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Teaching Ancient Egyptian Philosophy (Ethics) and History: Fulfilling a Quest for a Decolonised and Afrocentric Education

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Abstract

Despite the granting of “independence” to African countries more than 50 years ago, colonial scholarship continues to dominate in African institutions of higher learning. The genesis of ethics, a branch of philosophy, is attributed to the Greeks as if James Breasted’s study of ancient Egypt did not, in the early 1930s, demonstrate convincingly that the ancient Egyptians were the first to seriously engage with issues of right and wrong in the world. In political science, the notion of the *philosopher king* is attributed to the Greek philosopher, Plato, as if Plato introduced this concept. When students in South Africa are putting pressure on institutions of higher learning to abandon colonial scholarship in favour of a decolonised and Afrocentric curriculum, this article, in fulfilment of the students’ quest, invokes and echoes Cheikh Anta Diop’s call for centring the study of ancient Egypt in African institutions of higher learning. Such an approach will go a long way in affecting the manner in which philosophy in general, and ethics in particular, are taught. The same will apply to other disciplines such as history, political science, and exact sciences. This exercise is philosophical and uses Afrocentricity or the Africa-centred approach as a theoretical framework.

Keywords: Afrocentricity, ancient Egypt, colonialism, decolonisation, ethics, Eurocentrism

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Background and Introduction

In 1974, Cheikh Anta Diop, published his book, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, in which he argued that “ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization” and that the “ancient Egyptians were Negroes” (1974, p. xiv). His insistence on ancient Egypt’s blackness or Africanness was informed by

persistent and consistent attempts by Eurocentric historians to project ancient Egyptians as white (Diop, 1974, p. 27). In 1987, 13 years after the appearance of Diop's work, Martin Bernal, a white British scholar published his work, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, in which he pointed out that ancient "Egyptian civilization was fundamentally African" (p. 1991, p. 242) and that "many of the most powerful Egyptian dynasties which were based in Upper Egypt—the 1st, 11th, 12th and 18th—were made up of pharaohs whom one can usefully call black" (1991, p. 242).

The objective of this article is to trace ancient Egypt's origin of ethics, and to argue that African institutions of higher learning must reclaim and centre this African heritage in the curricula. Reclamation in this case means the restoration of African heritage on Africans' own terms. It implies, in other words, re-Africanising the African heritage which was de-Africanised and Europeanised by Eurocentric scholarship. This refers to, specifically, to Eurocentric scholarship's attempt, as pointed out by Diop (1974), to whiten ancient Egypt. The concept *re-Africanisation* is preferred over the traditionally used concept *Africanisation* because the former dispels the unintended dissemination of the notion that Africans are taking what is foreign and putting it in an African garb (Sesanti, 2016).

Diop (1974, p. xiv) pointed out that "the African historian who evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest nor objective . . . he is ignorant, cowardly and neurotic." Ignoring ancient Egypt is tantamount to—which is unimaginable—a Western historian writing European history without referring to Greco-Latin antiquity (Diop, 1974). Teaching ancient Egyptian history and philosophy would dispel Palmer's (2014, p. x) claim that "China is the oldest continuous culture in the world," on the basis that while Egyptian and Babylonian records might go back for four or five thousand years "nobody today actually still venerates the ancient figures of Pharaonic Egypt" (p. x). The study of ancient Egypt would bring to the African student's consciousness that the "Black world is the very initiator of the 'western' civilization flaunted before our eyes today" (Diop, 1974, p. xiv). Studying ancient Egypt would enable African students, to their "great surprise and satisfaction, . . . discover that most of the ideas used to domesticate, atrophy, dissolve, or steal [their souls] were conceived by [their] own ancestors" (Diop, 1974, p. xv).

The study of African history must begin in ancient Egypt because, as Williams (1987, p. 44) pointed out, "most of their indestructible monuments are there." For it is a matter of historical record that it was the ancient Egyptians who invented "the world's oldest known calendar" used to this day even by the Western world (Fletcher, 2016, pp. 13–14). The ancient Egyptians invented this calendar in 4241 BC (Breasted, 1908, pp. 15, 35). Historical records indicate that the "concept of a nation-state—a political territory whose population shares a common identity—was the invention of the ancient Egyptians" or more explicitly and specifically, the "unification of Egypt . . . created the world's first nation-state" (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 38). Underlining the significance of this revolutionary move, Wilkinson (2011) noted that while the nation-state may presently seem ordinary and normal, before the Egyptian invention of the nation-state, identity and loyalty were based on family, community, or region. While Breasted (1908, p. 16) placed the unification at 3400 BC, in a later work, he (Breasted, 1933, p. 26) pointed out that this was, in fact, the Second Union—the First Union having occurred in 4000 BC. At the height of her power, this African country, ancient Egypt, was known as "the throne of the world's only acknowledged superpower" (p. 12), a "dominant world power" (p. 28), and the "centre of the civilized world" (Tyldesley, 2005, p. 37).

