



**STUDYDADDY**

**Get Homework Help  
From Expert Tutor**

**Get Help**

## Credo Reference

### AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

from [The Essentials of Philosophy and Ethics](#)

---

#### Essentials of African philosophy

The earliest African philosophy was that shared across African social groups, passed down from elders to the young of each new generation, transmitted and preserved in verbal genealogical records. It consisted of shared mythologies, wise sayings, the memories of the elderly, traditional proverbs, stories, and the living religions and socio-political structures of the African peoples. Because of the lack of written records to formalise these philosophical traditions and because of the lack of specific authors to whom the original ideas could be attributed, the first Europeans to enter Africa interpreted this lack as an absence of philosophical activity on the part of Africans.

The first African philosophers were responding to a deep anxiety, the felt absence of logical Western-style philosophy, but also against neo-colonialism. African philosophy arose to serve the [EXISTENTIAL](#) needs of the African peoples, whose very right to free existence, to self-government, and to valorisation for their inclusion in the 'human' world and for their positive contribution to human 'civilisation' had been placed in question in the colonial, prejudicial, reality postulates that emerged to justify colonial oppressions.

#### AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND COLONIALISM

Ethnocentric European philosophers, such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, ascribed this lack of (Western-style) philosophy to the supposedly unevolved 'primitive mentality' of the 'pre-logical' African mind. When African philosophers following the Western tradition finally arose in the closing decades of the twentieth century, they too suffered from and reasserted this Western prejudice. Kwasi Wiredu, author of *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980), holds that traditional African philosophy only begins where the bald dogmatic assertions of traditional belief meet with the activity of Western-style philosophical reflection and argumentation to form true philosophy – the fruit of a reasoning and logical process.

However, just as the long centuries of colonial slaughter and abuse obliterated the bodies, the political alliances and the sacred territorial holdings of African peoples, colonialism also obliterated their histories, their cultural traditions and their prolonged and deep intellectual customs and practices.

Contributor: WCH

#### African philosophy, negritude and healing the scars of colonialism

Ancient Greek philosophers saw themselves responding to a divine calling to be 'physicians of the soul'. Yet philosophy can be rallied by the unscrupulous to wound as quickly as to heal. This was never truer than with modern European philosophy. Since René [DESCARTES](#) asserted in his *Discourse on Method* the limitless possibilities of the human mind to probe the secrets of the universe by dissecting and reducing each thing to 'clear and distinct ideas', [ENLIGHTENMENT](#) philosophy provided formidable justifications for, and found amplification in, the slaughters and exploitations of the European [IMPERIALISTIC](#) era.

Under the reigning conviction that 'history is progress' and the concomitant prejudice that some human [CULTURES](#) have historically advanced beyond others, Europeans, across every discipline, agreed that Europe was the centre of the intellectual universe and the cultural gem of god's creative project.

The Eurocentrism of the philosopher and the scientist went hand in hand with projects for and exploiting the bodies of non-Europeans. In the 'glory centuries' of the various European empires, the 'civilised' nations launched themselves upon small bands of self-sufficient tribal peoples around the globe. In the name of moral and industrial progress,

enlightenment and the expansion of knowledge, as much as in the name of king and god, 50 million or so tribal peoples were forced to surrender great swathes of the globe to the Europeans.

African philosophy always remained active in the lived wisdoms of the African peoples, passed through genealogies, wise sayings, religious beliefs and socio-political traditions from across the African continent and throughout the African diaspora. African philosophy proper, at first fashioned after the Western-style argumentative tradition, finally arose phoenix-like from the smouldering ashes of the colonial ruin, and has demonstrated the healing power for which it was known in the ancient world. In the evolving forms that post-colonial African philosophy has assumed since its inception in the 1930s, African philosophy has been responding to what Tsenay Serequeberhan calls the anxiety of an 'African humanity [that] does not find itself at home.'

The path that African philosophy has taken since the 1930s confirms not only the richness of African cultural tradition and the profundity of African philosophical talent, but the multifold effects of colonial violence. The first wave of African philosophy, [ETHNO-PHILOSOPHY](#), occurring between the 1930s and the 1960s, we might call the substantialist stage, because this early period describes a substantialising moment, a [HUSSERLIAN](#) 'back to the things themselves', as first European, then African, thinkers sought to redeem the denigrated cultures and histories of African societies by a return to a 'glorious black past' through (often over-essentialised and nostalgic) reevaluations of African social beliefs and practices which were then translated into philosophical nomenclature.

