

QUESTIONS OF CANON FORMATION IN PHILOSOPHY: THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY IN AFRICA

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KEY CONCEPTS

African history of philosophy; epistemic injustice; canon formation; conceptual decolonisation

ABSTRACT

The history of philosophy is not just an academic discipline, but considered to be a philosophical activity itself. It has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of philosophy, our philosophical canon and curricula. The history of philosophy in Africa is still a young discipline, although philosophical thinking (concepts, manuscripts, books and philosophers) can be traced back until ancient Egypt. Facing the problem of exclusion and inferiorisation of traditions of thought and philosophy in Africa, the discipline of the history of philosophy involves very specific problems and requires a project of “conceptual decolonisation”. This explains both the importance and the difficulty of writing a history of philosophy in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first part shows how Africa was excluded from the history of philosophy. The second part deals with some basic methodological questions of writing the history of philosophy in Africa, its specific challenges (colonialism, orality) as well as unique opportunities (a new approach to the discipline, the philosophical canon, and curricula). Moreover, considering

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the fact that any process of writing the history of philosophy is an exclusionary one, the paper identifies primary patterns of exclusion in the young discipline of the historiography of philosophy in Africa (Lusophone philosophies, Afrophone philosophies, the Arabic-Islamic tradition, and women in philosophy). The paper concludes that further investigation into the mechanisms of exclusion are required, which might offer answers of global interest.

The history of philosophy is not just an academic discipline; it is considered to be a philosophical activity in itself. Although it is, strictly speaking, a secondary discourse, the echo of the primary discourse that produces philosophical concepts and texts, in writing a history of philosophy a new discourse emerges which preserves and changes all previous discourses of a different nature.

Today, the study of the history of philosophy comprises the lion's share of philosophical work, in research as well as in teaching. As evidenced by an almost endless number of volumes on the history of philosophy, doing philosophy is predominantly the discussion of the texts, terms and concepts of our forebears.¹ A move toward philosophical reflections on key issues of our time (environment, media, poverty and justice, cognitive sciences, biotechnology, and so forth), has occurred only recently. And even these reflections depend to an amazing degree on references to those concepts and persons considered canonical in the long history of the discipline. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the history of philosophy has become self-constitutive for the subject and discipline of philosophy. It has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of philosophy, our philosophical canon and curricula.

The process of writing the history of philosophy is an exclusionary one; thinkers, concepts and terms are included or excluded from the narrative depending on current evidence or definitions of philosophy, which may vary according to time and place. This process creates a certain canon of philosophical works and authors, which in turn shapes all further understanding of philosophy as a way of thinking and as an academic discipline. The French historian of philosophy, Lucien Braun, declares that what we actually call the history of philosophy is the selection and classification of texts in order to compile them into a new ensemble. The results of such compilations are constitutive realities which shape any subsequent readings. The "weight of this inertia", as Braun (1990) calls it, becomes obvious if a text is assumed to be a philosophical text, not because the current evidence or understanding of philosophy would define it as such, but because the tradition accepts it as such (Braun 1990: 3). It is the "weight of this inertia" which determines all subsequent readings. At this point it is not only crucial which texts, concepts and authors are included in the grand

1 Schneider (1990) counts over 300 volumes on the history of philosophy from the nineteenth century alone.

narrative of philosophy, but also those which are excluded. Ultimately, exclusion is the dominant motif of the history of philosophy and perhaps even of philosophy itself, in particular when philosophy is associated with a claim to truth. Presently, the history of philosophy is still used as the main evidence that philosophy is a specific, narrowly defined activity which cannot be practised by everyone.

In Africa's case, exclusionary tendencies have played a particularly destructive role in the perception of philosophical concepts, schools and traditions in this region of the world. To this day they are partly responsible for the low opinion of Africa as a source of original philosophical ideas and concepts. Here the dominant occidental version of the history of philosophy is an example of "epistemic injustice", an idea explored by Fricker (2007). According to her, epistemic injustice consists "most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker 2007: 1). Since epistemic injustice is manifested in patterns of incredulity, misinterpretation, or silencing, the exclusion of a whole continent from the history of philosophy is certainly a profound epistemic injustice which has to be corrected.

