

African Philosophy? Questioning the Unquestioned

Thabang Dladla

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7964-8082>

University of Limpopo

dladlathabang@yahoo.com

Abstract

African philosophy, at least the modern modality of its practice, is said to have been initiated by the overwhelming question concerning its existence: Is there an African philosophy? No doubt such radical questioning concerning “knowledges” from Africa is determined by an overarching, indeed imperial, definition of what is understood to be “philosophy”; in other words, this question sought to determine whether those knowledges from Africa fit the category of what is known to be “philosophy” in the Western world. In this paper, I deal with the historical question pertaining to the existence of an African philosophy and the present reiterations of this question. I begin in the first section with an interrogation of such questioning concerning doubt about African philosophy’s existence: 1) to subvert the question and thereby undermine the basis of its questioning; 2) to examine the underlying structures of coloniality in Western philosophy and its colonising effects—showing how such a question is rooted in doubt, ignorance and power as functionaries of the European epistemological paradigm facilitating epistemological dominance; and 3) to use such questioning as a basis from which to develop an account of what African philosophy is.

Keywords: African philosophy; liberation philosophy; history of African philosophy

Introduction

African philosophy, at least the modern modality of its practice, is said to have been initiated by the overwhelming question concerning its existence: Is there an African philosophy? (Bodunrin 1981; Keita 1985; Momoh 1989; Oruka 1990). No doubt such radical questioning concerning “knowledges” or “ontological narratives” from Africa is determined by an overarching, indeed imperial, definition of what is understood to be “philosophy.” In other words, this question sought to determine whether those knowledges from Africa could be said to fit the category of what is known to be



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philosophy in the Western world—which has assumed global dominance since the “Enlightenment”—introduced to us through slavery and conquest.

This, in turn, means that this question is not apprehensive about the distinctiveness of such an African philosophy, but really concerned with integrating it to the broader Western scheme as a lesser part (which will be developed later in this paper in our exploration of how doubt, ignorance and power facilitate such an integration). The repercussions of such an undertaking, incorporating African expressions into Western presuppositions, are far-reaching in that African philosophy properly defined is yet to find an independent expression, i.e., an expression that is not dependent on an imposed or self-imposed European paradigm. Understood in this way, African philosophy cannot but be a philosophy of liberation par excellence, as what propels it forward ultimately has to be this will to extricate itself from the domineering European epistemological paradigm brought to bear upon it by the multi-centuries’ experience of subjugation.

In this paper I deal with the historical question pertaining to the existence of an African philosophy and the present reiterations of this question. I begin in the first section with an interrogation of such questioning to: 1) subvert the question and thereby undermine the basis of its questioning; 2) to examine the underlying structures of coloniality in Western philosophy and its colonising effects—to show how such a question is rooted in doubt, ignorance and power as functionaries of the European epistemological paradigm facilitating epistemological dominance; and 3) to use the “questioning of the question” as a basis from which to develop an account of what African philosophy is. I aim to show how *doubt* and *ignorance*, coupled with *unrelenting power* on the side of the oppressor and those bought into the project of facilitating (epistemic) oppression, function to suppress the genuinely *philosophical* and *liberatory* character of African philosophy. This is to adumbrate the history of African philosophy, of which the philosophical establishment in South Africa has remained ignorant; and the impeding need to remedy such an ignorance, which is to liberate philosophy from such an ignorance.

On Doubt, Ignorance and Power

What has been illustrious as the age of reason, or enlightenment, as commonly known in the West, coincides with the enslavement of Africans and the colonisation of Africa, Asia and Latin America together with the “discovery” of the New World. Modernity, as Oyeronke Oyewumi (2002, 393) illustrates, is hallmarked by the “expansion of Europe and the establishment of Euro/American cultural hegemony throughout the world” with gender and race as “two fundamental axes along which people were exploited and societies stratified.” According to Oyewumi (2002), this process has profoundly impacted upon the production of knowledge about societies, human behaviour, history and cultures with Euro/American institutions and social categories being dominant in the writing of human history. This Eurocentrism, which Tsenay Serequebehan (2002, 65) has defined as a “pervasive bias located in modernity’s self-consciousness of itself ... is grounded at its core in the metaphysical belief or idea (*idee*)

that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life.” Indeed, this amounts to the racialisation of knowledge, which Oyewumi (2002, 391) has identified as distinctive of the modern age: “Europe is represented as the source of knowledge and Europeans as knowers”; the privileging of the White male experience in the generation of knowledge.