While ancient Egyptians' victory in material issues is a cause of celebration, "the supreme achievement is the discovery of character" the ushering of "the dawn of the age of conscience" (Breasted, 1933, p. xvi). This ancient Egyptians' supreme achievement can be appreciated if one takes into cognisance Breasted's (1933, p. xxiii) observation that there was a time when human beings were completely unaware of their conduct, when all what they did was a matter of instinct. Having emerged victorious

in the struggle with nature, the ancient Egyptians began the “baffling *struggle of mankind with himself*—a struggle which has hardly passed beyond its beginnings at the present day” (Breasted, 1933, p. 11). Explicitly, Breasted (1933, p. 19) pointed out that “surviving sources would indicate that the moral mandate was felt earlier in Egypt than anywhere else” where “earliest known discussion of right and wrong in the history of man” took place.

The consequence of these ethical reflections resulted in the philosophy of ancient Egyptians, *Maat*, “the earliest conception of a moral order, designated by a significant word ‘righteousness,’ ‘justice,’ or ‘truth,’ which endured for a thousand years from the Thirty-fifth to the Twenty-fifth Century B.C. and made a profound impression on the human mind” (Breasted, 1933, p. 20). The point that Breasted (1933, p. x) made in 1933, nearly 100 years ago, rings with amazing accuracy and urgency to this day:

At a time when the younger generation is throwing inherited morals into the discard, it would seem to be worthwhile to re-appraise these ancient values which are being so lightly abandoned.

Celebrating the greatness and achievements of ancient Egyptians is not the same as claiming that ancient Egypt was a perfect society. In this article, we move from the premise, as Asante (2015, p. 24) pointed out, that “like many other nations Kemet [ancient Egypt] had its problems, periods of instability, squabbles over leadership, attempted coup d’états, and internal intrigue.” It is from the same premise that we approach African history in general, being, as Davidson (1970, p. xviii) noted, that African history is “a story of success and failure, disaster and resurgence and fulfillment, which is no different in its essence from the story of any of the major families of man.” This exercise is neither insensitive to, nor feigns ignorance of claims to the effect that “Egyptian and Greek civilizations for instance were dependent on slavery” (wa Thiong’o, 1997, p. 155). In response to this observation, in no uncertain terms, Obenga (1992, pp. 162–163) stated that “there was never slavery in Egyptian society at the time of the Pharaohs.”

Commenting on the issue of slavery in ancient Egypt and Greece, Diop (1974, p. 210) argued that while in “Greco-Latin Antiquity, capitalist production depended on a slave market,” unlike in the Greco-Roman and feudal societies, ancient Egypt “had no servile labour force.” He did concede, though, that there were, in ancient Egypt, “conquered Indo-Europeans [who were] systematically enslaved and branded to prevent their escape” (p. 210). In contextualising the case of the Indo-Europeans, Diop emphasised that it was as “prisoner[s] of war” that they were captured, and later “transformed into . . . slave[s]” (1974, p. 213). More emphatically, he argued that “strictly speaking, Egypt never adopted an economy dependent on slaves; that always remained marginal” (Diop, 1974, p. 217). Unequivocally, Diop (1974) pointed out that the “white man contributed nothing to Egyptian civilization” (p. 213) and that:

from a comparison between Greco-Roman society on the one hand, and Egyptian society on the other, it is apparent that, despite its long history, Egypt did not practice slave, feudal (in the Western sense), or capitalist systems of production. These three economic systems existed there only marginally. (p. 222)

The call for the centring of ancient Egypt in the curricula is an act of decolonisation and is Afrocentric. If the theoretical basis of this study is Afrocentricity as opposed to Eurocentrism, it is essential that both concepts be defined, and their relationship with, and approach to, education be clearly stated.

This Study's Approach

After defining both Afrocentricity and Eurocentrism, and given that our focus is the teaching of African history and philosophy with particular reference to ethics, a branch of philosophy, our second task is to examine some efforts in South Africa's higher education to place African ethics in the curriculum—the successes and limitations. We then move on to show how the separation of ancient Egypt from the rest of the African continent is neither innocuous nor an accident of history, but a deliberate act of colonial and Eurocentric scholarship. That is followed by an outlining of the history of the ancient Egyptians' origin of ethics. Subsequent sections discuss ethics' implications for leadership and communities. That is followed by a discussion of African cultural unity between ancient Egypt and other African communities, and concluding remarks.

Afrocentric Versus Eurocentric Education: A Response to South African Students' Call for a Decolonised and Afrocentric Education

In 2015, more than 21 years after South Africans placed in power the African National Congress (ANC), a liberation movement that has anti-colonial struggle credentials, students in South Africa, led by the Rhodes Must Fall Movement, demanded a decolonised and Afrocentric education (John & Sosibo, 2015, p. 8). The students' demand was an indication of a realisation that even though South Africans had elected a government with a black head of state, the content of education had remained colonial and Eurocentric. Eurocentrism here is understood as a culturalist phenomenon that not only places the Westerners' interests at the centre, but "claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time" (Amin, 1989, p. vii).

In order to understand how, after 21 years of democracy, education in South Africa remained colonial, it is important to understand the nature of two interrelated concepts, *colonialism* and *colonisation*. Colonisation refers to the physical occupation and domination of one people's territory by another, while colonialism refers to the displacement of one people's culture by another (Mudimbe, 1988, pp. 1–2). Culture in this case refers to people's ways of life, values, and education. The struggle by South African students for a decolonised education gives an indication of an appreciation by the students that while colonisation (physical occupation) was addressed in a limited way, colonialism (cultural domination) with particular reference to education, remained intact—colonial and Eurocentric. Hence, calls for a decolonised and Afrocentric education.

