

**Race Ideology and the Conceptualization of
Philosophy: The Story of Philosophy in Africa from
Placide Tempels to Odera Orika**

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Abstract

Philosophy in Africa has come a long way. From the 18th and 19th centuries when it was totally ignored or denied altogether, to when it was given a lower status by ethnophilosophers. Today we talk proudly of an African philosophy. What is often forgotten is its history and the players behind its historical moments. This paper tells the story of how racial ideology had defined the course of philosophy in Africa. We are particularly concerned with telling the story of Henry Odera Oruka, and how he contributed to raising the status of philosophy in Africa.

Key words

African philosophy, Racial ideology, Chauvinism, Logocentrism, dystopia, Essentialism

Introduction

Since the publication of *Bantu Philosophy* by the Belgian Missionary Placide Tempels, a lot has been written concerning African Philosophy. Tempels' book sought to bring to an end the 'controversy' over the existence or non-existence of a philosophy among the 'primitive peoples'. This however led to the beginning of yet another controversial discourse within African Philosophy revolving around the question: *why did Tempels ascribe to Africans an inferior philosophy? Why did he find it necessary to assert that African philosophy is different from western philosophy?* The answer lies in the racial relationship between whites and blacks - what we shall refer to as the ideology of race.

We set out by examining the pioneering efforts on African philosophy. Our inquiry then confronts the question: what triggered the need for African self-definition? Next, we look at Oruka's identification of six theories in African Philosophy, and reflect on how they clarify the nature of Philosophy in Africa. We focus on the third theory, sage philosophy, for the reason that Prof Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2002) has identified the evolution of the theory from sage philosophy to philosophic sagacity. Our

conclusion is that the course of philosophy in Africa has been determined by racial ideology.

Tempels and the Setting of African Philosophy

Due to his *Bantu Philosophy* (1959), Placide Tempels has been honored for having brought forth the first piece of literature concerning “Bantu (African) Philosophy” into academic philosophical discussion (see Masolo 1995, 46; Masolo 2010, 144, 196, 33-34; Ochieng’-Odhiambo 2009, 44; Oruka 1990, 1). Tempels ‘discovered’ a philosophy among the Bantu, getting the honor, again, of being the first scholar of European origin to stand up against the 18th and 19th Century European rationalism and logo-centricism, in which only Europeans could produce a philosophy that was both human and rational. Hegel (1956, 99) represents the height of this trend of thought.

The story of Tempels’ contribution to the discourse on African philosophy has been told so many times that it has become practically impossible to hold a meaningful conversation on African philosophy without mentioning the ideas contained in *Bantu Philosophy*. This is true for those who support his position on philosophy in Africa as well as those critical of them (See Mbiti 1969, 10, 213; Oruka 1990, 1, 5-6, 114-118; Masolo 1994, 39, 42, 46-49; Hountondji 1996, 15-17, 34-37, 48-49, 56-57; Appiah 1992, 94).

A number of scholars have highlighted the positive contributions of Tempels’ pioneering work in African Philosophy, with one of the best examples of this evaluation being found in Mbiti (1969). Others find his language paternalistic and overbearing (Hountondji 1996, 34-37). Those sympathetic to his views are referred to as ethnophilosophers (Oruka 1990, 5-7, 23-24). Those who regard his work as falling below the threshold of what should pass as philosophical are referred to as professional philosophers (Oruka 1990; Masolo 1994; Hountondji 1996; Appiah 1992; Mudimbe 1988). This polarity is at the core of the struggle to control the direction of philosophy in Africa. Fearing that this struggle might obliterate all the gains made in African philosophy, Oruka proposed mediation via sage philosophy. In a paper titled “*Sagacity in African Philosophy*” first published in *The International*

Philosophical Quarterly (1983), and republished in Oruka's *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (1990), he observes:

Although the phenomenon of ethnophilosophy persists in *various forms*, we are currently in a new phase, the phase of professional philosophy One remarkable characteristic of this philosophy is that it employs techniques commonly associated with European or Western philosophy. Yet, contrary to the general claim, such techniques are not unique to the West (Oruka 1990, 35).

