



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

African Philosophy and History

Anke Graness, University of Vienna

Graness, Anke. "African Philosophy and History." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7, no. 10 (2018): 45-54.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-42b> (provided by WordPress)

Edwin Etieyibo's recent collection of papers is the result of the conference 'African philosophy: Past, Present and Future' held at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa) in 2015. The presentations and lively discussions during that conference, especially those concerning the future methodology of philosophy in Africa and the steps to be taken towards integrating African philosophy in university curricula, were organised into four sections of the book: (I) African Philosophy and History; (II) Method in African Philosophy; (III) Substance of African Philosophy; (IV) African Philosophy and its Future. All four parts raise important questions and deserve a detailed discussion. However, I will focus my review on the first chapter, 'African Philosophy and History'.

How Important Is the History of Philosophy?

The importance of the history of philosophy is vigorously contested. In particular, it was challenged by logical positivism and the analytic school during the twentieth century, both of which maintained that historiography had a weak epistemic basis. However, despite all attempts to minimise the role of the history of philosophy in current research and teaching, it continues to play a crucial role in present-day philosophy. An examination of what Africa has done towards writing a history of philosophy is of utmost relevance, especially to the formation of educational policy.

The first article is Edwin Etieyibo's 'African Philosophy in History, Context, and Contemporary Times'. Here, the first sentence of the essay is problematic. The author claims: 'African philosophy does have a long history, albeit mostly undocumented, unwritten, and oral.' (13) The author seems to assume that orality is a fundamental characteristic of African cultures and societies, and perhaps even that one cannot speak of philosophy in the absence of a written tradition.

Both assumptions have to be strongly refuted. There is a long tradition of written philosophy on the African continent, extending from the time of the ancient Egyptians and including Ethiopian philosophy, the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition in Africa south of the Sahara, the Ajami tradition, and the written tradition in the Swahili culture. Souleymane Bachir Diagne sharply criticises the equation of Africa with oral traditions. He calls it a gaze that confines Africa to its oral tradition and de-historicises the whole continent. He argues that the debate:

is often carried out in complete ignorance of the established history of intellectual centres in Africa, where texts containing an undeniable philosophical dimension were studied and commented on, in writing, and where the names of Plato and Aristotle, for example, were well known long before the European presence. (Diagne 2016, 57)

A number of philosophers, including Henry Odera Oruka and Sophie Oluwole, have provided positive proof of the existence of philosophy in oral traditions. And as Diagne argues:

to understand orality is to understand that it too involves intertextuality, which is to say the art of producing a text (it makes no difference if this text is oral) in relation to another one, which the new text evokes in different ways: by citing it, making allusion to it, imitating it, miming it, subverting it, treating it at times with derision. In this way orality returns on itself, becoming a critical reworking of its own stories, and along with them the knowledge and values that they can carry and transmit: it produces new stories that put the old ones, often established as canonical, into question. (Diagne 2016, 54)

It is troubling that prejudices about the history of philosophy in Africa are still widespread. Precisely for this reason, a more detailed study of the history of pre-twentieth-century African philosophy is urgently needed.

Discovering Long-Maligned African Thought

While the next sections of Etieyibo's article deal with the rejection of African philosophy and in particular with the racist theses of some European philosophers such as Hume, Kant and Hegel, the fourth section of his contribution is devoted to the question of who can be regarded as an African philosopher. I will deal with this question in more detail in a moment.

Towards the end of his essay the author names six areas in which African philosophy lags behind international discourse, among them African metaphysics, African epistemology, African logic, and African philosophy of mind. Etieyibo leaves open what the qualifier 'African' means in this context. Concerning the institutional frame of academic philosophy, Etieyibo rightly laments that there is an insufficient number of publications on African philosophy and limited access to them; that there are too few specialist conferences and meetings regarding it; that the discipline suffers from a lack of financial support; and that there is too little exchange between scholars in the field. He maintains that the institutional framework of philosophy production in Africa must be significantly improved.

Two scholars who made major contributions to the reconstruction of the history of philosophy in Africa, particularly African philosophy's development since the beginning of the twentieth century, also contributed to this section of the book: the American philosopher Barry Hallen (*A Short History of African Philosophy*, 2002, second edition 2009) and the Kenyan philosopher Dismas A. Masolo (*African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, 1994). Barry Hallen starts his article with a number of important questions which have to be answered in order to demarcate the scope of research of a history of African philosophy:

Does African philosophy include all philosophy done by Africans regardless of content?

