NOTION OF "AFRICAN" AS A STRATEGIC IDEOLOGICAL EPISTEMIC POSITION IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the racial essentialism implicit in the geographic criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy (as black, ethnic and sub-Saharan) limits the development of African philosophy as a disciplined methodological inquiry into the question of African − and the African question in philosophy. It articulates instead a strategic ideological notion of "African" in African philosophy; defined by a commitment to the ethics of social justice for the historical injustice of racial dehumanisation of Africans, to transcend the racial essentialism implicit in the above geographic criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy.

Key words: African, Africanness; African philosophy; post-colonialism; epistemic position; social justice

INTRODUCTION

What is the meaning of "African" in African philosophy? Does it signify the origin and history of philosophy in Africa; the geographic origin of the philosopher; does it connote derivation from and basis in African cultural heritage and relevance to Africa's neo-colonial concerns; or does it imply a strategic ideological epistemic position defined by an ethic of social justice for the historical injustice of racial dehumanisation of Africans in philosophy? This article challenges the racial essentialism implicit in the taken-for-granted geographic criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, and instead articulates a strategic ideological

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notion of "African" in African philosophy as a disciplined methodological inquiry into the questions of African − and the African questions in philosophy.

There are extensive works of literature on the debate of what is required for a body of thoughts to be "authentically African and philosophical" (Hountondji 2002: xiii). Hountondji insists on the geographic origin of the philosopher as definitive of the meaning of African in philosophy (Hountondji 1983: 53). Appiah (1992: 106) affirms this geographic designation, which Mudimbe (1988: ix) seems to concur with, along with Wiredu (1984). On the other hand, Yai (1977), Gyekye (1995: 32) and Serequerberhan (2000: 3) reject it and argue differently that what is "African" in African philosophy is its derivation from and focus on African cultural heritage. Outlaw (1996) argues that the "African" in African philosophy is a signifier of the deconstruction of philosophy in its hegemonic configuration. Intersecting these competing criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, is the position of Diop (1974) and Obenga (2004), that what is "African" in African philosophy is the etymology of philosophy (Obenga 2004: 16)[1] and the historical origin and antecedent of philosophy in ancient Egyptian civilisation, which they affirm as an African civilisation (Diop 1974: 1991). While this last position has been derided as fictitious and akin to the notion that the earth is flat (Lefkowitz 1997: xiii), I show in this article how it represents a strategic ideological epistemic notion of "African" in African philosophy that escapes the racial essentialism implicit in the ubiquitous geographic criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy.

The impetus for the position in this article is that, apart from the early criticism of the geographic criteria by Yai (1977), who challenges the naivety of emphasis on geography as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, as well as Masolo and Karp (2000: 14), who urge in a different vein that the meaning of "African" in African philosophy should not be based on race, ethnic nationality or academic discipline, but should depend on scholarship about it, irrespective of the geographic origins and locations of its practice. Thus apart from Yai and Masolo, in addition to Wamba-dia-Wamba who challenges Hountondji's geographic criteria, by pointedly raising the question of "what does 'African' mean in 'African philosopher'" (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1991: 228), there has not been much focus on the challenges posed to the development of African philosophy as a theoretical, methodologically disciplined activity by the unquestioned, beneath-the-surface general acceptance of geographic criteria as definitive of "African" in African philosophy.

Significantly, while the geographic criteria seem to be on the surface, as Hountondji (1993) argues, to demythologise the concept of "African" in African philosophy by returning it to its primary geographic meaning, seems to allow the inclusion of Arabic and Afrikaner philosophy, for instance, as part of African

1 Obenga, T., (2004), *African philosophy: The Pharaonic period: 2780-330 BC,* Dakar, Per Ankh, pp. 16; (1992*). Ancient Egypt and black Africa: A student's handbook for the study of ancient Egypt in philosophy, linguistic and gender relations.* London: Karnak House.

philosophy. There is not only an unmistaken racial essentialism of African as black, sub-Saharan and implicit ethnicity in the geographic criteria, but also the unstated assumptions of an epistemological privilege of knowledge of African philosophy by Africans thus defined.