Oruka was worried that professional philosophers in Africa were becoming too metaphysical, demanding of African philosophy parameters that were unrealistically high. In addition, because professional philosophers' challenge to ethnophilosophy was becoming a threat to the development of philosophy in Africa, Oruka advised that the problem "calls for the current African and black philosophers to 'let one hundred flowers bloom.' The future will sort out those flowers and preserve a tradition" (Oruka 1990, 36).

For a long time, the question of the direction of African philosophy was resolved by attempts at demonstrating a racial rational ability or lack of it. It was a question of whether or not Africans have the same rational ability as Europeans. This rationality debate left one with a comparison based on an assumption that those who developed a philosophy or philosophies were better than those who did not. This is the absurd part of conversations in African philosophy, since the existence or non-existence of a philosophy does not and cannot establish rationality as an exclusive possession of any one culture (Oruka 1990, 14-15).

The question that one should address is whether philosophy is equivalent to rationality, and in defining philosophy as love of wisdom, whether or not all wise persons are philosophers; and if the answer is in the affirmative, whether or not the converse is true. Looking at the history of philosophy from Thales, through Plato, Aristotle, down to contemporary time, it is clear that philosophical views belong to individual critical thinkers, men and women who reflect on reality, social and natural, in a bid to transform, modify, or even reject current explanation. The philosopher's task is to rearrange knowledge. Tempels and the entire ethno philosophical school failed to see this in African philosophy. Their version of African philosophy is rich in content but scarce in individual input. Their theoretical framework fails the test of the

relationship between a philosophy and the philosopher. In this scheme, we have an African philosophy without a corresponding African philosopher. Who will own these truths? Who will defend these philosophical positions? Tempels has no answer.

In *The Mind of Africa*, William Abraham (1962) makes a distinction between a 'public philosophy' and a 'private philosophy'. The former he says is concerned with the traditional society, laying bare the communal mind. The latter is concerned with the thinking of individual philosophers (Abraham 1962, 104). To paraphrase Abraham, the African has his own conception of the universe, and his philosophy and life activities are based on this conception, which is a metaphysical view of the world as seen from the traditional society. Here Abraham is in agreement with Kwasi Wiredu, who identifies two phases in the evolution of society: traditional and modern (Wiredu 1980, 4, 16, 36).

The traditional phase presents a folk or pre-scientific view of life. This folk system of thought includes but is not limited to original unwritten proverbs, maxims, and palavers among others. It presents a closed system whose truths are insulated from external interference, and are justified exclusively within the system. These truths are defended, sometimes irrationally, and in any conflict with other truths, the system's truths always prevail. This phase of society has a philosophy relevant to the time of its operation. For Wiredu (1980), this is the right place for ethnophilosophy.

As society evolves, new epistemologies emerge, informing new technologies leading to the development in science. The latter disrupts the traditional set up, transforming the society. The traditional set up becomes irrelevant to the modern society, which adopts modern patterns of living. The modern society is open to criticism. It uses logic, and is characterised by acceptance based on rational considerations and not the dictates of tradition (Wiredu 1980, 36).

Since Tempels' pioneering work, many have contributed to entrenching his approach by describing various aspects of African culture in the name of philosophy. Reading some of these works, one is left wondering whether or not there exists an African philosophy distinct from an African culture. The problem partly lies in the fact that it is not clear what the methodological and conceptual paradigms within which African

philosophical discourse is to be analyzed and understood. How do we, for instance, use Western concepts to define and interrogate African culture, when it is clear that culture results from human interpretations of the natural environment, yet, environments differ? It is here that we find Oruka's most important contribution - charting future possibilities for a philosophy in Africa. Below we turn to this.

The African Philosophical landscape

The discussion of how the African philosophical landscape looks like is a reflection of the way various thinkers have attempted to define and situate African philosophy. This is easily understood if one reflects on theories in African philosophy. These theories cover and determine in a significant way not only the culture of philosophy, but also the direction that African philosophy takes. Suffice it to say that these theories are defined and characterized by the two significant events that have all along determined discourse on African philosophy, namely, Western discourse on Africa and African reaction to the same (Masolo 1994, 1).

