THE IMPACT OF NON-AFRICAN RELIGIONS, PHILOSOPHIES, AND SYSTEM OF THOUGHT ON AFRICAN LIFE, AND ON THE INTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHIES

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Today in Africa, Christian religious institutions, institutions of higher learning, teaching and research institutes of all kinds, in the fields of science, technology and the humanities, are primarily modeled on those which we find in the West, their former colonial masters. This statement applies not only to the institutions per se, but also to the systems of thought - Western systems I have to repeat - that are based in a Western way of thinking and a Western approach to Christian religious teachings and to all the various disciplines - including philosophy.

Both terms we use here: religion and philosophy, are Western terms and thus embody longstanding Western traditions and connotations: Religion - the term being derived probably from the Latin ‘relegare’ (Cicero) “to observe conscientiously,” or ‘religari’ - “to be bound or committed to God” (Lactantius), and Philosophy from the Greek philos sophia “Love for Wisdom.” Thus using both terms in an African content and for studies of African data, we cannot help having in the back of our mind - that is, subconsciously - the Western connotations. We will come back to this central point later in the text.

Before looking at Western interpretive distortions of what are referred to as African ‘religions’ and ‘philosophies,’ I want to critically reflect on the influence and practice of Western and other non-African religions and philosophies in Africa. In Kenya, for example, one can find Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Zen-Buddhist, Jewish, and other philosophic and religious influences. Most of these have their own health care and educational organisations, by which they demonstrate that they have the well-being of poor Africans in mind. This accounts for the Lion’s Club, the rich donations by Kenyan and foreign dignitaries, the Christian missions, Christian and secular volunteer services, hospital services, medical services of various schools (Aryan, Chinese, Western), feeding programs, slum projects - and so on. We have to admit that a number of these organisations and their volunteers are genuine in their intention and efforts to help the poorest of the poor.

We would then tend to think that these religions must have had an impact on the life, on the ideas about life, of the average Kenyan. Christianity and Islam certainly have changed African—Kenyan life.
Problem of Missionary and Colonialist Thinking

However, once you look closely at the real source of the altruism of the African adherents of Christianity, Islam, Hindu or other non-African religions, what you find is the ancient African commandment: “We have to help our relatives, our family, our tribe,” which is behind such seeming altruism. This great commandment is unfortunately also the source of the nepotism and corruption we find in Africa.

Daily life is changing in Africa and many Africans, and non-Africans alike, are concerned that these changes are heavily determined by foreign cultural influences. John S. Mbiti (1969/1987, p. 225) has described these changes as an attempt “to plant a form of culture which is shallow... on the African soil.” He lists: the alphabet and comics, pop music, transistor radio, TV and magazines with photos of semi-naked women and the like... All these you find in Western countries among Western Christians, too - yet not only. However, one may also find Africans participating in the annual performance of Handel’s Messiah. I, myself, have had the privilege of discussing the philosophy of Martin Buber with a fellow Kenyan scholar. Such experiences are encouraging insofar as they give one a sense that not only the shallow dirty beach waters of Western civilization have reached Africa but also the deep clear waters of the great ocean of what European and Western civilization have contributed to the cultural heritage of the world. However, compared to the ‘shallow culture’ as Mbiti terms it, these influences are very meagre and reach but a few.

It is important, however, to not only focus on the rather impersonal cultural forces, but examine the kind of examples it is that Westerners - even staunch Christian believers - and Easterners - Muslims and Hindus, are giving to the average African. Sadly, in my experience what one finds is gross materialism and egotism, which have nothing to do with the belief in a supernatural being nor with the African care for the nuclear and the extended family.

In Kenya we are all familiar with the ‘Christian Sunday Religion,’ when high-ranking dignitaries give rich donations for the poor, for hospitals, for education, be it ten thousand, fifty thousand, hundred thousand shillings donations, which are then duly publicised in the media - while amassing business profits of millions of shillings during the week - which are not publicised. The same accounts for members of other religions.

On a personal level, I have met Christian pastors and social welfare workers from the West intent on importing expensive cars and planning safaris that a poor Kenyan employee can never even dream of. I remember once I entered a small Muslim second-hand shop; I wanted to withdraw, since I noticed that the people were reading from holy scriptures, yet they indicated I should stay and tell them what item I was interested in. It might be that this was mere politeness towards me; it might, however, also be that their business interests ranked before their religious interest. Several times I attended Hindu meditations. In these circles I detected some of the most notorious Asian money sharks who in their daily life were certainly not affected by their meditative enlightenment.

This - I am afraid - is the reality of life transmitted by representatives of various religious to Africans, rather than trust and love of a compassionate, benevolent, and wise, supernatural being. The effect of such realities on African societies is compounded by the fact that at the same time the traditional African value: ‘We have to help our relatives’ - that is the
preparedness to help with human warmth and active caritas those who are close to us - is being eroded by the same cultural forces that have undermined the values of non-African religions.

