

African Philosophy and Multicultural Thought

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Professor Huey-Li Li has provided us with a concise history of the debates over African philosophy and some persuasive reasons for its serious interrogation by, and integration into, the field of philosophy of education. The essay's conclusions are quite unimpeachable and should be taken to heart in the community of philosophy at large. I will discuss some of the specific merits of this essay, raise a couple of points of concern, and suggest an issue for general consideration.

The present essay promises to accomplish three things at the outset. The first of these is to provide an examination of the metaphilosophical debates regarding the nature and existence of African philosophy. Li's account is balanced and, given the constraints of length, quite adequately representative. Her response to the argument against African philosophy based on a lack of writing goes beyond most thinkers in pointing out that the nuanced richness of a dialogic mode of inquiry can be lost in an ossified oral tradition just as well as in a written one. And, like many other Africanists, she indicates that conversely there have been oral traditions in Greece, or China (and, I might add, India), which exhibit a great depth and subtlety of thought. The conclusion that writing is not indispensable for philosophical inquiry is eminently sensible.

Li's essay questions another set of arguments about the cloudy, superstitious, and authoritarian style of African intellectual discourse, which, in the eyes of the so-called professional philosophers, makes the arguments unfit for categorization as philosophy. In response, Li gives two sorts of reasons. The first points out that African philosophy is certainly not so dissimilar from the Ancient, Medieval, and even modern periods of Western philosophy (although it is perhaps distinguishable from contemporary analytical philosophy). Secondly, Lucius Outlaw and others have argued that philosophy is necessarily rooted in a social milieu, and indeed a genuine engagement with African philosophy could potentially provide a powerful corrective to a certain parochialism, masquerading as universalism, that characterizes canonical Western thought. The first of these arguments occasions me some concern — indeed, it is of the form made notorious by Kwasi Wiredu's classic article, "How Not to Compare African Philosophy."¹ In brief, this runs the danger of reifying the stereotype of the African as simply less evolved.

The second argument is related to the tension between universalism and particularism, whose resolution is the second stated objective of this essay. The particularist position holds that it is African culture that determines the specificity of African philosophy. But as Li points out, since African culture changes so must the philosophy, and in a colonial context exposure to European ideas has deeply weakened belief in witchcraft and the like. Thus on Li's view, both the false universalism of the European tradition and the invented, static, traditionalism of African thought must be challenged. And it is through a profound, dialectical

interrogation of the relationship between philosophy and culture that we can move forward. I am sympathetic to this position, but I cannot help feeling that Li has not defended it with sufficient vigor. After all, this form of compromise with particularism is not new and has been attacked by the likes of Anthony Appiah and Paulin Hountondji as a devaluing of both the discipline of philosophy and of the potential of African peoples.² After all, what message does it send to say that this fuzzy stuff here is valuable, since it expresses the African culture it is rooted in, and so we call it philosophy? On their view this does a disservice, both to the existing achievements of philosophy and to the present and future Africans doing rigorous and rational work all around the world who are constructing a true African philosophy. Arguments can be constructed against this response — but Li does not make them here.

In the following section on postcoloniality, Li identifies, precisely, the psychological underpinnings of some Africans' desire to have had a recognizable philosophical tradition of their own. Li uses DuBois's wonderful image of the double-consciousness of the subaltern to explore this, pointing out clearly the ways in which culture and identity are constructed within a context of sociopolitical realities and compulsions. Colonization becomes a veil for the African intellectual. Again I find the general position here quite plausible. By way of adding a wrinkle, however, I would like to question whether the situation of the African native is really quite as congruent to that of the African-American as Li imagines. Appiah, in his book *In My Father's House*, makes a persuasive case for considering cultural colonization to have been restricted to a very small urban elite in Africa. My own experience growing up one generation after the Raj in India also bears this out. The masses of Third World people live in thought-worlds not essentially different from those of their ancestors before the common era. The problem is that these most alienated members of native cultures seek to be the purveyors of the authentic tradition. If Western training makes them un-African, and traditional Africans do not do anything that we can call philosophy, then African philosophy must indeed be in the future.

The conclusion of Li's essay is that the investigation of non-Western traditions can both cast light on the nature of philosophy, as well as enrich its practice. This is both sympathetic and sensible, and I hope more of us will come around to this way of thinking.

But let me turn to what is both my principal worry regarding Li's essay, and also my suggestion as a topic for serious consideration. I feel that this essay has been guilty of a failing that has plagued the great majority of early European investigators into African thought, and this is the problem of *Unanimism*. The term was made popular by Hountondji and describes the strange and unwarranted assumption that all the inhabitants of the vast and varied continent of Africa can be supposed to resemble each other in any salient characteristic of thought or culture. To Hountondji, such a simplification is clearly ludicrous. I would add that it has some rather nasty racist-imperialist resonance. After all, even the more bigoted among us have learned not to say "they all look the same" about people of African descent. And yet all manner of enlightened and educated folks speak of all Africans being one way or

another. Aside from the political problems, I would suggest that this is an impoverishment of Philosophy. When we speak in simple Manichean dichotomies about entire traditions, the results are rarely nuanced or productive. To say that the Germans are analytical while Indians are mystical is to misrepresent grossly the internal complexity of both traditions. After all, this picture will exclude the German mystics like Meister Eckhart and perhaps even Hegel, upon whom their influence is writ large. And it will exclude the ancient and still popular *Nyaya* tradition of analysis and argument and the wonderful tetralemma logical paradoxes of the *Madhyamikas*, from the tradition of Indian thought. To speak in terms of an African culture or philosophy is shallow at best and may be tantamount to chicanery.

Related to this is a more general question regarding difference itself. In our discourse on difference and the difference it makes, we are always walking a tightrope between a Scylla of essentialism and a Charybdis of universalism. On the one hand, if there is no real difference between Ghanaian and Italian minds (as I fervently believe) then why do we need to pay attention to particularity? If we say that they are indeed deeply different in so significant a matter as their intellectual traits and world-views, are we not accepting as reality the worst kind of racist superstition?

If there are specific differences based on accidents of history and geography, they have not been shown to us either in this essay or generally in the last fifty years of African philosophy and metaphilosophy. Perhaps we need to consider early work like that of Alexis Kagame in 1956, who indicates that in the Bantu languages, Descartes's *Cogito* and its attendant centuries of perplexity could not even have been stated: The word for "being" can only be used as a copula.³ Of course, Hountondji has pointed out that we cannot base our understanding of a nation's philosophy on the peculiarities of its grammar — no scrutiny of French grammar will reveal the existentialism of Sartre. There may, however, be some pertinent differences discoverable along these or other lines, and I hope future investigators will provide us with a deeper understanding of these kinds of specificities.

In the meantime, my recommendation would be to be extremely careful about making sweeping generalizations of any sort. Certain easy expectations of difference may serve as self-fulfilling prophecies — the Westerner expecting to find mysticism in India will probably find precisely that. We must wait for African philosophers to reveal their range of thought and critique, and we must welcome their perspectives into the discourse of philosophy of education.

1. Kwasi Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Philosophy," in *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

3. Alexis Kagame, *le Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de l'Être* (Brussels: Academie Royale de sciences coloniale, 1956).