

Tradition and Modernity in African Philosophy and Beyond

Discussion Starter

Mark G. Henninger, S.J.

Georgetown University

Thursday December 28th, 7:30 PM to 9:30 PM (not to 10:30 PM), Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, Virginia Suite B, Lobby Level.

I would like to center our discussion on one area that has occupied philosophers who are interested in Africa and/or the lands of the African diaspora. But to do this, I must briefly and inadequately first say something about the context in which African philosophy is done today.

To begin, there is the distinction often made between traditional oral African philosophy and contemporary written African philosophy. The first, broadly, comprises the centuries-old oral traditions, such the proverbs, myths, religion, and folk tales of the many different people occupying the land mass called “sub-Saharan Africa”. The second is what has appeared recently, namely the writings, along with websites, journals, symposia and conferences, of professional African philosophers trained in the West, mostly, though not exclusively, after the wars of liberation from the 1960s onward.

There is also a three-part schematization that helps understand the context in which African philosophy is practiced today. First there is the legacy of the remote pre-colonial African traditions that in some areas are still very much alive, including, as mentioned above, the myths, proverbs, religions, and folk tales. For some philosophers today, including Appiah and Gyekye, an extensive and profound critical evaluation of the concepts and values of this traditional African thought should be the starting point for

contemporary African philosophy. For most of the traditional concepts, beliefs and values have not relaxed their grip on modern African life and thought, despite the massive tidal wave of modern Western culture on Africa in the past, say, 50 years.

Then, secondly, there is the extensive legacy of the colonial era. Here, I can only wave my hand at a few things and trust your own knowledge: the borders of many countries, the division among Anglophone, Francophone, German-speaking and Portuguese-speaking lands, with their respective cultural legacies and historical burdens. And finally, thirdly, there are the contemporary “post-colonial” challenges, such as (more hand-waving with the help of Kwame Gyekye) the problem of creating a new modernity respectful of African people’s experience of the past and a vision of the future created by and for them; the problems of nation-building, of evolving viable and appropriate democratic institutions after the “socialist interlude” immediately following liberation; the problems of inculcating a political morality and eradicating rampant political corruption; the problems of traditional moral standards that appear to be disintegrating in the wake of the whirlwind of dizzying social change, especially in the cities. Not to mention (the usual culprits) urbanization, AIDS and globalization.

In confronting these contemporary challenges in a freed, post-colonial Africa, a key question is: what of our authentic African past should we preserve and what should we reject? What of the Western (colonial and post-colonial) experience should we accept and what reject? This is not an empirical question, of course, it is a philosophical question: what type of future shall we choose, that is, what type of life is best to live? It is a philosophical question, a question of identity.

Tradition and Modernity -- not only an African problem! Iraq, India, China ... and let us not forget our own Catholic and Jesuit philosophy departments, with their own age-old traditions and whirlwind changes also starting in the 1960s. A question of identity.

A few further questions for your consideration: What resources are there in anglo-American philosophy, continental philosophy, and Thomistic philosophy that would contribute to the discussion of this problem? Are there any particular reasons why philosophers at a Jesuit and Catholic university should be interested in doing philosophy on an intercultural basis? What might North Americans learn from philosophy stemming from Africa?