Recognition of the resilience of colonialism, with particular reference to education or scholarship has been recognised by scholars advancing *decoloniality*. Citing Mignolo, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 13) defined decoloniality as a theoretical framework that seeks to usher "into intervening existence another interpretation that brings forward, on the one hand, a silenced view of the event and, on the other, shows the limits of imperial ideology disguised as the true (total) interpretation of the events" in the making of the modern world. Decoloniality is about "decolonizing the sciences" as it is about "decolonizing society and the world" (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 435). While this may be the case, decolonial scholars do not see what remains after independence as continued colonialism but coloniality. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 13) citing Maldonado-Torres, "a leading philosopher in decolonial thought" observed that "coloniality is different from colonialism," arguing that colonialism "denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or people rests on the power of another nation." Coloniality, on the other hand, is defined as "long standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture. . . . Thus, coloniality survives colonialism" (Maldonado-Torres as cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 13).

For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 13), decolonisation refers to the "withdrawal of direct colonialism from the colonies as well as the struggles ranged against those empires that were reluctant to do so." While

this study agrees with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's definition of decolonisation, it does not limit decolonisation to the physical withdrawal of direct colonialism but to the mental and cultural as well, which, to decolonial scholars, is the task of coloniality. While decolonial scholars distinguish between colonialism and coloniality, this study does not. Differences notwithstanding, this study appreciates decolonial scholarship's stance of holding "emancipatory and identity goals central to its project" and regarding as "an imperative of decoloniality, . . . 'decolonial knowledge-making' that reasserts and draws in concepts and meanings from Indigenous knowledge production" (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012, p. 124). What this means is that decolonial scholarship "engages the question of knowledge and epistemology critical to understanding the presence of others' worldviews and the limits these impose on Western philosophy" (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 124). This approach is shared by Afrocentricity.

Afrocentricity is a "philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture" (Asante, 2003, p. 3). Having defined both Afrocentricity and Eurocentrism, we proceed to examine the aims and objectives of education both from African and European historical contexts with specific reference to Africa.

The Objective of Education: Afrocentric and Eurocentric Contexts

The ultimate objective of education in ancient Egypt was to fashion a human being to be "one with God" or to "become like God" (Hilliard, 2003, p. 272). Explicitly, the ancient Egyptians' educational project was to build a human being whose personality was just, compassionate, generous, against corruption and exploitation. Ancient Egyptians were one with the rest of the African continent in making education an instrument of inculcating in human beings the importance of social responsibility, the development of spiritual power, and the development of character (Hilliard, 2003, p. 275). What emerges clearly from these objectives is a clear ethical basis of African education. It is this type of African culture and history that underpins the Afrocentric thrust for education.

The Eurocentric project with reference to education in Africa was carried out by both the colonial governments and the missionary schools. While missionary schools sought to convert Africans into Christianity, and making them priests who would further missionary work, the colonial governments' schools sought to mould Africans into becoming administrators and clerks in the service of the latter (Molony, 2014, p. 49). Just as the colonial government schools specifically targeted and placed chiefs' sons in their elite schools so that they would be instrumental in implementing colonialists' policies, anticipating the inevitability of decolonisation and independence of African countries, the "future of British colonial Africa was to be placed in the hands of a tiny cadre of Africans who were to be educated as black facsimiles of (rather idealised) white colonial officials" (Molony, 2014, p. 96). This explains why after "over 50 years of post-colonialism in Africa . . . the cultural orientation and attitudes of the African elite towards educational systems and curricula on this continent . . . [have] hardly altered" (Prah, 2017, p. 34). It is in recognition of this reality that Prah argued that "in Africa today, Eurocentrism is propagated more by Africans than Westerners" (2017, p. 35).

The South African students' objection to and rejection of colonial and Eurocentric education in favour of a decolonised, Afrocentric education, should be seen in this context. The African students appreciated that "the curriculum lies at the core of all educational systems" and that it is "through the curriculum that the larger social objects and values of the social order are implemented and achieved" (Prah, 2017, p. 30). While the call by the South African students for a decolonised and Afrocentric education is a historical event, it would be false to assume that South African academics in institutions of higher learning made no effort to challenge the Western paradigm in order to advance an African paradigm prior 2015, when the Rhodes Must Fall made these demands. There were efforts, with specific reference to the teaching of ethics in institutions of higher learning, to place African ethics in the curricula.

Placing African Ethics in the Curriculum: Successes and Limitations

In 2004, the African Ethics Initiative, as part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Unilever Ethics Centre, rallied a number of ethics scholars to consider if there is such a thing as a set of African ethics, what such constitutes if it exists, and whether African ethics are consistent with or different from Western ethics (Nicolson, 2008, p. 1). The scholars were also asked to examine whether or not African ethics have anything valuable to say, not only to an African context but also in the wider world. The initiative sought to investigate, clarify, and highlight the "contributions of ethics derived from sub-Saharan African culture and lived experience as part of the panorama of rich ethical guidance from which we may draw" (Nicolson, 2008, p. 1). Within a sub-Saharan African context, the initiative sought to investigate whether "some aspects of traditional African culture" such as "male hegemony" and "respect for elders and chiefs" were not "tantamount to sexism, gerontocracy, authoritarianism . . . and the like" (Nicolson, 2008, p. 1).

