

# **THE RIGHT TO DIFFERENCE: THE COMMON ROOTS OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>**

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The purpose of this paper is to consider the impact of historical developments on the quest for theological relevance in Africa. Specifically, the complex history inaugurated by the European factor in Africa is taken as the background for the present search for identity in the continent.

European presence in Africa has initiated what A. A. Mazrui calls a clash of cultures. This resulted in a paradoxical situation. Mazrui explains:

Clearly Africa is not the nearest in culture to the western world, yet the continent has indeed been experiencing perhaps the fastest pace of westernization this century of anywhere in the non-western world (Mazrui 1980:47).

The expressions "European factor," "European presence," "westernization" and "European colonialism" are somewhat synonymous. Yet the new situation created by Western influence in Africa was not due to a single source. It is convenient to summarize European intentions in Africa with formulas such as "Christianity, Commerce and Civilization" or "La Croix et le Drapeau." In reality these formulas cover a host of institutions, ideologies and motivations. Christianity in its varied forms, adventurers, empire builders, philanthropists and mercenaries were all part of the European factor in Africa. In time the interaction between Africans and the self-appointed masters had to lead to a new sense of African self-awareness. A. A. Mazrui describes the phenomena in these words:

Christianity, Western liberal democracy, urbanization, Western capitalism, the rules of Western science and the rules of Western art have jointly exerted an unparalleled influence on the emergence of personalized identity in Africa (1980:68).

Indeed, I wish to argue that "the emergence of personalized identity in Africa" permeates all forms of reflection in the continent, including not least the quests for African philosophy and for African theology.

## **1. Reflection, history and culture**

European colonialism in Africa created a crisis situation, particularly in relation to culture, which is the common denominator for both African

philosophy and African theology. The Africans' search for their past is the result of a reaction to Western domination and domestication. And this quest for an African past different from that of Europe is itself a form of reflection. It has ramifications in literature, philosophy, religion, art and culture. Hence the quests for African philosophy and African theology are historically related. In Africa, as elsewhere, reflection is always related to history and culture.

I wish to explore the impact of historical developments on the quest for African theology especially in conjunction with a study of a similar process in African philosophy. Before we get to the heart of the matter, the following three quotations may shed light on the problem before us.

In his last book, *The Guardian of the Word*, the late Guinean novelist Camara Laye writes:

When people live for years in freedom or within some sphere of influence, either in a feudal state or under colonial domination; and when their own lands—even if they become French-speaking, like the country of the colonizer—are nevertheless as different from France in their customs, nature and climate as Africa is from Europe: then it is natural that such people should return to their roots, should investigate their past, and, delving into that past, should enter upon a passionate quest for traces of those beings and those things that have guided their destiny (1975:24).

In his introduction to P. J. Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, the Nigerian scholar Abiola Irele states:

... the encounter between Africa and Europe has brought about a conflict of cultures, a situation that, in the specific historical context of colonization, has produced a tension in the heart of the African system of values. . . . There can be no form of reflection in Africa today that does not bear a direct relation to history and culture (1983:1,10).

Aylward Shorter, a British Catholic priest and missionary, writes:

With their neo-scholastic training Catholic [writers of sub-Saharan Africa] assumed that there could be no African Theology without the prior discovery of an African Philosophy (1975:24).

If the three authors are right, then one should not, and cannot, study the quest for African theology while ignoring colonial history and the quest for African philosophy. It is even possible to defend the thesis that the search for theological relevance in Africa passes through stages similar to those of the quest for an African philosophy.

## 2. African philosophy, history and culture

The quest for African philosophy reflects the tensions of political, economic, cultural, religious and ideological relationships between Africa and the West. In that sense, the quest for an African philosophy is a by-product of European colonial domination, particularly in its cultural and intellectual dimensions. L. Apostel notes that

the attitude taken by Western writers and Africans with reference to the problem of the existence of a genuine and specific African philosophy is . . . the expression of a stage in the struggle of Africa for emancipation and autonomy (1981:8).