The question of whether being an African, privileges an epistemological perspective of knowledge of African philosophy is germane to this paper, but deserves a different focus and is not addressed in this article *per se*. Rather, I focus on the problems of the racial essentialism implicit in the geographic criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy − for the development of African philosophy as a theoretical methodological discipline. I propose a strategic ideological notion of "African" in African philosophy, defined by commitment to the ethics of social justice for the historical injustice of racism to escape the racial essentialism implicit in the geographic criteria of "African" in African philosophy.

In order to articulate this position, I begin with an analysis of the unsettled debates on the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, which I describe as the *question* of "African" in African philosophy. This is followed by a discussion of how the problems of the racism of philosophy, referred to as the *African question in philosophy*, shows the meaning of "African" in African philosophy as an ideological theoretical construct that signifies the deconstruction of philosophy in its Western historical configuration. I then analyse the *historical* and *etymological* theses of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy to show how they represent a strategic ideological notion of "African" in African philosophy that escapes the racial essentialism of geographic criteria of "African" in African philosophy.

THE QUESTION OF "AFRICAN" IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

> What is an 'African'? Where and how does one gain knowledge of his or her being? How does one define this very being, and to what authority does one turn for a possible answer? (Mudimbe 1988: 153)

> The idea of 'Africa' is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, so that any exploration of what makes African 'African' is often quite slippery, as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between poles of essentialism or contingency. (Zeleza 2006)

As these references to Mudimbe and Zeleza highlight, the designation "African", seemingly simple, is a slippery, never-ending inquisition centring on deep ideological contestations. This cannot be divorced from the history of the notion of "African" and the history of the people of Africa, nor from the cultural geo-political locus of enunciation of the inquirer, or the functional dynamics of the designation; and especially from its history and meaning in philosophy.

Mudimbe, both in *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge* (1988), and its sequel *The idea of Africa* (1994), shows the history of the invention of African as the European "other" and seems to agree with Hountondji's geographic criteria that "the notion of 'African' in African philosophy refers to contributions of Africans practicing philosophy within the defined framework of the discipline and its historical tradition" (Mudimbe 1988: ix). He cautions, however, about the paradox of problems of knowledge of African, given that the question of the meaning of African is asked from an ideological epistemological locus, which "theories and methods, constraints, rules, and systems of operation suppose a non-African epistemological locus" of knowledge of Africa (Mudimbe 1988: x). This paradox of knowledge about "African" in African philosophy, according to Mudimbe (1994: 39), is the search "for criteria on how to attain truth about 'African' and express it in scientifically credible discourses" within a paradigm of philosophy that was designed to obstruct and silence this truth.

This concern with the meaning of "African" in African philosophy does not centre on the debate of the physical, geographic boundary of Africa (Mazuri 1986) or on who is an African, but on the question of the conceptual meaning of "African" in African philosophy. Thus while some African philosophers like Gyekye, Wamba-dia-Wamba and Serequerberhan insist on the centrality of derivation and focus on African heritage and present neo-colonial realities as necessary defining features of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, Hountondji (1983: 53) disagrees and insists that "the 'Africanness' of African philosophy will not necessarily reside in themes but will depend above all on the geographic origin of those who produce it". Gyekye for one (1995: 33), rejects Hountondji's geographic origin of philosophers as the criterion for the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, and argues instead that a philosophy produced by an African with no basis in African cultural heritage cannot be regarded as African philosophy; irrespective of the geographic origin of the philosopher.

Therefore, while Hountondji (1983) regards the legendary Ghanaian Anton Wilhelm Amo as an African philosopher, Gyekye (1995) disagrees because, according to him, though Amo is an African by birth and geographic origin, his work focused on non-African philosophical issues. While I agree with Gyekye that a work must be rooted in African cultural heritage to qualify as African philosophy, it is on record that Amo wrote a dissertation on the rights of Africans in Europe, which qualifies as a concern with present African realities in his time (Molefi and Abarry 1996). Furthermore, as argued by Wiredu (1984; 1996: 151), it is mistaken to insist that a philosophy produced by Africans with no basis or links to African cultural heritage is not African philosophy. This, according to him, is because there is a distinction between traditional African philosophical heritage and modern African philosophy. Wiredu (1984: 320) therefore suggests that Gyekye, by excluding Amo's

work from African philosophy, seems to be identifying African philosophy solely with traditional African thought.

