

*Feature*

## **Philosophizing about Africa in Berlin**

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At the end of the nineties, some fellow students and I attended several courses on the question of the history of philosophy in Africa at *Freie Universität Berlin* (German for “Free University Berlin”). During my previous studies, nothing had been taught to us of this long and rich tradition - our curriculum was only composed of European philosophy. Thus as the nineties came to a close, I was fascinated by the prolific ways in which the thinkers and philosophers of the different African traditions handled concepts of metaphysics and community.

After graduating, some of us came together to acquaint broader audiences with the traditions of African philosophy. Towards this end, we founded the *Gesellschaft für afrikanische Philosophie* (German for “Association for African Philosophy”) in 2001 (see [www.gaph.org](http://www.gaph.org)). From then on we met every week to discuss texts of African philosophers. Our meetings were always open to everybody who wanted to listen or join. It did not matter where they were from or what education they had - interest was the only qualification for admission.

For fourteen years we have been compiling a large reference library as a substantial resource for students and other interested people for their own formal or informal study. At the moment we can offer readers about 2000 monographs on the subject of philosophy from and about Africa, as well as numerous articles from newspapers and magazines. We are trying to acquire all important Anglophone and Francophone publications in this field in the last 100 years. Besides, of great interest to us is the work of Anton Wilhelm Amo (c. 1703 to c. 1759), the African from present day Ghana who became a respected philosopher and teacher at the universities of Halle and Jena in Germany after getting his doctorate in philosophy from Wittenberg in 1734, and we possess all published facsimiles of his writings.

We have also arranged and hosted several panels on territorial claims in southern and eastern Africa (with the representatives of the respective ambassadors), on the genocide of the Herero and Nama by the Germans, and on ways of approaching the matters of stolen sacral artifacts and human remains from Africa in German museums. Furthermore, we have invited and hosted some philosophers from Africa including Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and Reginald M.J. Oduor for public discussions so that they could present their ideas to a German audience.

In forming our association, we wanted to establish a new centre for African philosophy in the city where in 1884/1885 Africa was divided into colonies. Our goal was to move beyond the division of Anglophone, Francophone and lusophone written traditions by recognizing all publications and documents, including texts in Arabian or indigenous African languages. As a long term goal, we aim to find a way to offer a broad range of translated texts for all interested parties. This project confronts us with the questions of translating texts of different cultures without adulterating them with the translators' own prejudices, questions of communication and intercultural philosophy, and the issue of the importance of language for philosophy and philosophizing in general.

One question has proved to be persistent and important for us: what does it mean to discuss African philosophy in Europe today? How is it possible for us to understand the various distinct concepts of African philosophy? In other words, how can we contemplate concepts that essentially *differ* from our own, constituted as we are by our Western upbringing and formal education with their prominent cultural influences on us? In sum, are there any universals that allow for a global understanding? We are inclined to answer the last question in the affirmative.

There is still much ground to cover in our efforts to enhance inter-cultural philosophical dialogue among African cultures on the one hand, and among African cultures and non-African ones on the other. One thing is undisputable: the problems of our world today cannot be solved or even meaningfully explored simply locally or nationally. It is the eminent task of a real "polylog" discussion, a global inter-cultural dialogue, to create theoretical foundations in a philosophical manner, whenever we try to work towards the improvement of anyone's life on a shared earth.

As we seek to establish global inter-cultural communication, it is crucial to see that the rich oral philosophical traditions in Africa are committed to writing. There is much work yet to be done because there are many unsolved problems, apparently. The former or still ongoing European claim to cultural hegemony regarding philosophy - the assertion that Europe is the original or even singular province of philosophy, responsible for all the important accomplishments and efforts of philosophy - has been unreasonable, and will remain so. "Cultures" must be understood as structures of hybridity, since they are formations of fluid interchange and transposition. They cannot be comprehended as definitive entities, but rather

as evolving in reciprocity. Thus there cannot be a “European” or an “African” philosophy in the strict sense.

The Asian traditions of philosophy, mainly the philosophies of China and India, have attracted considerable attention in the West, and so globally as well. However, African, indigenous American and indigenous Australian thought have, by and large, not yet been the focus of philosophical research in the West. Though there is sufficient research in terms of the history of philosophy for the cultural interchanges in philosophy over many centuries in the past, there is still very little attention in the West to the African traditions of philosophy, due to various reasons: on the one hand Western academies of philosophy and the Western science community in general remain sceptical towards non-European philosophical thinking; on the other, there are manifest structures of power in the West’s scientific community that persist. Besides, there is still the problem of the perceived cultural and theoretical supremacy of written traditions over oral ones.

Yet oral philosophy has rich traditions in all cultures. What is more, leading philosophers of various cultures often argued in favor of oral philosophizing even where written traditions existed. These philosophers correctly understood philosophy as a dialogue, and emphasised that oral philosophy is not only immediate and spontaneous, but that it is also part of what makes us human. Though one could at first perceive the conservating qualities of the written word regarding thoughts and discourses as rendering it undisputably superior to oral philosophical works, there are also the advantages of eminent inter-human aspects of oral philosophizing regarding its immediacy, imminence, humanity and spontaneity. Oral language has always been considered to be superior with regard to originality and humanity. On its part, the written word has been regarded as superior due to its mimetic and testable qualities. Still, a lot that has been written by philosophers would not have been said if the authors had been addressing a listening audience - they would not have dared to say it.

The discourse on ethno-philosophy has been important and will continue to be so in the future. It has increased awareness of the various problems that encompass that very discourse. Nevertheless, there is great need to work with the philosophical productions of individual thinkers, as well as with sources that contribute to reconstructing a culture’s philosophical consciousness. It will prove fruitful to view these two categories of sources in the context of eminent human problems.

Philosophy is no culture's exclusive property: it emerges wherever and whenever people try to build a community. Its central questions, about who we are, where we come from and where we will go after our death, and how happiness on earth can be achieved are at the core of every culture, as are the investigations of the possibility of human knowledge, the essence of language and the nature of things. In other words, every culture poses questions such as "Who are we?", "what is the origin of the human race?", "where are we heading?", "what is the human person supposed to do to achieve happiness on earth?", "about what and to which extent is human knowledge possible?", "what is language?", "what is the essence of things?", etc. All other questions of philosophy can be regarded as (mere) extensions of these questions. Thus philosophy becomes a quality and expression of humanity.

Concepts of philosophy from Africa not only seek to offer answers to these questions, but also pose them in distinctive ways. The willingness to re-examine our own perspectives - as required by inter-cultural dialogues - facilitates an improved understanding of philosophy in Africa, but can also enrich European philosophies. There is a great opportunity in the inter-cultural exchange of philosophy between Africa and Europe that could lead to a fruitful synthesis in future, stemming from both traditions and their shared philosophical roots, that could supervene today's aporias - since there is an essential origin of European philosophy in Ancient Egypt.

Joining the international inter-cultural dialogue has been an important step for us. The new digital means of this age offer us direct uncomplicated ways of communication. Nonetheless, we should meet in person and also connect our academies, so that we can get to know each other better. We are sure that the inter-cultural dialogue will prove to be a milestone for the global philosophies.