How to correct such injustices? Until today, academic philosophy is strongly influenced by "Western" thinkers and concepts, contributions from different cultures and regions (historically as well as contemporary) are rarely taken into consideration, and a monocultural reduction of the discourse is not even perceived as a deficiency that limits the horizon of the debate and our understanding of philosophy. As philosophers and academics it is in our hands to change our approach to philosophical topics and concepts, to modify our discursive methods, and to work for more academic justice in our respective fields. Several considerations are of eminent importance here. First, philosophers have to be aware of their own contextuality and how it influences their thinking. Second, it should be a basic principle of academic work to make a serious effort to include perspectives from different cultural, religious and politico-economic contexts and to start a true intercultural exchange of philosophical ideas and concepts (Granness 2015: 136-37).

In the specific case of the history of philosophy, the challenge is threefold: deeper research on the origin(s) of philosophy in the different regions of the world; reflections on mechanisms of marginalisation of traditions of thought; and reflections on how to continue narrating the history of our discipline – reflections which, ultimately, need to be incorporated in the structure of our curricula; in the "South" where the history of indigenous philosophies has long ago ceased to be a central aspect of education and education is oriented on the curricula of European or North American universities, as well as in the "North" where a new intercultural perspective on world-philosophy has to be established.

AFRICA AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

For centuries Africans' ability to philosophise has been entirely denied, and African thinkers, traditions and schools were not seen as a part of world philosophy. The characterisation of Africa's pre-colonial cultures and societies as "a-historical"² and "primitive"³ was one of the main obstacles to unprejudiced, solid research in the history of philosophy in that region of the world. Since black Africans were regarded as incapable of intellectual reflection, it was generally assumed that there was and is no philosophical thinking in sub-Saharan Africa. Questions like "Is there philosophy in Africa? What is African in African philosophy?" still evince pervasive belief in centuries-old stereotypes.

However, Africa was not always rejected as a source of philosophical knowledge. Until the end of the eighteenth century, volumes on the history of philosophy still refer to Chaldean, Persian, Arab, Indian, Chinese and Egyptian philosophies. Phoenician, Ethiopian and Japanese philosophies are also occasionally mentioned. Such philosophers and historians of the history of philosophy as Braun (1990, orig. 1973), Schneider (1990), Bernasconi (1997), and Park (2013), to mention only a few, showed that the exclusion of Africa, especially Egypt, did not take place until the

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- 2 Hegel's characterisation of Africa in his famous *Lectures on the history of philosophy*, based on lectures delivered in the winter of 1830–31, is well known and frequently quoted: "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit...Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History" (Hegel 1939 [2001]: 117).
 - 3 "In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example, God, or Law – in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character" (Hegel 1939 [2001]: 110-111).

end of the eighteenth century.⁴ Park, for example, locates a major shift in writing the history of philosophy that was accompanied by the exclusion of Africa and Asia and concentration on ancient Greece as the one and only origin of philosophy, between the years 1780 and 1830. Before this time philosophical-historical works like Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1764) refer to the predecessors of the Greeks and describe continuity, not a break. Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and Brucker's *Kurze Fragen aus der philosophischen Historie vom Anfang der Welt bis auf die Geburt Christi* (9 Vols., 1731-36) and *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabilis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta* (5 Vols., 1742-44; 2nd ed, 6 Vols., 1766-67) – one of Diderot's main sources – discuss various ancient peoples who are said to have a philosophy, among them the Egyptians and Ethiopians.⁵ According to Schneider (1990), the last works to include significant discussion of people and cultures before the Greeks are the *Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie* (1787, General history of philosophy) by Eberhard and the *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1796, Textbook of the history of philosophy) by Buhle (Schneider 1990: 75). Schneider (1990) and Bernasconi (1997) consider Tiedemann's *Der Geist der spekulativen Philosophie* (1791-7, The spirit of speculative philosophy) and Tennemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1798-1819, History of philosophy)⁶, both published at the turn of the

4 Famous in this respect is of course Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987). He argues that a change in the Western perception of Greece took place from the end of the eighteenth century onward. He differentiates between two models concerning the origin of ancient Greek civilisation: *the Aryan model* (Greek civilisation was founded by Indo-European settlers from Central Europe) and *the Ancient model* (Egyptians and Phoenicians influenced and shaped the Greek world, a view widely accepted in antiquity). According to Bernal, the *Ancient model* was not seriously challenged until the 1820s, when concepts of progress, romanticism and racism started to dominate the discourse and *the Aryan model* became generally accepted. This fostered a subsequent denial of any significant African and Phoenician influence on ancient Greek civilisation in subsequent theories (Bernal 1987). Bernal's arguments have been challenged and put into question several times. See Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996).

