

Caliban's Reason: Introduction to Afro-Caribbean Philosophy

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Commentaries and translations are from KissTheSky writers

The African Philosophical Heritage

Me tryna speak of the African heritage of Afro-Caribbean philosophy:



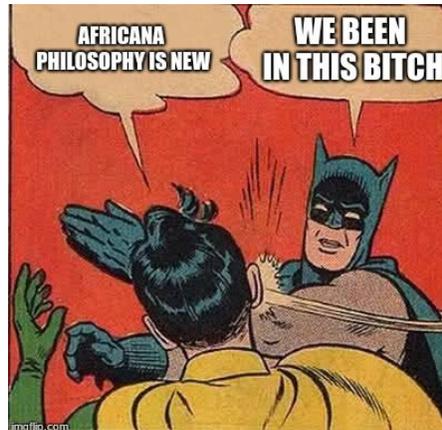
But thankfully,



We used to have doubting tom's everywhere! Everybody and they mama in philosophy/the academy (in Africa and the West!) was doubting the existence of such a distinct philosophical heritage. A cloud of colonial invisibility had descended over African philosophy. However,

thanks to the work of scholars like Kwame Gyekye #goals, Alexis Kagame #TheGoat, Marcien Towa #Royalty, Henry Oruka #StephCurryofPhilosophy, Tsenay Serequeberhan #WeInHereNow and others, it has been rescued from this awful fate.

Consequently, I can proceed with my primary task of outlining the traditional phase of this heritage, which remains a formative influence on Afro-Caribbean philosophy. What these scholars have been able to show is that long before there were professors of philosophy there were philosophers.



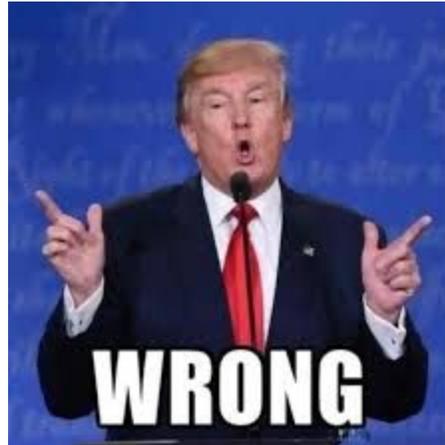
Gyekye and Oruka in particular have developed for us the role of the African sages who were the producers and conservers of rich philosophical traditions. Thus in the case of the Akan, Gyekye has shown that



This is an individual who exhibits a distinct type of self-reflective activity that others recognize as both wise and profound. Of such an individual, it is said: "The wise man is spoken to in proverbs, not in speeches (or words)."

In this chapter, I will present a systematic outline of traditional African philosophy, particularly those aspects that bear directly on Afro-Caribbean philosophy. Throughout the exposition I make the assumption that the character of traditional African philosophy has been profoundly

shaped by its intertextual relations with the religious, mythic, genealogical, and proverbial discourses that dominate African cultural systems. Indeed, it is a central argument of this book that traditional African philosophy emerged in the philosophical positions that were implicitly taken by sages in these and other important discourses. This approach to traditional African philosophy will of course differ from those of Robin Horton and the early Paulin Hountondji, who argued that such a discourse did not exist.³



It will also differ from the position of Marcien Towa, who approaches traditional African philosophy through its intertextual relations with folkloric, rather than mythic or religious, discourses. Focusing on the authoritarian nature of sacred power, Towa argues for a deep opposition b/w religion & philosophy, and hence against the reconstruction of philosophy through its intertextual relations with religion. Further, in Towa's view, philosophy is essentially a secular discourse, characterized by the making of rational arguments and counterarguments. In African folktales, the implicit philosophical position as Towa demonstrates, is often a secular one. The heroes are usually not religious or mythic figures, but rather crafty animals or humans who challenge all authority and play tricks on everyone including the gods.