This phase composes a redemptive apology for African belief and thought systems in the face of their overwhelming historical denigration. We see attempts to escape Western categories of thought – and evidence of their continuing hegemony. We see challenges to historical interpretations and the articulation of more 'authentic' formulations of African self and community. To this end, early African philosophers sought to deconstruct colonial representations of the Africans and to replace the latter denigrating images with positive substantialised expressions of self. These new, 'refound' self-images were articulated either as continuous with the dominating philosophical order (and thus fittingly 'civilised' in already acceptable ways), or in polar opposition to a demonised (and thus rejected while still existentially dominating) radical other, the evil white colonist. These new self-descriptions also included sketches of the unique brands of [SOCIALISM](#) peculiar to Africa, revalorising African culture by positing its focus as communal, to be positively compared to European [EGOISMS](#) celebrating autonomy and individuality.

#### **FORCE VITALE**

Human beings, *muntu*, occupy the centre of this field of invisible realities, because the vital force is supreme in humans. To be wise, among the Bantu, is to know the forces and their effects, to be capable of explaining events in terms of the *force vitale*, that is, capable of giving metaphysical explanations for the physical events that occur. Specialists in the form of diviners and magicians held sway in their communities for having precisely this capability. Since the universe is the outward manifestation of an inner dynamism of forces, names acquire a special significance for the Bantu, both as signs of inner strength and as the expression of connections with the forces of others, including the dead ancestors. The contemporary writer, D.A. Masolo confirms: 'By acquiring a name, every person becomes a link in the chain of forces linking the dead and the living genealogies'.

Ultimately, however, it could be argued that Tempels' sympathetic reading of the Bantu belief system was duplicitous. While insisting upon its inclusion in the body of true 'philosophy' and carefully articulating a systematic ontological vision that governed everyday beliefs and behaviours, ritual practices and ethical understandings in Bantu societies, Tempels concludes that Christian beliefs and scientific knowledge form the paradigm of rationality, while traditional African religious belief systems and magical explanations of life are the 'paradigm of irrationality' and ignorance.

Contributor: WCH

Ironically though, many of the first new 'African philosophers' were neither Africans nor philosophers, but Europeans living among the Africans, mostly theologians and anthropologists, attempting to articulate what they recognised as an identifiable world view among Africans that could be said to be 'philosophical' in some sense. The most important of these early thinkers was Father Placide Frans Tempels, a white Franciscan missionary, who studied and recorded the behaviour patterns and the language of the Shabu Baluba of Zaire, among whom he lived and served as a mission

priest for years. Tempels' project was to write for colonials, and especially for missionaries, to demonstrate to Europeans that African systems of thought and belief exhibited a systematicity and a defining **LOGIC** of their own that might qualify their inclusion in the world's true 'philosophies'. In his primary work, *La Philosophie Bantoue* (1944–48), Tempels unfolded the philosophical underpinnings of the everyday beliefs and practices of the Bantu peoples. He demonstrated that their world view had a definite **ONTOLOGICAL** structure, envisioning the universe as a vast field of vital forces or life forces which he termed *force vitale*.

Ethno-philosophy composed a kind of defensive 'apology' for African thought systems. This first stage of African philosophy composes a 'self-empowerment stage' for African thought traditions through nostalgic reclamation of their histories, yet, in so far as those reclamations are over-essentialised and static descriptions of dynamic groups, they tend to repeat Eurocentric prejudices and to reassert the European logical categories that served in colonial abuse. Ethno-philosophy maintained a foundational assumption consistent with the Hegelian notion of the universality of being; it maintained the notion of an inherent coherence to the natural (and human) order that allowed differing thought systems to be expressed and understood in universalist terms, according to some fundamental unifying logical principle. In effect, then, African ethno-philosophy remained faithful to the assumption of a natural order to things (people, events and history) that had served to legitimise historical abuse. Moreover, early African philosophies, composing merely descriptive accounts of lived philosophies of tribal life, rather than idealised **ABSTRACTIONS** of metaphysical formations, failed to answer challenges about rigorous form and methodology, leaving earliest thought traditions as 'pre-logical' (by Western logical terms) and more recent African intellectuals defensive of their philosophical prowess.