5 Brucker (1696-1770) did not deny the Egyptians the title "philosopher".

6 The beginning of the academic study of the history of philosophy was significantly shaped by German protestant scholars – thus, works by German philosophers are exemplary here. The works of Christoph August Heumann, Jacob Brucker, Dietrich Tiedemann and Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann were groundbreaking for the modern understanding of the discipline, its methods and its function. Lucien Braun states: "L'histoire de la philosophie est, au moment de sa modification radicale, chose allemande, chose protestante" (Braun 1990 [1973]: 94).

nineteenth century, prime examples of a shift towards the claim that philosophy's origin was Greek.⁷

According to Schneider (1990), a new definition of philosophy as scientific, rational reasoning carried out by an individual, the philosopher, was the decisive reason for the change in the conception of the history of philosophy. For Tiedemann, philosophy is the reasoning of an individual. Only those who rely on reason, experience and rational concepts can be called philosophers. Since philosophy is the activity of a single person, and since the first evidence of individual philosophical thought can be traced back only to ancient Greece, the history of philosophy has to begin in Greece. Consequently, with Tiedemann, we must consider Thales the first philosopher – until we find someone before Thales who based his teaching on reason. Tiedemann argues explicitly against the thesis that Thales owed his knowledge to his stay in Egypt, for a “real philosopher” cannot simply be a student of a foreign culture (Schneider 1990: 76-77). This is a significant milestone in the study of the history of philosophy, and it is accompanied by an unhistorical narrowing of the question of the origin of philosophy to an evaluation of the originality of the philosopher. The influence of speculation and religion, myth and reason alike are marginalised to clear the way for an account of an uninterrupted tradition. The unity of the tradition is based on a continuous guarantee of the ability to name a philosophy's author. Authorship becomes the decisive criterion for inclusion in the history of philosophy.

The turn towards authorship was accompanied by an attempt to base philosophy and the history of philosophy on science. As Braun (1990) shows, the scientific nature of eighteenth-century historical thinking caused a kind of standardisation of the concept of philosophy. Philosophy's past was unified on the basis of a particular methodological approach. The idea of continuous progress toward comprehensive knowledge and mastery of reality dominates the study of the history of philosophy. This view considers older philosophies stages on the way to truth and the development of philosophical concepts a continuous story of progress. Thus, Tennemann's *History of philosophy* is based on the idea that philosophical thought advances and regresses, occasionally erring but fundamentally heading for a particular goal (Tennemann 1798, vol. I, Vorrede). “Reason's self-knowledge” is the goal of all philosophical thought and the “ultimate justification” of philosophy as a science – a view that reaches its fullest expression in the Hegelian system. Here, knowledge about the history of philosophy becomes part of a search for meaning in that history which will reveal the progress of reason.

Such a teleological approach undoubtedly goes hand-in-hand with reductions or exclusions. Who and what are included in the history of the philosophical spirit and as a contribution to the self-knowledge of reason, is ultimately a question of definition.

7 Park (2013) sees the shift a little bit earlier, namely in Christoph Meiners' *Geschichte des Ursprungs, Fortgangs und Verfalls der Wissenschaften in Griechenland und Rom* (1781) and his *Grundriss der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1785).

The emergence of the “Other of reason” (e.g. myths), a tendency toward exclusion, springs from the roots of the nineteenth century’s grand narrative of the history of philosophy. It is this kind of teleological grand narrative that has fundamentally determined the practice of philosophy as well as the concept of philosophy as such over the last 200 years in Europe and North America – and, as a consequence, the perception of philosophy in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

The presupposition of the grand narrative is that philosophy has a beginning and an end. Even though there are different views regarding the goal of the development of philosophical reason, the beginning, once it was determined by Tiedemann and others, was rarely questioned.⁸ Ancient Greek philosophy is established as the first “real” philosophy and thus the origin of all philosophy. According to this unhistorical view, an amazing cultural change of universal value took place 2500 years ago in the north-eastern Mediterranean area. Due to favourable conditions in climate, technical development, and literacy, the Greeks leapt from the childlike imaginings of Homeric myth to the prudent maturity of reason, thereby laying the foundation of Western culture and philosophy, or so the argument goes (Heit 2007).