Following the initiative, ethics' scholar, Munyaradzi Felix Murove (2009, p. xiv), felt that the time had come for the nature and form of African ethics to be considered and defined by Africans themselves, free from the influence of people from other parts of the world. Murove (2009, p. xiv) had correctly observed that many anthologies on ethics "have been structured to give the impression that ethical traditions are found only in the western or eastern worlds, and in Christian and Islamic traditions." Identifying the source of this problem, Murove (2009, p. xiv) correctly pointed out that "such bias is attributed to Eurocentricism at institutions of higher learning in post-colonial Africa." That is the case because, as Murove (2009, p. xiv) further argued, education institutions in Africa "still tend to be highly westernised" because "they remain sophisticated bastions for the dissemination of western values." The studies of ethics in these institutions, Murove protested, "deal scantily with African ethics although most Africans south of the Sahara rely on traditional ethics to guide them as to what is right or wrong" (2009, p. xiv).

While both initiatives to highlight African ethics are appreciated, the major shortcoming is limiting African ethics to sub-Saharan Africa. The problem with the sub-Saharan approach is that, as Keto (1989, p. 23) noted, the "sectionalist focus on sub-Saharan or tropical Africa, ignores the elements of cultural unity in Africa before the severe desiccation of the Sahel in historical time and the advent of Islam in the seventh century of the Current Era." Focus on sub-Saharan Africa at the exclusion of ancient Egypt is detrimental to the writing and study of African history because, the "history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt" (Diop, 1974, p. xiv). Furthermore, it would be impossible to build African humanities, a body of African human sciences, so long as the relationship between ancient Egypt and the rest of Africa does not appear legitimate (Diop, 1974, p. xiv). Having said that, it would be unfair to the UKZN's initiative not to state that one of the chapters, authored by Mkhize (2008, pp. 36, 40–41), made a conscious and commendable effort to link ubuntu, a philosophy associated with sub-Saharan Africa, to Maat, a philosophy associated with ancient Egypt. The cultural separation of ancient Egypt is neither an accident of history nor an innocuous omission, as discussed below.

Setting Ancient Egyptians—Culturally—Apart from Their Fellow Africans

In 1996, Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, brought out a volume of edited articles, *Black Athena Revisited*, contesting Diop's and Bernal's thesis. In this volume, Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996, p. xii) argued that on the "basis of the available evidence we believe that it can be shown that the ancient Egyptians regarded themselves as ethnically distinct from other African peoples, as well as the peoples of the Near East and of Europe." Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996, p. xii) go on to point out that "although they are 'people of color' by modern definition," the ancient Egyptians, "in their own minds and in the minds of ancient Greeks . . . were a different nation from the Ethiopians." In line with Lefkowitz and Rogers' arguments, Bard (1996, p. 104) charged that "Egyptians were Egyptians, the people of *Kmt*."

In a direct challenge to Diop who pointed out that the name Kmt or Kemet means the “Land of Blacks,” Bard (1996, p. 104) argued that “*Kmt* means ‘Black Land’ . . . not . . . ‘Land of Blacks.’” In direct opposition to Diop who scientifically demonstrated the link between Mdw Ntr, the ancient Egyptians’ language, and Wolof the Senegalese language, Bard (1996, p. 104) argued that “looking at the linguistic evidence, there is nothing that links Egypt to other areas in Africa except generally.” For Bard (1996, p. 104) it was “disturbing . . . that archaeological evidence—the artifacts, art and architecture of ancient Egypt—has been identified with race and racial issues.”

In a determined act to separate the ancient Egyptians from the rest of other Africans, Bard (1996, p. 104) pointed out firmly that “ancient Egyptians were Mediterranean peoples, neither Sub-Saharan blacks nor Caucasian whites but peoples whose skin was adapted to life in a subtropical environment.” In case Bard was not clear enough, she emphasised that the “ancient Egyptians were North African peoples, distinct from Sub-Saharan blacks” (1996, p. 111). But confronted with the reality that ancient Egypt is geographically African, Bard conceded that

because it was located on the African continent, ancient Egypt was an African civilization, though perhaps its African identity has been subtly minimised within the discipline of Near Eastern studies, which has its roots in European Orientalism of the nineteenth century.
(1996, p. 103)

In a desperate and blind attempt to distinguish ancient Egyptians from the rest of Africans, Bard contradicted herself. While on one hand Bard (1996, p. 111) argued that “culturally and linguistically the ancient Egyptians were different from other peoples living outside the Nile Valley, as well as those farther south and east,” on the other hand, she pointed out that “ancient Egypt was definitely the earliest African civilization and as such certainly had an influence not only on the other cultures that arose in the Near East, but also on the states that arose farther south in Africa.”

