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What Is 'Genuine' African Philosophy? An Answer to John Lamola

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In his review of the *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, edited by Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola (2017), South African philosopher John Lamola regrets that the volume does not contribute to the task of developing a 'genuine African philosophy'. But what is a 'genuine' philosophy, whether it be African, European, Asian, or any other? Or to put it in a different way, what makes a philosophy 'genuine'?

### Conditions of Original Genuineness

According to Lamola, the precondition for a 'genuine African philosophy' is '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'. On the basis of this tentative definition and Lamola's critique of the volume, I would first like to discuss some of the achievements and shortcomings of *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, then return to the question of 'genuine' philosophy.

*The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy* tries to cover a wide range of topics. The first part, 'Preliminaries and Reappraisals', includes essays which discuss such fundamental subjects as the issues that confront historians of African philosophy ('Rethinking the History of African Philosophy', by Safro Kwame); the difficulties posed by the use of indigenous and colonial languages in intellectual life ('Revisiting the Language Question in African Philosophy', by Godfrey Tangwa); and the diverse concepts of logic in African cultures ('The Question of African Logic: Beyond Apologia and Polemics', by Jonathan O. Chimakonam).

It also traces major trends in twentieth-century African philosophy in essays that discuss influential philosophers and their works, including 'A Philosophical Re-reading of Fanon, Nkrumah, and Cabral in the Age of Globalization and Postmodernity', by Teodros Kiros; 'Africanizing Philosophy: Wiredu, Hountondji, and Mudimbe', by Dismas Masolo; and 'Oruka and Sage Philosophy: New Insights in Sagacious Reasoning', by Gail Presbey.

Part II of the handbook, 'Philosophical Traditions and African Philosophy', introduces specific philosophical traditions of the continent, including essays on classical Ethiopian philosophy (by Teodros Kiros, 181–206) and Islamic philosophy (by A.G.A. Bello, 223–230), and discusses ideas developed in the diaspora, including Afrocentricity (by Molefi K. Asante, 231–244), African philosophy (by Lucius T. Outlaw, 245–268), or presents examples of comparative philosophy, for example Confucianism and African philosophy (by Thaddeus Metz, 207–222).

Part III is topic-centred and includes articles on African Feminism (by Louise du Toit and Azille Coetzee, 333–348, and Olayinka Oyeleye, 349–370), philosophy and sexuality (by Workineh Kelbessa, 371–390), nationalism (by Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, 405–416), communitarianism (by Ifeanyi Menkiti, 461–474), Ubuntu (by Leonhard Praeg, 493–506), African cinema (by Adeshina Afolayan, 525–538) and the philosophy of science (Helen Lauer, 539–553).

Part IV, entitled 'African Development and African Philosophy', presents essays on such urgent issues of our time as good leadership ('Supporting African Renaissance: Afrocentric Leadership and the Imperative of Strong Institutions', by Lesiba Teffo, 557–570), democratic governance ('Africa and the Philosophy of Democratic Governance', by Polycarp Ikuenobe, 571–584) and the environment (*Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism): An African Environmental Theory*', by Michael O. Eze, 621–632, and 'Ubuntu and the Environment', by Edwin Etieyebo, 633–658), as well as terrorism ('African Philosophy in a World of Terror', by Leonhard Praeg, 659–670) and peace ('Yorùbá Conception of Peace', by Adebola B. Ekanola, 671–680).

The last part of the book is entirely dedicated to essays on the challenges of including African philosophy in the curricula of our universities and schools (for example, 'Teaching African Philosophy and a Postmodern Dis-Position', by Philip Higgs, 765–778, and 'An African Philosophy for Children: Towards a Situated Paradigm', by Amasa P. Ndofirepi, 779–794). The book closes with a 'Bibliographical Report on African Philosophy' (by Anthony O. Chukwu, 813–826). Including the index, there are more than 850 pages on African philosophy, but, apparently (for Lamola), there is no 'genuine' African philosophy in sight.

### **The State of the Tradition: African Philosophy**

In my opinion, the *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy* offers a comprehensive survey of the state of and debates in African philosophy by summarizing basic issues of doing African philosophy (particularly in Part I), presenting particular traditions of philosophy in Africa and the African diaspora (Part II), and discussing recent issues of philosophical interest in the twenty-first century from different angles (Parts III–V).