This epistemology of the Europeans as superior is informed by the ontological fiction that Europeans are superior to the rest of humanity, as can be attested by Ramose’s (1999) reading of Aristotle’s assertion that “man is a rational animal” was not spoken of anyone else other than the European man. Amerindians, Africans and women are not included in this equation, i.e., man (the true human) is a rational animal and others, e.g. Africans, are not rational, which means then that Africans are not “men” (true humans). The late colonial thesis, as demonstrated by the 1820 English settlers in South Africa, is slightly more complex, with a scale of civilization for different people, measured by their capacity for self-determination (i.e., “maturity” in the Kantian sense of an individual’s restraining the influence of impulses, desires and external forces on behaviour and thinking by willing in accordance with principles one has assessed and accepted on the basis of empirical evidence and logical reasoning).

It will then follow that their existence, for women, Africans and Amerindians, is insignificant and it is for the European man to decide what to do about them. According to Ramose (1999, 5):

Aristotle’s definition of man was deeply inscribed in the social ethos of those communities and societies which undertook the so-called voyages of discovery, apparently driven by innocent curiosity.

In order to demonstrate this point, Serequebehan (2012, 139) provides reading from Anne Hugon that further shows this point of the innocent curiosity to discovery, which was earlier expressed by other colonialists:

In 1788 [i.e., the heyday of the Enlightenment], a booklet was issued in London by the newly formed Association for promoting the discovery of the interior parts of Africa (or the African Association). It stated [at its founding] that at least one third of the inhabited surface of the earth was unknown, notably Africa, virtually in its entirety. For the first time this *ignorance* was seen as a shameful gap in human knowledge that must immediately be filled. (Serequebehan 2012, 139)

However, as history teaches us, these “voyages of discovery”—perhaps by accident or design—then changed into “violent colonial incursions” that are not justifiable, even under the principles of the theory of just war, and whose consequences are still suffered by the people concerned (Ramose 1999, 5). For Ramose (1999), decolonisation, which was set out by Africans and other people conquered in the unjust wars of colonialism, has not addressed the questionable belief that “man is a rational animal,” which only refers to European men and not women, Australians, Amerindians, and Africans. A

justification of this view by Aristotle is to be found in Immanuel Kant's anthropological work (which has been downplayed in philosophical discussions of his work) where, according to Eze (1997, 115), Kant characterised "non-Europeans" as "devoid of ethical principles because [they] lack the capacity for development of 'character' ... presumably because they lack adequate self-consciousness and rational will."

According to Eze (1997, 115), for Kant, the Amerindian, the African and the Hindu give the impression of being inept in "moral maturity" because of their lack of talent, a gift from nature, according to him. For Kant, as quoted by Eze (1997, 115):

[T]he race of the Negroes ... is full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain. They can be educated but only as servants [slaves], that is they allow themselves to be trained [by Europeans presumably].¹

Ultimately, it is the use of force and unrelenting power, on the part of Europe, that would result in its domination of the world. Moreover, it is from the position of such power that the quality of the African's humanity would be in doubt, and indeed questionable at least in the realm of rational animals, which in turn conditions the questioning of the existence of an African philosophy. Indeed, if philosophy is a fundamentally human undertaking, then why would there be doubt concerning the existence of an African philosophy, unless doubt concerning the quality of the human of the African is affirmed. Olabiyi Yai (1977) has shown: "this interrogative [does an African philosophy exist?] is but an ill-disguised affirmation or, in other words, the affirmed negation of African Philosophy" (1977, 6). As already pointed out, the notion of what counts as a human being proper, is predicated on a Eurocentric understanding of "man" who is understood to be self-sovereign (rational), which are qualities presumed to be lacked by Africans.

