

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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**Overview** **The earliest phase** African philosophy is both multiform and consistent. From the earliest organized thinking of the ancient Egyptian Ptah-hotep, through the early Christian-Hellenistic thinking of such as Plotinus and Philo Judaeus, to the major North African Islamic philosophies of such as Averroes and Al-Ghazali, the organized thinking of the African continent is basically a contribution to world ethical/religious thinking: Egyptian-hieratic, Christian theology, Islamic speculation. Is this early material African philosophy or is it simply philosophy that took place on the African continent?

**Sub-saharan and northern Africa** That is where the debate begins. For those to whom ‘true African philosophy’ begins later than the above, in sub-Saharan Africa, the story of African philosophy will commence with the post classical world--speculations of pre-literate second millennium C.E. African tribes--the Bantu, the Dogon, the Akan--to understand whose thinking we depend largely on the living traditions of African people, and on our scholarly understanding of Africa as a cultural system. African philosophy in ‘modern times,’ that is from the times of the Colonial powers, who intrude on the continent in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, until the present, is a tapestry of intertwining projects: the culturally self-assertive movements of Negritude (Black consciousness), the ethnophilosophic stance of the Bantu migrations, and the stance of the professional philosopher, who wrestles with the universal philosophical issues of metaphysics and ethics. From Ptah-hotep to our contemporary Kwasi Wiredu is both far and near, for the ancient Egyptian ‘issues’ are timeless, and yet there is no minimizing the vast time and culture difference separating sub-Saharan from ancient North African cultures.

## The ancient period

**Ptah hotep** Ancient Egyptian philosophy--Ptah-hotep (24<sup>th</sup> century. B.C.E.)--opens with maxims for dignified courtly living and elevated ethical principles, in the world of a highly traditional Pharaonic society. The moral maxims which would emerge from Black African folk wisdom, millennia later, are already here the name of the game.

**Augustine** (354-430 C.E.) Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, opened pre-Christian Roman culture to the vulnerability of confession, and deep self inspection in the eyes of God. In *The City of God* (426 C.E.), Augustine invites us to see the secular world as a fallen image of God’s world. The door is opened to thought-categories like grace, fall, and sin. The thoroughgoing susceptibility of much of modern Black Africa, to the categories of Christian redemption, binds Augustine the African to the fundamentalist strain on the streets of Lagos today.

## Post classical

Highly literate African Islam flowered into its own African philosophical maturity with thinkers like Averroes (1126-1198 C.E.; died Morocco) or Al Ghazali (1058-1111 C.E.; Mecca; Medina). A central intellectual issue, the relation of God to causality, and the freedom of the individual soul, joined these two thinkers to one another--and arguably to Saint Augustine. For Averroes the causality of natural law does not compel the individual, depriving him of freedom, but natural law is itself God’s free creation, and does not constrain the individual. For Al-Ghazzali caused events are simply the result of the immediate will of god. The individual is free, even in a nexus of god-created events. This stress on freedom within God’s will picks up Augustine’s central argument. And Ptah-hotep’s, too?

## Early modern

In the dearth of written testimony, we had best refer this developmental stage, in African philosophy, to those Bantu migrations which we feel able to date to the almost millennium and a half long set of movements which initiated in Cameroon, and worked through into the cultural formation of the peoples of Central and Southern Africa today. This migration was ‘ethno-philosophic’: it implied and developed the gradually forming family-clan-tribal system--still the norm in sub-Saharan Africa--through which was formulated a comprehensive view of human being in society: a

view of man as deeply and intimately social, god created, and mutually supportive: a view ultimately aligned with the traditions of human dignity, openness to god, freedom, and mutual responsibility which we have noted above, in our birdseye survey of early African philosophy.

### **19<sup>th</sup>-and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Negritude**

The Scramble for Africa (1881-1914) provoked in many thoughtful Africans the need to define and defend their own world-views. One influential expression, of this position, emerged from the collaboration of a number of francophone African and Caribbean writers, statesmen and intellectuals, the axis of whose thinking was African culture. (Aimé Césaire, 1913-2008, poet and politician, from Martinique; Léopold Senghor, 1906-2001, poet, philosopher, president of Senegal; Léon Damas, 1912-1978, French-African poet). These men, and a wide cultural support group of francophone intellectuals, gave 'philosophic/poetic/visionary' expression to the Black race's senses of identity, pride, and dignity. The dignity of Africanness became, in these people's work, their way of formulating those maxims of Ptah-hotep--about duty, honor, self-control-- which are the hallmarks, for Negritude, of the socially complete African.

### **20<sup>th</sup> century**

Kwasi Wiredu (b.1931) exemplifies the capacity of academic African philosophers to build on the living totality of African thought. Drawing on his Akan background, permeated as it is with proverbs and folk wisdom, Wiredu distinguishes the African from the western sense of the person. For the Westerner the first dimension of personality is the ontological, the choosing and willing human being. (For some western Christians, for example, man is born in sin, therefore has a pre-established nature which is part of the equipment with which he will have to work, in shaping his world. He may exercise free will but in doing so he is coming from a position of tainted selfhood. This is the perspective of 'original sin,' and clearly modifies the kind of freedom that the individual could have. )

Wiredu counters the western position. He enters to exemplify his hard-working view that the language we speak shapes the thoughts we have. He turns from the western view of self to the view of *self* implicit in the word for *self* in his own first language, Akan. In Akan the first sense of self includes one's biological presence, me, here. But of superior importance is the second sense of self. The second dimension of self is the capacity of self to will, to choose freely. One's capacity to will is entwined with one's ethical position; if that position is high, and sustained, the willing person qualifies for true personhood. The freedom of will, which can move mountains and change governments, is familiar to us from the injunctions of Ptah-hotep, the reflections on freedom and causality in Al-Ghazzali, and Césaire's calls on African pride and dignity. From the academic podium, Wiredu has no trouble rejoining the classical positions of his continent's ethical philosophy.

### **Readings**

Bodunrin, Peter, *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives*, Ife, 1985.

Paulin, Hontoudji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington, 1983.

Imbo, Samuel Oluoch, *An Introduction to African Philosophy*, Lanham, 1998.

Safro, Kwame, *Readings in African Philosophy, An Akan Collection*, Lanham, 1995

Serequeberhan, T., ed., *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, St. Paul, 1991

Wiredu, Kwasi, *Philosophy and an African*, Cambridge, 1980.

### **Discussion questions**

When did African philosophers begin to write? What difference did writing make to them? What difference would writing make to you, as you faced the need to express your views on essential reality?

Wiredu is a 'humanistic' philosopher. Is there an African tradition of logical and mathematic philosophy? Has 'hard philosophy,' in Africa, native or foreign roots?

Akan moral maxims, proverbs, and short short tales are considered particularly rich, for their provocative philosophical implications. Can a philosophy of life be generated from such fragments of developed thought? Can you extrapolate a whole philosophy from 'a stitch in time saves nine'?

Is African philosophy essentially ethics? If so, or if you see some truth there, to what would you attribute it? Is there a special reason why African thought should be immersed in questions of how to act?

What is the role of myth and religion in shaping the character of African philosophy? Is there any purely secular element in African ethical philosophy?

Does African philosophy show any conspicuous influences from 'foreign' philosophical traditions? Does African philosophy reflect a consciousness of its own uniquely African character?