The absoluteness of the Greek model engendered serious doubts, which were expressed in the controversy about the origin of philosophy in ancient Egypt raised by Diop (1954) and his followers. A narrowly defined narrative of the development of philosophy since Thales ignores the fact that the history of ancient Greece is a story of interference and overlay. Braun (1990) pronounces that all our knowledge of Greek and Latin antiquity is the result of slow, patient restoration and repeated readings. The extensive work which gradually revealed Greek antiquity to us still continues and creates a variety of contradictions which are often difficult to disentangle (Braun 1990: 10). Today we are able to restore sources more precisely than ever before. Guided by new theoretical, social and political needs we compare, interpret and read texts over and over again, judging them based on current evidence. Consequently, the story of antiquity is continuously rewritten from different points of view; different aspects assume importance at different times. Our present understanding of Greek antiquity is a result of our reconstruction; and our reconstruction constitutes history (Braun 1990: 9).

The process of writing and re-writing the history of philosophy goes along with a canon-forming process and the inclusion or exclusion of concepts and theories. It is part of a meaning-producing process that does not escape an inherent capacity to become a discourse of domination, as is obvious in the construct of a unique, Greek origin of philosophy which incorporated nationalist and even racist resentments, despite being formulated in idealistic terms. Seen from this angle, inquiry into the

8 Exceptions are Dussel (2013a&b) and Van Binsbergen (2009-10), who claim ancient Egypt as one of the origins of world philosophy, and of course scholars like Obenga (1990), Diop (1954), Asante (2002).

origins of philosophy and science is not merely a matter of scientific curiosity, but a question of politically charged memory.

From the end of the eighteenth century until recently, this process has excluded African concepts, schools, traditions and authors from the philosophical canon and kept Africa out of almost all of the main reference works on the history of philosophy.⁹ At present, Africa is excluded from almost every attempt to write a history of philosophy except those that concern a kind of pre-history of philosophy involving such notions as “traditional ways of thinking”.¹⁰ Africans are considered incapable not only of philosophising, but even of having an independent historicity. To this day, the history of Africa is usually constructed in terms of the forces affecting Africa. In this respect, the question of the history of philosophy in Africa actually goes far beyond the discipline of philosophy, or as Masolo states in his book *African philosophy in search of identity*: “The history of African philosophy is therefore the history of Africa in a very special way” (Masolo 1994: 44). It is the history of a struggle for conceptual and institutional liberation and self-determination in the context of world history. Because exclusion and inferiorisation cast doubt on the capacity of the African person as a “knower” of philosophy, in Africa’s case the discipline of the history of philosophy involves very specific problems and requires a project of “conceptual decolonisation”.¹¹ This explains both the importance and the difficulty of writing a history of philosophy in Africa: any such attempt is politically charged from the start.

QUESTIONS OF CANON FORMATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY IN AFRICA

Although study of the history of philosophy has a long European tradition that begins with Plato’s descriptions of the teachings of various thinkers in his dialogues, the study of the history of African philosophy, particularly that of sub-Saharan Africa, is a rather young discipline. The first attempts to systemise the development of

9 An outstanding exception is the *Oxford handbook of world philosophy* by Garfield and Edelglass (2011).

10 An interesting example is the *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle* (Jacob 1989), which is divided into three main parts: 1. Philosophie occidentale; 2. Pensée asiatique (Inde, Chine, Japon); 3. Conceptualisation des sociétés traditionnelles (Afrique, Amérique, Asie du Sud-Est, Océanie).

11 The project of “conceptual decolonisation” or the “decolonisation of the mind” has a long history that can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when Latin American intellectuals like Andrés Bello and José Martí became concerned about the colonial mentality that continued to exist in Latin America despite formal political independence. For African scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o or Kwasi Wiredu, the fight against colonial mentality and for conceptual decolonisation is a central topic, too.