In her preoccupation with emphasising differences among Africans, Bard (1996, p. 111) argued that the “Kushite peoples were considered non-Egyptians by Egyptians—in other words, ethnically different.” She failed to contextualise a fact about which she was fully aware: that considering that at some stage in history ancient Egypt was ruled by the Kushites, the ancient Egyptians’ resentment towards others they considered outsiders should not be a surprise (Bard, 1996, p. 110; Snowden, 1996, p. 122). Ably, Diop (1974, p. 62) addressed this issue by pointing out that if it could be insinuated that ancient Egypt’s Pharaohs fought the black populations of southern Ethiopia, because they did not belong to the same race, this is tantamount to saying that because Caesar undertook expeditions in Gaul, the Gauls and Romans did not belong to the same white race or that, if the Romans were white, the Gauls must have been yellow or black.

Having observed that, firstly, the “Egyptians and their southern neighbors were perceived as distinctly different types,” and that, secondly, “it was the inhabitants of Nubia, not the Egyptians, whose physical type most closely resembled that of Africans and peoples of African descent referred to in the modern world as blacks or Negroes,” Snowden (1996, pp. 115, 121) went on to argue that one of the great ironies of the Afrocentrists’ position is their emphasis on ancient Egypt, “a rather distorted and myopic view of history,” which has led to neglect the significance of Nubia, “which was really a black African culture of enormous influence and power.” Snowden’s claim is simply false. In 1974, 22 years before Snowden made this point, Cheikh Anta Diop acknowledged the cultural greatness of the Nubians (Ethiopians). Actually, he pointed out not only to their greatness, but also the contribution they made to ancient Egypt’s celebrated civilisation. Citing the earliest scholars who studied Nubia, Diop (1974, p. 150) noted that their studies indicated that ancient Egyptian civilisation descended from that of Nubia

and that, in fact, ancient Egyptians themselves recognised that their ancestors came from Nubia, the heart of Africa.

Significantly, Diop further pointed out that excavations in the area of ancient Ethiopia “reveal documents worthy of the name only in Nubia proper, not in modern Ethiopia,” and that:

In reality, it is in Nubia that we find pyramids similar to those in Egypt, underground temples, and Meroitic writing, not yet deciphered, but closely related to Egyptian writing. Strangely enough, though this point is not emphasized, Nubian writing is more evolved than Egyptian. While Egyptian writing, even in its hieratic and demotic phases, has never completely eliminated its hieroglyphic essence, Nubian writing is alphabetical. (1974, p. 150)

Next, we discuss ancient Egyptians’ origin of ethics.

Ancient Egypt: The African Origin of Ethics

Breasted (1933, p. 19) pointed out that the “earliest known discussion of right and wrong in the history of man is embedded in a Memphite drama.” It is a text written on a millstone that contains a “philosophical discussion” (Breasted, 1933, p. 32). This discussion on ethics, in the form of the Memphite drama, is traced to the middle of the Fourth Millenium BC, regarding which, Breasted observed that “it is very surprising to find that such ideas as these had already arisen by the middle of the Fourth Millenium BC” (1933, p. 34).

Significantly, the Memphite drama had the inscription of an “Ethiopian Pharaoh Shabaka, who ruled Egypt in the Eighth Century BC” who, when he saw the writing, referred to it as “a work of the ancestors” (Breasted, 1933, p. 29). This is significant considering the emphasis by writers cited above on the differences between ancient Egyptians and the Nubians. Why did the Ethiopian pharaoh, who ruled ancient Egypt, claim ancient Egyptians’ heritage as a work of his ancestors? One answer is that this was due to the Nubian origin of some ancient Egyptians. Another answer linked to the foregoing observation is that the content of the Memphite drama resonated with the philosophical orientation of the ancestors of Pharaoh Shabaka, as will be demonstrated later.

While Breasted (1933, p. 346) spoke in glowing terms of Phoenician civilisation, at the same time he noted that of “Phoenician moral development, however, we know practically nothing.” With reference to Babylonia, Breasted (1933, p. 343) noted that the “sense of social justice, which lies at the very foundation of moral development, was very imperfect or lacking altogether among the Babylonians.” This absence of social justice among the Babylonians is “very strikingly demonstrated by the famous law code of Hammurapi, in which the penalties and verdicts are graded according to the social station receiving substantially more favourable consideration than the man of low birth” (Breasted, 1933, p. 342). Western development in ethics is very recent compared to that of African Egypt, considering that the “study of ethics in the Western world began nearly 2,500 years ago when Socrates, according to his faithful student, Plato, roamed Greece probing and challenging his brethren’s ideas about such abstract concepts as justice and goodness” (Day, 2006, p. 3). The association of ethics with Europe has a lot to do with the power of definition. For instance, Day (2006, p. 3) in defining ethics, noted that the term is derived from the Greek *ethos*. That this term came to English through Greek gives the false impression that ethics has a Greek genesis, while the fact of the matter is that it came *through* not *from* Greek.

It is not only the genesis of ethics that is falsely attributed to the Greeks, but also the “idea of the philosopher-king” which is credited to Plato in whose book, *The Republic*, the idea is said to have been canvassed for the first time (Adebajo, 2016, p. 13). The notion of the philosopher-king existed in ancient Egypt of which Plato was great admirer. Extant ancient Egyptian literature indicates that leaders in general, and kings in particular, were expected to be guided in their leadership and rule by, Maat, the ancient Egyptian philosophy, defined as “truth, justice, righteousness, balance, order” (Hilliard, Williams, & Damali, 1987, p. 49).

