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Will We Ever Have a Genuine African Philosophy?

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This collection of contributed and commissioned papers, *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, edited by Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola (2017), is a product of an ambitious project aimed at delivering the most comprehensive and contemporaneous portrait of African philosophy as a progressing, relevant and theoretically cogent academic discipline.

An anthology of this nature is a philosophical product in its own right. In a philosophical tradition that is still recovering from the bruising debates around its self-identity and questions of its most appropriate self-differentiating methodology, the choice of the panel of contributors and the thematic range of the content, including the editorial leitmotif being pursued, constitute a philosophical statement by the editors. In this case, the anthology might as well have been subtitled ‘Rethinking African Philosophy in the Age of Globalisation’, which, fortuitously, is the title of the customary Introduction chapter by the editors (1-18).

Besides writers from across the representative regions of Africa in its heterogeneous culturo-linguistic kaleidoscope, Africanists and Africologists from Europe and North America are included in this *Handbook on African Philosophy* (hereafter ‘*The Handbook*’). This geographic and ethnic-national diversity, subliminally, proclaims the capacity for cosmopolitan self-expression of African Philosophy in ‘the age of globalisation’.

Decidedly, this undermines and eschews a view, represented by Paulin Hountondji amongst others, that African philosophy proper, is a set of philosophical text exclusively written by Africans (Hountondji 2018), in favour of a kind of a cosmopolitanism held by Anthony Kwame Appiah (2006) and Achille Mbembe (2007).

In the Introduction, the editors compliment Kwasi Wiredu’s *A Companion to African Philosophy* that was published as part of the Blackwell Companions to Philosophy series in 2004. They point out that Wiredu’s volume (he was assisted by William E. Abraham, Abiola Irele and Ifeanyi Menkiti) is historical in that ‘it constitutes a significant nod to the appearance of African philosophy in the global academe that is decidedly sold to the idea of the universality of Western philosophy’ (p.1). Laced around this gesture of professional magnanimity, is a construct of a developmental trajectory of African philosophical thought.

Accordingly, it is suggested that whereas *A Companion to African Philosophy* (2004) of Blackwell marked the enthronement of African philosophy as a credible intellectual system within the global academe of Humanities, Palgrave’s *Handbook on African Philosophy* (2017) is a declaratory demonstration of the maturity of African philosophy. The volume is thus presented as both an exhibition of the progressive prowess of African philosophy into the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of globalisation, and, as a *handbook*, an up-to-date go-to source on African philosophy in the global age.

I propose to isolate for critical reflection issues relating to the epistemic sovereignty of Africa within the global geography of knowledge and knowledge production as provoked by this publication. My issues revolve around a contention on the measurement or criteria for

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judgement of progress in philosophy as applied to a polemical vision of an evolving and maturing African Philosophy, as presented by the editors.

Will African philosophy be deemed to have progressed when it assumes a global cosmopolitan identity, or when portrayed as such, as the volume emblematically suggests? I found it more than provocative that co-editor, Afolayan, contributed a chapter entitled 'African Philosophy, Afropolitanism, and Africa' (391-403) in which he surreptitiously endorses Achille Mbembe's African-identity-defusing Afropolitan campaign (Mbembe 2007).

Hinged around this critical observation of the reconstruction of African thought through the prism of Euro-American globalism, I shall restrict my commentary to the following: (1) the implication to the vexed philosophical question of 'Who is an African philosopher?' related to the criteria employed in the assemblage of the contributing authors; (2) The occasion and location of the production of the book, that is, the global economic-power dynamics that continue to determine the prospects of Africa's epistemic sovereignty, and; (3), interrogate the application of *relevance* as a quality of progress the editors used as a criterion and imperative which guided the selection of the articles.

As a prelude to this aforementioned disputation it is, of course, necessary that I give a summary overview of the structure of the volume and its contents.

Evaluations, Appraisals, and Re-Imaginations

The Handbook is a breath-taking assemblage of fifty original scientific contributions and commissioned papers from forty-three scholars of African post-colonial thought. The contributed chapters are arranged into five thematic parts.

The first part of the collection decidedly avoids the tendency of 'introducing and justifying African philosophy'. Far from this vindicationist, and exogenous pre-occupation, the opening six essays are bound together by a thematic title of being 'reappraisals'. Here African philosophy has attained a status of self-reassessment and self-critique. To underscore and crystallise the strategic purpose of this section, there is Safro Kwame's 'Rethinking the history of African Philosophy' (97-104).