However, doubt, as Ramose (2003) has shown, is impossible without its object; which one has to take as existing before one can proceed doubting; which in relation to the doubt concerning the existence of African philosophy one must acknowledge its existence first—which illuminates his chosen title, *I Doubt therefore African Philosophy Exists*. Furthermore, that such doubt persists, is a function of what Mills (2007) has identified as White ignorance; which is the intentional cultivation and protection of ignorance; not a lack of knowledge, but a practice of conditioned and intentioned not-knowing. In the case of South Africa, this ignorance, is conditioned by the over-reliance on the presupposed superiority of European and or Anglo-Saxon

1 According to Eze (1997, 115), "[training], for Kant, seems to consist purely of physical coercion and corporeal punishment, for in his writings about how to flog the African servant or slave into submission, Kant 'advises us to use a split bamboo cane instead of a whip, so that the 'negro' will suffer a great deal of pain (because of the 'negro's' thick skin, he would not be racked with sufficient agonies through a whip) but without dying.' The African, according to Kant, deserves this kind of 'training' because he or she is 'exclusively idle,' lazy, and prone to hesitation and jealousy, and the African is all these because, for climate and anthropological reasons, he or she lacks 'true' (rational and moral) character."

models of rationality (i.e., self-understanding) and their reproduction and maintenance. According to Linda Martin Alcoff (2007, 49), Mills's argument is predicated on a definition of Whiteness as a socio-political construct, as opposed to it being an ethnic category. According to Mills, as quoted by Alcoff (2007, 49), such a socio-political system, Whiteness, brings with it a "cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of all social realities," which ensures that Whites will live in a "racial fantasyland, [or] a 'consensual hallucination'" and that the root of all this is the "cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement."

Indeed, such insights, by Mills and Alcoff, best illuminate the situation in South Africa and make it apprehendable to us, since South Africa is a settler colonial society predicated on the doubt of the humanity of the indigenous people—including their epistemic practices, which justified the seizing of their land and their enslavability. It is no wonder that the question concerning the existence of African philosophy would find meaning and articulation, because the type of ignorance outlined is *structural*, as Alcoff (2007, 49) elaborates:

The structural argument focuses not on generally differentiated experiences and interests, but on the specific knowing practices inculcated in a socially dominant group. Where the last argument argued that men, for example, have less interest in raising critical questions about male dominance, the structural argument argues that Whites have a positive interest in "seeing the world wrongly," to paraphrase Mills. Here ignorance is not primarily understood as a lack—a lack of motivation or experience as the result of social location—but as a substantive epistemic practice that differentiates the dominant group.

While it is the case, as Alcoff (2007, 43) quoting from Sandra Harding shows, that "members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in ignorance about the social order and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups," Whites as a dominant group, which also seeks to maintain its dominance, have a rewarding interest in maintaining ignorance about social reality.

Doubt and ignorance about the existence of African philosophy is thus a function of European epistemological dominance, which leaves un-interrogated the question concerning the existence of an African philosophy that we have scrutinised. As Ramose (2003) has demonstrated, it is impossible to doubt "no thing"; and in relation to the doubt concerning the existence of African philosophy, one has to take it as existing before continuing doubting, which by itself proves that indeed African philosophy does exist. Such doubt, however, is conditioned by a wilful ignorance that we have identified as White ignorance—which is causally linked to White supremacy as a socio-political system—which is not an aversion to knowledge but a practice of not knowing, which comes from occupying a privileged (indeed dominant) status in a society.

The question then about the existence of African philosophy, as we have tried to demonstrate, is conditioned by a blissful ignorance and uncritical doubt, as opposed to genuine intellectual and philosophical enquiry, which are a function of power and dominance. The question should be taken as expressing preconceived notions of what counts as philosophy; thereby seeking to determine whether African philosophy fits that rubric. Our questioning of the question has allowed us to expose the underlying presuppositions, which are undergirded by Eurocentric conceptions, and thereby demonstrates that the question does not emanate from genuine philosophical enquiry. Moreover, “questioning the question” gives us the space to elaborate African philosophy as a practice of resistance against extroversion.

Eurocentrism as a Philosophy of Domination

We have noted that Eurocentrism is the idea located in modernity’s self-understanding that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms (Serequebehan 2012)—or to use Oyewumi’s expression, Eurocentrism presumes the idea of “Europeans as knowers.” This section seeks to briefly outline the impact of this idea as it affects the production of knowledge concerning Europe itself, its reified self-image, and those victims of its self-understanding, i.e., non-European² people. To be sure, the past does not determine the present—in the sense that all that the present is can be understood from what happened in the past, as causally determined by it (a progression from it)—but it is the present that draws on the past to make meaning of itself as present, and it is from our neo-colonial present that we seek to engage with our colonial “past” to disentangle ourselves. The former notion, of the past determining the present, can be attributed to the West as a historical system, as Cedric Robinson (1990) aptly demonstrates in his appraisal of the work of Trinidadian sociologist, Oliver Cox (as Quoted by Robinson 1990),³ who laboured tirelessly to disfigure this myth of Western historiography. Adducing Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History*, Robinson (1990, 5) points out that:

[T]he triumph of the West as a historical system has constituted a nearly incontestable essentialist envelope surrounding Western literature for the past three centuries. The telos of the narrative of the *epistemic* West is by now so familiar and its logic so compelling that it can be costumed as natural history: “the West” is conceived in a genealogy of civic virtue and moral progress from ancient Athens to twentieth-century America.