Apostel then proceeds to distinguish four stages in this struggle as it relates to African philosophy. In Stage I, Westerners view African cultures as childlike; they are to be corrected and brought to the level of the West. This display of an attitude of superiority inevitably leads to reaction. The reaction takes place in Stage II. This second stage is properly the beginning point of the quest for an African philosophy. As Africans and some Westerners react against Western ethnocentrism, they tend to assert qualitative differences between African and Western philosophies. The goal is for Africans to achieve cultural autonomy. In this second stage, the search is for ethnic, tribal or traditional philosophies. In time Stage III is reached. Stage III, as a reaction against the assumptions of Stage II, is actually more of a critique than a formulation of philosophies. In Stage III, the critics claim that there is no philosophy that is proper to cultures or nations but only philosophies created by individuals. Stage IV in turn would be a synthesis between stage II and III. According to Apostel, Stage IV is yet to come (Apostel 1981:1-10). It may be worthwhile to examine Apostel's four stages in greater detail.

### *Stage I*

The first stage in the quest for African philosophy actually provides only the launching pad for stages two and three. Roughly, Apostel's first stage covers the period from the European conquest of Africa (particularly in the nineteenth century) to around 1930. This is the time when Westerners denied the Africans civilization and thought. This ethnocentrism was evidenced in L. Levy-Bruhl's depiction of primitive mentality as pre-logical. And, of course, Africa provided the modern laboratory for the study of such primitive mentality!

The missionary literature of the time reflects this Western sense of superiority vis-a-vis Africa. Witness the two volumes authored by Robert H. Milligan: *The Jungle Folk of West Africa* and *The Fetish Folk of West Africa*. They were published in 1910 and 1912, respectively, by Fleming H. Revell Company. A few lines from *The Fetish Folk of West Africa* will illustrate the extent of Mr. Milligan's ethnocentrism. This is, for instance, how he introduces the African to the reader in his *Preface*:

In the present volume the author essays the more difficult task of revealing the interior world of the African – his mental habits and beliefs . . . Fetishism . . . is the jungle of jungles, an aggregation of incoherent beliefs. The world of the African is as wild and strange as the weird world we often visit on the brink of sleep. . . . The degradation of the African is a fact (Milligan 1912:5,7).

In a later chapter, he compares America to Africa, that is civilized society and savagery. Of the six contrasts established by Milligan, I will mention only one,

the third. According to Milligan, civilized man has intellectual development, the savage does not. Milligan writes:

There is no increase of knowledge and no expanding of intelligence. The intellectual stagnation, the stifling mental torpor of an African community must be experienced in order to be realized (1912:273).

The remarkable thing in all of this is that Milligan honestly believed he was presenting facts, not theory. For he defends himself with these words:

In thus recording the successive contrasts between civilization and the savage state, I am not conscious of exploiting a theory but have rather recorded the differences that impressed me in the course of actual experience in Africa (Milligan 1912:275).

In a way, the excesses of stage two are in reverse proportion to the damage done by such Western ethnocentric attitudes toward Africans. Africans needed (and still need) to be rehabilitated! Moreover the ideas expressed by Milligan are still part of current missionary thought in relation to Africa. Milligan's books are read in the libraries of missionary training institutions. Words like "savage" have not yet disappeared from missionary hymns, even some of the more recent ones!

### *Stage II*

Since, by and large, Westerners justified colonialism and domination of Africa by the "fact" that Africans were incapable of thought and intellectual development, it is not surprising that, in stage two, the battle to rehabilitate the Africans is fought on the ground of philosophy. We Black Africans are also able to produce coherent systems of thought, was the battle cry. Historically, Apostel's second stage covers the years between 1930 and the early 1970's. The development of the concept of *Négritude* by A. Césaire and L. S. Senghor in 1932- 1934 and the publication in 1945 of *Bantu Philosophy* by P. Tempels are important milestones in the development of this second stage. Note, for the record, that the debate on African theology began in the 1950s during the second stage of the quest for African philosophy.

A. J. Smet (1975:1-2) notes that there are three trends or schools in current African philosophy. In the first trend he puts the writers of *Négritude* and African Personality. The second school is that of Bantu philosophies; this is the group of Tempels and his successors. The third trend includes writers and philosophers whose emphasis is on African cultural unity. Smet's distinctions may be a little artificial. They nevertheless point to the fact that the second stage of the search for African philosophy is a diversified reality. The reader should note, for the sake of clarity, that I have identified Smet's "current African philosophy" with Apostel's Stage II. The date of Smet's writing, 1975, marks the transition between Stages II and III.