These theories also attempt to cover the paradigmatic and methodological issues involved in conceptualizing and practicing African philosophy. A discussion of these theories is an attempt at articulating the nature of African philosophy. Oruka observes: "*The expression 'African Philosophy' often calls forth the question 'what is African philosophy?' In an attempt ... to demonstrate examples of African philosophical thought, various proposals and findings have sprung up*" (Oruka 1990 , 13).

Overall, discourse on African philosophy rests on two broad perspectives of interpretation. The first draws from the principle of essentialism, namely, that there is a set of attributes which are necessary to the identity and function of a given group or entity. Essentialists hold that a member of a specific group may possess other characteristics that are needed neither to establish its membership nor preclude its membership, but that essences do not simply reflect ways of grouping objects; they also result in properties of the object, as the object can be subjugated to smaller contexts (Cartwright 1968, 615-626). This defines African philosophy in opposition to

Western philosophy, the implication being that there are certain values found in Western philosophy that are totally lacking in African philosophy. The inference here is that African Philosophy is radically un-European.

The second perspective of interpretation defines African philosophy from a Universalist perspective. The simple requirement is that what is true of philosophy elsewhere is equally true of philosophy in Africa. The view here is that although cultural categories may influence philosophical priorities, by its very nature philosophy is a universal human exercise where individuals reflect upon reality. Thus according to this viewpoint, the method and not the content defines what passes, or fails to pass, as philosophical.

It is from the first perspective above that the racial ideology was introduced into African philosophy in a formal way. Of course it lingered in the sociological past of Africa. The responses to that perspective, including taking universalist positions, have all failed to achieve their objective, since they allow the prism of investigation to be modeled by racial considerations. To what extent did this racial chauvinism influence ethnophilosophers? (see Oruka 1990, 5-6).

Martha Nussbaum (1997, 6-7) warns against several kinds of vices that infect and influence comparative analysis, among which is the kind of methodological procedures or dispositions present when dealing with cultures that are not one's own. Descriptive chauvinism, she says, consists in recreating the other tradition in the image of one's own (Nussbaum 1997, 34). This is reading a text from another tradition and assuming that it asks the same questions or constructs responses or answers in a similar manner as the one with which one is most familiar. In descriptive chauvinism, ethnophilosophers recreated African thought systems and traditions in the image of the West, in order to make them comprehensible to a Western audience. Here the assumption was that African philosophy constructs responses and answers in a way similar to Western philosophy. Difference in outlook led the West to dismiss Africa as a place of philosophical unanimity and lacking in critical inquiry, because Africans were not pursuing the same kinds of analysis as Westerners in their philosophical inquiries.

Normative chauvinism is the view that one's tradition is the best, and that insofar as the others are different, they are inferior or in error. The lesson here is that in reflecting, a philosopher should only hold those views that are most defensible and credible. However, because philosophers are human beings, the criteria for what is defensible may be tradition-dependent. If one is unwilling to revisit one's own criteria in the light of another tradition, one may find oneself committed to little else other than a form of normative chauvinism. The most common form of normative chauvinism is the belief that unless philosophy is done in a certain kind of way (for example, rational, critical, reflective and logical argumentation), it cannot properly be regarded as philosophy.

In line with normative chauvinism, ethno philosophers molded a paradigm in which the Western philosophical tradition was the best, and in so far as others are different they are inferior or have a mistaken view of reality. In this ethnophilosophy relied on a criterion that was too tradition depended to make decisions on and concerning African thought. This robbed it of its credibility and defensibility, especially with the rise of new trends in African philosophy. What is important to note is that ethnophilosophers refused or were unwilling to re-examine their own theoretical framework in the light of African realities. For the ethnophilosophers, unless philosophical reflection is undertaken following the parameters of the West, it cannot be considered as philosophy. To date, when many Europeans visit departments of Philosophy in Africa, they expect to be told about African culture rather than philosophy. The latter, they believe, is absent.