It is important to note how this is not only limited to history as a discipline, but largely concerned with the self-image of the West, how it makes sense and meaning of itself.

2 Following Ramose (1999), I use the term non-European here under protest to designate those who have been victims of the de-facto self-globalisation of Europe and not necessarily as the ontological negative of Europe.

3 Oliver Crumwell Cox and the Historiography of the West.

This can be thought of as concerning the civilisational narrative of the West's self-progression as Wolf (as quoted by Robinson 1990) demonstrates:

We have been taught, inside the classroom and outside of it, that there exists an entity called the West, and that one can think of this West as a society and civilization independent of and in opposition to other societies and civilizations. Many of us even grew up believing this West has a genealogy, according to which ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry, crossed with democracy, in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The West's indebtedness to ancient Greece as a civilisational progenitor, is best demonstrated by how philosophy itself has become inconceivable outside of its ancient Greek origin.⁴ This is Eurocentrism at its best: writing itself into dominance over others. Veroli (2001, 56), relying on historiographer of philosophy, Lucien Braun, "has observed that modern historians of philosophy until Hegel were in the habit of tracing the origin of their discipline back to Egypt, if not to ante-diluvian [i.e., pre-Flood] times, rather than arbitrarily stopping with Greece, as has become the habit since." Indeed, Veroli (2001) adduces arguments by Martin Bernal concerning the Afro-Asiatic roots of Western civilisation that it has come to mask, as he demonstrates:

The hermetic magic of the Renaissance, for instance, spearheaded by such figures as Giordano Bruno and Marcilio Ficino during the 16th century, puts forward a conception of the historical origins of Civilization that is deeply indebted to those who would rapidly become the other par excellence for all the nascent and rising colonial empires (Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, England, France). The Africans, whose labor was rapidly becoming necessary for the American expansion of the European empires, were supposed to be—in the Hermetic and, more broadly, Renaissance interpretation—the originators of everything that their enslavers held to justify their bondage. Indeed, as such scholars as Frances Yates and Martin Bernal have noted, it is Africans, and particularly Ancient Egyptians, who were widely held, during the Renaissance, to be the inventors of culture, an idea that was in large part propagated by the canonical texts of Hermetic Magic, the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This conviction, or so Bernal argues, held for many well into the Enlightenment. In spite of Isaac Casaubon's attempt in 1614— i.e., when Descartes was 18 years old—to debunk the claims to Egyptian authenticity of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the principal text on the basis of which those claims were made, many would continue to believe in the original priority of Africa in the historical constitution of human civilization. From Lorenzo de Medici's deathbed order to Ficino

4 As Serequebehan (2012, Our Heritage Chapter 5) shows, referring to Heidegger's statement that "the statement that philosophy is in its nature Greek, says nothing than that the West and Europe, and only these are, in the innercourse of their history, originally philosophical" and Cornelius Castoriadis's (1978) remark that "among the creations in our history, Greeko-Roman history, there is one that we judge positively and take credit for: putting things into question, criticising them, requiring a *logon Didonai*—accounting for something and giving reason for it—which is the presupposition for both philosophy and politics."

during the 1490s that he translate the Corpus before Plato's dialogues to Napoleon's insistence on taking a team of Egyptologists with him on the way to conquering Egypt in the early 19th century, there can be no doubt that the priority of alterity haunted Early Modern European consciousness. (Veroli 2001, 55–56)

To be sure, it has been a concern of African scholarship, at least since Cheick anta Diop and Theophile Obenga, among others, to demonstrate the richness of African heritage, as can be traced back to ancient Kemetic traditions and how they influenced and gave birth to Western civilisation. Indeed, Afrocentric scholarship has demonstrated at length the extent of the indebtedness of ancient Greek philosophy to ancient Egyptian philosophy.⁵ However, it was the European prerogative and project of dominance to privilege Greece over Egypt/Africa and to declare it as a place of darkness, as Hegel shows:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. (Hegel 1956, 93)

