Review of “The African Philosophy Reader”

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The most distinctive feature of this anthology is that the editors have presented the ongoing philosophical debate in Africa to a more multicultural audience in this edition than they did with the first. They have achieved this feat by addressing the dialogue to more diverse worldviews and life experiences and by reflecting the existential conditions not only in post-colonial Africa but also in post-apartheid South Africa within the contexts of the 21st century and globalization.

This comprehensive multiculturalism is best reflected throughout the chapters in a kind of dualism rightly termed “antiphony” by the editors. It features such contrasting voices as the dominant vs. discordant, Black South African vs. White South African, and Anglophone vs. Francophone. Other contrasting voices include Western vs. Non-western, modernism vs. postmodernism, particularism vs. universalism and traditional vs. contemporary.

The book consists of eight large chapters, each with five to nine papers from well-seasoned African researchers and writers. They include Professors Abiola Irele, Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, Kwame Appiah, Odera Oruka, Gail M. Presbey, Ali Mazrui and Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka.

The chapter headings are:

- Chapter 1: Discourses on Africa
- Chapter 2. Trends in Africa
- Chapter 3. Metaphysical Thinking in Africa.
- Chapter 4. Epistemology and the tradition in Africa
- Chapter 5. Morality in African Thought
- Chapter 6. Race and Gender
- Chapter 7. Justice and Restitution in African Political Thought
- Chapter 8. African in the Global Context

Chapter 1 features various foundational discourses in African Philosophy. The main argument in this chapter as borne by the nine essays is that while it is important to reject the negative images of the African and African culture mere rejection is not enough. Examples of the negative images are evident in the thought and practice of European racism, slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and their impact on Africa and Africans. Many contemporary African writers have
rightly rejected these negative images through Critical Theory, Negritude and Afrocentrism etc, but it has become even more important to transcend this form of discourse in favor of cultural pluralism or what Oruka terms “trans-cultural consciousness.”

The lead chapter in this section is that of Mogabe B. Ramose, ‘The Struggle for Reason.’ He traces the tendency of the European to deny rationality (the mastery of logic, reason and science) and hence human ontology and dignity to African and other non-Europeans to Aristotle. Aristotle maintained not only that rationality was a necessary condition for being human but also that it was non-existent among Blacks. On this premise he argued that slavery was justified because it was in the interest of Blacks to have ‘white’ masters for guidance.

The rest of the authors agree with Ramose that this false and pernicious consciousness has been nurtured over the centuries by such influential philosophers as Hume, Kant, and Hegel and has served as the rationale for slavery, colonialism discrimination and other forms of Eurocentrism and domination. For example, Irele presents Negritude not as a mere negative rejection of Eurocentrism and Africa’s alienation as the “Other”, but as an inclusive cultural ideology contributing towards the evolution of “broader humanism” and “a civilization of the Universal.” Similarly, Wiredu argues not only against the Eurocentric rejection of African Traditional Religion as a valid form of religion, but also calls for the decolonization of African Theology. Although Wiredu identifies himself (in other contexts) as an atheist, his aim here is far from hostile to Christian theologians and philosophers. His aim is to call attention to wrongness of certain narrow conceptions of religion held within African Christian Theology so that it could admit of religious pluralism. A wider conception of religion, he argues, will also more accurately reflect the diversity of beliefs about the Supreme Being held in Africa, including skeptical and atheistic viewpoints. In the same spirit Thiongo argues for the pluralism of cultures while Steve Biko call for “a true humanity” in which all races and cultures are respected.

Reflecting on the current political scene, Ramose states “the condescender currently manifests the will to dominate through the imposition of democratization, globalization, and human right.” [P.2) That Ramose is not opposed to these liberal values per se but the method of imposition by military and economic might is borne in his cautionary follow-up statement; that (the catch-all concept) ‘democracy’ became inadvertently the route towards the inhumanity and irrationality of the holocaust. While the comparison with the Nazi aggression is a little overstretched, the caution is timely and necessary for introducing a dose of moderation to curb the hawkish tendencies within the corridors of power bent on the hurried democratization of Iraq at virtually any cost.