In *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (1990), Oruka identifies six theories in African philosophy. Of these, four are significant (Oruka 1990, 13-20), while the remaining two are subsidiary to the discourse on African philosophy. The six are:

1. Ethno philosophy.
2. Professional African philosophy.
3. Sage philosophy.
4. Nationalistic-Ideological philosophy.
5. Literary- artistic philosophy.
6. Hermeneutical theory in African philosophy.

Ethno-philosophy

As earlier noted, this theory can be traced to Placide Tempels. Ethno-philosophy is a system of thought that deals with collective worldviews of diverse African peoples as a unified form of knowledge that is based on myths, folklore, palaver and proverbs. This theory is based on the assumption that African philosophy is structurally and methodologically different from Western Philosophy. According to this theory, it is this difference that confers some uniqueness on African philosophy, and that this unique nature can be demonstrated. It considers African philosophy as the set of values, rituals, beliefs and ideals that are implicit in the language of African peoples. The assumption by most, if not all, ethnophilosophers is that every culture is organized around a set of philosophical principles that are manifested in its language, beliefs and practices regardless of whether this is explicitly stated by any member of that culture. Placide Tempels and Alexis Kagame in particular hold that the linguistic categories of the Bantu people reflect their metaphysical categories, which in turn shape their view of reality.

The ethnophilosophical assumption that there is an essential difference between Western and African thought implied that there are some *essential* differences between the two mentalities, classifying them into distinct camps, on the one hand, a powerful and conquering West, and on the other, an Africa that is submissive, mystical and almost lacking in *logos*. The West is the prototype centre, defining every value that is attributable to human-ness, including reason, logic and science.

Besides Placide Tempels, ethnophilosophy has found expression in the works of two groups of thinkers. *First*, we have academics such as J.S. Mbiti (1969), Alexis Kagame (1956), and Marcel Griaule (1965). *Second*, in some instances, the works of statesmen such as Kwame Nkrumah (1970), Julius K Nyerere (1968; 1974) and Leopold Sedar Senghor (1962) are also included. Despite the efforts of the members of the first group to pioneer African philosophical discourse, they have received an unfair amount of criticism, which the second group has been spared. The former have been accused of smuggling anthropological approaches into African philosophy, which is essentially descriptive and lacks the analytic power that every truly philosophical work carries. Interestingly, while the latter engage in a similar exercise, they have been characterized as champions of African cultural values and dignity, that is, they are regarded as the cultural nationalists out to liberate Africa from the bondage of Western imperialism.

Professional African Philosophy

This consists of works by trained scholars of philosophy in Africa. It also includes works and writings by Africanists and Black Africans in the diaspora. Most of these reject ethno philosophy as an approach to the study of African philosophy. They hold that philosophy is a universal discipline and that for any piece of work to qualify as philosophical, it must meet the acceptable criteria, among them, that any philosophy ought to be critical, self reflective and logical. However, they equally acknowledge that it is possible to have great dissimilarities in philosophical priorities and traditions that are occasioned by differences in culture. All in all, Professional African philosophers grant the existence of African philosophy as a body of works produced by Africans in any area and tradition as meeting the threshold of philosophy.

Some of the African professional philosophers are very hostile to ethnophilosophy (see Hountondji 1996, 33). In particular, Hountondji's definition of African philosophy has been cited as the most radical. The demand that African philosophy should be a "set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophic by their[sic] authors themselves" (*Ibid.*) has been seen as creating unnecessary and extra qualifications to the practice of philosophy in Africa. In Hountondji's words, his goal is:

To circumscribe this literature, to define its main themes, to show what it's problematic has been ... and to call it into question. These aims will have been achieved if we succeed in convincing our African readers that African philosophy does not lie where we have long been looking for it, in some mysterious corner of our supposedly immutable soul, a collective and unconscious world view which it is incumbent on us to study and revive but that our philosophy consists essentially in the process of analysis itself, in that very discourse through which we have been doggedly attempting to define ourselves - a discourse, therefore, which we must recognize as ideological and which it is now up to us to liberate, in the most political sense of the word, in order to equip ourselves with a truly theoretical discourse which will be indissolubly philosophical and scientific (Hountondji 1996, 33).