philosophy in Africa date back only to the mid-1970s and early 1980s. One might consider Diop (1954) the first to seek the origin of African philosophy; however, only Towa (1971), Odera Oruka (1981), Hountondji (1983 [1976]) and Sumner (1974-1978 for Ethiopian philosophy) try to systemise schools and traditions on the continent. More comprehensive works on the history of philosophy date back only to the turn of the twenty-first century (Hallen 2009; Masolo 1994; Osuagwu 1999; Wiredu 2004). One of the first comprehensive attempts to reflect on the development of philosophy in sub-Saharan Africa is Masolo's *African philosophy in search of identity* (1994), where he surveys themes and debates in African philosophy. His purview includes Francophone and Anglophone philosophers in both the analytic and phenomenological traditions, but focuses mainly on the debate on African identity. Furthermore, his discussion of trends in African philosophy starts rather late, namely in 1939. Publications which followed Masolo's trail-blazing book concentrated mainly on specific issues in African philosophy (Boele van Hensbroek 1999; Lölke 2001; Martin 2012; Praeg 2000) and are not intended as contributions to the history of philosophy. The pioneering works of Kimmerle (1991; 1994; 2005), who was one of the first to introduce and discuss African philosophy in the German-speaking world, were also not intended to give a systematic overview of the history of philosophy in Africa, but try to illuminate certain fields of discussion. At present, approaches to systemising philosophy in sub-Saharan Africa fall into three types:

- a. **Chronological** (e.g. Hallen 2009¹²; Makumba 2011; Ndjana 2009). These overviews provide a compressed introduction into various philosophical traditions, debates and thinkers throughout the ages; however mainly concentrate on the development of philosophy since the second half of the twentieth century.
- b. **Classification according to the major colonial language areas.** This is the suggestion of the *Oxford encyclopaedia of African thought* (Irele & Jyifo 2010), where the keyword "philosophy" contains six sub-entries: African American philosophy; African (South of the Sahara) philosophy; Anglophone philosophy; Francophone philosophy; Lusophone philosophy; and North African philosophy. As entries of an encyclopaedia, the descriptions are naturally very short and compressed. The advantage of the approach is to draw attention to the widely neglected Lusophone philosophy in Africa as well as to emphasise Arabic-Islamic philosophy as an integral part of the philosophical heritage in Africa. However, such classification follows patterns of colonial history and has difficulties to include and describe the pre-colonial history of philosophy, which does not follow such language areas. Furthermore, the discussion of the

12 The first chapter of Hallen's *Short history of African philosophy* provides a very brief outline of the history of philosophy in Africa (from ancient Egypt until Amo in twenty pages!), but focuses mainly on twentieth-century academic philosophy in Anglophone Africa, starting with Tempels's *Bantu philosophy* (1949).

philosophical exchange between these language areas in recent years is limited in such an approach, and it fails to include Afrophone philosophies.

- c. **Six trends in contemporary African philosophy.** This is without a doubt the most influential attempt to systemise the development of philosophy in Africa to date. The Kenyan philosopher Odera Oruka distinguished six trends in modern African philosophy (Odera Oruka 1981; 1990a&b): professional philosophy, ethno-philosophy, national-ideological philosophy, sage philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy and literary/artistic philosophy. His classification, which was meant as a tentative systemisation of different schools of twentieth-century African thought, is now widely recognised and often taken as a standard (see e.g. Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010). However, his approach is limited in its applicability to understanding and interpreting new trends and recent historical developments in African philosophy, and might need to be replaced by new forms of categorisation.

Up to the present, study of the history of philosophy has lacked deeper reflection on the conditions of formation, transmission and interpretation of philosophical thought in Africa and their consequences for the history of philosophy in Africa. Because of its importance to the philosophical canon and indeed even to the concept of philosophy, a critique of the conditions, targets, methods, categorisation and function of the history of philosophy in Africa is urgently needed.

Although his discredited, unthinking views on Africa are of no use to us, Hegel's (1982) *Lectures on the history of philosophy* raise important issues we must keep in mind when studying Africa's role in the history of philosophy. He states that the history of a subject is necessarily very closely linked to the ideas one has about that subject.

The demand that a history, whatever the subject may be, should state the facts without prejudice and without any particular object or end to be gained by its means, must be regarded as a fair one. But with a commonplace demand like this, we do not get far; for the history of a subject is necessarily intimately connected with the conception which is formed of it. In accordance with this what is important in it is determined, and the relation of the events to the end regulated the selection of facts to be recorded, the mode of comprehending them, and the point of view under which they are regarded. (Hegel 1892: XV)

Our perception and concept of a subject determine what is considered important and appropriate – as well as the acceptable points of view. Hegel (1982) argues that there can be no “objective” history. Each history is based on subjective criteria shaped by individual preferences, individual understanding of the research object, such social factors as prevailing worldviews or ideologies, and of course, power constellations. Definitions of the object of research, criteria for evaluation, and the influence of social, political, ideological and epistemological conditions and power relationships,

are of immense importance to the new study of the history of philosophy in Africa. All of these conditions influence the formation of a philosophical canon.

