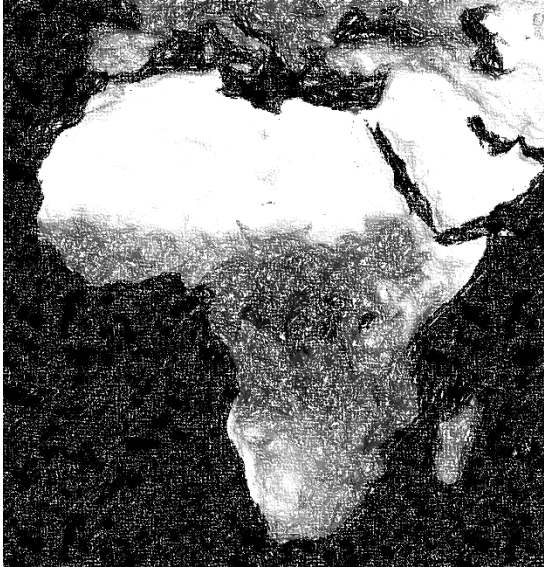


Diversifying the Teaching of the History of Rhetoric Series:

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 philosophical 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 papyrus.



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:

Allen, James. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta: 2005).

Foster, John L. *Hymns, prayers, and songs: An anthology of ancient Egyptian lyric poetry* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995)

Foster, John L. 2001. *Ancient Egyptian literature: An anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001)

Lichtheim, Miriam. *Ancient Egyptian literature: A book of readings*. 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973-1980)

Ogden Goelet and R. Faulkner (trans.). *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (San Francisco: 1998).

Parkinson, Richard. *Voices from ancient Egypt: An anthology of Middle Kingdom writings* (London: British Museum, 1991)

Simpson, William K. ed., *The literature of Ancient Egypt: An anthology of stories, instructions, and poetry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973).

Simpson, William K. *The literature of ancient Egypt: an anthology of stories, instructions, stelae, autobiographies, and poetry* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003)

A selection of secondary sources:

Asante, Molefi. *The Egyptian Philosophers: Ancient African Voices from Imhotep to Akhenaten* (Chicago: 2000).

Assmann, Jan. *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (Harvard: 2003)

Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol. I: Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785 – 1985* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987)

Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena Writes Back. Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001)



- Blake, Cecil. *The African Origins of Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Campbell, Kermit E. "Rhetoric from the Ruins of African Antiquity," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 24, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 255-274.
- Dodson, Aidan, *Amarna Sunset: Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, Ay, Horemheb, and the Egyptian Counter-Reformation* (Cairo: 2009).
- Dodson, Aidan, *Amarna Sunrise: Egypt from Golden Age to Age of Heresy* (Cairo: 2014)
- Fox, Michael V. "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 1983):9-22
- Goelet, Ogden and R. Faulkner. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (San Francisco: 1998).
- Hoffmeier, James K. *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism* (New York: 2015).
- Hornung, Erik. *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light* (Ithaca: 1999)
- Karenga, Maulana. *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: a Study in Classical African Ethics* (New York: 2004).
- Lipson, Carol S. "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric: It All Comes Down to Maat," in *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks*, ed. Carol S. Lipson and Roberta A. Binkley (Albany: State University of New York, 2004).
- Morrow, S.B. *The Dawning Moon of the Mind: Unlocking the Pyramid Texts* (New York: 2015).
- Obenga, Théophile. *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period, 2780-330 BC* (Popenguine: 2004).
- Sweeney, Deborah. "Law, Rhetoric, and Gender in Ramesside Egypt," in *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks*, ed. Carol S. Lipson and Roberta A. Binkley (Albany: State University of New York, 2004).
- Hutto, David. "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric in the Old and Middle Kingdoms," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 213-233.

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. *Ijinlê Ohun znu Ifa: Apa Kiini* (The Deep Utterances of Ifá: Part One) (Glasgow: Collins, 1968)

Wándé Abímbólá. *Ijinlê Ohun znu Ifa: Apa Keji* (The Deep Utterances of Ifá: Part Two) (Glasgow: Collins, 1969).

Wándé Abímbólá. *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (UNESCO, 1975).

Wándé Abímbólá. *Ifa Divination Poetry* (New York: NOK, 1977a).

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

Bascom, William R. *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1969).

Bascom, William R. *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980).

Secondary sources:

Abimbola, Wande. *Ifa: Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976).



Akinnaṣo, F. Niyi 'Bourdieu and the Diviner: Knowledge and Symbolic Power in Yoruba Divination', in Wendy James (ed.) *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 234–257.

Barber, Karin. 'Discursive Strategies in the Texts of Ifá and in the "Holy Book of Odù" of the African Church of örùnmílá', in P.F. de Moraes Farias and Karin Barber (eds) *Self-assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa*, Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies.