The overall lesson from this chapter could not have been articulated better than in the following quote from one of Aimee Cesaire’s famous poems used by Unguji Wa Thiong’ O, “There is no race which held for all time the monopoly of beauty, intelligence, and knowledge; and that there was a place for all at the rendezvous of victory, human victory.”

Chapter Two discusses the main trends in African Philosophy and identifies them as Ethno-Philosophy, Philosophic Sagacity, Nationalist-Ideological and Philosophy, and Professional Philosophy. The issues here are by no means new, having appeared in all or most of the anthologies and texts for African Philosophy for the last three decades. Together they affirm the existence of African Philosophy as a proper philosophical sub-field, as worthy of recognition as French Philosophy, British Philosophy, Russian Philosophy and similar sub-fields. There is however no
consensus on which of the trends satisfies the necessary conditions for being part of Philosophy or what those conditions must be. Hountondji for example, insists that a written tradition as well as the analytic-scientific tradition are necessary for any orientation to qualify as ‘Philosopher proper’. Another trend, which qualifies as any other, is missing from the list: The Historical Hermeneutical Philosophy. This is exemplified in the works of Leonard Harris, and Lucious Outlaw and is largely responsible for uncovering and publicizing the implicit and nuanced racism within the writings of various European philosophers from ancient times to the present including Aristotle, Hume, Kant and Hegel.

The best attempt to resolve the demarcation debate on what is and is not African Philosophy I know is that by Professor Kwame Gyekye. He argues for an inclusive approach that recognizes Ethno-philosophy (the most controversial of all the trends) as Traditional African Philosophy since it does not lack the critical reflection required of all philosophical discourses. Taking that as the starting point he makes the case for incorporating all the other trends as part of a continuum that culminates in contemporary African Philosophy with its multiple methodologies and issues.

Although philosophical debates can hardly be resolved by fiat, the recognition given to African Philosophy by the American Philosophical Association, the world most popular and influential philosophical organization cannot be ignored or taken lightly. By its formal recognition of Africana (African and African-American) Philosophy in 1986 as a university course for the award of PhD in the US, the APA has effectively taken the bite out of this debate. Consequently, the burden of proof for showing why Africana Philosophy is not part of Philosophy proper now lies not with the African Philosopher or his sympathizer, but with the skeptics and the exclusivists.

Consequently, many African scholars (including myself) have consequently resolved to move on towards more substantive issues in philosophy. Our focus in research and teaching now is or should be in response to the existential conditions in Africa through the framework of Social and Political Philosophy, Africa’s Recent Experience, and more recently, Philosophy of Development and Development Ethics. [See for example, Joseph Osei, *Contemporary African Philosophy and Development*, Ann Arbor, UMI 1991]

Chapter 3. focuses on examples of metaphysical thinking in Africa. Metaphysical thinking is unquestionably the gateway to African philosophy. It is the first place for any one seriously looking for the existence of philosophical thinking in Africa could go for the most compelling evidence. For here, the people - sophisticated and unsophisticated - raise and discuss the most fundamental questions of philosophy regarding the existence of a creator (God or Supreme Being) and other divine beings. They also discuss issues of destiny, freewill, cause, responsibility, the existence of evil, the purpose of life, and the nature of a person. For example, the question is raised whether a person is purely a physical being or dualistic with a spiritual or non-material aspect called soul or mind.

Such discussions may be heard not just in formal lecture rooms, seminars, and churches, and local radio talk shows. They are also heard in palm-wine and other drinking bars, Village Squares and in the palaces of traditional rulers notable for eloquent and wise elders. Their metaphysical discussions are often heard within the context of religious and moral issues. Such themes are well covered by the essays in this chapter. The comparisons between the particularistic conceptual schemes of the Yoruba and the Akan are useful in showing the similarities and the differences between their
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respective metaphysical worldviews.