But what is a canon? It is a group of works, theories and persons generally believed to represent necessary, timeless and universally valid concepts, a kind of standard or norm in a field. According to the Oxford English dictionary a canon is “the list of literary works which are considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality”. The same dictionary defines the word “canonical” as “accepted of being authentic or established as standard” (Waite 2012: 98). Consequently, what is considered canonical determines which theories are going to be taught to our students, which concepts and authors will be studied – and which not.

Specific challenges in Africa

Beyond the usual issues involved in creating a world history of philosophy, the discipline must consider issues specific to Africa, which have the potential to change the face of the whole discipline.

The difficult heritage of colonialism

The extensive colonisation of the continent in the nineteenth century led to a crucial break in African intellectual history. Colonisation resulted in displacement and repression of local knowledge and socio-political practices. Indigenous political institutions and knowledge were downgraded, and mainly Christian concepts and a general Western epistemological framework were imposed on education and all kinds of intellectual life. The history of philosophy in Africa cannot ignore the impact of slavery, colonialism and racism as well as so-called scientific arguments concerning the intellectual inferiority of the African. The reconstruction of any historical subject in Africa must be critiqued in light of the serious epistemological problems engendered by the ethnological and missionary descriptions of African societies, cultures, religions and systems of thought still used as primary sources (Mudimbe 1988). Any study of the history of philosophy in Africa, therefore, confronts a number of lacunae. In this respect, the discipline faces very specific and in some cases difficult circumstances which are closely intertwined with the task of a “conceptual decolonisation”. The initial conditions of the African colonial and postcolonial context render continuous narrative impossible; the uninterrupted tradition assumed in European studies of the history of philosophy since the end of the eighteenth century, simply does not exist.

The language problem

Closely connected to the impact of colonialism is the serious epistemological problem caused by the use of European languages as the *lingua franca* which serve

as the academic languages in many African countries. The majority of descriptions and reconstructions of pre-colonial thought systems as well as contemporary philosophical concepts are written in European languages and according to Western conceptual frameworks. Wiredu (1996) emphasises that any foreign language used as a medium of expression and of thought shapes the thinking. Categories of thought embedded in that language seem to be natural and inescapable, and thus will be unwittingly superimposed on the thought structures of one's own culture. Consequently, a process of "conceptual decolonisation" should encompass a critical conceptual self-awareness of unexamined assimilations in the thought of contemporary African philosophers of the conceptual frameworks embedded in foreign philosophical traditions and to exploit the resources of indigenous conceptual schemes (Wiredu 1996: 136). In respect to philosophical core concepts like reality, being, existence, etc., he demands: "Try to think them through in your own African language" (Wiredu 1996: 137). A critique of the influence of foreign languages and frameworks on the perception of African reality, theorising and canon formation must be part of any study of Africa's role in the history of philosophy.

The oral transmission of tradition and the question of authorship

Since the European, Asian and Arabian traditions of writing the history of philosophy are ultimately textual criticism, we are confounded by a serious lack of written philosophical sources in sub-Saharan Africa. Although African philosophical writings date back to ancient Egypt (e.g. ancient Ethiopian, Arab-Islamic, Ajami and Swahili literature – among many others still unexplored), there is an enormous wealth of cultural and spiritual heritage and sophisticated systems of thought in regions and cultures without any trace of writing. How to deal with oral heritage was for a very long time not even considered a philosophical question, and a satisfactory solution still remains to be found. A prevailing opinion holds written form to be a prerequisite of the standard for philosophical argumentation (Goody 1986; Havelock 1988). Here any oral traditions or systems of thought are seen as utterly alien to our current standards for the form, content and method of philosophical work. These standards have been debated over the last 20 or 30 years, especially regarding the reasons why fragmentary texts by Thales, Pythagoras and other pre-Socratics are considered philosophy, whilst fragments of ancient Egyptian texts are not.