Notwithstanding the limitations of Gyekye's position, his argument shows the possibility of conceptualising an epistemic meaning of "African" in African philosophy, since what defines "African" in African philosophy, according to Gyekye, is its epistemic foundation and derivation in African cultural heritage as object and source of philosophical inquiry. Thus, for Gyekye, while Amo qualifies as "African" according to the geographic criterion of origin, his epistemic orientation to African cultural heritage and sociology of knowledge makes his work part of European philosophy and not African. Significantly, if we invert Gyekye's position on Amo, it is impossible to deny that the works of Tempels (1969) and Griaule (1965), for example, are part of African philosophy, given their epistemological basis and focus on African cultural heritage as evidence and source of African philosophy, notwithstanding their dubious colonial motivations (Cesaire 1972).

The importance of Gyekye's notion of "African" in African philosophy, which is based on an epistemic orientation to African cultural heritage as object and source of philosophy inquiry, and not limited to the geographic origin of the philosopher, is that it allows us to escape the racial essentialism implicit in this geographic criterion and move towards an epistemic orientation to African cultural heritage in philosophy, as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy. Surprisingly, while Appiah cautions that we could not resolve the meaning of "African" in African philosophy by the facts of geography alone, and agrees with Gyekeye that it is imprudent to disregard completely the inclusion of African cultural heritage as a crucial feature of African philosophy (Appiah 1992: 90), he nonetheless paradoxically agrees with Wiredu and Hountondji's geographic criteria as definitive of "African" in African philosophy.

The contradiction in Appiah's position of rejecting a racial essentialist notion of "African" in African philosophy, while agreeing with Hountondji's geographic criteria with implicit racial essentialism (Appiah 1992) is addressed by Serequerberhan (1994: 5), who criticises Appiah's restatement of Hountondji's geographic criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy and maintains, in agreement with Gyekye, that "African philosophy is about African 'concepts' and 'problems' and is, indeed, the 'methodological and critical examination' of these concepts and problems in light of concerns and exigencies of the present" (Serequerberhan 2000: 38). While Serequerberhan concurs with Appiah's rejection of racial essentialism as a foundation for an African identity, he not only rejects the ascription of racial essentialism to the African intellectual heritage of Dubois and Blyden, but also challenges the dismissal of the concreteness of any singular unifying notion of African articulated by Appiah (Serequerberhan 1994).

Appiah, according to Serequerberhan, overstates his case of rejection of the racial essentialist notion of African by "putting into question the very idea of the

historical actuality of a concrete African identity" (Serequerberhan 2000: 42). This, as he argues, is because the appropriation of the heritage of the African liberation struggle against racism provides historical concreteness for a singular unifying notion of African that displaces Appiah's alleged mystical metaphysical African unity. Serequerberhan therefore rejects Appiah's position that to be an African is "a usable identity" among many others and argued that beyond racial essentialism of blackness, "our being African is grounded in a shared history of subjugation, struggle, and political liberation" (Serequerberhan 2000: 42).

A further criticism of Hountondji's argument on geographic criteria of the Africanness of philosophy, apart from its implicit racial essentialism, is that it contradicts his insistence on a universal orientation in African philosophy. This is because, if as argued by him (Hountondji), African philosophy is "not culture dependent but rather a systematic and methodological inquiry that should not be altered by its geographic application" (Imbo 1998: 18), then in agreement with Outlaw (1996: 35), we can posit that as long as African philosophy is a disciplined methodological inquiry, it is absurd to confine it to only people of African geographic origin. It is therefore contradictory of Hountondji (1983: 66) to insist on the geographic origin of a philosopher as the primary criterion for the signifier of "African" in African philosophy − and also to argue that African philosophy should be universal and not altered by geographic location.

I concur that the geographic criteria as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy are extremely narrow, as also pointed out by Outlaw (1996: 34), who shows that "it takes only a few probing questions to uncover that Hountondji uses African as a signifier not just for geographic origins, but also for race/ethnicity". This is because the geographic criteria exclude diaspora Africans with no ethnicity without recourse to the racial essentialism of blackness and the black Holocaust. If, as argued so far, Hountondji's geographic criteria do not escape racial essentialism of African as black, how does derivation from and focus on African cultural heritage and neo-colonial concerns (as meaning of "African" in African philosophy) escape narrow ethnicity, given the ethnic focus of African cultural heritage?