Barber, Karin. 'Quotation in the Constitution of Yorùbá Oral Texts', *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 3 (1999): 17–41.

Horton, Robin (1979) 'Ancient Ife: A Reassessment', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9, no. 4 (1979): 69–149.

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 *Kebrā Nagast* (the Glory of the Kings), a volume that unfolds Ethiopian myths of origin, the *Tarīke 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.



Sumner, Claude. *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. I: The Book of the Wise Philosophers* (Commercial Printing Press, 1974b).

Sumner, Claude. *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. II: The Treatise of Zara Yaacob and Walda Hewat: Text and Authorship* (Commercial Printing Press, 1976b).

Sumner, Claude. *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. III: The Treatise of Zara Yaacob and Walda Hewat: An Analysis*. (Commercial Printing Press, 1978).

Sumner, Claude. *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. IV: The Life and Maxims of Skandes* (Commercial Printing Press, 1974a).

Sumner, Claude. *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. V: The Fisalgwos* (Commercial Printing Press, 1976a).

Sumner, Claude. *Classical Ethiopian Philosophy* (Commercial Printing Press, 1985)
Claude Sumner. *The Source of African Philosophy: the Ethiopian Philosophy of Man* (F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1986).

Sumner, Claude. *Oromo Wisdom Literature, I. Proverbs, Collection and Analysis*, 1995.

Sumner, Claude. *Proverbs, Songs, Folktales: An Anthology of Oromo Literature* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 1996).

Secondary sources:

Harden, John M. *An Introduction to Ethiopic Christian Literature* (Macmillan, 1926).
Kidane, Dawit Worku. *The Ethics of Zär'a Ya'eqob* (Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2012).

Kiros, Teodros, "Zera Yacob and Traditional Ethiopian Philosophy," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

Presbey, Gail, "Should Women Love 'Wisdom'?" *Research in African Literatures*, 30 (1999): 165–181.

Sumner, Claude. "The Light and the Shadow: Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat: Two Ethiopian Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

Kebede, Messay. "The Ethiopian Conception of Time and Modernity," in C. Jeffers (ed.), *Listening to Ourselves: A Multilingual Anthology of African Philosophy* (Albany: 2013), 15-37.

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](#).

Ahmed Baba Institute (1995–98) *Fihris makhtutat markaz Ahmad Baba li’l-tawthiq wa’l buhuth al-tarikhiyya bi Tinbuktu / Handlist of manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Rechercher Historiques Ahmed Baba* (5 Vols). London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation

Hunwick, John (trans), *Sharī‘a in Songhay: the Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Hājj Muḥammad* (Oxford: 1985).

Hunwick, John and RS O’Fahey, ed., *Arabic literature of Africa. The writings of Central Sudanic Africa, vol. 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1995)

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)

Hunwick John and Fatima Harrak (annotated and trans.) *Mi'raj al-su'ud. Ahmad Baba's replies on slavery* (Rabat: Institute of African Studies, 2000)

Secondary literature:

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir, "Precolonial African Philosophy in Arabic," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

John Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literatures*, 28, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 210-223.

Hunwick, John. "Ahmad Baba on Slavery," *Sudanic Africa* 11 (2000): 131-39.

Jeppie, Shamil and Souleymane B. Diagne (eds) . *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: 2008).

Kane, Ousmane O. *Beyond Timbuktu: an Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge MA: 2006).

Dalen, Dorrit van. *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa* (Leiden: 2016).

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 Beninese 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 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:

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)

Bell, Richard H. *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2002)



Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, ed. *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997)

Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi. *On Reason. Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008)

Gordon, Lewis R. *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Graness, Anke, and Kress, Kai, eds. *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997)

Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

Gyekye, Kwame. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Hallen, Barry. *A Short History of African Philosophy*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2002)

Hallen, Barry. *African Philosophy. The Analytic Approach* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006)

Hallen, Barry, and Sodipo, J. Olubi. *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997)

Hountondji, Paulin J. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (London: Hutchinson, 1983).

Hountondji, Paulin J. *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on African Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

Jeffers, Chike, ed. *Listening to Ourselves: A Multilingual Anthology of African Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Masolo, Dismas A. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Mudimbe, V. Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).



Nzegwu, Nkiru. *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006)

Ochieng, Omedi. *Groundwork for the Practice of the Good Life: Politics and Ethics at the Intersection of North Atlantic and African Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

Oruka, H. Odera, ed. *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

Ramose, Mogobe. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999).

Serequeberhan, Tsenay, ed. *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*. (Saint Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991).

Serequeberhan, Tsenay, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy, Horizon and Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Philosophy and an African Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: an African Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Wiredu, Kwasi. *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004).