African Philosophy and Rhetoric
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Themes and Context of African Rhetoric

African intellectual traditions have long generated intense and systematic reflection on philosophy and rhetoric. It is unfortunate that myths about Africa have obscured much of the continent’s scholarship. Of those myths, one of the most persistent has held that all African societies were “non-literate” and that, therefore, systems of writing and reading only came to Africa with European colonialism. This pernicious myth is demonstrably false, as can be seen in written traditions across such diverse African societies as ancient Egypt and Nubia and the flourishing centers of learning in the middle ages such as in Mali in West Africa and Zanzibar in East Africa.

That said, any robust understanding of African philosophical and rhetorical traditions ought to begin by acknowledging the continent's diverse societies. It should follow, then, that this module lays no claim to being exhaustive. Its rather more modest ambition seeks to proffer pointers to some of the most prominent traditions of philosophic and rhetorical thought on the continent. This module, moreover, will proceed on the assumption that African philosophical and rhetorical thought are inextricably intertwined. This is largely because, unlike the dominant strains of philosophical and theoretical reflection in the North Atlantic world, African intellectual traditions did not draw sharp contrasts between philosophy and rhetoric.

Ancient Africa

Prominent ancient African philosophical and rhetorical traditions include those of Egypt, Nubia and Yoruba societies. Below, I will highlight two: ancient Egypt and that of the Yoruba.

1. Egypt

Ancient Egypt is almost certainly the most well-known civilization in Africa. Perhaps as one would expect from a 3,500-year written tradition, its corpus of writing was richly diverse. These ranged from wisdom texts (instructional and teaching books), to writings on history, religion, law, and autobiography, to more explicitly “literary” or aesthetic texts (hymns, poems, and prose tales). Ancient Egyptian writing was not, of course, confined to papyri.
Tombs and temple walls, coffins and statues, monuments of all kinds were inscribed with words. The primary and secondary literature in this tradition is dauntingly voluminous. Below, I offer a selection of texts for the beginning student.

**Primary sources in translation:**


**A selection of secondary sources:**


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Dodson, Aidan, *Amarna Sunrise: Egypt from Golden Age to Age of Heresy* (Cairo: 2014)


2. Yoruba

The Yoruba people of West Africa have one of the most distinctive and widely recognized philosophical and rhetorical traditions in the African continent. The Odu Ifa corpus, a largely oral collection of verses, comprises a breathtaking archive of reflections on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. There continues to be considerable debate among modern scholars over the historicity of the Ifa corpus. Popular accounts hold that the Yoruba supreme God, Olodumare, handed down Ifa to the first diviner priest and deity, Orunmila. Some scholars have inferred from such narratives that Orunmila is a mythological figure. But against such a reading, the Nigerian philosopher Sophie Oluwole has forcefully argued that Orunmila was indeed a historical figure. Oluwole’s groundbreaking and deeply influential text, Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy, offers a comparative analysis of the philosophical works of Orunmila and that of the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates.

Primary texts in translation:

The Odu Ifa corpus was initially orally transmitted through Babaaláwo, Ifa diviners or priests. Modern scholars, led by the acclaimed linguist and literary critic, Wándé Abímbólá, have since then recorded and published these works in several volumes of books.


Wándé Abímbólá. Àwn Ojù Odù Mçràrindicnlógùn (All of the Sixteen Principal Odù )


Secondary sources:


**Medieval Africa**

1. Ethiopia

Ethiopia boasts a 1700 years-old formal educational system. It has a rich written tradition, going back to at least the 300s CE. Ethiopian philosophy and rhetoric witnessed an efflorescence in the 14th century following the ascension into power of the Solomonic Dynasty. Some of the most notable texts to have emerged in this era included the *Kebrà Nagast* (the Glory of the Kings), a volume that unfolds Ethiopian myths of origin, the *Tarike Nagast* (Royal Chronicles), a text that documents the deeds of Ethiopian kings, the *Mashafa Mestira Samay Wamedr* (The Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth), a text that sought to explain the creation of the universe, and several anthologies of sermons and hymns.

The 17th century would prove to be another major inflection point in Ethiopian intellectual history. It is in this period that Zera Yacob, reputed by many to be one of Ethiopia’s greatest philosophers, wrote his *Hatata* (Treatise). In this book, Yacob makes a stringent case for a rationalist approach to human inquiry. Yacob, writing in the midst of a relentless campaign of persecution against those opposed to forced religious conversion, argued for a conception of religious faith guided by reason. Walda Heywat, who studied under Yacob, would follow in his teacher’s footsteps by writing his own treatise. His book follows his teacher’s staunch defense of rationalism and extends his insights into the realm of everyday ethics.

**Primary texts in translation:**

The philosopher Claude Sumner is often credited with having brought Ethiopian philosophy to the attention of the anglophone world. Sumner extensively translated Ethiopian philosophical works and published them in several volumes. More recently, Princeton University professor Wendy Belcher has also worked prodigiously on the translation and analysis of medieval Ethiopian literature and texts.