Does African philosophy include the work of non-Africans who focus on African content?

Can Africans who focus only on researching and teaching 'Western' philosophy be considered 'African philosophers'?

In other words, who should be included in and excluded from the narrative of a history of African philosophy? Hallen's questions concern the geographical and socio-cultural origin of the scholars and concepts which should be included in a history of philosophy in Africa, or to put it differently, how to localise thought and scholarship. Hallen does not answer these questions but rather focuses his explorations on the general significance of cultural or geographical labels like 'Indian', 'Chinese' or 'African' for philosophy and examines the relationship between the universal and the culturally particular in philosophy.

What Is an African Philosopher?

However, in his article Etieyibo tries to define 'African philosopher' using analytic and logical methods. Etieyibo asks whether blackness or being African obliges one to do African philosophy and, moreover, who may count as an African philosopher. To answer these questions, he differentiates between a 'narrow view' and a 'broad view' of who may be deemed an African philosopher.

According to the 'narrow view', 'one is an African philosopher if one engages with works in African philosophy and works towards developing it.' (19-20) Unfortunately, Etieyibo leaves open 'what sorts of work count as African philosophy' (20). He argues that this issue is not decisive; however, if we do not know what work counts as African philosophy, we will not be able to apply the 'narrow view' criterion ('engages with works in African philosophy') to identify someone as an African philosopher. Thus, we are thrown back on the old question, 'What is African philosophy?'

In the 'broad view' the basis of identification as an African philosopher is the 'person's origin and what the person does ... That is, one is an African philosopher if one is an African and works in philosophy' (20). Furthermore, Etieyibo argues that 'just because one ... is African does not mean that she does or ought to do African philosophy'. (22) Of course, it is absolutely correct to remind us that philosophers from Africa do not have any duty to do African philosophy— if doing African philosophy means one is constrained to dealing with theories and methodologies which emerged on the African continent or with issues that concern the African Lebenswelt alone.

Like philosophers anywhere in the world, philosophers in and from Africa are free to choose their areas of research without losing their identity as an African. If I do not lose my identity as a European when I deal with philosophical traditions from Africa, the same applies to philosophers from Africa. However, Etieyibo's remarks do not bring us any closer to answering the questions raised by Hallen, which target issues of classification.

I think it is less important to clarify the continental affiliation of those who practice philosophy in Africa than it is to clarify the definition and demarcation of African philosophy. This clarification has important consequences, for example for the integration of African philosophy into curricula and publication projects, and especially for financial support: What exactly is the 'African philosophy' that has to be integrated in curricula? What is to be labelled and promoted as 'African philosophy'—the work of a philosopher from

Africa who is a Wittgenstein specialist? Or does 'African philosophy' include only the work of philosophers who deal with African thought traditions, the relevance of those traditions, issues of the African Lebenswelt, such as questions about concepts of justice in the present-day African context, etc.?

The Wittgenstein specialist would certainly have plenty of funding possibilities via research programs in analytic philosophy, philosophy of language, continental philosophy and all kinds of funding foundations; those dealing with marginalised and formerly excluded philosophy traditions in Africa hardly any funding prospects at all. In this respect, a definition of the term 'African philosophy' is not only relevant here, but also decisive.

Africa and Universality

Barry Hallen discusses in his essay the relationship between the universality and the particularity of philosophical knowledge with regard to the debates on African philosophy since the 1960s, when African philosophers started to discuss and to attack centuries-old 'Western' stereotypes that denied Africans' ability to think rationally, logically, and critically. During the 1960s African philosophers started to reassert their capability and reclaim their right to describe and to represent the history, present, and future of their continent as well as the African history of ideas, and they refused to be defined and represented according to 'Western' anthropological and colonial terms. Hallen describes the debates about the question 'What is African philosophy?' between the 1960s and the 1980s as being of immense importance, for here African philosophers:

were putting their own house in order, and they were conscious of their responsibility as scholars to do so. This was Africa talking to Africa about an issue that mattered to Africa. (39)

But still, during these early years of academic philosophy in Africa south of the Sahara, 'Western' philosophers considered these debates 'culture philosophy' because of the focus on African languages and culture and their philosophical dimensions. For 'Western' philosophers, African philosophy seemed to lack the universal dimension characteristic of philosophy.