Nonetheless, against the positions of Hountondji, Appiah and Wiredu that philosophy can be African without reference to and basis in African cultural heritage (which seems to allow us to escape narrow ethnicity as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy), I subscribe to Gyekye (1995: 12) and Serequerberhan's position that African philosophy cannot be authentically African and philosophical without a foundation in and focus on African cultural heritage and neo-colonial concerns. This is because the insistence on a focus on African cultural heritage and neo-colonial concerns (as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, against and beyond the insistence on geographic origin), offers possibilities of an epistemic position to African cultural heritage as source and

object of African philosophy as a methodological inquiry, which can be engaged theoretically − irrespective of geographic origin and location of the investigator.

The question is, therefore, what do we mean by African cultural heritage in African philosophy? I argue that the meaning of African cultural heritage in African philosophy, defined by its connection to ancient Egypt, allows us to escape regress to ethnicity in the conception of African heritage. The critical focus on African philosophical heritage of ancient Egypt in the context of neo-colonial concerns (as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy) definitely transcends the geographic origin criterion without recourse to ethnicity implied in African heritage. For example, Bernal (1987), who sought to lessen European arrogance on behalf of Africans, is ideologically aligned with James, Diop and Obenga on the articulation of historical philosophical connection to ancient Egypt, as definitive of African heritage in philosophy. Bernal's example, which I discuss later, suffices to show that, rather than geographic origin as the criterion for the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, it is the methodological and critical examination of African philosophical heritage and neo-colonial problems in the light of concerns and exigencies of the present (Serequerberhan 2000: 38), with an ideological commitment to the ethics of social justice for the historical injustice of racial dehumanisation, that can define "African" in African philosophy, without recourse to racial essentialism.

Thus while Bernal and Tempels are far apart in all respects, both their works fit the notion of "African" in African philosophy as an ideological epistemic position, defined by an ethics of social justice for the historical accident of racial dehumanisation. Tempels's epistemic immersion in African cultural heritage, though focused on ethnic Bantu philosophy, challenges the racist denial of reason in African philosophical heritage. Bernal's ideological commitment to reducing European cultural arrogance and focus on ancient Egypt as part of African heritage of philosophy, represents this notion of African as a strategic ideological epistemic position.

This elusiveness of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, which seems to dismantle the whole edifice of any concreteness of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, is the *question* of "African" in African philosophy. This is because, if neither history, as shown by Diop and Obenga (discussed below); nor racial essentialism, as discredited by Appiah; geography, as articulated by Hountondji; epistemic derivation and concern with African heritage, as suggested by Gyekye; and heritage of the liberation struggle, as advocated by Serequerberhan, does capture the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, what does? Does the "methodological and critical examination" of African cultural heritage and problems in light of "concerns and exigencies of the present" (Serequerberhan 2000: 38), with an ideological commitment to the ethics of social justice for the historical accident of racial dehumanisation, capture the meaning of "African" in African philosophy?

I argue that the *answer* is all and neither of any of the features of "African" in African philosophy articulated, but the *questions* that these features engender. This epistemological space of elusiveness and ambiguity of capturing any truth or essence of "African", but rather the interplay of mischief, of truth and deception of knowledge, is, I suggest, the true meaning of "African" in African philosophy. "African" in African philosophy, therefore, is neither this nor that, it is this *and* that. It is "alii alia dicunt".[2] This, I conclude is the *Esu*[3] of "African" in African philosophy, which signifies the ambiguity, slipperiness, elusiveness and impossibility of capturing any essentialist notion of African in philosophy (Eze 1993: 5). The figure of *Esu*, which is uncritically described as a trickster in African mythology, correlates with Hermes Trismegistus in Egyptian philosophy, who is well known for his "ambiguity, deception and dissimulation" (Kingsley 1993: 24).