Today, there is a growing consensus among philosophers in Africa and Latin America¹³ that the history of philosophy has to consider both existing written and

13 In Latin America the question of how to deal with oral philosophical traditions arises in regard to pre-Columbian thought and its importance in the history of Latin American philosophy. A number of indigenous cultures (particularly the Aztecs, Mayas, Incas and Tupi-Guarani) produced sophisticated systems of thought which might be comparable to what we call philosophy.

oral sources in the reconstruction of the history of philosophy. Nevertheless, the philosophical potential of oral traditions is subject to a number of methodological questions. How can philosophical traditions in an oral society be documented and analysed? What is the place of oral traditions in the narrative of a history of philosophy in Africa? As we have seen, the question of authorship became a crucial one in the history of philosophy in Europe around the turn of the nineteenth century; but the authors of specific ideas or concepts go unnamed in oral traditions. Who are they? And is authorship indeed a crucial criterion for philosophy? To answer these questions, students of the history of philosophy must break new ground, and a critique of the relationship between written and oral traditions is a basic requirement. The sage philosophy project of Odera Oruka and his followers (e.g. Kresse 2007) took the first steps in this direction, but these steps must be followed up, especially in regard to methodological questions (see the methodological critique by Janz 2009: 111-113; Van Binsbergen 2003: 497).

Despite the specific challenges the discipline faces in Africa, the African context offers a number of unique opportunities for the historian of philosophy. First of all, the context demands deeper reflection on questions of fundamental importance to the discipline. Does philosophy have one origin or many? What is the relationship between oral and written traditions, myth and reason, thought and language? These are only a few of the methodological questions. The African context also calls for a critique of the role and function of the discipline in the formation of a philosophical canon and definition of philosophy, as well as the discipline's importance beyond the academic study of philosophy and even the academy itself.

The development of philosophy as an academic discipline and the debates on what the canon of philosophy in Africa must include and exclude, are taking place right before our eyes. Hallen (2009) notes on the very first page of his introduction to the second edition of *A short history of African philosophy* that it was necessary to expand the chapter on the early history of philosophy in Africa "given recent reconsiderations about those who deserve to be regarded as *canonical* figures" (Hallen 2009: 3; my emphasis). His remark gets to the point which is obvious in many works: there are processes of canon formation in motion. We have the unique opportunity not only to observe and to study processes of canon formation, but consciously to form them – an opportunity which hardly arises in the European context with its load of century-old, highly influential standard works. In the African context, we must not only inquire who the grand philosophical narrative has included or excluded, and why, but also find philosophy's untold stories and tell them. And first and foremost, we have to find an answer to the question: How do we want to continue writing the history of philosophy in Africa – and worldwide? Or as the Latin American philosopher Dussel emphasises in view of the South-South dialogue: "A key priority which should be included in the initial stages of development of a network of philosophies of the South is to begin with the study, debate, exposition,

and publication of *histories of philosophy* in each of our countries, continents, and regions” (Dussel 2013b: 14-15).

If the task of the discipline of the history of philosophy is the selection and classification of texts in order to create a new ensemble – as Braun (1990: 3) says – then one should scrutinise the previous selections and omissions reflected in anthologies and introductions to the history of philosophy in Africa.

Primary patterns of exclusion

Analysis shows that overviews and compilations that cover the development of philosophy in sub-Saharan Africa omit whole regions as well as schools and traditions in the history of philosophy in Africa. According to my research the following regions or schools are rarely or never included:

- a. **Philosophy in Portuguese-speaking Africa** is widely neglected or reduced to the works of Cabral. Whether this is a result of a language problem or not, Portuguese-speaking Africa is never actually taken into account in either the reconstruction of the pre-colonial heritage or contemporary philosophical work. Minor exceptions are Ndjana (2009) and the *Oxford encyclopaedia of African thought* (2010). In his *Histoire de la philosophie africaine* the Cameroonian philosopher Ndjana regrets the lack of knowledge about philosophical thought in Portuguese-speaking Africa. However, when he argues that the long civil war in Angola and the newness of university institutions in that region are reasons for a lack of true philosophical knowledge there (Ndjana 2009: 247), he seems to take for granted that there is no philosophy in those areas of Africa. American anthropologist Lundy’s entry on Lusophone philosophy in the *Oxford encyclopaedia of African thought* reports little about the development of philosophical thought and mainly concerns the historical development of the colonial power in Portuguese Africa, its politics of assimilation, and recent efforts to strengthen socio-economic ties between Portugal and its former colonies by promoting *Lusofonia*. Ultimately, the entry fails to speak about philosophy, except to mention Cabral as someone who “helped plant the seeds of a nationalist independence movement based on pragmatic political philosophies” (*Oxford encyclopaedia of African thought* 2010: 236).