Later African ethno-philosophers attempted to break free of this universalising feature by employing a logic that was more pluralistic in its assumptions and approach. Melville Herskovits, an anthropologist who was a pioneer of African Studies in the United States, argued for a 'cultural relativism' born of a 'respect for differences' and an 'affirmation of the values of each culture', whereby philosophy becomes more generous in its categories and seeks to 'understand and harmonise goals'. Though this second phase of ethno-philosophy was more generous in its approach, perhaps because of its anthropological roots, perhaps because undertaken by non-Africans, the African societies, no matter how philosophically expounded and positively extolled, remained as an exotic specimen under the scientist's microscope, rather than a viable subject of philosophical discourse and participant in philosophical dialogue. Alexis Kagame and John S. Mbiti remained some of the few Africans to engage in the ethno-philosophical debate during this earliest stage of African philosophy.

Almost simultaneous with ethno-philosophy emerged another universalising voice in the 'negritude movement' that sought the formulation of an 'African identity' characterised by common fundamental cultural features. Launched during the 1930s in the Latin Quarter of Paris by young black students from Africa and the Caribbean, **NEGRIUDE** drew its inspiration from the African American 'Harlem Renaissance' and writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Sterling Hayden, Countee Cullen, Paul Vesey and James Weldon Johnson. The Negritude debate served well during the crucial era of independence struggles against colonial rule and in the early life of the new independent states. Writers such as Léopold **SENGHOR** and Aimée **CÉSAIRE** struggled to overcome the latent Eurocentrism of the founders of African philosophy, but, in so far as they continued to employ colonial categories to measure the worth of African thought systems, it was difficult for the African mentality to come out ahead in calibrations of rationality and systematicity.

Late in his life, Senghor came to recognise his philosophical generation's inherited ethnocentrism and attributed it to the instruction they had received in the 'white man's schools', public or private, in the colonies. Consequent to this new philosophical awakening, Senghor attempted to turn the Eurocentric discourse inside out with his theory of the civilisational complementarity of races, but his essentialist renderings on the basis of racial difference, figuring the 'Negro [as] the man of Nature' (albeit loving, feeling, sensual, living off the soil in the immediacy of sound, smell, rhythms and forms) against the European with his 'discursive reason', once again reasserted the idea of abiding essentialised 'natural kinds' of human beings that Europeans had applied to Africans to justify their oppression.

No matter how copacetic a mix the complementary races might make in the grand scheme of cosmic being, ultimately, it remained difficult to distinguish the **Africanité** of a Senghor from the racism of a **LÉVY-BRUHL**. Africans may be no less 'human' for their immersion in a state of **NATURE**, but, according to Senghor's own final accounting, the 'proper

characteristic of Man is to snatch himself from the earth'. On Senghor's own terms, then, Africans are not endowed with the 'proper' characteristics of real human beings.

The **NATIONALISTIC** poet, Aimée Césaire, served an important phase of African self-discovery and identity reclamation, but his was an equally unfortunate platform for establishing an Africanist position that was to persevere beyond early independence struggles. His *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955) focused on the problem of recovering lost African histories. The fundamental difficulty for African philosophy, by Césaire's calculation, was facing the problematic of the new kinds of **SUBJECTIVITIES** that colonial denigrations had constructed – ahistorical beings. The charge that the native Africans were 'primitives' had robbed Africans of their 'humanity' precisely because human beings have memories, genealogies – histories. Human beings take up their destinies and throw themselves toward their futures. They act. The downtrodden apolitical masses were reduced to beasts of burden. The fundamental concern of post-colonial Africans must be to retake the initiative and enter the **DIALECTIC** of history by taking up the counter-violence that their prior negation (as historical subjects) evoked.

The second wave of African philosophy was equally reactive in nature. This period we might name the 'self-critical' stage because it composes a challenge against the approach and methodology of the various strains of ethno-philosophy. It was recognised by African thinkers of the 1970s and 1980s as insufficient, both to the task of philosophy per se and to the needs of post-colonial Africans, that African philosophy confine itself to definitions of how, and to what extent, African traditions exhibited those features of 'civilisation' denied them in colonial discourse. It was agreed that African civilisation in general could prove itself more convincingly by its particular philosophy extending itself beyond the mere task of locating vague philosophical components in traditional African cultures.

Since a huge feature of colonial myth had been its challenge to the 'African mentality' as 'pre-logical' and incapable of abstract thought or systematic shrewdness, African philosophers had to step outside colonial categories and extend beyond reactionary discourses of identity, as well as nostalgic and purified discourses of traditional life, and produce a bona fide philosophy of culture that was capable of self-critique. African philosophers needed to develop peculiarly African standards that could be called upon to evaluate African belief systems and customs.