In the following passage, Hallen refers mainly to the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu and his counterarguments against such allegations. Wiredu, who conducted a thorough study of his mother tongue Twi and the culture and political institutions of his people, the Akan, insisted that:

African philosophers are doing the same thing as Western philosophers when they extrapolate from the ideas, beliefs, and practices of their cultures to see their relevance to and for more transcendent concerns. African philosophers must therefore insist that the intellectual playing field be levelled and that our cultures be accorded the same initial integrity as any others. In Africa as in other places of the world African philosophy is philosophy, full stop. (41)

This is an important point: why is Heidegger's theoretical work, which was devoted to the study of the German language and its origins and the Lebenswelt of his time, or Wittgenstein's analysis taken to be philosophy, but theoretical work on African languages or Lebenswelten classified as cultural studies? Philosophy always starts from particular or contextual circumstances that give rise to further considerations. Wiredu has made this a fundamental principle of his work: he has applied the method of analytic philosophy to the study of a particular language and a particular context in order to make further, general judgments on this basis. The particular language in his case is his mother tongue Twi.

Or as Hallen expresses it:

The whole point of his philosophy is to demonstrate ... that a philosophical methodology identified with the "Western" tradition ... can be extracted from that tradition and applied to African content with positive consequences ...' (48) and '... using African content as a basis for abstracting alternative conceptualizations of truth, of the person, of the community, of development, of modernization that can then be placed in comparison with those more conventionally taken as paradigmatic by academic philosophy. (46-47)

Hallen is concerned that the current generation of young philosophers has not adopted Wiredu's approach and method. So he asks: 'Who else is doing philosophy in the African context along the lines of Wiredu?' (45) Like Wiredu, Hallen argues that it is right and important to apply accepted philosophical methods to African content. He urges that those who argue that new and different forms of approach to philosophy are needed to represent African philosophy independently and fairly should develop and successfully implement such new methods.

One can only agree with Hallen's criticism of the term 'World philosophy': that it is a euphemism for non-'Western' thought, for in such volumes on 'World philosophy' there is no section devoted to European philosophy (47). This also shows that there is a long way to go before non-European philosophy ceases to be considered exotic.

Africa Beyond Reaction

Dismas Masolo also begins his essay by referring to the difficulties that beset African philosophers in the twentieth century:

much of what we have done in the contemporary history of African philosophy appears to be only corrective work – that is, to respond to bad philosophy that came out of equally bad scholarship on Africa by European social scientists. (54)

Despite all the progress that has been made since then, Masolo criticises the current discourse in African philosophy as follows:

we have not developed out of those responses and corrections what Wiredu calls 'a tradition of philosophy' that builds on highlighting a discursive sparring among ourselves about our own specific conceptions, beliefs, or experiences in a manner that would be called philosophical. (56)

With reference to Wiredu, who demands 'that folks throughout the continent should develop a sustainable or self-sustaining tradition of a philosophical discourse that explores Africans' beliefs and conceptions of the world' (57), Masolo underlines that a 'sustainable tradition of a philosophical discourse' has to be developed. Masolo does not provide us with a definition of 'sustainable tradition', but he points out that 'sustained discourses among locals give traditions of thought their identities' (57) and that it is important 'to confront and interrogate the informing historical or ontological contents (such as specific socio-political or cultural interests) of philosophical or deontological principles when in competition with others.' (57)

According to Masolo, it is vital to recognise the importance of the time and place in which philosophy emerges; no philosophers can completely free themselves from their locally and temporally conditioned context, which determines their thinking in important ways, e.g. their methodology, content, and research interests. Even so, it is necessary to try to transcend the local and to come to universal judgments. To demonstrate how local knowledge production can be made fruitful for philosophy and a 'sustainable', proprietary tradition of philosophy can be built, Masolo uses his own research on the famous intellectual, poet, and essayist Shaaban Bin Robert (1909-1962), who supported the preservation of the Tanzanian verse tradition and wrote *Utubora Mkulima*, a story about the search for human perfection which offers guidelines for a good life.

Masolo does not consider the difficult and complex situation of present-day African knowledge production an obstacle. This complexity is due to various tensions that emerge from aspects of colonial and neo-colonial heritage, among them the intersection of indigenous and colonial traditions of knowledge production, the relationship between local and global cultures, and the need to participate in international discourse and yet remain free of the domination of Western dictates of discourse. Masolo argues with reference to Hegel that such complex systems of social contradictions are a precondition for the formation of philosophy.