The antithetical positing of Africa, for Hegel, here becomes the possibility condition for celebrating Europe as the epitome of the development of World spirit (Irele 1983), or to use Wilderson's (2012) words, "how the West posited itself as the personification of humanity by denying the humanity of the enslaved Africans," who were later to be colonised. It is interesting to note how this positing of Africa by Hegel acts to justify the domination of Africa that was unfolding at the time he delivered the lectures. To be sure, the colonial project also justified itself as a civilising project that was to save those who had not been bestowed with the gifts of enlightenment. But how can a child begat its mother? How can Europe as a junior and student of Africa in terms of civilisation, claim to be civilising Africa?

It is the result of the de-facto self-globalisation of Europe, through slavery and colonialism, that it would assume dominance in all spheres including discourse, which Serequebehan (2007, 11) argues is "grounded on the West's claim to superiority based on the belief, bias, or idea that, its historicity has 'at last compelled [Man] to face with sober senses his *real* conditions of life and his relations with his kind'" because "Modernity grasps the real in contradistinction to the ephemeral unreality of non-European existence." As such, modernity (Eurocentrism) proves itself to be a pervasive condition of thought, particularly concerning the existence and experience of non-Europeans which is not real for it, and which further concretises it as a philosophy of domination.

5 Diop African Origin of civilisation: Myth or reality? Asante Afrocentric idea

African Philosophy: Past to Present

Mafeje (1992, 4) has pointed out the great challenge among African philosophers with regards to authenticity in their discourse. For Mafeje (1992, 4), while there is a general agreement that the beginnings of African philosophy are in fact traceable to the work of Father Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (1946); which was followed by Alexis Kagame's *The Bantu-Rwandaise Philosophy of Being* (1956); which has had a tremendous influence on what was to be the first generation of philosophers.⁶ The negative representations of Africans by early anthropologists no doubt left a radical impulse to refute them, although this tended to be what Mafeje (2007) characterises as vindicationist: an extraverted attempt to justify ourselves to a purely European audience, and on terms best understood by them (Hountondji 1983, 37). However, those negative representations, or “negations” to use Mafeje's (2007) own terminology, give us the occasion to deeply reflect upon them and their impact on our situation, so as to disentangle ourselves from their binds as per the demands of African philosophy as a critical negative project (Mafeje 1992; Serequebehan 1994). According to Mafeje (1992, 4), what remains to be resolved by this philosophical discourse, that conditioned by the present, is: “a) the philosophical status of ethnophilosophy or folk philosophy; b) the universality of the Western criteria for judging whether or not a given discourse is philosophy; and c) whether there could be an equivalence between European and African philosophical status.” Indeed, these are concerns of the modern practice of African philosophy, given Henry Odera Oruka's (1990) characterisation of the four trends in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, sagacity, national-ideological, and professional philosophy.

The preponderance of professional philosophy has no doubt left a cavity on the status of ethnophilosophy, and that of sagacity, as Oruka's reaction to the critique of ethnophilosophy as collective philosophy (as a philosophy which has tended to reinforce the Western criterion for judging the philosophicality of a discourse), which leaves African philosophy indebted to Western conceptions (Bodunrin 1998; Hountondji 1983; Momoh 1989). The pejorative meaning ethnophilosophy has come to acquire has largely been attributed to Hountondji (1983, 34), who has been assumed to have coined the term, while Kwame Nkrumah is said to have been its progenitor in the 1940s already in an unpublished doctorate he did at the University of Pennsylvania (Ajei 2013, 131). However, the pejorative coinage of Hountondji (1983), as opposed to Nkrumah's (1970) somewhat neutral use, comes as a response to the dominion of the methods of anthropology, particularly ethnology, which tends to portray a static picture of African societies and their beliefs. Such undertakings, like Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy*,

6 It is important to note here that the African philosophy that Mafeje is hereby referring to, is that conditioned by present modalities—the predominant European epistemological paradigm that also conditions the questioning of any such thing as an African philosophy—and not particularly African philosophy proper that is independent of colonial domination—which emanates from the long history of African philosophy predating the colonial era; a philosophy emanating from African cultural expressions and expressions of existentiality.