However, preliminary research in contemporary philosophical debates in Portuguese-speaking areas of Africa reveals some interesting trends and topics. Philosophy in Portuguese-speaking Africa is grounded in its specific historical, politico-economic, language and cultural contexts and, thus, it is first and foremost political philosophy dedicated to questions surrounding freedom and responsibility in a postcolonial, post-Marxist and post-civil war situation. It includes discussions of the theoretical and moral legacy of liberation movements;

the concept of liberty (Ngoenha 1993; 2004); the concept of modernity (Macamo 2005); the task, function and identity of philosophy today (Castiano 2010; Ngoenha & Castiano 2011) and the relationship of philosophy and education (Castiano 1997; Ngoenha & Castiano & Berthoud 2005). Inclusion of these concepts, debates and authors would surely enrich any philosophical work.

- b. In addition, the **Arab-Islamic tradition in sub-Saharan Africa**, which can be traced back to the eleventh century, has been practically ignored until recently. This is astonishing, since it offers an existing text corpus in Arabic and Ajami, for example in the libraries of Timbuktu, which was a centre of Islamic scholarship in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The wealth of Islamic manuscripts on law, theology and philosophy from pre-colonial times in Timbuktu was long suppressed, since the works clearly challenged the colonial representation of Africa as a continent without history. However, even after political decolonisation the Arab-Islamic literature of sub-Saharan Africa remains neglected as a source of African knowledge and philosophy, perhaps due to the prevailing idea that Islam, along with Christianity, is foreign to Africa. In view of the long history of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, this is a totally unhistorical point of view. In recent years pioneering works (Jeppie & Diagne 2008; Diagne 2004) began exploring the rich heritage of the Arabic-Islamic tradition from a philosophical viewpoint. Integration of this strand of discourse into a comprehensive history of philosophy promises not only a new picture of the history of ideas in Africa but perhaps even a valuable response to the current demand for an Islamic Enlightenment.
- c. **Afrophone philosophies** are rarely taken into consideration. “*Afrophone philosophies* or *Afrophone philosophical discourses* are those discourses conducted in African languages that fulfil the function of philosophy in given African societies, that is, that are the site where philosophical reflexion takes place” (Rettová 2007: 38). According to this definition, Afrophone philosophies are not restricted to the pre-colonial heritage but include the works of contemporary authors, oral and written discourses and traditional as well as modern or recent philosophies. Afrophone philosophies can be expressed in pure philosophical texts, but are often found in literature, songs and other media, too.
- d. And last but not least, theories and debates concerning **African feminism and women in philosophy** are too rarely included in overviews on the development of philosophy in Africa. However, African feminist theory offers interesting insights into several theoretical areas and questions, as well as topics with political relevance. Issues of the social position of African women are not only critical considerations of gender roles or of social, economic and political power of women, but at the same time critical reflections on colonialism, neo-colonialism and the postcolonial situation, i.e. reflections on the global structure of the world and the hegemonic position of the “West” (economic, political and academic).

They are reflections on racism and its social effects, and on possibilities of self-determined theory production under such hegemonic conditions, and ultimately, on issues of “conceptional decolonisation” (Banda 2005; Nzegwu 2006; Oyěwùmí 1997). It remains to be a topical issue of research why female thinking continues to be marginalised – even in the academy in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature on philosophy in Africa gives the impression that the African philosopher, yesterday and today, is a black, male Christian,¹⁴ perhaps simultaneously practising a traditional religion, who articulates his philosophical theories in either English or French. Given the diversity of the continent, we have an urgent need to revise and correct this impression. Thus, the challenge of writing the history of philosophy in Africa is not only to bring Africa as a continent into the framework of philosophical research, but to bring philosophy in Africa in its plurality and diversity of schools and traditions, into the view.

However, exploring the fields just mentioned in more detail and including them in the reconstruction of the history of philosophy in Africa, is not the only issue of interest here. The mechanisms by which these regions and theories are marginalised and excluded require further investigation, which might offer answers of global interest, since study of the history of philosophy goes along by default with a canon-forming process of including and excluding concepts and theories that produces meaning and unifies people. This action does not escape the inherent potential to become a discourse of domination. Thus, we constantly have to ask the question how can the inexistence of regional philosophies as well as philosophies from marginalised groups of people or cultures be overcome. Consequently, questions of canon formation must be constantly critiqued, both inside Africa and globally. And they should impact the study of the history of philosophy as well as the curricula at institutes of philosophy – worldwide.

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14 The strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the formation of the academic discipline of philosophy in Africa is undeniable, and it certainly needs further research. See *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* XIX (2005).

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