So, in this context, let us look at the role of ‘philosophy’ in Africa. We would think here primarily of Western-trained African scholars and thinkers - intellectuals, who by and by pass their beliefs, values, and ways of thinking to the average African.

Yet - we may have to ask here: What type of philosophy?

Western-trained philosophers among us are familiar with a great number of thinkers from the Western tradition, including Socrates, the great Church Fathers, the Scholastics, Bacon, Pascal, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Schliermacher, Emerson, Heidegger, Buber, and others. I would dare to suggest that what all these thinkers had in common was the search for truth through critical examination. Socrates, as portrayed in Plato’s dialogues, is a fine example of this tradition. ‘How is it,’ asked Socrates, that ‘the god Eros is perceived as beautiful. Yet Eros is longing, yearning for beauty - how can he yearn for something he already has? How can he be beautiful? Must he not rather be ugly?’ It is this questioning mind of the West to which eventually we owe the broad spectrum of knowledge and technology which dominate our world today. But this questioning spirit does not seem to have given Western thinkers peace of mind. Rather, returning to John Mbiti’s statement referred to above about the transmission of the ‘shallow culture’ of today’s changing world, Rollo May, as a Western scholar, has warned that Westerners are today about to throw overboard the very sources and values to which everything that belonged to her was to follow her. And she herself with all the riches, flocks and herds disappeared into the lake. In this simple Kenyan folk tale we find the very same message: the danger of disowning the very sources of our achievements.

But we should not think that such ideas and concerns are characteristic of the West alone. There is a Kenyan folk tale, published by Asenath Bole Odaga in her book *Thu Tinda*. It is a tale entitled: The Poor Fisherman. The protagonist of this tale gains all his riches through the help of a mysterious rather oldish woman whom he caught in his net when fishing in the lake. He took the woman home, took her as his first wife, and it was she who ordered him to build kraals for his herds and flocks. After many years - and after having married many wives - he abused his first wife and told her to go back where she came from. Whereupon she said that everything that belonged to her was to follow her. And she herself with all the riches, flocks and herds disappeared into the lake. In this simple Kenyan folk tale we find the very same message: the danger of disowning the very sources of our achievements.

There is, in my view, no such thing as ‘the origin of African philosophy.’ We find ourselves here in the straitjacket of the Western term. It would seem that many of the systems of thought which we may compare with ‘philosophy’ have been part of African spiritual and intellectual life since time immemorial.

However, coming from the West, we are accustomed to see a separation between religion and philosophy. One central reference point for this separation in Christian Europe came at the end of the Middle Ages and with the emergence of the Renaissance/Reformation periods. Yet we had the same phenomenon already before in the Western World: among the Ancient Greeks. Around 500 BC, separate
schools of philosophers - i.e. thinkers, distinct from the classical religion, emerged. Thus, the supposed 'separation' of religion and philosophy is problematic even within the Western tradition.

It should be noted that Sub-Saharan Africa has no written records either about African religions or about something which we may describe or define as philosophy. However, the position that the two can not be separated in African thought is reinforced by John S. Mbiti. In his book African religions and philosophy (1969/1987), Mbiti does not make a distinction between religion(s) and philosophy(ies). We may assume that - according to Mbiti - a separation of religion and philosophy, the way we find it in the West, has not taken place.

If we turn our focus explicitly to African religion, again we find ourselves in a dilemma. The first scholars up to very recently who studied African religions were Western, primarily European scholars, and they approached their work with a Western trained mind. In addition, they had to use assistant-interpreters and informants who were capable and willing to comprehend the questions asked by the Western researcher and to answer them accordingly. Even with the best of intentions and academic integrity, the interpretation of the African data was thus distorted. A German scholar, Eno Beuchelt (1981), wrote about a striking example of this type of distortion - African data being interpreted by Western scholars through a Cartesian trained mind. His account focused on the studies by Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen and their school carried out among the Dogon and among the Bambara.

Unfortunately, we have to add, African scholars of today studying African religions and philosophy will find themselves in the very same dilemma as their Western colleagues. African scholars have gone through a Western academic training, often including the subjects philosophy and religion. While perhaps less prone to miscomprehension of their data because of a lack of command of the local language, they still interpret their data through the eyes of a Western-trained mind. For example, Alexis Kagame in La philosophie Bantu—Rwandaise (1950), interprets the classificatory prefix language of the Rwandese as a type of indigenous philosophy. This idea then gave rise to Janheins Jahn's book Muntu which was highly acclaimed at the time of its publication - yet which, with its generalisations and its interpretation of West African data with East African religious criteria and vice versa results in a gross misinterpretation of African religions.