In order to pave the way for science in Africa, however, it’s not enough to describe or to compare these metaphysical concepts or to introduce new categories such as “primary cause” and “secondary cause” as Sogolo does in ‘The Concept of Cause in African Thought.’ The more important contribution to the discourse should be how to analyze and re-conceptualize these numerous ontologies or beliefs so that they are assets rather than obstacles to scientific thinking as some of them have proved to be.

Examples of this kind of analytic or critical metaphysics can be found in such works as Sodipo’s ‘Notes on the Concept of Cause and Chance in Yoruba Traditional Thought’ Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy (1975). Sodipo distinguishes between ‘personal’ explanations and scientific explanations and cautions about letting the personal explanation take over too soon from the scientific explanation. He also discourages letting the personal explanation dominate or overshadow the scientific explanations by deferring to them only as last resort when all attempts at scientific or (humanly) rational explanations seem to have failed. Another contribution of this kind dealing with the concepts of destiny, the Supreme Being, and the gods etc. from the analytic perspective can be found in Kudadjie and Osei’s chapter on ‘Understanding African Cosmology...’ in Faith, Science & African Culture: African Cosmology and Africa’s Contribution to Science, C.W.Du Toit editor, (UNISA, 1998).

Chapter 4 is about epistemological issues and the tradition in Africa. The large space given for discussing epistemological issues in this book is well deserved since it was on the grounds of the African’s alleged epistemological incompetence that the question of the possibility of African philosophy began in the first place. The key question in this regard is whether or not the African is rational in the sense of possessing logical skills, wisdom, and capable of scientific thinking.

All the authors in this chapter address this issue and conclude that rationality so construed has never been lacking in traditional African thought, past or present. The evidence includes references to logical principles such as modus ponens and the laws of consistency and non-contradiction without which inter-cultural discourses would be impossible or meaningless.

Consequently, they all reject the attempt by Senghor and other African writers to define the African as essentially emotional in contrast to the Greek/white who is essential rational. To paraphrase the argument by Kaphagawani and Malherbe, if the European could not recognize rationality in the traditional African, it is only because the European mind (and not the African mind) was closed. The two authors have also captured the trend of Africa’s epistemological thinking in what they term, the “C4 factor: Contemporary Confluence of Cultures on the Continent.”

Once we recognize the new reality on the continent, as no longer homogenous or mono-ethnic (if it ever was), but multi-ethnic and pluralistic, no longer traditional, but modern, we are logically led to reject any form of ethno-centric and epistemology. And this includes the kind of ethnocentric epistemology once advocated by Molefi Kete Asante’s as part of Afrocentrism in the Diaspora. I’ Such narrowly conceived epistemologies do not only generate confusion, they also undermine confidence in well-established facts and scientific objectivity in general.

After rejecting such extremist and ethnocentric epistemologies, the new epistemological challenge
becomes two-fold: First is the challenge of comparing, criticizing, and synthesizing the traditional and the modern theories of truth and knowledge etc. as Wiredu does in The Concept of Truth in Akan Language. Second, and more importantly for the African, is using these new epistemological theories and principles as guidance for thought and action, especially in science and technology as well as in ethics. We can also apply them to socio-economic and political thinking to promote (total) development. As Wiredu has observed elsewhere, there should be no shame in borrowing and adapting scientific models and ideas from the West or anywhere, “for the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing.”

Chapter 5 discusses Morality in African Thought. When African scholars describe the traditional moral orientation as communitarian as distinct from the individualistic ethos of the West, critics often attack it as a form of communism. Others think it is individualism suppressed by traditional African authoritarianism. Such distortions of the traditional ethos have been corrected with the essays showing the communitarian ethics to be authentic African values based on their indigenous metaphysical assumptions. In the case of the Akans of Ghana, these include their normative conceptions of personhood, (nipa,) and the tripartite conception of a person as body, signified by blood from the mother) soul, (signified by okra from the Creator) and spirit (entoro signifying the personality of the father).