In line with Hountondji's outlook, Wiredu (1980, 13-25) argued that traditional philosophy in Africa should not be taken as the paradigm for African philosophy just as no one in their right mind can hold traditional Western philosophy as the model for contemporary Western philosophy.

The contribution of professional African philosophers has been immense at all levels - methodology, style, language, critique, and in the creation of a written history within African philosophy.

Sage Philosophy

This theory, traceable to H. Odera Oruka, is a reflective system of thought that is based on the wisdom of individual African men and women. The gist of this theory is the claim that although there were no professional philosophers in the academic sense in traditional Africa, it had men and women of wisdom who fulfilled both the professional and social functions associated with philosophy, namely, the analytic and prescriptive. Oruka introduced philosophic sagacity to the international community in 1978 during a conference held in Commemoration of Dr Antony William Amo in Accra, Ghana. He stated:

Sage philosophy consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom and didactic wisdom.... While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set up and popular wisdom (Oruka 1991, 33; Oruka 1997, 181-182).

It is the view of this paper that the distinction that is often made between folk and philosophic sages is not that watertight (Oruka 1991, 33-36). Perhaps this is explained by the fact that many times people do not understand that what is seen as folk wisdom was once the didactic wisdom of a respected sage before it lapsed into common knowledge. Similarly, it is noteworthy that all philosophers are not didactic on everything in society. One may be very good at moral matters while quite ignorant on social matters. This theory seems to be the least appreciated within African philosophy (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2007, 17). Strangely, it is the most criticized theory after ethno philosophy.

From Sage Philosophy to philosophic sagacity

An interesting perspective has emerged in African philosophy in which it is claimed that everything African and philosophical, and all that is philosophical and African, is reducible to Philosophic sagacity. Prof Ochieng'-Odhiambo advanced this argument in a paper titled "The Tripartite in Philosophic Sagacity" (2006). He holds that the concept of philosophic sagacity is actually not new, since Oruka himself used it in his early works. He identifies three stages in the evolution of sage philosophy representing the periods pre-1978, 1978 to 1983, and 1984-1995.

In the first phase, pre-1978, sagacity was used to refer to philosophy in its normative rather than in its technical and theoretical sense. The view was that there existed African philosophers in the same way Socrates was a philosopher without writing anything down or expressing serious opinion on discourse about nature and reality.

In the second phase spanning 1978-1983, Oruka is concerned with explicating the notion of Sagacity in African philosophy, explaining that sagacity in African thought should be distinguished from traditional wisdom, which is a collective participatory activity. In this case, sagacity is the critical initiative of responsible individuals (Oruka 1990, 47-48). It is useful to point out that this period witnessed the softening of heart towards ethnophilosophy, as it is seen as one of the trends or theories that could be used to explain African philosophy. For Oruka, ethnophilosophy is acceptable because of its explanatory power with regard to the nature of philosophy in Africa (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2002, 34). Ochieng'-Odhiambo's assessment is based on Oruka's own position that "...between the folk-philosophy and the written critical

discourse, sage philosophy comes as the third alternative: it demonstrates the fact that traditional Africa had both, folk-wisdom and critical individualized philosophical discourse” (Oruka 1990, 65). Oruka is at pains to assert the potential role of sagacity in creating a critical philosophy as a theoretical discipline with not only the normative function but also the critical, epistemological and logical functions of philosophy.

The post-1983 phase witnesses another shift by Oruka from philosophic sagacity back to sage philosophy. In a paper titled “Sagacity in Development” (Oruka 1990, 57-65), a clear meaning is delineated with regard to philosophic sagacity. He uses sagacity specifically to imply the wisdom of *named specific* individuals (Oruka 1990, 57). It is in this last period that Oruka makes attempts at distinguishing the various usages of the idea of sagacity as being at the core of any future efforts in the practice of philosophy in Africa.

A careful reading of these developments reveal two main issues regarding the relationship between philosophy and sagacity in African philosophy. First, sagacity can refer to popular wisdom in which the community claims ownership, which implies that no particular individual is responsible for its truth claim: this could be written or oral. Second, the term sagacity could refer to the didactic wisdom of known individuals who claim ownership and are responsible for the ideas, and are able to rationally defend their truth claims. For Oruka, it is in the second conception that African philosophy lay, since to recognize and affirm African wisdom is to implicitly recognize and affirm the existence of individuals in Africa who hold this wisdom, hence pointing to the existence of African philosophers.