The second stage of the development of African philosophy did not occur without antecedents. One such antecedent is the concept of African Per-

sonality, used for the first time in 1893 by E. W. Blyden in Freetown (Irele 1975:57). The twin concepts of African Personality and *Négritude* share at least three common characteristics. First, Irele contends that both African Personality and *Négritude* originate within the context of Black diaspora, particularly that of the United States (Irele 1975:57-58). Secondly, African Personality and *Négritude* are both movements and theories created by "westernized" Blacks and Africans in reaction to the domination of the West. L. S. Senghor acknowledges that the concept of *Négritude* was invented by Aimé Césaire, a Black man from French Antilles (1964:8). This explains why both concepts are expressed in the languages of the colonizers. *Négritude* was first "expressed, sung and danced" in French, admits Senghor (1964:316).

The third common characteristic of African Personality and *Négritude* brings us back to their origin. A. Irele notes that Blyden's concept of African Personality was in keeping with the nineteenth century definition of nationality. Consequently, for Blyden, African Personality included Blacks everywhere; it was a racial and ethnic concept (Irele 1975:66). Collective Black personality and identity are also the guiding principles of *Négritude*. Senghor, the well-known poet of *Négritude*, claims that Blacks everywhere have one and the same culture. This unitary and universal Black culture is marked by Black people's emotive sensibility. This Senghor summarizes in his famous statement: "L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison hellène" (Senghor 1964:22,24) ["Emotion is to the Black what reason is to the Greek"].

The poet and former President of Senegal has not significantly altered his thought over the years. In a more recent essay he maintains that Blacks in the Middle East, Africa, India and the Americas have the same culture. It was also the culture of North Africa during the time of the Berbers and the Pharaohs of Egypt. According to Senghor this global Black culture is based on the same philosophy and religion, the same art and the same rhythm (1982:89).

Blyden's African Personality and Senghor's *Négritude* clearly seek a pan-negro philosophy which will restore dignity and value to Black culture everywhere. That is the reason that both concepts are akin to K. Nkrumah's *Consciencism*.

Viewed against the background of Blyden's and Senghor's thought, the proponents of Bantu philosophy appear to be looking for more localized ethnic philosophies. Such a conclusion, however, would be rather hasty. Tempels himself had a more general goal. He conducted his study of Bantu philosophy on the assumption that primitive peoples' conception of the universe rested on a logically coherent ontology. He also concluded that the best description of Bantu philosophy is that of vital force. This vital force is the center of Bantu thought and behavior (Tempels 1959:15,30,33). Tempels also claims that Bantu philosophy, as he describes it, "is perhaps that common to all primitive peoples, to all clan societies" (1959:26). Throughout Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, one gets the impression that "Bantu" is ill-defined. Bantu,

primitive, semi-primitive, Black, and African are terms used somewhat synonymously. Tempels and his followers are therefore not very different from the philosophers of African Personality and *Négritude*. Their concern is the same: to restore the Black person and the primitive into full human dignity. This is aptly summarized by Tempels in these words: "anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men" (1959:16).

The quest for African philosophy was then motivated by the desire to include Africans in the category of rational human beings. For this, the different writers appealed to the Africans' right to difference. Their thought, though not Western, was nevertheless rational. Their philosophy, though different and collective, was no less philosophical than the works of Western thinkers. The proponents of African Personality, *Négritude*, Bantu philosophy, and African cultural unity all seem to posit a general and collective African thought. Apostel clearly moves in that direction when he states that "the structure of a worldview may be called a collective philosophy" (1981:15). J. S. Mbiti, for his part, finds African philosophy in "religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals" (Mbiti 1969:2). Such collective, unreasoned philosophy, as one can see, encompasses the totality of what anthropologists call culture. African philosophy, in that sense, becomes another synonym for African culture, religion or worldview. In time the term ethnophilosophy was coined to describe this kind of collective folk thought. This leads directly to Apostel's Stage III in the development of African Philosophy.

### *Stage III*

Quite naturally, the assumptions of Stage II have come under examination and challenge. The critics generally point to two weaknesses in the concept of a collective African philosophy. These weaknesses are: the definition of philosophy and the origination of philosophy.