Questions of Progress

The last article in this section is Edwin E. Etieyibo and Jonathan O. Chimakonam's analysis 'The State of African Philosophy'. Their starting point is the question: What progress has African philosophy made since the end of the great debate about its existence and nature?

Now, it is always difficult to define 'progress', but in philosophical debates it is even more difficult to make 'progress' manifest, because after all, philosophical research and debates do not lead to billable results or established form of output as do social sciences, economics or natural sciences. How can progress be measured in a discipline like philosophy, which

despite continuous effort over thousands of years, has never even been able to reach definite conclusions about such key concepts as justice, truth, or being?

In order to measure 'progress' in African philosophy, the two authors propose to elicit numbers regarding scholars and researchers engaged in African philosophy, including the number of undergraduate and graduate students specializing in African philosophy; the number of publications, conferences, and courses about African philosophy; etc. (72) Thus, in the first line, Etieyibo and Chimakonam focus on progress as a matter of quantitative, not qualitative, analysis.

However, the authors also suggest analysing the content and substance of current research and debates in African philosophy. Here, of course, the standard or yardstick is again particularly unclear: how should the 'substance' of philosophical work be measured? And how can subjective preferences (with regard to the philosophical methods or schools considered relevant) be excluded from such an evaluation? What is considered to be 'substantial' – and what is not? The answer to these questions is never free of interests, preferences, and positions of power. What are the possible guidelines for questions about 'substance'? The two authors do not give us any criteria.

Due to the scope of such quantitative research, the authors limit their enquiries to an investigation of the number of universities and philosophy departments in sub-Saharan Africa that offer courses in African philosophy. The two authors are well aware of the inadequate basis for their study; many of the departments they tried to contact in Africa did not respond, so no statements can be made about them, which leaves the authors' database incomplete.

It is notable that there are many lusophone and francophone universities among those Etieyibo and Chimakonam were unable to include in their study due to lack of response to their enquiries. This suggests that the two Anglophone authors, disregarding the language issue, may have contacted those universities only in English. A language-sensitive approach would be necessary in a follow-up attempt. It is astonishing that none of the East African universities which exerted a profound influence on the development and traditions of African philosophy—such as Makerere University in Uganda, Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, and Nairobi University in Kenya—appear in the authors' study.

Even though their search cannot claim to be complete, the authors think that it is possible to prove emerging tendencies from it. In their analysis of the curricula of philosophy departments of various African universities, they come to the conclusion (which is not new in itself but rather obvious) that philosophical education at African universities continues to be Eurocentric, since there are few or no courses in the curriculum that cover philosophical traditions which originated on the African continent.

Of course, such a numerical listing is interesting—especially against the background of the call for decolonization of curricula and universities. However, it would be more interesting to make a comparison between the present time and the situation in the 1960s and 1970s than

between present circumstances and those prevalent less than half a dozen years ago. Such a comparison would certainly show a significant increase in the frequency of these courses and thus 'progress' in the quantitative sense. After all, the figures collected in Etieyibo and Chimakonam's study can provide a basis of comparison should such a study be repeated in a few years.

It would be important in a follow-up study to examine to what extent the integration of African philosophy has progressed on an international level, e.g. in teaching at non-African universities (the US is certainly leading here) as well as at international conferences. African philosophy and African philosophers demonstrated an impressive presence at the most recent World Congress of Philosophy (WCP), which took place in 2018 in Beijing. Here, too, a lot has happened since the first appearance of African philosophy at the WCP in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1978.

Bringing African Thought Throughout the Globe

The authors raise but do not answer a crucial question of didactic methodology concerning the integration of African philosophy in the curriculum of philosophy departments worldwide: is it better to offer standalone courses in African philosophy or to integrate topics and content from African philosophy into existing courses on, for example, ethics, metaphysics, or political philosophy? Is it better to present African philosophy separately or to weave African philosophical perspectives into general philosophy courses? (77) Which of these approaches is more effective in disseminating knowledge about the history of ideas and the current philosophical debates in Africa? Which is more effective in diversifying the conversation in both educational settings and international discourse?