It is a valuable and timely contribution to a task which started back in the 1980s with *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, edited by Richard A. Wright (1984), and continued with *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, edited by Emmanuel C. Eze (1998), and the well-known Blackwell *Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu (2004). A similar project is the lesser-known but extremely rich two-volume *Reclaiming the Human Sciences and Humanities through African Perspectives*, edited by Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho (2012), which although it transcends the discipline of philosophy, includes a majority of articles on philosophical topics, many of them written by influential African and non-African philosophers of our time.

Anthologies on African philosophy are designed to provide the academic community with 'an up-to-date go-to source on African philosophy in the global age'—as Lamola puts it (Lamola, 39). Lamola's comment is intended to be rather critical, but I think it is a good description and even a compliment for a volume which is meant to serve as a tool for teaching and research in African philosophy. Teaching and research depend on such 'up-to-date go-to' sources.

The new volume differs from previous collections in that questions which dominated the discourse for decades—Is there an African philosophy? What is 'African' in African philosophy? What are the traits that distinguish a philosophy as 'African'?—have been set

aside completely or are mentioned only in summaries of closed debates (see the introduction by Afolayan and Falola, 1-16; 'African Philosophy: Appraisal of a Recurrent Problematic', 19-33, and 'Revisiting the Language Question in African Philosophy', 129-40, both by Godfrey Tangwa; and 'Rethinking the History of African Philosophy', 97-104, by Saforo Kwame). The focus is definitely on recent work in African philosophy.

### **A View of Lamola's Critiques**

But it is not the thematic range of the content that Lamola criticises. At the centre of his concerns are 'issues relating to the epistemic sovereignty of Africa' (39). Lamola asserts that 'the reconstruction of African thought is carried out in *The Handbook* through the prism of Euro-American globalism', and thus, that global economic power dynamics continue to determine the prospects of Africa's epistemic sovereignty (40). Among the anthology's faults he includes not only the lack of 'a formal article that problematises globalisation as it affects Africa', but also the choice of topics and authors, which seems to him to reflect a dependency on Euro-American epistemes (42).

Lamola concurs with the editors that there is a need for African philosophers to be deeply entangled in the realities on the African continent, but he asks, '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?' (42)

I completely agree with Lamola that this is indeed a problem—even though in an ideal world it shouldn't be, since the study of philosophical topics should be guided by interests and not dependent on the origin of the philosopher. I think limiting each philosopher to the study of the traditions of his or her own cultural context is not really helpful, and to do so would destroy the philosophical enterprise of wondering and seeking the roots of knowledge about our world.

I also wonder if Lamola would raise the same objections about an anthology on classical German philosophy authored by a group of mostly non-German, anglophone writers—which is actually the case with any given handbook on Kant. Would Lamola suggest that, for example, Kant's philosophy is part of the universal heritage of humanity, accessible to anyone who would like to deal with it, but African philosophy is not? Should we measure European and African philosophy with different scales? Such an approach would relegate African philosophy to the curio cabinet once again.

### **An Intersectional Parry**

As I mentioned above, I agree with Lamola's concerns about the (cultural, politico-economic) background of the handbook's authors. As long as we are not living in an ideal world and *colonial* structures persist in the academic landscape, we must pay attention to them, even in respect of the contributors to a volume. However, what Lamola does not

notice and therefore does not criticise—but should—is the fact that the author list is dominated by men.

Philosophers differ not only in their geographical and socio-political backgrounds, but also in gender. Altogether, there are only seven women whose work is included in this publication: three white philosophers from the US and Europe, two white philosophers from South Africa, and only ONE black African, a doctoral philosophy student from Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> My apologies for referring to skin colours here, but unfortunately, skin colour, like gender, still matters—even in academe.

Interestingly, the list of female contributors seems to reflect quite well the global asymmetries of academe. Moreover, the three African women's essays were about African feminism—of course! What else would women philosophers write about? Many of our male colleagues still seem unable to imagine that women deal with a wide range of philosophical issues. Where are all the distinguished black African women philosophers one would expect to appear in such an important work?

Sophie Oluwole (unfortunately passed away in Dec. 2018), Nkiru Nzegwu, Betty Wambui, Tanella Boni, to mention only a few, all 'genuine' philosophers with 'genuine' philosophy PhDs—none of them contributed to the handbook. Editors should make more of an effort to include their female African colleagues in such important publications! I can practically repeat here my sentence above: as long as we are not living in an ideal world and *patriarchal* structures persist in the academic landscape, we must pay attention to gender, even in respect of the contributors to a book.