The critics in Stage III contend that proponents of ethnophilosophy misuse the term philosophy. F. Crahay, for instance, points out that Tempels' book rests on a confusion of meanings of the word philosophy; the colloquial usage is not distinguished from the technical one (Crahay 1975:328). This mistake, according to Crahay, leads Tempels into assuming a naive, implicit, irrational and immediate philosophy (Crahay 1975:330). One may equate worldview with philosophy only when philosophy is given a non-technical definition. Otherwise, philosophy as a second order reflection occurs at a later stage. Consequently, worldview can only be a proto-philosophy, a prelude to philosophy (that is, philosophy is to world view what theology is to religion).

The critics also maintain that philosophy, defined as critical reflection, cannot be a collective enterprise. Only individuals produce philosophies. To be sure the individual philosopher is influenced by his culture and the worldviews of

his society, but ultimately philosophies are produced by individuals, not by societies. The critics in Stage III, both Africans and Westerners, agree that philosophy is an individual exercise. Crahay, Hountondji, Towa and Wiredu may disagree on what constitutes a philosophical production. They all assume a definition of philosophy as a type of reflection which is explicit, analytic, radically critical and autocritical, with the courage to think the absolute (Crahay 1975:329; Towa 1979:7).

What are the implications of the criticisms of Stage III thinkers? Should one reject completely the concept of African philosophy? What is the best way of relating African traditional worldviews with philosophical thought? These questions point to the contours of Apostel's Stage IV.

#### *Stage IV*

Apostel thinks that the fourth stage in the development of African philosophy should be a synthesis of Stages II and III. This stage, according to him, has not yet been reached (Apostel 1981:10). But there may be, despite Apostel's position, the beginnings of Stage IV in the writings of K. Wiredu, M. Towa and N. Tshimalenga. K. Wiredu sees no problem in the fact that "there is a traditional African philosophy and there is an emerging modern African philosophy" (1980:xi). He suggests that "it is a particular . . . responsibility of African philosophers to research into the traditional background of their philosophical thought" (Wiredu 1980:36). Contemporary African philosophies should therefore be built, in part, on traditional worldviews.

M. Towa and N. Tshimalenga express similar ideas. M. Towa states: "not all cultures have philosophy, but all are capable of producing one" (Towa 1979:19). In other words, the ingredients for African philosophies are already present in African societies and cultures. It is the job of African philosophers to bring this potential to its full fruition.

N. Tshimalenga contends that philosophies are molded by "the impact of the more or less pre-philosophical traditions they inherited from religious and popular beliefs" (Tshimalenga 1981a:72). African philosophies would therefore differ from Western or Asian philosophies because of the different religious and cultural backgrounds.

"The search for the correct conception of African philosophy is part of the post-colonial African quest for identity" (Wiredu 1980:xi). As we reviewed the various stages of this quest for identity, we discovered that the debate moved from generalities to specifics. A more irenic situation is now being reached. African philosophy is no longer defined in opposition to Western philosophy. Yet African thinkers take traditional worldviews seriously. Today, the question is not: How African is this or that philosophy? Rather the question is: How may Africans contribute to philosophy? This has implications for other disciplines. As K. Wiredu puts it, "the sensible African will . . . try to develop

a particular orientation not in the disciplines themselves but in their application" (Wiredu 1980:26). With this in mind we turn to the question of African theology.

### 3. African theology, history and culture

The problems which have generated and governed the quest for African philosophy are essentially the same for African theology. That explains why N. Tshimalenga can claim that the proponents of Black philosophy, Black Theology, Bantu philosophy, African philosophy, and African Theology all have the same preoccupation: the rediscovery of African identity and the recapture of historical initiative (1981b:173). Somehow Africans want to be free to participate in theology and philosophy without just repeating what they learned from the Western masters!

The common origin and development of African theology and African philosophy is suggested by the fact that many writers on philosophy in Africa are also churchmen. Such is the case for both P. Tempels and J. S. Mbiti, for instance. If one adds to this the opinion of some who think that "African theology will of necessity depend on a genuinely African conceptual framework" (Maurier 1979:12), it becomes quite clear that one should not be studied without the other.