THE AFRICAN QUESTION IN PHILOSOPHY

The African question in philosophy is how the struggle to transcend the racism of philosophy and the philosophy of race is definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy. The racism of philosophy is the historical domination of the canon of philosophy by white supremacist ideology, and the philosophy of race refers to the theories propounded to annunciate, systematise and justify racist ideologies for the dehumanisation of Africans (Eze 1997; 2003). The contention is not whether these theories are racist in our current understanding of the term or whether modern philosophers are racist, but, to paraphrase Bernal (1987: 9), the contention is that "modern philosophers are still working with models set up by men who were crudely positivist and racist". This, as stated by Eze (1998: 215), is because "philosophical prejudice against Africa and Africans was easily circulated and recycled among modern European philosophers with little originality". According to him:

> [t]he philosophical reception of the Enlightenment in our age has largely ignored the writing on race by the major Enlightenment thinkers; when writing on race by the major Enlightenment figures has been noted in traditional philosophical scholarship, it is often dismissed as journalistic, or having little that would be of philosophical interest. (Eze 2003: 3-4)

It is, therefore, the challenge to racism in philosophy and the philosophy of race that defines the meaning of "African" in African philosophy as signifying the struggle against racism in the canon and history of philosophy, and the effort to reinvent

2 Some people say one thing, others say another.

3 It is Esu among Yoruba speakers, Anansi in the Akan/Twi languages, and recurrent in different variations all over the continent and diaspora. The features of Esu correlate with features of Thoth – Hermes Trismegistus.

philosophy as a terrain of critical reflection on the questions of humanity. It is not, in my opinion, necessary to recite evidence of the racist history of philosophy vis-à-vis Africans, reason and sub-humanity; however, it is important to acknowledge that Western philosophy not only provided rationale for racist imperial colonising violence, but also its subsequent justification (Eze 2003). This challenge to racism in philosophy is what marks the African prefix to philosophy as a signifier of the deconstruction of the hegemonic meaning, canons and history of philosophy, and as an anti-racist practice.

Outlaw's assertion in *On race and philosophy*, that contemporary discussions about African philosophy have been "deconstructive of philosophy as practised in Western tradition as a function of the historical exigencies conditioning their emergence and their agendas" (Outlaw 1996: 53), aptly captures the anti-racist deconstructive meaning of "African" in African philosophy, projected here. This, according to him, is because "each instance of African philosophy – whether ethno-philosophical, ideological-nationalist, critical or synthetic – is, at the onset, a deconstructive challenge that decentres the concept of 'Philosophy' and its discursive practices" (Outlaw 1996: 65). This is because:

> [t]he development of African philosophy as a discursive and disciplinary enterprise involves efforts to displace the dominant Greco-Eurocentric notions of idealised 'man' and 'civilized' human by redefining these notions and expanding their denotative ranges, by particularising them to African people such that it becomes possible to distinguish them in non-trivial ways from people of European dissent and from the latter's intellectual and cultural project. (Outlaw 1996: 54)

Problematically significant is that while the intrusion of African in philosophy signifies the deconstruction of philosophy as construed in its Western history, meaning and canons, it nonetheless retains an umbilical cord to Western philosophy, given its origin and history. This is because African re-emergence in philosophy, by being implicated in the deconstruction of philosophy that signifies the symbolic slaying of the "*homo rationalis*", is invariably conditioned, implicated and contaminated toxically by the rotten corpse of *homo rationalis*. This, according to Outlaw (1996: 62), is because the notion of "African" in African philosophy marks and inaugurates a "new field of discourse which, simultaneously, is heavily conditioned by its European heritage by calling itself philosophy while in many instances challenging this very heritage and its claims to truth, exclusivity and, thus predominance". The African question in philosophy, which defines "African" in African philosophy, is the dilemma of what to do with the contamination from the "rotten corpse of the 'racist' idealised *homo rationalis*" (Outlaw 1996: 56,) killed by the (re)-emergence of African in philosophy.

This, as further pointed out by Outlaw, is because this deconstructive process, which invariably entails a reconstructive dimension to "sanitize African intellectual practice of their necrophilia", entails:

> …a self-definition, the specification and re-appropriation of an African authenticity and legitimacy…and most of all, the effort to reclaim control over African historicity and the interpretation of African histories in general and African philosophical history in particular. (Outlaw 1996: 68)

The paradox of the reconstruction of philosophy through its deconstruction by the re-emergence of "African" in African philosophy as definitive of "African" in African philosophy, as revealed by Outlaw (1996), is that there cannot be "African" in African philosophy without the deconstruction of Philosophy, and there is no more Philosophy[4] because the "African" in African philosophy signifies a deconstructive undertaker of Philosophy in its Western configuration (Outlaw 1996: 52; Rorty 1982; 1993). It is in this light that Outlaw's commendation of the reconstructive effort of re-writing the history of philosophy to unearth its suppressed African dimension by connecting it to ancient Egypt, is instructive in understanding the meaning of "African" in African philosophy as a strategic ideological position − defined by an ethic of social justice for the historical injustice of racial dehumanisation.

HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AS DEFINITIVE OF "AFRICAN" IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

It was only at the end of the 19th century, when Egypt had been entirely stripped of its philosophic reputation, that its African affinities could be re-established (Bernal 1987: 30).

Diop's thesis that "without connection to ancient Egyptian philosophy, the restorations of the authentic tradition of African philosophy, in its most ancient chronological aspect and most fundamental manifestation, remain impossible" (Obenga 2004: 16; 1992) is the basis of a contested ideological historical meaning of "African" in African philosophy. In its extreme formulation, this historical ideological position maintains that the meaning of "African" in African philosophy represents the stolen intellectual heritage of ancient Egypt at the origin of Western philosophy

4 I use philosophy here following the distinction made by Outlaw and Rorty between "Philosophy" and "philosophy". According to Rorty, "PHILOSOPHY is the quest for truth about the essential nature of things…the Platonic quest for the universal, for a unified vision of the whole of reality. It is essentially an argumentative endeavour, for it lives by argument and counter-argument. By contrast, philosophy is the quest for meaning, an attempt to create self and reality rather than discover what is already out there. It seeks diversity rather than unity; it is narrative rather than argumentative". Rorty (1982), "The fate of Philosophy in the new Republic", Oct 18, 1982, quoted in J.M. van Hook, "African philosophy: Its quest for identity", *Quest* Vol. VII, no. 1, June 1993, p. 43. See also Outlaw (Jnr)*, On Race and Philosophy,* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 52.

(James 1954; Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996).[5] This thesis, which constitutes a central component of the pan-African intellectual resistance canon[6] continues to be refined in contemporary post-colonial scholarship (Olela 1984; Onyewuenyi 1994).[7] From this perspective, the meaning of "African" in African philosophy is defined by its historical connection to the origin of philosophy in ancient Egypt, which is claimed to be the classical antecedent of African philosophy.

The current advocacy of this position derives its authority from Diop, Obenga and Bernal, who argue that the tracing of the chronology of the history of philosophy reveals the origin and evolution of philosophical thoughts in ancient Egypt, which they affirm is basically an African civilisation (Diop 1991: 310). The chronological study of the history of philosophy, Diop argues, will reveal that the corpus of philosophy, "Pythagorean mathematics, the theory of the four elements of Thales of Miletus, Epicurean materialism, Platonic idealism, Judaism, Islam, and modern sciences are rooted in African cosmogony and science" (Diop 1974: xiv). It is on this basis that we can agree with Diop (1991: 5) that a historical connection to ancient Egypt is definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy.

A historical connection to ancient Egypt as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy is plausible, according to Keita (1984: 58), because "a genuine African philosophy should be defined by the periods of Africa's most articulate efforts throughout its history". This is in order to justify "its legitimacy from a historical background", according to Olela (1984), who advocates a genetic approach to the history of African philosophy. Keita's compression of Obenga's five chronological periods into three phases outlines how the history of philosophy in Africa is definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy (Obenga 2004: 13). These are the classical, medieval and modern phases, which Keita argues provide evidence that "a sufficiently firm literate philosophical tradition exists in Africa since ancient times, and that this tradition is of sufficient intellectual sophistication to warrant serious analysis" (Keita 1984: 57) as the historical and theoretical foundation of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy (Obenga 2004: 14).

However, while Appiah (1992: 101) regards the claim of a historical connection of African philosophy to ancient Egyptian philosophy as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy as absurd, Gordon (2008), Hallen (2002) and Outlaw (1996: 31), among other, argue for the relevance of further investigation of this orientation.

5 See James (1954) for the canonical articulation of the thesis of "Stolen legacy", and Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996) for a rebuttal of this thesis in what has come to be known as the "*Black Athena debate*".