These metaphysical beliefs serve as the basis of a network of family, extended-family and kinship relationships that help define individual and communal identities and obligations as well as their corresponding individual and communal rights. One distinction between the two ethical systems noted by Professor Kwame Gyekye is worth stressing. Whereas the West derives obligations from rights because of the primacy of place given to individualism, the African communal system derives rights from the moral obligation because of the primacy of place given to communalism.

The emphasis on human rights in most of the essays in this chapter is significant for three main reasons. First, it shows that communalism may share some of the social bonding and sharing associated with communism but is by no means co-terminus with it since communism lacks the human rights ethic. Second, the metaphysical foundation for the moral orientation shows beyond reasonable doubt that human rights in the African context is neither borrowed nor veiled western individualism which for the most part lacks communal bonding and caring. Third it shows that those who contend that Africa lacks a human rights tradition and cannot consequently sustain democracy for which such a transition is essential are wrong. (See Gyekye’s essay, ‘Traditional Political Ideas and Values: An Examination of Their Relevance to Development in Contemporary African Political Order,’ in Culture and Modernity,1990.)

Readers interested in detailed analysis of the human rights tradition and a comparison of the key concepts with those found in western jurisprudence may want to look at ‘The Philosophical Bases of Human rights in Akan Traditional Ethics’ by Joseph Osei in Human Rights in Ghana, Frederich Ebert Foundation, Accra, 1998.

Chapter 6. deals with the touchy issues of Race and Gender. Many Black African women are not only combating economic oppression and racism with their male counterparts, they also have to bear the extra-burden of gender oppression and discrimination from their own people, especially the wise and elderly in authority to protect them. Thanks to Marxist analysis colonialism and economic oppression and exploitation in all their forms have now be uncovered and are now being confronted...
by all the means at our disposal. Also thanks to liberal analysis and criticisms, apartheid and other forms of racist oppression on the continent and in the Diaspora have lost their stranglehold. The arguments of W. E. DuBois as modified and amplified by Kwame Appiah with more contemporary scientific evidence have proved the fallacies of racist theories and arguments beyond any reasonable doubt. They have also clearly shown that those who disregard the counter-arguments and still hold on to racism do so not because they any longer believe their racism to be rational but merely as a form rationalizing or comforting ideology.

The same however cannot be said of female domination on the continent even at the beginning of the 21st century, despite the best efforts of the Christian missionaries and other well-intentioned Western educators for the last two centuries. Some of the means of female control and patriarchal domination are hidden in idioms, proverbs, myths, and sacred or wisdom texts whose true origins and meanings are not to be questioned by the ‘uninitiated.’ Since most women do not qualify for the initiation necessary for their own enlightenment, the implication is that they are doomed to submit to the ‘wisdom’ of the traditional elders all the days of their lives. But help is on the way. With the research and critical writing of concerned non-African women such as Gail Presbey, there is hope the plight of the least known of these women will be exposed to critical scrutiny by philosophers and others until their yoke under traditionalism and patriarchy is broken. Her research takes her to inner cities as well as villages in rural Africa where many fear to go. Instead of imposing western values or standards on the people, as many Westerners do and alienate the people they re trying to help, her approach is drawing attention to indigenous sayings and writings from both male and females within the native traditions that challenge the status quo and become sources of female empowerment. This is exemplified in her article ‘Should Women Love Wisdom?’ as well as in her other writings such as ‘Contemporary African Sages and Queen Mothers: Their Leadership Roles in Conflict Resolution,’ in Peacemaking, by Sally Scholz and Judith Presler eds. (2004).

Presbey does not only write and inspire African women to do the same on these issues but also draws attention to their efforts and thus makes them more effective weapons against oppression. Among these less known female ‘warriors’ she has brought to the center stage of philosophical discourse are Florence Hetzler, Sohia… Yeshi Mariam, (Ethiopian) Kavita Adgala (Kenyan) Adefioye Oyesakan (Nigerian), Florence Dolphyne,(Ghanaian) and Scyla Benhabib (Ethiopian).