The Philosophy of Maat and Implications for Ethical Leadership

The ancient Egyptians reasoned that it was possible to have an environment where truth, justice, righteousness, balance, and order dominated “provided there exists a pharaoh willing and able to apply Maat in every sphere, from the most abstract to the most concrete” (Jacq, 2004, p. xv). Echoing this point, Tyldesley (2005, p. 71) pointed out that “the king’s most important duty . . . was the maintenance of *maat* throughout his land.” The emergence of a just king was not left to chance. Conscious measures were taken to mould such. There were certain instructions that were given to those who were to ascend to the throne about how to apply rule characterised by justice. One such document is the *Instruction to Merikare*, “the legacy of a departing king which embodies a treatise on kingship” (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 97). In this treatise, Merikare’s father urges his son to “not neglect my speech, which lays down all the laws of kingship, which instructs you, that you may rule the land, and may you reach me with none to accuse you!” (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 107). The father told the son that as a king he was expected to do justice, to calm the weeper, not to oppress the widow, not to expel a man from his father’s property, not to punish wrongfully and not to kill (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 100).

Merikare’s father cautioned his son against being biased in favour of the “wellborn” against the “commoner” and to give a person work on the basis of “skills” (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 101). In a world where powerful people prefer to surround themselves with weak, self-ingratiating and sycophantic people, Merikare’s father advised his son against surrounding himself with the obsequious but, rather, critical and independent minds who would be able to show him his wrongs when occasion necessitated:

Great is the Great man whose men are great,

Strong is the king who has councilors, . . .

A king who has courtiers is not ignorant. (Lichtheim, 1975, pp. 100, 105)

It is remarkable that the articulation of ideas advancing meritocracy and democracy in the *Instruction to Merikare*, took place during the years 1650 to 1080 BC (Lichtheim, 1975, p. xiii). But historical records reveal that in an earlier period, the Old Kingdom, between 2650 BC and 2135 BC, there existed texts entitled *The Teachings of PtahHotep* (Hilliard et al., 1987), *The Wisdom of Ptah-Hotep* (Jacq, 2004), and “The Instruction of Ptahhotep” (in Lichtheim, 1975), giving an indication that the ancient Egyptians were sensitive to how easily a leader could be swayed to the side of injustice.

Notwithstanding the fact that Ptah-Hotep’s book is so old, Jacq (2004, p. x) observed that Ptah-Hotep’s teachings “give sound, practical advice for life today.” That is so because even though the book is “a testimony of another era,” and “although the setting is different, many moral and spiritual dilemmas remain exactly as they were in 2040 BC” (Jacq (2004, p. x). What this reveals is that humankind has, in ethical terms, advanced very little since the “dawn of conscience” and the “Age of Character” in ancient Egypt (Breasted, 1933, p. xxiv). Jacq’s sentiments are an echo of Breasted’s (1933, p. x) who noted that “at a time when the younger generation is throwing inherited morals into the discard, it would seem

worthwhile to re-appraise these ancient values which are being so light-heartedly abandoned.” The ethical teachings of the ancient Egyptians are not only relevant in general but speak directly to the call of a decolonised and Afrocentric education, in that this call is not about merely replacing European with African education, but is about the values that these systems would impart. The emphasis of a decolonised and Afrocentric education is about the moulding of an ethical human being in general, and a leader in particular.

Ptah-Hotep observed:

If you are a man who leads, a man whose authority reaches widely, then you should do perfect things, those which posterity will remember. Don't listen to the words of flatterers or to words that puff you up with pride and vanity. (Hilliard et al., 1987 p. 24)

Ptah-Hotep taught that those in position of “guidance and leadership” had an obligation to listen calmly to petitioners, not to turn them away until they had said everything that they wanted to say (Jacq, 2004, p. 21). The logic in listening patiently, Ptah-Hotep explained, was that anyone oppressed by injustice has a fervent desire to unburden one’s heart. Whether the petitioner’s complaint is resolved immediately or not—Ptah-Hotep reasoned—is neither here nor there. The important issue is that the person has felt that she or he has been given the attention deserved by all human beings, and had a platform to vent. Ptah-Hotep warned that leaders who did not listen to grievances would always be treated with suspicion by people. The lesson in Ptah-Hotep’s teachings on leadership is that listening to the powerless is an ethical act.

Ptah-Hotep issued a strong warning against greed, arguing that it was a “grievous sickness without cure,” an evil that “embroils fathers, mothers,” that which “parts wife from husband . . . a compound of all evils, a bundle of all hateful things” (Lichtheim, 1975, pp. 68–69). While it was expected that everyone should guard against the evil of greed, there was a greater expectation from the leaders of society. In strong terms, Ptah-Hotep pointed out:

He whose heart obeys his belly

Puts contempt of himself in place of love . . .