according to Hountondji (1983, 34), “ethnological works with philosophic pretensions”, are addressed to Europeans.⁷

While Tempels’s *Bantu Philosophy* may have been a response to the conservative gestures of early anthropologists like Lucien Levy-Bruhl, “who devoted his entire life and career to the demonstration of the radical disparity between the nature and quality of mind of the European and what he called ‘primitive mentality’ which he attributed essentially to non-Western peoples and cultures” (Irele 1983, 12), his (Tempels’s) reaction is still indebted to the methods of ethnology and its presuppositions, which leaves his attribution of a philosophy to the Bantu people as “not the equivalent” to the Western conception (Hountondji 1983, 36). In other words, Tempels has substituted primitive for Bantu and mentality with philosophy, which still leaves open the task of identifying what African philosophy could be. Hountondji (1983, 34) would then define African philosophy as an alienated literature: that literature produced by Africans and defined by their authors as thus. This, for Hountondji (1983), would be to demystify the picture painted by ethnophilosophy’s descriptions of African societies and the supposed unanimity about those descriptions from Africans themselves.⁸

No doubt, there are resonances between Hountondji’s preoccupation with the critique of ethnophilosophy and Mafeje’s critique of anthropology, particularly the extraversion of its discourse. However, Hountondji (1983) is captive to the Western idea of an individual philosophy as opposed to collective philosophy, while Mafeje (2007) is more concerned about authentic representations of Africans emanating from their collective world sense and understanding. Furthermore, their respective critiques of anthropology can be understood as external (Hountondji) and internal (Mafeje), which can be explained by their respective training as intellectuals—Hountondji in philosophy and Mafeje in social anthropology. However, their concern about Africa converges them to a properly African philosophical practice that Lansana Keita (1985, 122) has identified as “to help in the imparting of knowledge of the natural and social world and to assist in the constant discussion of the optimal set of value judgements and cultural assumptions that social man must make to take the fullest advantage of the sum of scientific knowledge available.” According to Keita (1985, 123):

7 “The Black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse” (Hountondji 1983, 34).

8 According to Hountondji (1983, 45), “The African ethnophilosopher’s discourse is not intended for Africans. It has not been produced for their benefit, and its authors understood that it would be challenged, if at all, not by Africans but by Europe alone. Unless, of course, the West expressed itself through Africans, as it knows how best to do. In short, the African ethnophilosopher made himself the spokesman of all-Africa facing all-Europe at the imaginary rendezvous of give and take—from which we observe that ‘Africanist’ particularism goes hand in glove, objectively, with an abstract universalism, since the African intellectual who adopts it thereby expounds it, over the heads of his own people, in a mythical dialogue with his European colleagues, for the constitution of a ‘civilisation of the universal’.”

It would be an error, therefore, for the philosopher in the African context to assume that philosophy as it is practiced in the Western world should serve as a model for the practice of philosophy. A useful approach, it seems, would be to regard philosophical activity as an engaging in theoretical analysis of issues and ideas of practical concern. But in modern society, it is the social and natural sciences that discuss ideas and issues relevant to practical concerns. Thus, the practice of philosophy in the African context should be concerned first with the analysis of the methodology and content of the social sciences, etc. for it is the methodology of research of a given discipline that determines the orientation of research in that discipline and the kinds of solutions to problems ultimately proposed. Furthermore, analysis of the methodology of the sciences of human behaviour would be constantly alert to the notion that the modes and objects of human thought are potentially value-laden.

Indeed, the convergence of Mafeje's concerns and those of Hountondji speak to the distinctive method African philosophy ought to adopt in relation to the present postcolonial concerns, which deplete the boundaries of disciplines and inherited thought.

Moreover, apart from the rootedness of ethnophilosophy in anthropology that would inspire Hountondji's dismissal of it, it is also the use to which ethnophilosophy has been deployed to legitimate the somewhat corrupt African elites and leaders who speak of a glorified return to the past. Such a return to the past and ethnophilosophy's endeavour to uncover it, neglects what philosophy proper for Hountondji (1983, 47) is and could be—a science. According to Hountondji (1983, 97), philosophy is a scientific endeavour due to its organic link in its development and fruition to the development of modern sciences as per Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy* (as cited in Hountondji 1983, 97):

Philosophy has not always existed; it has been observed only in places where there is also what is called a science or sciences-science in the strict sense of theoretical discipline, i.e., ideating and demonstrative, not an aggregate of empirical results ... for philosophy to be born or reborn, it is necessary that sciences be. That is why, perhaps, philosophy in the strict sense began only with Plato, goaded into being by the existence of Greek mathematics; was blown up by Descartes, roused into its modern revolution by Galilean physics; was recast by Kant, under the influence of the Newtonian discovery; was remodelled by Husserl, stung by the first axiomatic, etc.