Even the classical thoughts of Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, lack of reference to whom would render any anthology on African social thought incomplete, are subjected to a timely interrogation. This is performed by Teodoris Kiros' 'A Philosophical Re-reading of Fanon, Nkrumah, and Cabral in the Age of globalism and Postmodernity' (49-60).

Being hinged around the motif of globalisation, the anthology proceeds, in the second part of its collection, to position African philosophy in an interrogative dialogue with major worldviews from Africa, her diaspora and beyond. These range from A.G.A. Bello's 'Islamic Philosophy and the challenge of African Philosophy' (223-231) to the tackling of the semantic issue relating the naming of African philosophical enterprise as conducted in and

outside of Africa. Lucius Outlaw undertakes this in the contorted “Black” Philosophy, “African” Philosophy, “Africana” Philosophy: Transnational Deconstructive and Reconstructive Renovations in “Philosophy” (245-268).

A refreshing surprise in this section is a contribution by Latin American philosophy of decoloniality, Walter Mignolo. In his ‘The Advent of Black Thinkers and the Limits of Continental Philosophy’ (287-302) dealing with ‘the mirage of universalism behind European localism’ (293), he reminds how historically, the *global* was confused with the *universal* and in turn, how the universal is essentially Eurocentricism. He warns that ‘to assume that philosophy is universal is an aberration’ (287).

Mignolo’s rare focus on Africa is taken up by Messy Kebede in the third Part of the volume dealing with a plethora of ‘Issues and Discourses’ which are by now perennial challenges confronting African intellectuals. In the chapter, ‘Re-imagining the Philosophy of Decolonisation’ (447-460) we find Kebede seized with recasting ‘the controversy’ on conflicting philosophical approaches to African decolonization (447).

According to him, ‘the essential source of the controversy emanates from the attempt of negritude philosophers to counter the colonial discourse and rehabilitate the African self through racialisation’. Against this, he proposes Henri Bergson’s (454-455) paradoxical embrace and transcendence of the culturo-racial centrality of African identity.

This chapter turns out to be the only one in the collection that attempts a systematic engagement with the ontological challenges that globalisation presents to Africans. Kebede insightfully compresses Appiah’s famed notion of cosmopolitanism into a concept of ‘glocalization’, an approach that accommodates both global and local realities, and ‘wants neither the preservation of African identity nor its dissolution’ (456).

The mission of discharging the volume’s objective of situating African critical thought onto the pressing crises of the times and demonstrating that the African philosophical tradition has attained tools to tackle these issues is demonstrated in the fourth Part of the book. This is particularly borne out in the chapters ‘African Philosophy and World Terror’ by Leonard Praeg (659-670), Helen Lauer’s ‘African Philosophy and the Challenge of Science’ (605-620) and Edwin Etieyibo’s ‘Ubuntu and the Environment’ (638-659).

There can, of course, be no handbook on African Philosophy without a confrontation of the state of the Philosophy curriculum in Africa. ‘African Philosophy and the curriculum’ is the subject head of the seven papers clustered under this Part 5. Contributors in this field on the transformation of the Philosophy syllabus attempt to move the discussion into the rubric of pedagogic relevance and the future of African philosophy.

Emblematic of this focus is Thaddeus Metz’s ‘African Philosophy as a Multidisciplinary Discourse’ (795-812) wherein he surveys the ‘successful’ infusing of the African philosophical tradition into other disciplines, such as ‘law/politics . . . psychology/medicine . . . and ecology’(795).

Whilst it establishes the intellectual stature of African philosophy, the anthology lacks a formal article that problematizes globalisation as it affects Africa. A discussion of Afropolitanism by Afolayan merely touches the swelling sore of African social otology within a hype that denies identitarian difference. Equally, whilst the subject of science and technology is registered as a challenge, a chapter on the raw economic question of global financialisation of capital and the structural constraints African face in this global economy is conspicuously missing.

Globalization, Cosmopolitanism as Progress

The polemic editorial framework of Afolayan and Falola is that ‘progress in African philosophy would only be significant to the extent that it serves to intellectually instigate progress on the continent’ (12). This, specifically, is progress as the rate of the impact that philosophy has on the surmounting of ‘the African predicament’ of *being* African in a global community and a technologically advancing world (13).

It is upheld that it is only in this regard that this philosophy would be ‘disciplinary relevant’ (9). Relevance *to*, and *in* the global age, is upheld as the litmus test of the contemporary efficacy of African philosophy.