He who obeys his belly belongs to the enemy. (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 67)

In the *Instruction to Merikare* we find a strong echo of caution to the soon-to-be king against greed:

A wretch is who desires that land [of his neighbor]

A fool is who covets what others possess. (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 100)

This concern about kings who coveted others’ possessions was not merely the ancient Egyptians’. When Cambyses, the king of the Persians, sent gifts to the king of Ethiopia, the main aim being to spy, the Ethiopian king responded thus:

You are nothing but liars, come here to spy on my realm! As for these gifts that you have been sent by the Persian King to bring me, they suggest no great desire on his part to establish links of friendship with me, but rather that he has no sense of what is right [emphasis added]. How otherwise to explain this longing of his for lands that are not his

own [emphasis added], and his hauling into slavery peoples that never did him any wrong?
(Herodotus, 2015, p. 17)

What emerges from the passage above is the common appreciation of ethics between the Ethiopians and the ancient Egyptians, the shared rejection of greed for other people's land between the *Instruction to Merikare* and the Ethiopian King. Contrary to Eurocentric scholars' quests to highlight differences between the ancient Egyptians' cultural values and those of the Nubians, the shared ethical concerns make sense why the Ethiopian King Shabaka claimed the ancient Egyptian Memphite drama as the work of his own ancestors (Breasted, 1933, p. 29).

Ptah-Hotep recognised very clearly that ethical leadership and the importance of listening to the powerless could not be left to kings alone. Conscious of the fact that the courts of law wielded great power in effecting justice, he did not leave the judiciary out of his teachings. He observed that if magistrates were to be perceived as having integrity, they had a responsibility to "hew a straight line," not to lean on one side when they spoke, because if they failed to do so, they would be accused of distortion, and their judgements would turn against them (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 71).

Even though there is an appreciation that the philosophical reflections of ancient Egyptians are placed around the years 2 600 BC, and that locating them in that period may be informed by sincerity and good intentions, to limit their reflections to this period would be to underrate the ancient Egyptians' achievements. Ptah-Hotep did not take credit for his teachings but attributed them to "the instructions of the ancestors" (Jacq, 2004, p. 3), the "ways of the ancestors" (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 63; Hilliard et al., 1987, p. 16).

Reverence for the Wisdom of the Ancestors: A Pan-African Culture

Ptah-Hotep's reverence for the wisdom of the ancestors was not unique. His compatriot, Merikare, emphasised the same to his son about kingship:

*Justice comes to him distilled,
Shaped in the sayings of the ancestors,
Copy your fathers, your ancestors—
See, their words endure in books,
Open, read them, copy their knowledge. (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 99)*

This act of invoking and acknowledging the wisdom of the ancestors in preparing a person to be a just king was not a uniquely ancient Egyptian culture, but a Pan-African one. In the 1800s, Mohlomi, a chief and seer in Lesotho, in counselling the future king of BaSotho, Moshoeshoe, gave advice that has a striking resemblance to the *Instruction to Merikare*. We give a long direct quotation here because paraphrasing would rob the reader of appreciating the cultural ties that bind ancient Egyptians to the BaSotho and the rest of the African family:

One day you will truly be a chief and rule over men. You should then perform your duties in all their affairs 'SETHO' (as Sacred Beings do, i.e. with human purity of thought and unmitigated truthfulness). Learn to understand men and know their ways. Learn to bear with their human weaknesses and shortcomings. Always determine to direct them along the paths of truth and purity. In their disputes, adjudicate with justice, perfect justice and

sympathy. You must not allow preferences based on wealth, status or prestige influence and tarnish any of your decisions in your judgment. Always keep in mind that all people are equal before the law. . . . The words that I have just spoken to you, are the words of my Balimo [ancestral souls]—the words that I received in a vision at Mophato and have guided me throughout my life. . . . I am to-day passing to you these same words, in order that that which I inherited from my Balimo, you may through me, also inherit. (Mokhehle, 1990, pp. 31–32).

In these words of Mohlomi, the seer from Lesotho, one finds the echoes of ancient Egypt's Maat, the *Instruction to Merikare*, the *Teachings of Ptah-Hotep* and ancestor reverence—all in one.

The centrality of ancestor guidance and ancestor reverence in traditional African governance is found in many African traditional polities. Writing about the Zanj people of the period 925 AD, Abu al-Hassan-al-Masudi (cited in Davidson 1994, p. 36) noted that the Zanj people gave their ruler the title *Waqlimi*, meaning "supreme lord" because he had been chosen to rule them with equity. But "once he becomes tyrannical and departs from the rules of justice, they cause him to die and exclude his posterity to the throne" (Davidson 1994, p. 36). The killing and barring their descendants from ruling was informed by the Zanj's belief that "in behaving thus he ceases to be the son of the Master, that is to say, of the king of heaven and earth" (1994, p. 36). In his commentary, Davidson correctly observed that "other Africans will quickly recognize the echoes of their own attitudes to good rulers as well as to bad rulers who depart from the ways of God and the wisdom of the ancestors" (1994, p. 36). This is but one example testifying to African cultural unity.

