we live. Moreover, African philosophy is considered to be a thought system driven by Africans or people of African descent. As a result of the uniqueness of the individuals involved, African philosophy may differ from other continental philosophies.

The philosophy that is fostered by the African cultural experience, tradition, and history is referred to as “African Philosophy.” Thus, there is always the spirit of African philosophy, a spirit of philosophical and spiritual orientation that emphasizes coexistence with nature rather than conquering, collectivism above individualism.

The discussion about African philosophy began as a forceful reaction to European intellectuals’ accusations of irrationality leveled against Africans. Africans’ battle to affirm their identity was influenced by their relegation to the status of primal animals, deprived of the ability to aspire to metaphysical or intellectual realities. Throughout African history, many uprisings appeared to be supportive of the restoration of African identity.

The Aime Cesaire-led Negritude movement, the Harlem Revolution, the South African Apartheid movement, and others are all examples of recent literature expressing opposition to the perspective of black inferiority and various insults directed at black Africans. Some European scholars did accuse Africans of being irrational beings. These claims provided the impetus for the spread of various beliefs and ideologies masquerading as African philosophy. In light of this, the purpose of

this essay is to disprove prejudicial claims made against Africans and African philosophy. The works of Western thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, and Lucien Levy-Bruhl would be highlighted.

The Conception of African Philosophy by Western Thinkers

Philosophy has long been seen as a crucial instrument for living a meaningful life. Nonetheless, for more than a decade, systematic philosophical study in Africa has been dominated by a single compound question: Is there an African philosophy, and if so, what is its nature? When it comes to Africa and philosophy, there is a lot of debate about whether or not Africans have a philosophy. Africans have long been accused of being irrational. Some Western scholars' interpretations of African philosophy may help us comprehend it better.

I. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher and the founder of critical philosophy. He seems to be a prominent figure as far as the concept of African philosophy is at stake due to his view regarding the African race especially. He is thus referred to with his theory termed the “*legacy of racism.*” There have been traces of “raw” racism by some Europeans towards Africans, and Immanuel Kant appeared to be one of those with such an intellectual and availability bias. This was taken over by many anthropologists and historians as well as philosophers who claimed that Africans do not have any ground to claim the existence of any philosophy, that is, a rational system of thought proper to them. In his work *Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschen* (1775), it has been reported that he held that mankind consisted of only one race, and the original white human species was white, appearing as dark brown.¹

For Kant, the differences between blacks and whites are as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour. Therefore, a person's skin determines his or her rational ability. So, by virtue of their *blackness*, black people are disqualified from the realm of rationality. The influence of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Locke became expressed in Kant, who laid philosophical foundations for a purely formalistic rationalism. He thus instilled reason in the supreme seat of judgment, before which anything that made a claim to validity had to be justified.²

¹ Maurice M. Makumba, *An introduction to African philosophy: Past and present.* (Paulines Publications Africa, 2007), 36-37.

² Mabogo P. More, “African philosophy revisited.” *Alternation* 3, no. 1 (1996): 111

Such a conception seems not doubtful coming from a German, for history has proven it in what we call today “*German idealism*,” manifested through the deeds of Adolf Hitler. He proceeds by saying that the black race came as a result of the humid weather conditions that bore upon the original white species. This explanation remains the private of biologists and anthropologists. The centrality of Kant’s argument is to reach the conclusion that black people are irrational. The inferiority he inferred to black people is thus biologically established, and thus has intellectual implications. Such a view seems to be based on ignorance or prejudice. He was indeed carried by the great cultural revitalization of Europe in his day and so seems inclined to compare the achievements of different races with the priority of Europe being superior to all others. He reduces the mental ability of Africans to the colour of their skin, which he perceives not to be pure.

Kant appears to have fallen short of the categorical imperative, one of his own moral foundations. This is, indeed, a revealed contradiction of a philosopher whose system has, at its core, critical reason as a means and source of human knowledge. Due to his analysis, Kant rejects the existence of an African philosophy due to his racist view of the African race and the influence of the Enlightenment ideology.

It then suggests that for a system of thought to be called African philosophy, it must therefore abide by the principles and norms of European thought. Africans, being thus deprived of these norms, it follows that they do not and cannot nurture a philosophical system of thought according to Kant.