6 Edward Blyden, Fredrick Douglas, Pixey Seme, WEB Dubois, Marcus Garvey and others all alluded to ancient Egyptian civilisation as an African civilisation.

7 See specifically Olela (1984) and Onyewuenyi (1994) for a detailed updated current articulation of this thesis in the debates of philosophy as African.

ETYMOLOGY OF PHILOSOPHY AS MEANING OF "AFRICAN" IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

> How can philosophy be of Greek essence or origin if the word philosophy itself is not a Greek word? (Obenga 1992: 54).

With these words, Obenga challenges the "'Western cultural prejudices" that admit the "existence of 'systems of thought', 'cosmogony' but never philosophy in Africa". He rejects the five cardinal dogmas of Western philosophy (Obenga 1992: 52)[8] and proposes a "thorough research in order to re-establish the whole history of African philosophy from antiquity to the present" (Obenga 1992: 28). Obenga (1992: 13) presents an etymological analysis of philosophy, which, he claims "places serious doubt on the mainstream interpretation of *sophos*, a component of *philosophia*". He argues that, based on "linguistic facts and historical testimonies, the compound word 'philosophy' and its association with the word 'wisdom' does not have an etymology neither in Indo-European nor in Greek" (Obenga 1992: 53). He therefore concludes that "an Egyptian etymology for *'sophos'* (lover of wisdom) is not so unbelievable if we take account of the history of philosophy which the Greeks received from the Egyptian" (Obenga 1992: 55).

According to Obenga (1992: 56), "the Greek word *sophos*, is derived from the Egyptian *seba, sbo, sabe*...the Egyptian *seba, sbo, sabe,* 'instructed' became *sophos* in Greek, with derivative Sophia, and the compound to *sophon*, hence *philosophia*".[9] Based on this etymological analysis, which he claims "opened a debate on a fundamental notion of meaning" of the paradox of a non-Greek word for an activity claimed as Greek, Obenga argues that the Greek word *sophos*, "instructed", is not etymologically explainable in Indo-European or even in Greek. It is probably derived from the Egyptian *Sbo*, which means "instructed, or wise". Consequently, according to him:

> …it is quite exact from the point of view of the history of philosophy to say that philosophy is of African origin, since Egypt is an African country and the first definition of 'the sage, the philosopher' in the history of mankind is to be found in Africa, specifically in Egypt (Obenga 1992: 60).

Obenga's position on the Egyptian etymology of philosophy as signifier of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy derives from a conviction that ancient Egyptian language, as revealed in hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic writings, Coptic

8 The five dogmas are: 1) Philosophy is of Greek essence; 2) Philosophy has nourished science; 3) Philosophy is a privileged discipline exclusive to the West; 4) Only the West have philosophy, all others have thoughts, cosmogonies, but not philosophy; and 5) Only the Greeks have universal reason.

9 Sabe, spelt Tseba, is "to know" in SeSotho and Sabi is also "to know" in Nigeria, it is Hlelba in IsiXhosa.

and modern African languages, constitutes a single linguistic community (Obenga 1992: 32).[10] This position, which is consistent with Diop's (1974) thesis of the cultural unity of ancient Egypt with the rest of Africa, continues to witness fresh investigations (O'Connor and Reid 2003).

Obenga's historical etymological analysis of philosophy as deriving from ancient Egypt as definitive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy can be dismissed as a "Nationalist agenda". However, Kingsley plays an "academic Elvis" (Berlinerblau 1999) in the debate.[11] In "The etymology of the name and the origins of *Hermetica*", Kingsley (1993: 2) focuses on the etymology of *Poimandres* because of his mythical significance as the "teacher and superior authority of Hermes Trismegistus" and because "it could in a real sense be described as the most important word in the Hermetic corpus as a whole". He maintains that the "Greek etymology of the word is linguistically unacceptable because the word *Poimandres* is Egyptian in origin" (Kingsley 1993: 3). Kingsley's work is significant because through his analysis of the etymology and origin of *Hermetica* he arrived at the same conclusion as Obenga on the origin of the etymology of Greek philosophical words in the ancient Egyptian language.