The preceding observations should not be seen as painting a picture of a perfect society in ancient Egypt. Such a society does not exist and has never existed. Ancient Egypt had her moments of injustice. But the beauty of the history of ancient Egypt is that there was active resistance and opposition to oppression. As early as 2000 BC there were philosophers, to whom Breasted (1933, p. 361) referred as "social prophets." These social prophets, driven by ethical consciousness, "denounced the corruption and oppression under which the poor and the humble suffered at the hands of the rich and powerful" (Breasted, 1933, p. 361). Very significantly, "repeatedly their denunciations were delivered in the presence of the king himself" (1933, p. 361), a clear indication that these social prophets had the courage of their convictions to speak out against the rich in favour of the poor, against the powerful, in favour of the weak. These social prophets "raised the cry for social justice and looked for an ideal age of human happiness under the beneficent rule of a righteous king" (Breasted, 1933, p. 361).

While the role played by the social prophets was appreciated, the poor themselves did not give up agency to fight for their rights. The story of Khun-Anup, the Eloquent Peasant, is a case in point. When a rich and powerful man robbed him of his possession, Khun-Anup, invoking Maat, appealed to the high authorities of the land, seeking justice. Khun-Anup argued that instead of judges dispensing justice, it was them who snatched stolen goods; arbitrators became robbers, and punishers of evil committed crimes (Lichtheim, 1975, pp. 173–174). These evil acts, Khun-Anup publicly stated, were motivated by greed. Courageously, he reminded the authorities of the land that "Not great is the one who is great in greed" (Lichtheim, 1975, p. 176). When the king heard of Khun-Anup's eloquence in articulating Maat and condemning injustice, he gave instructions that his family be provided for secretly by the state, and that his case be prolonged so that he could have space to speak more. Ultimately, the rich and powerful man who had wronged him was found guilty and all Khun-Anup's belongings were returned.

Reflecting on Khun-Anup's story, Armah (2006, p. 206) noted that not only was Khun-Anup given his possessions back, but that the pharaoh sacked the powerful man from his position and appointed

Khun-Anup. While Armah appreciated the moral lesson of the story being that the anti-corruption campaign really worked, he was critical that throughout Khun-Anup's protest, he was subjected to continuous whipping for what he perceived as "the entertainment of state officials and the king" (Armah, 2006, p. 206). The dominant narrative, though, is that the exercise was not for entertainment but the creation of a platform for Khun-Anup, unbeknown to him, to teach Maat to the ignorant rich. Khun-Anup's victory at that time is important for us in our times when the rich are found not guilty because they can pay expensive lawyers, and the innocent found guilty because they have no resources.

Concluding Remarks

The act of de-linking and displacing ancient Egypt culturally from Africa in the face of the impossibility of dislocating it geographically, is an act of colonialism and Eurocentric scholarship. The act of re-linking and re-placing ancient Egypt culturally, is an act of decolonisation and Afrocentric scholarship. This article set out to argue for the centring of ancient Egyptian philosophy, with particular reference to ethics and history in the curricula of African institutions of higher education as a fulfilment of African students' quest for a decolonised and Afrocentric education. We briefly defined Eurocentrism, which informed the approach of colonial education, and Afrocentricity, which informed the approach of African education before colonialism. If colonialism and colonial education were unethical and dehumanising, a decolonised and Afrocentric education must advance ethical values that must contribute towards the act of re-humanisation.

Informed by a view that all educational systems are not value free but value laden, we invoked ancient Egyptian philosophy and history because they present us with the opportunity to examine African values that informed education before colonialism. However, in doing this, the quest is not simply about replacing European values with African values. Rather, the objective is to specifically invoke those values in education that will contribute towards building human beings who will see other human beings as deserving justice and to be given a space to flourish—but not at the expense of other human beings. Just as the ancient Egyptians, in particular, and Africans, in general, did not believe that a conscientious human being automatically came about, but had to be consciously moulded, we move from a premise that for a just society to come about there must be a conscious exercise to mould leadership that will usher a just society. Ancient Egyptians, as demonstrated in this exercise, recognised and emphasised the centrality of leadership in building an ideal society. It is as Azikiwe (1937, p. 135) observed, that "leadership is the soul of any community."

Invoking ancient Egyptian philosophy and history is neither sentimental nor an act of nostalgia. This exercise is premised on the view that the study of history should not merely be for intellectual gratification, but an opportunity for all people to realise their strengths and weakness and, more importantly, the study of history should be the foundation and guiding light for united efforts in serious planning about what needs to be done now for the future (Williams, 1987, p. 43). Studying ancient Egyptian ethics and history serves this purpose in that, as scholarship (cited above) has demonstrated, in as much as ancient Egyptian ethics were relevant in the time of the ancient Egyptians, they continue to be relevant in the 21st century and beyond. While it is hoped that the teaching of ancient Egyptian ethics and history will have the desired effect of inculcating a sense of pride once African students appreciate that their ancestors were the first to usher a nation-state, and were the leaders in mathematics and science, the main objective of this article is to bring consciousness to African students that their ancestors were the first to engage in a battle with the self by striving to develop ethics. It is hoped that a decolonised education will elevate the importance of recognising that the greatest measure of success and victory is not to conquer and vanquish fellow human beings, but to conquer vanity, conceit, greed, selfishness, and corruption in the self. Confronting the wrong done by others is easy, but confronting the wrong done by the self is a mountainous task. It is this that ancient Egyptian

and African education in general sought to inculcate in human beings. It is this task that a decolonised and Afrocentric education must accomplish.

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