II. Georg W.F. Hegel (1770-1831)

Due to the influence his thought exerted on the nature of African philosophy, Hegel is one of the most quoted Europeans as far as the debate on the nature of African philosophy by Europeans is concerned. His perspective is from a historical point of analysis. Hegel developed a theory that claims that Africans do not have a history, and thus it infers that they cannot have a philosophy because they are deprived of the “software” that activates a philosophical conception. He maintains that human history is rationality and freedom rather than feelings and inclinations. Africans, thus, lack rationality: a human being is a thinking being (*Homo rationalis*).³ An African is therefore incapable of reflecting, or reasoning, or planning. Hegel claims in his work *Philosophy of History*

³ More, “African philosophy revisited,” 111.

that the African proper or essence is wild and untamed, beyond the pale of humanity proper, cannibalistic, ungodly, or without religion, and without history because they are incapable of cultural development through history. Africans are not human enough to deserve freedom and respect because he believes that they lack what is fundamental to existence, that is, rationality.

Maurice Makumba will claim that this effectively excludes Africa from the realm of rationality because history, as Hegel understood it, was none other than the manifestation of the reason.⁴ His understanding of the role of reason in the formation of history is essentially primordial. According to Hegel, history is based on the dialectical movement of the spirit or reason in man, which Africans do not have.⁵ The application of the Hegelian view to Africa promoted what became the popular view among Europeans of Africans as people with inferior capabilities in terms of religion, philosophy, and history.

III. Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939)

He is said to have carried Hegel's theory in the twentieth century to another level. Maurice Makumba reported that he has been called by Paulin Hountondji, a professional ideologue of ethnocentrism, the cultural exclusivism of the West that created unitary civilization and attempted to make it the yardstick for all civilization.⁶ Levy-Bruhl did not merely mention Africa in passing, like the two German philosophers, Kant and Hegel. Thus, he centered his studies on Africa for three good years. He developed a theory that is referred to as the theory of the "*Primitive Mind*" or "*Pre-logical Thinking*."⁷

At first glance, the theory says everything about his ideas on African philosophy. By so-calling Africans or classifying them, the theory refers to a stage in the evolution of any race, and Africa was at that particular stage, which does not give way to philosophical issues because the mind appears not to be able to analyse such issues. We do understand that his argument for the primitive mind was measured by reference to the scientific mind of the West. Dismas Masolo ascertains that for Levy-Bruhl, individual thinking is influenced by collective representations, and these are shaped in turn by social institutions. These can be seen in the following:

⁴ Makumba, *An introduction to African philosophy: Past and present*, 38.

⁵ Georg W. F. Hegel, "The Philosophy of History," Trans. J. Sibree, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (1956): 99

⁶ Makumba, 43.

⁷ Makumba, 44.

- i. Long acquaintance with scientific institutions mould people into thinking logically and with method and that, African societies are lacking.
- ii. While the pre-scientific age attributes explanations to supernatural and occult powers, the scientific mind has ascended to the level of understanding of natural phenomena based on scientific approach. This simply activates in us the reminiscence of the beginning of philosophy wherein religion and mythology held a primordial place in the study of the cosmos.⁸

It appears plausible that Levy-Bruhl classifies human societies into two: the civilized (marked by scientific institutions); and the primitive society, marked by the attribution of explanation to supernatural and occult powers, which express things like magic, sorcery, witchcraft, etc. He then identifies Africa with the latter society. His two books, "*Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*" (1910) and "*La mentalité primitive*" (1922) deeply expanded on his theory. His ideas have thus led some Western anthropologists to represent Africans as incapable of evolving a scientific and reason-oriented culture.

Conclusion

To sum up our analysis so far on the conception of African philosophy by Western thinkers, we came across three eminent thinkers, namely Immanuel Kant, Hegel, and Lucien Levy-Bruhl. All three, through their various theories on Africa, came to the unanimous conclusion that philosophy is not an activity proper to Africans due to historical and natural factors. They do appear to be advancing arguments that are primarily and critically based on race. These theories can be termed racist simply because what they suggest fails to go beyond the expression of colour or geographical position. Why would Kant, for instance, adamantly hold a view that could not be empirically sustained? Hegel's anti-Negro theory, on the other hand, cannot be proven scientifically. How can he fallaciously deny a race from having a history simply because it is not documented? Unfortunately, Levy-Bruhl falls into the fallacy of generalization concerning his theory of societal patterns of reasoning.

⁸ Dismas A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 8.

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