### **Definitions of African**

But back to Lamola: For Lamola, the definition of 'African philosopher' remains crucial; the validity of the knowledge depends upon the background (or even ethnicity) of the person who produces it. Lamola disagrees with my statement (Graness 2018) that a definition of the term 'African philosophy' is crucial because the continental affiliation of those who practise philosophy in Africa is less important than the definition and demarcation of the content.

I base my argument on—among other things—the question of the distribution of financial resources, arguing that an African Wittgenstein specialist would certainly have plenty of funding possibilities available via various kinds of funding foundations and research programmes in such things as analytic philosophy, philosophy of language, and continental philosophy, whereas an African philosopher dealing with marginalised and formerly excluded African philosophical traditions would have hardly any funding prospects at all.

Lamola asks: '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"?' Now, in a tentative attempt to answer Lamola's intriguing questions: No, of course not, funding is

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<sup>1</sup> However, one of the US philosophers, Helen Lauer, has lived and worked for decades in Africa and is thus much closer to African realities than African philosophers who have lived and worked for decades in the US.

not all it comes down to. Nevertheless, knowledge production always emerges in specific economic and political power relations, as well as in a situation of epistemic hegemonies.

Knowledge never emerged in a vacuum, but always under very concrete historical, political, and economic conditions, as well as under historically shaped conditions of cultural and epistemic domination.<sup>2</sup> It would be fatal to ignore this and to assume that one could produce knowledge independently and autonomously, that is, free from these conditions. Only a critical distance from the conditions of knowledge production frees us to a certain degree and enables us to criticise or change those conditions. Once the canonizing power of certain factors is recognised, such factors can be changed. (Graness 2015)

### **Does Definition Create a One-Dimensional Human?**

Moreover, I do not reject the importance of the origin of an author, but I do think that origin or background means far more than geography. Class, race, and gender are aspects with the same relevance which, moreover, point to power hierarchies within a certain geographical or social context like the academe.

Indeed, what I criticise is the one-dimensionality of attempts to define who an African philosopher is or might be that are based on a question which ignores other determinants of a speaker's positioning and discounts the mobility of human beings and the personal and intellectual exchange between humans. Such attempts also ignore the existence of a large number of multicultural people who grew up at the intersection of bordering cultures, countries, or even religions and are at home in more than one.

Furthermore, Lamola strongly criticises the criteria for measuring progress in philosophy that were suggested by the editors Afolayan and Falola in their introduction. He objects to the fact that the editors uphold 'relevance *to* and *in* the global age [...] as the litmus test of the contemporary efficacy of African philosophy' (42). I think Lamola's critique does not do justice to the editors' rather extensive discussion of the question of the possibility of progress in philosophy, a discipline where Plato and Aristotle are as current and influential as they were 2000 years ago.

The authors suggest that progress in philosophy cannot be measured by the same criteria as in science, where the accumulation of knowledge is one decisive criterion of progress. Like John Kekes, they suggest considering philosophy a 'problem-solving enterprise' for generating solutions to perennial problems (10), specifically problems of the human condition.

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<sup>2</sup> As much as I personally like the film *Black Panther*, Lamola's reference to a Hollywood blockbuster in the midst of his complaints about hegemonies and the control of knowledge consumption is not without irony. The African country 'Wakanda' was invented in part to serve strong commercial interests operating in a matrix of profound asymmetries of power. The film earned \$1.35 billion worldwide, becoming the ninth highest-grossing film of all time, precisely because its story reverses these power asymmetries.

I think we cannot neglect the fact that globalization, climate change, and other vast, all-encompassing challenges are the basic human issues of our time – of our human condition – for which philosophers worldwide must seek solutions. African philosophers cannot and should not ignore those challenges.

Moreover, Afolayan and Falola's admonition that African philosophy, if it is to be relevant, must face Africa's problems instead of losing itself in sophisticated argumentation or indulging in 'the joy of internal philosophical squabbles' (13) could be directed to present-day European and North American analytic philosophers as well. Even though I do not agree with Lamola's critique of Afolayan and Falola, I think that his quest for an independent African episteme raises important questions, namely, has African philosophy really progressed, or can it ever progress if anthologies that canonise its developmental stages can only be undertaken by publishing interests that are based in the colonial metropolises?