In a general way the quest for African theology is a reflection on the fact that Christianity came to the continent in the garments of Western cultures. This Western imprint on Christianity has had a negative effect on the development of African theology. One observer notes that African churches suffer from a real theological underdevelopment due to the cultural weight of Latin Christianity (Ela 1980:129). The same could be said about Protestant Christianity in Africa. In one way or another, African churches are the by-products of the Christian West (Ela 1980:132).

Since the Christianization of much of Africa took place during the nineteenth century and into the present century, the modern missionary movement in Africa is placed in an ambiguous position. Wittingly or unwittingly, missions in Africa contributed to the making of the Black man into the White man. That is why the quest for African theology is also a quest for selfhood and emancipation (Ela 1980:32-37; Hebga 1976:80; Tiénou 1984). Ela even adds that one cannot speak of local (or national) churches without granting them the right to difference (Ela 1980:134). We have seen that the same motivations explain the quest for African philosophy.

More specifically, Apostel's four-stage model can be used as a fruitful tool for understanding the phases of development in African theology. At first missionaries communicated what to them was clear universal Christian teaching, doctrine, and theology. At a later date, somewhere in the 1950's, a group of Westerners and Africans begin consciously to wrestle with the question of an



**African theology.** Note that this is roughly the time of Bantu philosophies, *Négritude* and political independence for many African countries. In this phase the emphasis is on the singular, African theology. At a still later date, people begin to express the idea that collective and general African theology is impossible to achieve. They suggest the plural, African theologies, to account for the cultural diversity of the continent. Polemics continue for some time. It seems that we are now reaching a more irenic stage, similar to that in the development in African philosophy, where general African characteristics are recognized without denying the need for specifics. In African theology, as in African philosophy, the stage is set for a new emphasis.

Whether it is African philosophy or African theology, one gets the feeling that we have just begun. The last thirty to forty years have laid the foundation, have established the legitimacy of the struggle for selfhood. It is now time to build and provide African contributions in these disciplines. K. Wiredu's comments appropriately sum up the present situation not only for African philosophy but also for African theology:

At present a lot of time is given by philosophers in Africa to talking about African philosophy as distinct from actually doing it . . . [It] is necessary at this stage to balance this concern with Meta-African philosophy with a readiness to get along with the task itself of modern philosophical thinking (Wiredu 1980:xi, italics in original).

The recent publication of full-length scholarly monographs in both disciplines is a sure sign of maturity. The right to difference, even for Africans, is now largely recognized. This is no small accomplishment.

#### 4. Conclusion

Most countries in Africa are now politically independent. Nearly all the continent's mission-related churches are led by Africans. Is there still need for a quest for selfhood and identity? The paradoxical situation of Africa is that the struggle for identity is now more acute than ever before. As long as Europe and the West continue to dominate the economy and educational systems of Africa, the quest for the right to difference will remain. That is why the question of identity is a central aspect of all types of reflection in Africa.

I have attempted to show here how the debates on African philosophy and African theology are rooted in the historical situation of Africa vis-a-vis Europe and the West. Essentially the debates have moved from the stage of complete rejection of things African to a more irenic situation where Africa and Africans are taken seriously in the symphony of nations and cultures. This more irenic situation in African philosophy and African theology came only after a period of majoring on the differences between the West and Africa.

The quest for the right to difference will likely continue in African theology for some time. Even today theological education in the continent is dominated

by Western funding and personnel. That in itself will fuel the impatience of a younger generation.

While African philosophy and African theology do indeed have common roots, they will in the future develop separately. In the past, churchmen were major contributors to the search for African philosophy. This is less and less true. Today the debate on African philosophy is increasingly secular, as it has moved to the universities. Already one hears that African philosophy in the future needs to be "freed from the Christian and classical Islamic falsifications that are deeply incompatible with it" (Apostel 1981:400). The claim is that traditional African worldviews are anthropocentric. Modern African philosophy, to be African, must return to this anthropocentrism! But whatever happens in the future will not alter the facts: modern philosophy in Africa shares a common pattern in origin and development with the search for *Theologia Africana*.

#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Based on a paper presented at the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, Wheaton College IL, USA, 16-19 June 1986.

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