I concur with the editors that demonstrating an ability at unravelling the complicated economic theoretical formulae and programs that are ever proving so futile in turning the tide against poverty and misdevelopment in Africa, would be the real litmus test of the maturity of African Philosophy.

I believe there is sincerity in Afolayan and Falola’s exhortation that ‘there is a need for African philosophers to get to the street and get their theories dirtied by the African predicament on the continent’ (12). But how can this be achieved when those who are Afrophilosophising are sitting in Florida, Austria and the Europeanised enclaves of South African life?

Has this African discipline made any progress when approximately twelve out of forty-three of the contributors to this important reference guide on contemporary African thought are non-indigenous Africans? Is this staging of an extra-African cosmopolitan symposium that poly-flexes and dims the light of African intellection a sign of the progress of African philosophy?

Whilst admiring the theoretical necessity of this publication as a plausible catalyst for a progressive philosophical debate, I remain with a nagging sociocultural curiosity. I cannot help asking why, besides Godfery Tangwa, the only authors who contributed more than one chapters to ‘The Handbook on African Philosophy’ are, Metz, Praeg, Lauer, and Hosthemke.

In consternation, I ploughed through Tangwa’s two chapters on this matter, ‘African Philosophy: appraisal of a recurrent problematic’ (19-34) which addresses the question of

who is an African philosopher, and his ‘Revisiting the Language Question in African Philosophy’ (pp129-140). I found his dismissive trivialisation of the former question troubling (30). I further pondered on his fractured disputation that we must make do with the compromise that a lack of a certain level and kind of proficiency in English (and any European language) as the language of African academic production under-privileges indigenous African thinkers.

His conclusion that no answers have yet been found to the question: “What is African literature [Philosophy]? Is it literature [Philosophy] about Africa or literature [Philosophy] written by Africans?” (p130) has only compounded this haunting curiosity.

In a recent review of Edwin Etieyibo’s essay ‘African Philosophy: Its history, Context, and Contemporary Times’ in *Method, Substance and the Future of African Philosophy* (Etieyibo 2016, 13-34) Anke Graness, professor at the University of Vienna, engages in an intense critique of Etieyibo’s attempts at defining ‘what is an African philosopher’ (Graness 2018,47). Dismissing the latter’s vain disquisition about the ‘narrow view’ and ‘broader view’ of an African philosopher, Graness concludes that:

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. (ibid).

The critical existential-epistemic crisis relating to the authenticity of knowledge production, the question of ‘who is the producer?’ is resolved into the economic logic of academic survival. Graness proceeds to elaborate that a philosopher on the African continent who, according to her example, is ‘a 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.

Is this all that it comes down to? Is it a fact that until African scholarship and institutions have their own African financial fountains, we will forever have to have themes, books and conferences whose leitmotif will be dictated from the ‘developed North’? Elsewhere, employing a Marxian framework, I alerted of the ramifications of international post-colonial economic and political power relations on the emergence of epistemic hegemonies and the regulation of knowledge consumption, that is, the determination of canonicity in a discipline such as philosophy (see Lamola 2016).

We finally, then, have to ask: Has African philosophy really progressed, or can it ever progress if publication compendia that canonizes stages of its development can only be

undertaken by publishing interests that are based in the colonial metropolises? Why the Blackwell and the Palgrave Macmillan collected volumes? Will we ever have a ‘Wakanda¹ Handbook on African Thought’?

Conclusion

Within the context of the ambition of this project, Godfery Tagwa’s two chapters referred to earlier (19-34; 129-140) illustrate the existential aporia in which African philosophy finds itself. These, and the issue of the location of Africa within the matrix of commercial interests in global knowledge production, begs the question of whether, with the suggested cosmopolitanism that is driven by imperial values and languages, will we ever have a genuine African philosophy. A consideration of these issues, which could not be rigorously pursued in this book review, leaves us with a sceptical if not a pessimistic disposition on the possibility of a genuine, let alone, authentic, African philosophy.

My predilection is that until we have an *epistēmē* that is crafted and articulated in an African language by persons whose lived-experience is embedded in Africa, and/or what Africa represents to the world, we may never be able to claim having a genuine African philosophy. The representation of African philosophy as a centreless, open-ended, free-to-all enterprise, as in *The Palgrave Handbook*, militates against this goal.

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¹ The mythical technologically and economically futuristic African country in the movie *The Black Panther*

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