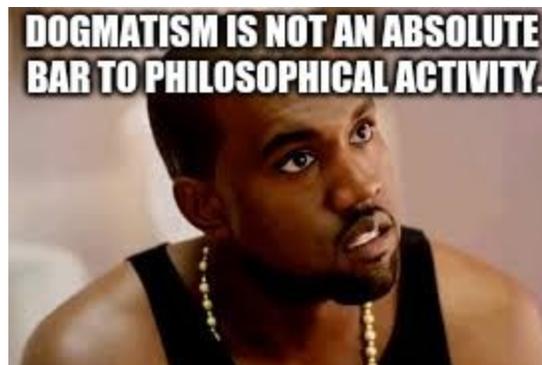
In developing the philosophical implications of this aspect of African folktales, Towa has made a valuable contribution to the origins of secular thought in traditional societies and their internal bases for rationalization and desacralization.⁴



1. the claim that the authoritarian and dogmatic tendencies of myth and religion void them and their intertextual relations of all philosophical significance is a false one. Dogmatism is not unknown to philosophy. As we will see, much of the phenomenology of both Husserl and Habermas has been directed at the dogmatism of positivism and scientism. Thus, in spite of their dogmatic tendencies, I will take the position that there is much in religious and mythic discourses that is of philosophical importance.

2. Towa indirectly admits the truth of this position when he begins his discussion of traditional African philosophy with an analysis of Egyptian religion. He demonstrates clearly the philosophical elements in Egyptian religious discourses in spite of the possibilities of finding dogmatic tendencies within them.

Hence we can conclude from Towa's own analysis that



This conclusion highlights the inconsistency in Towa's approach when he refuses to take a similar view of other traditional African religions.



An adequate portrait of traditional African philosophy can only be drawn from all of the discourses in which it is implicitly embedded and particularly the dominant ones which include myth, religion, and genealogy. Thus,



From proverbial styles of thought, it inherited its major mode of expression. In the Yoruba tradition, “A wise man who knows proverbs can reconcile difficulties.”⁶ According to Igbo tradition, “Proverbs are vegetables for eating speech.”⁷ From the philosophical positions implicit or explicit in the above discourses, I will develop my outline of traditional African philosophy. In particular, I will show that these positions include cosmogonic ontologies, cosmogonic/communitarian systems of ethics, vitalist and predestinarian systems of existentialism, and epistemologies that are both ego centered and ego transcending. However, before taking up these specific philosophical inheritances, I must provide a brief sketch of the vision of existence created by the religious, mythic, and genealogical discourses of traditional Africa. The vision that informs traditional African philosophy, that generates its fundamental questions is a religious one. It’s a vision that results from a set of religious answers to basic questions about the origin, nature, and purpose of being, particularly human being. As such, this vision rests on origin narratives that parallel Christian, Hindu, and other religious accounts of the origins of existence.

Origin narratives are stories of cosmogenesis, of the creation of the world that human groups use to define and legitimate their identities. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, we find several

competing origin narratives. One begins its narration by telling how the Supreme Being started creation with the making of Earth and Sky. After these were established, He created two messengers, Sun and Moon, to bring him news of events on earth.⁸



Among the Yoruba, the narrating of creation begins with the creator God sharing his Ashe, or creative powers, with a group of animals, which included a python, a viper, a snail, an earthworm, and a woodpecker.⁹ In spite of their diversity, origin narratives are not arbitrary or superfluous stories. On the contrary, they are a vital part of the linguistic/discursive infrastructure that complements our biology and makes possible the cultural regulation of behavior that is unique to human orders of existence.



Agency, rather than personal qualities. In other words, it was conceived in terms of its enabling capabilities, its creative intelligence and drives. Spirit was like a vast ocean of impersonal creative energy that was capable of realizing the nonspiritual world and of shaping events in it. Perhaps the best-known ethnographic account of such impersonal views of spirituality among Africans is Placide Tempels's study of the Bantu-speaking Baluba of the former Belgian Congo. For the Baluba, being or existence is constructed in terms of force: "Force is being and being is force."¹⁵



To be is to have force, to not be is to lack force. This force of being resides in the creator God and is the origin of the vital force that gives every creature its being.