Such a view of philosophy no doubt glorifies a fairly Eurocentric genealogy of philosophy that neglects other traditions that predate the Greek civilisation and which Greek civilisation was also indebted to, but also pedestals an absolutely aristocratic conception of it, which Marx sought to refute in the *German Ideology*, although with little success, largely due to the preponderance and deterministic logic of *historical materialism*.

To be sure, Hountondji's (1983) view of African philosophy, in light of the above declarations, is a theoretical discipline that is the reserve of experts, much like other sciences require expertise. Furthermore, such a philosophy is purely literature, as is the

precondition for scientificity, or the mere existence of a science. Therefore, African philosophy is that literature produced by Africans and described as philosophy by their authors, as Hountondji (1983, 53–54) elaborates:

Admit then that our philosophy is yet to come ... African philosophy like any other philosophy cannot possibly be a collective worldview. It can exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate. ... The Africanness of our philosophy will not necessarily reside in the themes but will depend above all on the geographical origin of those who produce it and their intellectual coming together. The best European Africanists remain Europeans, even (and above all) if they invent a Bantu “philosophy” whereas the African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating and transcending it, are producing authentic African work.

This geographic definition of African philosophy would seem to exclude work done in the African diaspora, and weaken attempts to achieve a thematic focus on realities facing the African continent and its peoples, as Serequebehan (2000, 1) intervenes:

But if it is not “themes” that define the “Africanness” of our philosophy, what does? Around what will the “intellectual coming together” of those who “produce it” occur? For philosophers (African or otherwise) are human beings and, like everybody else, congregate or come together around issues, concerns, or celebrations focused on a common theme and/or a cluster of themes. Indeed, Hountondji is well aware of this as it pertains to the development and practice of modern European philosophy. What, then, of African philosophy? Is Hountondji’s geographic and nonthematic conception a different “special” type of philosophy for Africa? Is he vying with the ethnographic conception, whose critique he initiated, for a “special-status philosophy” for Africa?

Indeed, Hountondji’s (1983) conception of both philosophy and African philosophy has generated a lot of responses, including that of Serequebehan (cited above), which have enhanced the development of African philosophy up to the present. To be sure, both Marcean Towa (1991) and Olabiyi Yai (1977) take issue with the scientific picture of philosophy and its theoreticism/epistemologism, not to mention its individualistic focus on the exclusion of any collectivistic outlook, although also critical of ethnophilosophy.

According to Yai (1977, 9), it is not enough to react against ethnophilosophy without providing radical critique against it, because “in philosophy, when we come to the collective and the individual, things are a tiny bit less straightforward than our pure philosophers would have us believe.” For Yai (1977, 9), “it is important here to distinguish between objective and subjective, or the material conditions that enable one or other philosophy and the vehicles for its expression to come into being.” Undeniably, Yai, whom Mafeje (1992) adduces, duly responds to the challenges of an African philosophy concerned with present conditions, as it disregards the legitimacy of the Western paradigm as universal and with their philosophy, contra Hountondji, as individualistic. Indeed, according to Yai (1977, 10):

The vital point, in a debate about the existence or non-existence of a philosophy cannot therefore be (unless one is subjective) the emergence of individual philosophers. Rather, it must be “the material base.” Philosophy, like history in general, cannot be conceived as the work of “geniuses.” In any case, oral African tradition abounds in examples of individual philosophers, who are expounders of explicit philosophies.

The relationship between the individual and the collective cannot be considered as mutually exclusive, one to the detriment of the other. However, they are mutually advantageous to respond to present reality faced by the African collective, as Towa (1991) has defined philosophy as the “thought about the essential.”

African Modes of Self-expression: Whither Eurocentrism?