With the fight against apartheid (virtually) over, more African intellectuals, Blacks and Whites now have the opportunity to join her and others in the fight for female liberation, and promote their education. With that Appiah’s vision of non-racial and non-sexist pluralism could soon be realized on the continent, so that one day our children could say, “In my father’s house (in Africa’s universities and centers of political and economic power) are many mansions”- for all races as well as for all genders.

The education of the African girl-child should be an overriding priority in all development theories for as the Ghanaian philosopher Dr Kwegyir Aggrey of Achimota College once stated: If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a, whole family.”

Chapters 7&8 deal with the question of reparation of compensatory justice for Africa and can therefore be conveniently discussed together. The authors examine the moral, legal and the
empirical or historical grounds for such a demand against the Europe/West. This leads to a thorough examination of Africa’s experiences from the time of European invasion, slavery, alienation in the Diaspora, apartheid, colonialism, neo-colonialism and the applicable moral and legal principles violated. The discussion extends to more contemporary experiences of faulty attempts at development or globalization based on questionable European models, and their negative impacts on African economies. These include deepening the twin evils of poverty and dependency. (The discussions do not include how to break out of the cycle of poverty and dependency. Readers interested in this issue are referred to Ali Mazrui’s book, *The African Condition* (1988) in which he defends a theory of modernization for Africa with seven counter dependency strategies. These strategies are critiqued, and adapted as part of a more general theory of development in Osei’s paper, ‘Towards the Philosophy of Development’ *Third World Studies Journal and Review*, 1994.)

The western affront is also according to Ramose, a violation of Africa’s traditional principle of Ubantu which is violated whenever we permit the profit motive philosophy to override the collective human welfare philosophy.

For these reasons, the authors call for (symbolic and substantive) reparation as a form of compensatory justice. The verbal apology expressed by the European states at the UN Conference on Race Relations held in South Africa in 2001, although boycotted by the US, may be seen in this light as part of the symbolic expression of the due reparation. The review and endorsement of Present Mbeki’s concept of African Renaissance towards the end of the book is an important feature of this book. For it could be deployed as the new guiding philosophy or ideology for Africa’s socio-economic and political integration that could also facilitate the demand for reparation and overall justice within the global village.

In view of its potential for accelerating Africa’s development, one should not be too concerned with what others might say about the origins of the terminology and whether it is borrowed from European history, as Ramose does (in ‘African Renaissance’: A Northbound Gaze) Those who prefer an African grounding for the concept can consider it as a derivation from the already familiar Akan concept, Sankofaism. The term literally means ‘the philosophy of going-back-for-it, and is based on a maxim that says, “It is not a taboo to go back for a (valuable) thing one has forgotten.” As long as the term can help mobilize all our moral and intellectual resources for Africa’s development, let no semantic obstacles stand in our way.

The second edition was published in Great Britain by Routledge and also in Southern Africa by Oxford University Press of South Africa (by special arrangement) in 2003. It has a total of 667 pages besides the3-page preface for the first edition and a 4-page preface for the second edition, both written by the editors P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux. Each paper, with few exceptions, ends with a comprehensive endnotes and list of references. Even more notable is the indexes of almost 17 pages in two columns, the most comprehensive to be found in any anthology in African Philosophy to date. It is identified by ISBN 0-415-96809-7.

Reflecting their common admiration for the traditional African virtues of non-selfishness and gratitude these philosophers have been careful not to limit the credit for their achievement to their own efforts, but have liberally extended it to the whole Department of Philosophy and the University of South Africa [UNISA] by acknowledging their funding and general support. To that extent this new edition, more than its predecessor, represents a celebration of African culture as well as a demonstration of UNISA’s commitment to reforming its curriculum and more importantly,
a determination to provide exemplary leadership in reforming the South African society and Africa at large.

In the spirit of the traditional African ethic of reciprocity we us reviewers and readers owe them a special debt of gratitude. This gratitude can best be expressed not in words, but in buying, reading, and recommending this book to the extended family of readers - in and out of Africa. This will ensure that their effort will not be in vain but bear more fruits for nourishing more minds for solving the myriad problems of Africa and our global village threatened by Tsunami and other natural and man-made disasters.

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