Returning to philosophy, it has been very difficult for the Western scholars to accept that there is something that should be called African philosophy. In contrast, the Chinese philosophical and scientific traditions are recognized in their own right due primarily to the existence of written records. Africans have not and, therefore, it is hard to convince Western scholars that African system of philosophy and science do exist. Eno Beuchelt, based on his own studies among the Zulu, and on the studies of Western colleagues in West Africa - maintains that Africans do have a philosophical system, a system of psychology and psychotherapies, and a system of science in their own right, distinct from the various religious systems.

According to Beuchelt, African thinkers are, or at least were, empiricists, since their insights and cognition were based on experience. The Zulu, among whom Beuchelt worked, have concepts and theories which cover psychological
phenomena like feeling, thinking and memory, models of personality, the conscious and the unconscious, psychic phenomena, anxiety and aggressions, dream, brain function, etc. The professional local therapists, the ‘Izinyanga’, have their own special therapeutic approaches to personality disorders like suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, and others.

I myself feel that Beuchelt’s work is a great contribution to the understanding of African system of psychology as a distinct discipline from religion and even philosophy. Yet again, we have to assume that he, too, has interpreted his data with his Western-trained mind, and that this applies even more so to the Western scholars and authors he uses for the West African examples he quotes.

We are faced with the problem of how to do justice to our African data, our information about religion and philosophy, systems of thought and science.

I myself wonder whether tape-recording the accounts by our informants and publishing the original text the way it is, perhaps together with a precise English or French translation, yet without any analysis, might be a first step in this direction.

Yet the straitjacket of Western academic training is being felt also in other fields of learning and studies. Western academics are humans, and humans tend to err. They develop hypotheses which later are found to be incorrect. Ultimately such hypotheses are, or at least ought to be, either modified or given up altogether. Unfortunately, Western trained African scholars frequently take up the uncritical hypotheses of their Western masters and treat them as proven truths, rather than as subjective value statements.

I referred above to materialism, which is a prominent part of the Western value system. As personally communicated to me by Prof. Dr. Carl Winter of Bayreuth, in the disciplines of Western history and archaeology an evaluation of civilizations has been developed which is termed as scaling. With this evaluative criteria, civilizations are graded according to the standard of their material and technological achievements. Scholars add that such an evaluation does not include ethics or religions, apparently ignoring, or at least marginalizing, the possibility that we may find civilizations with a much higher standard of ethics while their material equipment is rather scanty. Using the scaling method the criteria of evaluation is limited to: Does such and such a civilization have: cities, stone-covered roads, permanent (stone) houses, water supply system, heating and lighting system, etc. Such materially based achievement criteria would perfectly describe the achievements of Imperial Rome, which in my view is rather a barbaric civilization.

What Western scholars did not realize - in my view - was that instead of objective scientific criteria we have here an evaluation based on Western subjective values. It is unfortunate indeed that African scholars tend to take over such methods of evaluation. It would be interesting to learn other civilizations’ criterion. For example, how would Hindu scholars evaluate Western ‘civilization’? Or, is such a question a Western approach per se, while Easterners would not even consider it worthwhile to study? We might consider another type of scaling: the adaptation to the environment. Then, the Australian Aborigines would have ranked much higher than the early European settlers and explorers.
What remains?

Given the tendency of Western scholars to continue to misinterpret African religions, philosophies and systems of thought and pass such misinterpretations onto African scholars trained in Western institutions, combined with the corresponding decline in the strength of African values, and the hypocritical nature of non-African religious practices in Africa, what does remain?

I have recently read a book by a Kenyan writer, Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, which made a deep impression upon me. The protagonist is one of the uprooted poorest of the poor, yet someone who still tries to make an honest living by the work of his hands. The setting is in the dirt and filth of the slums, with their shabby bars, cheap drink, and cheap women. Yet - a glimpse of hope - not for the future, but rather for the present: There is real friendship here, and there is the fact that the protagonist takes into his care a little boy - the son of a run-away girlfriend of his, not even his own son. Thus, little visions of what I would want to call real humanity are portrayed. This, I believe, is the message the author wants to transmit to us.

I might add, that a similar hope had been expressed already decades ago by John Steinbeck. In his book, *The Grapes of Wrath* (first published 1939), he too describes the fate of an uprooted and dispossessed group of impoverished former farmers, who had once owned small pieces of land in the State of Oklahoma, which had become part of the “dust bowl” of the United States of America. It is a book in which the poorest of the poor help the poorest of the poor.

May we thus find in these portrayals of ‘humanity’ among the ‘poorest’ of humans a universal value for the future (yet already as ancient as the Christian Parable of the Good Samaritan) - no longer ‘we have to help our relatives’ but rather ‘we have to help our fellow men and women?’
Notes and References