**Secondary sources:**

Harden, John M. *An Introduction to Ethiopic Christian Literature* (Macmillan, 1926).


2. Bilad al-Sudan

“Bilad al-Sudan” (The Land of Black People) is an Arabic name for land that lay south of North Africa and stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. Initially meant as an epithet that medieval Arabic writers used to refer to the darker-skinned people they met in West Africa, it was subsequently appropriated by its targets as a badge of honor. It is here that an extraordinary ferment of intellectual work, largely catalyzed and inspired by the penetration of Islam into the region, emerged and flourished from roughly the 13th century to the 17th century. The range of subject matter was as broad as the ideas were deep, cutting across disciplines such as Islamic metaphysics, jurisprudence, history, ethics, rhetoric, and aesthetics. The most well-known center of learning in the Bilad al-Sudan was Timbuktu. At the peak of its “golden age” in the fifteenth-century, scholars estimate that Timbuktu hosted as many as 150 to 180 maktabs (Qur’anic schools). Ahmad Baba, considered the preeminent scholar of Timbuktu, is known to have written more than forty works, ranging from jurisprudential treatises to biographies.

Primary sources

No single library or book contains a comprehensive record for the manuscripts and works that were published in the Bilad al-Sudan. This is not only because of the astounding number of works produced and the sheer size of the region, but also because many of the manuscripts were held in private collections. For one of the most accessible pointers to libraries and collections as well as being an excellent scholarly work on the intellectual history of the Bilad al-Sudan, see Ousmane Oumar Kane, Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa (Harvard: 2016). It was only in the 2000s that a concerted effort gained support to digitize manuscripts of the Bilad al-Sudan. One of the most notable and ongoing projects led by researchers at the University of Cape Town is The Tombouctou Manuscripts Project.


Hunwick, John, Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire (including the English translation, on pp. 1–270, of the Introduction, chapters 1 to 27, and chapter 30, of al-Sa’di, Tarikh al-Sudan) (Leiden: Brill, 1999)
Modern and Postcolonial African Philosophy and Rhetoric

After the Second World War, a revolutionary wave rippled across the African continent as political movements fought to end European colonial domination. These movements succeeded for the most part in bringing about the end of de jure European control of African countries. In the wake of independence, African philosophy and rhetoric took a decidedly post-colonial turn as various schools of thought debated the form and substance of African knowledge. By far the strongest currents of thought argued that Africans had distinctive ontological, epistemological, and axiological systems of thought. The Senegalese intellectual and statesman, Leopold Sedar Senghor, for example, came into prominence as one of the foremost theorists of “Négritude,” a complex philosophical system that vehemently disputed the characterization of Africans as uncivilized and uncultured. Senghor’s version of Négritude held that African thought rested on a shared ontology of “vital forces.” Whereas Senghor’s Négritude was largely focused on elaborating a shared metaphysical and cultural philosophical system, other prominent African thinkers emphasized the political and the economic. This was the case especially for a crop of African leaders that led independence movements in their countries, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.
Arguments of the sort advanced by Senghor that insisted on what can be roughly described as an “Afrocentric” approach to philosophy and rhetoric came under fierce critique from a crop of post-independence African philosophers. The Beninoise philosopher, Paulin Hountondji, is generally credited with leading the charge. Hountondji pejoratively referred to such thought as “ethnophilosophy,” declaring it a poor substitute for real philosophy. In his influential book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hountondji argued that to deserve the name “philosophy,” African philosophy must be universal and critical.

Though most African professional philosophers resonated with Hountondji’s critique of ethnophilosophy, a few took the view that his dismissal of it was too sweeping. The Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, and the Kenyan philosopher, Odera Oruka insisted that pre-colonial African societies were, for the most part, rich in philosophical discourse. Wiredu called for a “conceptual decolonization” of African languages to enable a clearer view of their incredibly nuanced philosophical vocabulary. Odera Oruka, for his part, undertook a project that he called “the sage philosophy project.” In this project, Oruka visited a variety of African communities and identified people that were widely seen as “wise.” He would then interview them on a range of questions. Oruka’s work has been deeply generative in African philosophy, not only as a source of wide-ranging debate about African metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, but also by inspiring legions of researchers to continue his work.

The study of philosophy and rhetoric in contemporary Africa continues to be deeply vibrant. Some of the most pathbreaking and fruitful work has emerged from feminist African philosophers who have articulated startlingly fresh ways of understanding power, knowledge, and aesthetics. For example, the African feminist philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu in her book, *Family Matters*, unfolded an egalitarian vision of society drawn from the form of society that existed in precolonial Igbo society.

Southern African philosophy has also generated a great deal of scholarly conversation especially after its democratic transition from the white supremacist apartheid era. A particularly fruitful focal point of insight has revolved around the meaning and contours of the philosophical concept and practice known as “ubuntu.” Though there continues to be fierce debate about the definition and implications of *ubuntu*, many commentators are agreed that it is founded on a principle widely shared by many African communities that emphasizes interdependence and intersubjectivity.

**A selection of modern and postcolonial African philosophy:**