What is important now is to identify these philosophers. Moreover, the issue is no longer whether African philosophy in this sense exists, but to cultivate a history of discursive thought among African peoples. This task has been left to contemporary thinkers, both Africans and Africanists, trained and committed to the cause and future of African philosophy (Masolo 1994, 194). The task has predictably been taken over by professional African philosophers, some of whom were very critical of Oruka (Ochieng’-Odhiambo 2002, 26-31, 34).

In all the three stages, it seems that Oruka was too preoccupied with situating African philosophy among black Africans. He neither made attempts to reconcile the inconsistencies in the project, nor even recognized them, a point that is partly responsible for the misunderstandings and misrepresentations about sage philosophy. What Oruka was interested in was the rebuttal against ethnophilosophy, and to demonstrate that “African mythologies should not be substituted for African philosophy” (Graness & Kresse eds. 1997, 34)

Shades of Philosophic Sagacity

Ochieng-Odhiambo has identified what he calls *shades* of philosophic sagacity, contending that the entire discourse in African philosophy can be explained through the prism of any of the shades. These shades are academic, cultural-nationalist and epistemic (Ochieng’-Odhiambo 2006, 24-30). Below we briefly look at these shades.

The Academic shade

This represents the intellectual confrontation between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy on the question of the definition of African philosophy. Technically, this was an easy escape route that provided the then budding African philosophers with a punching bag in the absence of any credible philosophical literature. The immediate impact of this shade was to leave a trail of literature that is so critical of ethno philosophy to the extent of making unrealistic demands concerning the nature of African philosophy (Hountondji 1996, 45-47). The demand for a philosophy for Africa during this period was made by individuals who were critical about the elements and dynamics of culture.

The Cultural- Nationalist shade

This focuses on post independent African societies, and especially on the question of the negative impact of Western culture on Africa. According to Ochieng-Odhiambo (2006, 21), the second phase in Oruka’s research on sage philosophy underpins this thought. This effectively takes over the role previously performed by ideological-nationalistic theory. It advocates for African nationalism at the local cultural level, as well as at the national and continental levels, in which there is a progressive

modernizing of African ideologies, values and institutions, within the framework of African culture (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2006; Presbey 1999).

The Epistemic Shade

This is concerned with the preservation of traditional knowledge in Africa through the interpretive competency of trained researchers in philosophy. It focuses on traditional cultural themes, practices, and the cognitive structures underlying them. It inquires into forms of knowledge creation and validation, as well as techniques for appraising moral issues in society. This aspect of philosophic sagacity is involved in the generation and sustaining of discussions on African themes through texts that reflect this reality. Sages are engaged on ethical as well as empirical issues as they occur and influence social practice. The trouble with this shade is its over reliance on mythologies. It is not clear what aspects of myths have cognitive value and which ones do not.

Nationalist-Ideological Philosophy

Orika called the fourth theory that he identified 'Nationalist Ideological philosophy'. This has its basis in the presupposition that a true philosophy for Africa should be founded on a clear social theory that tries to explain the African conditions. If the assumption is granted, the works of various African political thinkers who formulated ideologies for liberating Africa should suffice to explain these conditions. For these thinkers, African culture, and consequently African philosophy, can only be revived on the basis of a truly free and humanist reorganization of African society. For Oruka, the main players here include Julius Kambarage Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Ben Bella, Sekou Toure, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Kenneth Kaunda, among others.

It is our view that these thinkers sought to create an African philosophy that was unique, hence the claims of a unique African Socialism by J.K. Nyerere (1968 & 1974). This is a keen to the efforts of ethnophilosophers to delineate a unique African philosophy, and no wonder it has achieved very little. Thus Nyerere over-emphasized those factors that make Africans unique, and insisted that in African Socialism, one can find an African contribution to universal civilization. It is worth noting that

nationalist-ideological literature interrogated both ideology in Africa, as well as the existential position of the African as a race and the liberation of Africa from racial bondage. It has been observed that quite frequently these efforts did not crystallize into a clear social theory defined by objective principles.