This phase of African philosophy was Socratic in a sense in seeking to reconceptualise its mission as an active critical engagement with the biases of its own thought, seeking to reflect upon and, where necessary, to transcend the logical paradoxes embedded in African world views and systems of thought. Thinkers raised such questions as the relation between race and culture, the appropriate role of intellectuals in new African nations, the implications of global forces in the production of African culture, the effects of the contest between indigenous and global **EPISTEMOLOGIES** on African modes of production of knowledge and definitions of 'development'. They asked: What is true development in the African context, how is it to be pursued and measured, and what are its costs? And this phase was characterised by its virulent critique of colonial descriptive categories.

Others, such as P.O. Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu and Odera Oruka, advocated a universalist approach. For them, African philosophy had to oppose itself to traditional beliefs, behaviours and folklore and rise above particularities peculiar to African socio-political contexts to the level of 'universal' discussion. A second wave, represented by the work of Paulin Hountondji, Eboussi Boulaga and the **MARXIST IDEALISTS**, Marcién Towa and Amílcar Cabral, favoured a dialectical approach to the new philosophy.

African philosophy, argues Hountondji, needs to carve out its own intellectual space within the global discourse. Philosophy, he asserts, is 'a perpetual movement, a chain of responses from one individual philosopher to another across the ages'. African 'texts' need to be taken up and criticised to usher their inclusion into the history of philosophical dialogue. In order for this to occur, four criteria must be met. African philosophy must be written, not oral, in its form; it must become 'scientific' (that is, give up its metaphysical, moral and religious questions as illegitimate for philosophical reflection); it must be produced by thinkers who are of African geographic and ethnic origin; and it must be purely dialectical in its form.

## EXISTENTIALISM AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY TODAY

Kwasi Wiredu's *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, Paulin Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa, The Idea of Africa*, K. Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* and, with Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, as well as the above-mentioned D.A. Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, head the impressive parade of African literature which seeks to move away not only from ethno-philosophy's repetitions of colonial categories, but also from reactionary discourses struggling against colonial hegemony. These authors are carving out new philosophical territory that is uniquely African, unquestionably 'philosophical' (beyond self-defensive claims of same) and yet deeply in touch with the thoughts and beliefs of African peoples now, in their dynamic shifting contextualised realities.

Contributor: WCH

With the 1990s, we find African thinkers freeing themselves from self-defensive or critical obsession with their cultural and philosophical pasts, and their work takes on a new focus that is self-determinative. This phase of African philosophy we might name the 'existential' stage, since problems of freedom, responsibility and the role of the **INDIVIDUAL** in the post-colonial nation have come to the foreground of philosophical discourse.

In the last years of the 1990s there was evidence of a growing philosophical refinement, a new subtlety, in African philosophy. Criticism still played a crucial role in the politics of knowledge, but a new appreciation has emerged for the complexity of structural modes and epistemological foundations of, and **TELEOLOGICAL** motivations driving, knowledge-production systems and governing cultural creation and transformation.

African philosophers have been calling for explanations of reality and analysis of ideas, beliefs and cultural practices that bring the social realities of their people to sophisticated levels of conceptual awareness, while remaining true to the everyday experiences of African life. These thinkers still work against the hegemony of conceptual structures that repeat colonial domination, but, significantly, they seek to maintain the intimate link with African people's everyday thought, closing the divide that splits academia from the social realities at large, a split that characterises and plagues philosophy throughout the Western world.

African philosophers of the twenty-first century seek to reclaim both the theory and praxis of the past. Extending themselves beyond essentialist descriptions of their people, beyond polar categories of self-identity, beyond the merely negative phase of resentful critique of demonic forces troubling their past, they have reached a phase of self-determination where they are able to achieve very practical effects in healing the wounds of a violent history. There is every reason to credit African philosophy with fulfilling philosophy's ancient calling, because in stark contrast to Western philosophy's hermetic isolation in the ivory tower of academia, African philosophy's integral connections with the realities of African life mean that scholarly discourse maintains the possibility of proving itself truly 'healing'.

## Author(s)

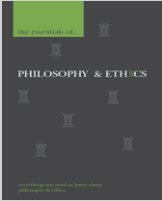
---

Contributor Wendy Hamblet



© 2006 Hodder Arnold

---



## The Essentials of Philosophy and Ethics

[← PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE >](#)

[← PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE >](#)

---

### SEARCH OTHER SITES

[Library Catalog](#)

[Academic Search Ultimate](#)

[Britannica Online](#)

[CQ Researcher](#)

[JSTOR: the Scholarly Journal Archive](#)

[Opposing Viewpoints](#)

[Oxford English Dictionary](#)

[ProQuest Central](#)



**STUDYDADDY**

**Get Homework Help  
From Expert Tutor**

**Get Help**