### **Following the Markets to Uncomfortable Places**

And why are these collections being published by global entities like Blackwell and Palgrave Macmillan? *The Handbook* was published, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) would say, 'on this side of the line', that is, in the global North, whereas the content, the thinking, comes from 'the other side of the line', the global South.<sup>3</sup>

It is indeed an interesting question: why have publishing houses like Palgrave, Routledge, and Oxford University Press recently shown a growing interest in publishing Handbooks and Encyclopaedias of African philosophy and African thought?

A positive explanation for this would be that there is a growing consciousness that students and researchers of the intercultural dimension of philosophy require appropriate resources in order to make their discipline bear fruit. A rather negative view would be that there is a new awakening of interest in the exotic Other, accompanied by renewed efforts to subject the thinking of the Other to a neocolonial episteme. This latter seems to be Lamola's fear.

At this point let me return to the question of a 'genuine African philosophy'. What makes a philosophy genuinely African? That it is 'crafted and articulated in an African language by persons whose lived-experience is embedded in Africa'? (44) At first glance, Lamola's definition seems to be plausible. A 'genuine European philosophy' would be in this case something that is crafted and articulated in a European language by persons whose lived experience is embedded in Europe. Does this definition describe traditions of European philosophy?

While it is correct that European philosophy is articulated in European languages—more often now in English than in the philosopher's mother tongue—however, historically and at present philosophers neither referred solely to their European lived experience nor reflected only on the significance of Europe to the rest of the world; they sought universally valid knowledge. In doing this, they often forget the contextuality of their thinking, but this is another problem which cannot be explored here.

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<sup>3</sup> Or at least partly, since some of the authors live and work in the global North.

That philosophers in Africa are extremely conscious about their own context and conditions of knowledge production, is certainly an advantage that can be fruitfully explored. But to reduce philosophy in Africa to lived experiences embedded in Africa alone, means to clip the wings of philosophy in Africa—and presumably this is not John Lamola’s aim.

## Conclusions

Lamola’s suggested definition of ‘genuine African philosophy’ seems very restrictive to me. Concerning the language question: Even though a *lingua franca* in academe is not a new phenomenon, for example, Greek, Latin, and Arabic were *linguae francae* in previous centuries, I would repeat here that the language question is not a trivial one in philosophy. (Graness 2015, 136) And it is surely not a problem only for African philosophers.

Since English has become the predominant academic language of our day, philosophers with different language backgrounds are increasingly forced to formulate and publish their ideas in English if they want to pursue an academic career. What Tangwa calls ‘linguistic pragmatism’ (Tangwa, 'Revisiting the Language Question', 135), that is, submission to the English language, is already an undeniable fact in academe worldwide.

For example, a considerable percentage of early-career German and Austrian philosophers who are under the age of 30 no longer publish in German. Even though a postcolonial situation like Africa's is completely different from the situation in former colonising countries like Germany, France, and Italy, submission to English will have similarly serious consequences for philosophy in them, too, consequences of which many European philosophers are not yet conscious.

They can learn a lot from African debates on the language question in philosophy. With Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o I strongly support the idea that it is necessary to use one’s mother tongue for artistic or scientific knowledge production; however, we cannot ignore that it is of equal importance to work and publish in the scientific language of our time in order to be part of the international discourse and not remain imprisoned in our language enclaves. The basis of fruitful scientific work is exchange; what is really needed is the investment of appropriate financial and human resources for translation work.

So, is it an expression of Africa’s epistemic sovereignty to produce philosophical thought in African languages and to make the African experience and its issues the focus of that thought? Yes! But this is not all. Another expression of Africa's epistemic sovereignty – which is of equal importance – is the discussion between intellectuals from Africa and elsewhere about issues of global interest, from their own diverse perspectives, in the language of their choice.

From its beginnings to the present, in all the different regions of the world, philosophy has been the result of intercultural interaction, and it will continue to be even more so in a world in which interdependence in everything—history, economy, politics, ecology, and all other

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aspects of life—will only increase, making regions no longer able to exist in isolation—or able to do so only artificially. We cannot ignore our world's new level of interconnectedness.

Even though Lamola criticises 'The representation of African philosophy as a centreless, open-ended, free-to-all enterprise, as in *The Palgrave Handbook*', (44) I think that philosophy should be exactly that: a centreless, open-ended, free-to-all enterprise, wherever people in this world philosophise.

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