Nationalist-ideological philosophy continues to form the core of the culture of philosophical discourse in Africa. By the time Oruka published his seminal paper “*Four Trends in Current African Philosophy*” (1978), the emphasis was on the four theories outlined above. Nevertheless, he later talked of two other theories, namely, Hermeneutic and Literary artistic philosophy. These two, particularly the latter, have received very little attention. Below we attempt a brief outline of them.

Hermeneutics in African Philosophy

Hermes, in Greek mythology, was the messenger of the gods, the son of the god Zeus and of Maia, the daughter of the Titan Atlas. As the special courier of Zeus, Hermes had winged sandals and a winged hat, and bore a golden Caduceus, or magic wand, entwined with snakes and surmounted by wings. He conducted the souls of the dead to the underworld, and was believed to possess magical powers over sleep and dreams. Hermes was also the god of commerce, and the protector of traders and herds. As the deity of athletes, he protected gymnasiums and stadiums, and was believed to be responsible for both good luck and wealth. Despite his virtuous characteristics, Hermes was also a dangerous foe, a trickster, and a thief. In one version of a characteristic tale, on the day of his birth he stole the cattle of his brother, the sun god Apollo, obscuring their trail by making the herd walk backward. When confronted by Apollo, Hermes denied the theft. The brothers were finally reconciled when Hermes gave Apollo his newly invented lyre. Hermes was represented in early Greek art as a mature, bearded man; in classical art he became an athletic youth, nude and beardless (Microsoft Encarta 2009). It is from this mythology that Hermeneutics derives its name as a special messenger and the interpreter of god’s message (Serequeberhan 1994, 1).

This theory holds that since African culture consists in myths, a social worldview, religion, proverbs, poetry, and all other oral or written literary works, African

philosophy should be the interpretation of these. Here, the emphasis is on the fact that philosophy is culturally determined, and is a form of wisdom. Here philosophy takes lived experiences as its starting point; and since the lived experiences of most Africans revolve around the struggle to cope with cultural, political and economic imperialism, African philosophy should seek ways and means of liberating Africans from these through interpretation. Worldviews, proverbs and all other forms of cultural wisdom on their own are not useful. Their relevance is predicated on their ability to contribute to achieving this liberation goal for African societies. Reading into this theory one is surprised at the apologetic nature of its assumptions as outlined below:

1. All the research and literature on African Philosophy has used the wrong methodology.
2. These researches have failed to understand the exact nature of philosophy as the study of wisdom within or of a given culture, in this case, African.
3. Therefore, given that philosophy is the study of human wisdom and European philosophy is the study of European wisdom, African philosophy is the study of African wisdom.

We wish to make some observations concerning these assumptions. *First*, the theory is not clear on the meaning and nature of wisdom. Wisdom is used in such a loose sense that it becomes difficult to pinpoint exactly what African or European wisdom means in each instance. By assuming that wisdom is defined solely by use of cultural parameters, and that particular cultures give forth a specific and unique form of wisdom applicable within that cultural environment, this theory deprives philosophy of its essential nature: application of reason to understanding the natural and social environment. This limits significantly the effectiveness of philosophy as a rational exercise that is not confined to cultural demands and peculiarities. As we said earlier, this does not in any way negate the role of culture in shaping the course of a philosophy. According to Wiredu, we are all children of our circumstances (Wiredu 1980, 36). Nevertheless, this does not give culture the sole right to determine philosophical ingredients and tools such as logic and rationality.

We hasten to add however that holding the view that philosophy is the work of pure reason contemplating upon eternal truths within and relevant to a particular culture is perverted if not misguided. Truth is neither White nor Black, European nor African. If truth were to be subject to the contingencies of cultures, it would reduce philosophy to shifting human opinions. Again, we are not here denying the role and influence of individuals in the development of a philosophy. We are equally not denying the role of culture in the development of philosophy. All that we are saying is that throughout the world, the direction of a philosophy is determined by the ability and effectiveness with which philosophers within a particular culture are able to reflect on existing values and forms of knowledge, confirming, rearranging and rejecting those that have ceased to be relevant (Wiredu 1980, 1). Understanding the demands of changing cultural behavior is the goal of philosophy.