One man has the ability to develop a new skill but another to judge whether it will be a curse or blessing to its user. Now ... this invention (writing) will cause those who use it to lose the learning of their minds by neglecting their memories; since through this reliance on letters ... they will lose the ability to recall things within themselves. You have invented not a medicine to strengthen memory but an inferior substitute for it. You are providing your students with a way of seeming wise without true wisdom: for they will appear to have learned without instruction: they will seem to know a good deal, while they are really ignorant of many things: and they will become nuisances. These men who look wise but lack wisdom. Egyptian god Thamus (quoted from Oluwole 1997).

Legend has it that Africans converted to christianity⁹ because it is based on the written word and that African spiritualities lacked such a firm grounding. Not only does such a myth privilege preconceived Western ideals, but also serves to obfuscate the reality behind such a conversion, which needs to be understood historically, particularly since Christianity has been a handmaiden of European expansionism, as Yves Winter (2011, 2) has noted. Furthermore, according to Winter (2011, 3):

Indigenous peoples had the right to refuse conversion, but they could not restrict the rights of Europeans to preach the word; any restriction on Christian proselytising constituted the basis for just war.

Ramose (1999, 13) elaborates:

Cultural differences (between the indigenous people and their Christian colonisers) were to be eliminated if and when they were perceived either as a threat or as a contradiction to the intent of both colonisation and Christianisation. Thus, the will to conquer and dominate was anchored upon the two pillars of colonisation and Christianisation. The legitimacy of the former was derived from the deliberate and complete violation of all the principles of the theory of the just war. The result was the emergence and protection of the so-called right of conquest. ... Christianity justified its domination and

9 We follow Ramose’s protest, following Soyinka, against the capitalising C in christianity, since many other religions are not afforded such a privilege.

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elimination of indigenous African religions by appeal to Jesus Christ's instruction: go ye and teach all nations. So it is that colonisation and Christianity assumed epistemological dominance crystallizing in their unilaterally conferred, though no less questionable, right to determine and define the meaning of experience, knowledge and truth on behalf of the indigenous African.

A common saying has it that when the colonialists came to Africa, they had Bibles and Africans had the land; and now the colonialists have the land and Africans the Bibles. What is often missing in the narration of this common saying is that the colonialists had the Bible only in the one hand, while the other had a gun. This is an important part in the story that helps to illuminate our understanding of how the conversion went about—the use of brutal force.

The transition to the Western way of life was not a smooth one because the coloniser was justified to kill savages, non-Christians, if they refused conversion. And conversion itself marked such a transition from being a lesser human to being recognised as “work in progress” towards attaining full human status. Not only was the colonialist ignorant about African ways of life, but he couldn't care less because of the unequal human status accorded to his conquered. Now, we understand that it was through unrelenting power that conversion was facilitated and, therefore, we cannot readily assume the power of the written word towards an understanding of ourselves as African. Indeed, it is the amplification of the text, at the expense of the oral African traditions, that the denial of a philosophy to Africa is best facilitated, as Oluwole (1997) contends. This is because the text as a model for thought is limited and best complies with the given Western models of science and philosophy. The task of a genuine philosophical undertaking on the part of the Africans has to take seriously the oral traditions that an African philosophy is best articulated. However, the preoccupation with texts for Oluwole (1997) need not be seen as opposed to exploring the oral, as these two can be complementary, which goes to show the impeding need for endogeneity.

Conclusion

African philosophy is a philosophy of liberation, which describes a position of interpretation from the perspective of the indigenous people conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation. Serequeberhan (2002) has noted that, as a practice of resistance, African philosophy has a double task, which is both de-structive and constructive. In its de-structive sense it is a practice of resistance, which is aimed at challenging the dominant Eurocentric ideas. This practice of African philosophy is part of the process by which the formerly colonised are reclaiming their world. Indeed, it has been the task of this paper to resist Eurocentric understandings of philosophy that presented itself as the curious question concerning the existence of an African philosophy, which was exposed as not originating in genuine intellectual and philosophical enquiry but on ignorance and doubt. This paper also examined the underlying structures of coloniality in Western philosophy and its colonising effects, where we exposed how such a question is rooted in doubt, ignorance and power as functionaries of the European

epistemological paradigm facilitating epistemological dominance. Moreover, the “questioning of the question” also provided a basis from which to develop an account of what African philosophy is and could be. This paper has also demonstrated how doubt and ignorance, coupled with unrelenting power on the side of the oppressor, and those bought into the project of facilitating (epistemic) oppression, function to suppress a genuinely philosophical undertaking and the liberatory character of African philosophy.

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