

PETER LANG

Beginning African Philosophy

THE CASE FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY
PAST TO PRESENT

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In 1994, Indiana University Press published D. A. Masolo's book, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. In the book, Masolo describes African philosophy as a debate driven by a desire to respond to Western discourse in which "Africa was depicted as a ready example of the opposite of the desirable heights already attained by Europe."¹ Besides touting reason as a rare achievement of Europeans, Masolo writes: "The debate evolved as claims and counterclaims, justifications and alienations passed between the two camps: Western and non-Western."²

Cognizant of these claims and counterclaims, the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, called for the need to clarify what African thinkers mean by 'African philosophy'; this he did during a UNESCO-sponsored African Philosophy conference in Nairobi, Kenya (1981). Wiredu repeats this call in his book, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (1996) and the *African Studies Quarterly* (1998). Because how one employs the expression 'African philosophy' does imply the existence of frameworks of thought or what he calls "communal philosophies,"³ some of which are unique to particular African groups, Wiredu writes:

It is, accordingly, the responsibility of contemporary philosophers to delve beneath the communal beliefs to find underlying reasons wherever possible.⁴

Although not a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word, one European who may have anticipated Wiredu's call to test the central question of the debate Masolo spoke of was Placide Tempels (1906–1977), a Belgian missionary who, in the 1930s and 1940s, was assigned to the Luba aka Baluba people who inhabit the towns and villages surrounding the Congo River basin. The Luba are a culturally heterogeneous group who share key elements of their languages, cultures and beliefs with the Bantu speaking peoples of east, central and southern Africa. These are tribesmen and women whose way of life left more than enough room for Tempels' imagination and curiosity.

Tempels did not leave us a completed treatise on the beliefs and rationality of the Bantu. He did not break new grounds the way Plato, Hegel, Rousseau, Kant, Sartre, and others did. But, unlike them, he did venture beyond the familiar concerns of his time. In so doing, he devised a project which, though not particularly philosophical, invites the bold and the curious amongst us to engage in a dialogue concerning the underlying reasons for some of Africa's communal beliefs.

Tempels' project was to ponder what he believed was at the core of African life and African beliefs. In the process, he sparked a long and controversial debate by which African philosophy would be defined long after him and long after colonialism. He arrived in Africa (1933) with the privileges and assurances of the colonizers of his time. And, although he was not impervious to the biases and prejudices of his Christian and European heritage, Tempels never took for granted what he found in Africa.

In hindsight, his efforts may have been visionary but not without the conflicting motives with which he arrived. As a Franciscan missionary, Tempels' primary goal was to Christianize the Bantu. As a European, however, he was aware that he would be perceived as one of the Europeans who had colonized Africa and were scheming to dismantle her soul.

Beyond the images of ignorance and savagery others had painted before him, Tempels saw instead a people attached to their customs and a unique way of life. He thought he could rely upon what he found to reconcile the competing motives of the missionaries and colonizers. Thus, he sought to erase the prevailing misconceptions and in the process pointed in the direction of how best to approach the ideas and beliefs of a hitherto unknown people. Ultimately, he left us a document that helped to pave the way to what we today call African philosophy.

That document was his *La Philosophie bantoue* or *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), consisting largely of Tempels' reflections on the Bantu outlook on the world. He insisted, this would allow his fellow Westerners (missionaries too) to revise their views about primitive⁵ societies. The goal, Tempels concluded, was to recover and articulate the deeper meaning of this unique outlook on the world. In his view, it was impossible to convert Africa to Christianity without first making an effort to understand Africans. So, despite the institutional barriers he had to straddle, Tempels was determined to do just that.

Essentially, Tempels' desire was to show that one could compare African beliefs to certain Christian and Western beliefs. This was so not because Tempels saw clear parallels between Western and African beliefs, but rather because he knew these beliefs had the potential to force us to engage in the sort of dialogue philosophers are likely to engage in. It goes without saying, then, that Tempels was aware that he would be criticized, even ridiculed, by those who thought he was forcing a comparison between philosophy and the study of a people's communal beliefs.

Indeed, Tempels was well aware of the hubbub about comparing African cultural ideas and beliefs to Christian and Western ideas and beliefs. In fact, the problem was more about the Catholic Church and its purpose in Africa than about anything Tempels had to say or do. The Church's mission, as one might expect, was not to validate Africa's practices and beliefs as Tempels was perceived to have done, but rather to convert Africa to Christianity.