The above comments notwithstanding, the works of Tsenay Serequeberhan (1991, 1994), Marcien Towa (1971), V.Y. Mudimbe (1988, 1994) , and to a lesser extent Lansana Keita (1985) are all often considered to belong to this category. What is interesting is that apart from Serequeberhan (1991, 1994), the rest do not proclaim their link to this theory.

The Literary Artistic Approach

This is the sixth and final theory in Oruka's account of the landscape of philosophy in Africa. It has received the least attention. One will find it hardly being mentioned in academic fora, only receiving passing attention in classes on African Philosophy (See Oruka 1991, 5).

This theory conceives African philosophy in terms of creative African writings (novels, plays, poems, etc.) and other artistic productions, with special reference to the perennial question of the relationship between Western and traditional African culture, in which the former is dominant. The claim here is that writing about African societies using fiction portrays the truth about African peoples, culture and thought patterns.

To illustrate the approach of this theory, let us take George Orwell's acclaimed novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). It is dystopian in nature. This is speculation about a fictional society that is in some important way undesirable or frightening. Writing in 1949, he speculates about how our world would probably have degenerated and how it would look like in 1984! We are introduced to a global political monolith headed by Big Brother, who justifies his rule in the name of some supposed greater good. Today this has come to pass. What with America's Big Brother arrogant propaganda in the name of Foreign policy geared towards global supervision and historical revisionism.

It is our view that in broad terms, metaphysical speculation undertakes systematic reflection with the object being very clear and independent of the inquirer. On the other hand, fictional speculation and other works of art are sometimes conceived in a void and are actually the creation of the author, a kind of recasting of reality. To this extent, fiction should not find its way into African philosophy. Let fiction form a different genre of works in African literary efforts, but not specifically philosophy. Philosophy is about taxing the mind to produce ideas on and about the universe, humanity, and God. Its speculative approach in metaphysics should not be confused with fiction. Metaphysics has a direct link to the development of culture, science and, in particular, progress in technology. Though fiction does deal with humanity, God, and the universe, the rigor of philosophical inquiry cannot be found in these efforts. Suffice it to add that we are not in any way denying literary scholars the benefit of philosophical honor. All that we are saying is that a few of these who rise to the level of philosophical reflection should be recognized for their efforts as philosophers besides their endeavors as creative writers.

Concluding Remarks

Our overarching goal has been to reflect on the path philosophy in Africa has traversed from Placide Tempels to Odera Oruka, and how this has been influenced by racial ideology. Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* ascribed a less rigorous communal type of philosophy to Africa, resulting in a philosophy of anonymity without men and women who could stand up to defend its truth claims. The basis of this is racism - the belief that Africans are structurally and methodologically different from western thinkers (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2009, 65-66; Masolo 1994, 1-12).

Hountondji's prescription on the other hand is heavily informed by racial ideology, as he clearly determines those qualified to participate in discourse on African philosophy on racial grounds (Hountondji 1996, 33-35). Appiah (1992) adopts a middle ground, in which though the ideology is still racial, we witness a new discourse on race and culture taking a Universalist narrative. Wiredu (1980) and Mudimbe (1988) take a rationalist position, but the framework remains racial in nature. Oruka takes a reconciliatory stance: he is not entirely Afro-centric. His position is that rationality, logic and beauty are not racially defined and are not a monopoly of any one given race, so that racial superiority cannot be validly inferred from such considerations. His advice is to let rationality define the course of philosophy in Africa. For him, , though rebellious discourse by Africans as a way of countering Western imperialism and cultural domination was necessary, it could not define the practice of philosophy in Africa. He clearly recognizes that philosophy in Africa originated and has developed through a cultural framework that is alien, and that indigenous philosophies in Africa require a cultural basis that is African in values, interpretation, and the possibility of creating an epistemological basis for this interpretation.

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