Unfortunately, the authors do not answer this fundamental question. And it is indeed a central and important question, for it entails the following issues: Does presenting special courses in African philosophy perpetuate the assumption that African philosophy is an exotic discipline somehow outside 'normal' discourse? Courses labelled 'European philosophy' are rarely offered, because the European tradition is presumed to stand as philosophy proper, and as such needs no further geographical qualification. To avoid viewing African discourse as exotica, it might be better to integrate examples from it into overviews and historical lectures.

Furthermore, is it possible to solve philosophical problems solely from the perspective of one philosophical tradition? Perhaps an intercultural approach to teaching and research should be the 'normal' way of doing philosophy. If so, it might not make sense to present courses solely on African philosophy; it would be more effective to integrate 'African' content into general philosophy courses.

The last part of Etieyibo and Chimakonam's paper addresses the issue of the 'substantiality' of the discourse in African philosophy. What does it mean to do philosophy in a 'substantial' way? The authors do not answer this question but offer very sharp criticism of contemporary discourses on African philosophy—large parts of which I, for my part, cannot

comprehend at all. For example I do not see contemporary African philosophers as 'telling worthless stories' or view them as being isolated people (86). Personally, I see a very serious struggle to create philosophical concepts that are rooted in the African experience. I do agree with Etieyibo and Chimakonam's observation of a revival of the ethnophilosophical discourse (87).

However, most of the criticism seems to me, especially because of its lack of specificity, to be unfounded accusations. Without reference to certain works or examples, these accusations cannot be investigated and therefore remain unproven; as such, they cannot lead to substantial reflection on ways to avoid certain mistakes. Also the authors' accusation that Heinz Kimmerle, the German philosopher who was instrumental in introducing African philosophy to the German-speaking world, denied the existence of African philosophy (87), must be decisively rejected.

Lastly, the authors urge that a link between theory and practice in philosophy is very important. Citing Karl Marx, the authors assert that philosophy must become practical (74), and in order for that practice to be relevant, they argue, it must engage with the African *Lebenswelt*. Only then can African philosophy be part of the solution to the problems Africa faces today.

Conclusion

Edwin Etieyibo rightly states in his article 'that any serious discussion of African philosophy in terms of its progress must and ought to be cognizant of its history.' (14) However, not even one article in this part of the book is dedicated either to philosophical traditions in Africa before the twentieth century, or to methodological issues of writing the history of philosophy in Africa. On the contrary, Etieyibo and Chimakonam even claim: 'Pre-colonial Africa was a period where emotions rather than reason primarily reigned supreme.' (74)

Not only does such a statement testify to a certain ignorance of the long history of philosophical traditions, written and oral, in Africa, but it also plays into the hands of those who have always accused the Africans of a lack of rationality and always maintained that only the encounter with Europe made education, science, technology, and even philosophy possible on the African continent. However, Etieyibo underlines in his article that 'saying that philosophy does not exist in Africa and among Africans because they lack rationality is to say that Africans are both biologically and ontologically inferior' (16)—an argument Etieyibo sharply rejects. His rejection of racist arguments on the one hand and statements like the one above, that emotion rather than reason reigned in Africa, seem inconsistent to me.

A thorough reconstruction of the history of philosophy in Africa should be one of the basic tasks for African philosophers, since a self-determined view of history is the basis for a self-determined concept of the future of a discipline or even of an entire continent. How philosophies of earlier centuries can be researched and integrated into the history of philosophy and what difficulties remain to be solved (for example the question of the

significance of orally transmitted philosophy, the question of the place of Arabic-Islamic philosophy in the history of philosophy in Africa, etc.) are not addressed in this part of the book. The really important questions about the history of philosophy remain unexamined. It is quite disappointing that the part entitled 'African Philosophy and History' of the book offers no new understanding of the really important questions in the history of philosophy in Africa.

Contact details: anke.graness@univie.ac.at

References

- Bachir Diagne, Souleymane. *The ink of the scholars: reflections on philosophy in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA 2016.
- Etieyibo, Edwin E. 'African Philosophy in History, Context, and Contemporary Times'. In: Edwin Etieyibo, ed., *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 13-33.
- Etieyibo, Edwin E., and Jonathan O. Chimakonam: 'The State of African Philosophy'. In: Edwin Etieyibo, ed., *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 71-90.
- Hallen, Barry. 'The Journey of African Philosophy'. In: Edwin Etieyibo, ed., *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 35-52.
- Masolo, Dismas A. 'History of Philosophy as a Problem: Our Case'. In: Edwin Etieyibo, ed., *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 53-69.