Whatever the case about the content and quality of Tempels' work, it remains above all a challenge to explore not just a mass of primitive beliefs but also the attempt by Africans to understand the world. We can rely on these ideas as a bridge to their thoughts about human existence, their traditions, and their folk wisdom. As best as I can, my goal is to present that wisdom as a genuine expression of philosophical curiosity.

Thus, I have designed this book first to introduce college students, philosophy instructors and researchers to the field of African philosophy. It requires little or no familiarity with Africa, its people, or its intellectual heritage. From the question of the nature of reality to questions about the human person, morality, God, and so forth, it explores some of the major themes that have dominated African philosophical discourse over the years.

As a critical assessment of the content of African philosophy, moreover, this book provides an opportunity for integrating African philosophy into college courses focusing on the nature of reality, the human person, right and wrong, and the problem of God's existence. And, while it does not replace the existing literature in the field, it does however address some of the difficult questions Westerners often ask about African philosophical discourse. In so doing, this book provides insight into what Africans have had to say about these very important philosophical questions.

One problem which often follows this way of speaking and writing about Africa is that one might be tempted to view Africa as if it were a monolith. Ironically, however, it is conceivable to view Africa this way given that Europeans governed much of the continent up until the late 1960s and left in place the languages and systems by which Africans govern themselves even today.

But, Africa is more than the product of colonialism or neo-colonialism as some would have it. It is primarily the product of the genius or collective wisdom of its people. Part of my goal, therefore, is to be clear about what that wisdom entails, what it contributes to the African ethos, and whether we can reasonably rely on it to deduce a broad base of ideas that underpin the people's vision of reality, the human person, the good life, the moral life, God, and in short, their knowledge concerning the underlying reasons for their important beliefs.

Beginning with the Bantu, Tempels certainly thought there was such a genius or wisdom that could be credited to Africa and Africans. Benjamin Ray, former Yale University professor of religion, also believes this wisdom does exist and does enjoy its best expression in the art, lyrics, proverbs, aphorisms and folklore of

Africa.⁶ In this book I therefore try to piece together the African vision of the world which Tempels, Ray, and others say exists and is manifested in Africa's wisdom traditions.

Appropriately, in chapters one through five, I provide a synopsis of African wisdom based largely on Tempels' account of the Bantu worldview. In a limited way, I show in chapter six the extent to which Africans have gone to convey their knowledge of the nature of the human person. I do the same in chapters seven and eight, where I show the extent of similar efforts to decipher the nature of the good life and the moral life. Finally, in chapter nine, I focus attention on the important question of the existence of God.

Ultimately, my aim here was not to bring to an end the discussion concerning the content and structure of African wisdom and African philosophy. And, despite the prominent role I assign to Tempels in the opening chapters of this book, I do realize there are those who would not consider his work a guide to African philosophy. Knowing this, I recommend Teodros Kiros's book, *Zara Yacob: Rationality of the Human Heart* (The Red Sea Press, 2005), a well thought out discussion on the contribution of Ethiopian scholars to African philosophy.

Take also the case of Anton-Wilhem Amo, a Ghanaian who, according to Paulin Hountondji, lived and taught in the universities of Halle, Wittenberg and Jena in Germany between 1730 and 1740. His works, according to Hountondji, include the following: *Dissertatio inauguralis de jure Maurorum in Europa* (The Rights of Africans in Europe, 1729); *Dissertatio de humanae mentis apatheia* (On the Impassivity of the Human Mind, 1734); and *Tractatus de arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi* (On the Art of Philosophizing with Sobriety and Accuracy, 1738).⁷ And, while one might marvel at Amo's genius, one cannot help but notice that none of this is traceable directly to Africa or his native Ghana, where fellow Ghanaians such as Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye and others have relied on various European languages to explore the folk or pre-literate thought and traditions of the people of Ghana.

Take African-Americans whose works rightfully focus on their unique history or inheritance as Africans-Americans. Although their history might resemble that of Africa, they are likely to view it from an African-American perspective.⁸ The same might be said of the Ethiopians, Zara Yacob or Anton-Wilhem Amo who predate Tempels but who, like St. Augustine, were concerned with literate traditions outside Africa.

For an introductory text such as this one, I had hoped to stay clear of the politics of African philosophy. For that reason, I was happy to avoid the discussion about whether philosophy began in Egypt or Greece and whether to view a writer's race or nationality as a contributing factor to what counts as philosophy. What I have done instead is to draw attention to the important topics that might be raised in a first class or seminar in African philosophy. For this reason, I hope therefore

that I did not disappoint the reader who was expecting more than this book was designed to do. Overall, my hope is that both students and teachers will view this book as a crucial step toward deepening our understanding and appreciation of the traditional wisdom of Africa.