Gordon (2008) cautions about the limitation of retrospective genealogical connections of ancient Egypt as being definitive of "African" in African philosophy, but nonetheless, he argues that "to end one's search for the origin of Western words in the Greco-Latin classical past is to treat that world as civilizations that have emerged ex nihilo, out of nothing or nowhere" (Gordon 2008: 2). Gordon (2008: 2) therefore suggests that philosophy might be a word that is a "transformed version of an ancient Phoenician and Hittite word, which in turn is a varied and adapted word from the old kingdom of ancient Egypt". "The upshot of this radical linguistic archaeology," according to Gordan, is "that it challenges an organizing myth in the study of Western intellectual history and the history of philosophy", that philosophy is of Greek origin (Gordon 2008: 2).

Notwithstanding continuing criticism and debate, not only on the reliability of history as a basis for identity (Appiah 1992: 32) and on the validity of the historical thesis of the ancient Egyptian philosophy connection to African philosophy (Okafor 1997),[12] we can concede from a historicist perspective that the etymology and history

10 See critical debate on these sentiments in Appiah (2007). Also see Gordon (2008: 15) for his discussion of the notion of African and retrospective genealogy for a critique of this perspective.

11 The concept of "academic Elvis" was coined in a Martin Bernal statement – "Certainly if a Black were to say what I am now putting in my books, their reception would be very different. They would be assumed to be one-sided and partisan, pushing a Black Nationalist line and therefore dismissed…But being not only white, male, middle aged and middle-class but also British in America has given me a tone of authority that is completely spurious" (Berlinerblau 1999). See also Bernal (1989), "The challenge of Black Athena", special issue of *Arethusa*, pp. 17–37.

12 Okafor rejected it as completely naive for black Africa to claim Egyptian ancestry because of Egypt's historical importance.

of philosophy in Africa are legitimate signifiers of "African" in African philosophy. The question is to what extent these two features capture and exhaust the question of what it is for philosophy to be authentically African and authentically philosophical, without recourse to one essentialism or the other, especially racial essentialism, which the historical and etymological arguments, just like the geographic criteria, cannot escape.

As argued earlier in this paper, while race, geography, cultural heritage, history, etymology, the signifier of the deconstruction of philosophy and the focus on neo-colonial concerns are legitimate signifying features of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, none of them is exhaustive of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy without recourse to one essentialism or the other. The consideration of the debate on these competing signifiers of African in philosophy, however, opens an opportunity for a conception of the notion of "African" in African philosophy as signifying an ideological position defined by a commitment to an ethic of social justice for the historical accident of racial dehumanisation. As seen in all the competing criteria of the meaning of "African" in African philosophy, what is central to all the notions of "African" in African philosophy is their ideological challenge of the denial of "African" in African philosophy.

How the ideological historical argument of the connection of ancient Egypt to Africa allows for a notion of "African" in African philosophy as a strategic ideological position defined by an ethics of social justice for the historical accident of the racial dehumanisation of Africans, is revealed best by Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis. This is because, although his equation of black as signifier of the Africanness of Egyptians does not escape the paradigm of race and racial essentialism, the *Black Athena* thesis nonetheless defines what is "African" in African philosophy in a very radical way. This is because what is "African" in African philosophy as revealed in the *Black Athena* debate is the ideological strategic ethical position Bernal occupies and projects in his intellectual orientation, in relation to African heritage, racial dehumanisation and social justice for Africans. Based on his ideological commitment to the ethics of social justice for the racial dehumanisation of Africans, Bernal exposes the racism of Western philosophy as instrumental in the racial dehumanisation of Africans, and his epistemic position derives from a focus on the African heritage of ancient Egypt as an African civilisation.

The articulation of the historical thesis of the connection of African philosophy to ancient Egyptian philosophy therefore represents the meaning of "African" in African philosophy as a strategic ideological epistemic position defined by a commitment to the ethic of social justice for the historical injustice of the racial dehumanisation of Africans. It is ideological because of its commitment to an ethics of social justice to expose the history of racism in philosophy. It is epistemic because it is derived from African heritage as object and source of investigation. It escapes racial essentialism because it is an ideological position that does not depend on

geographic origin or location, but on a methodological theoretical commitment to the ethics of social justice for the historical injustice of racism in philosophy through challenging the racism of philosophy and exposing the philosophy of race.[13]

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