A very short introduction into African Philosophy and their main streams

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History is always subjectively written and it is no doubt that the victors write history. For Africa and the colonialisation, this has enormous tragedies as consequence. The colonial past was critically viewed in former colonies, but the misery conducted by the colonisers was never really touched in history classes in most of the West. It took decades until former colonial rulers admitted their cruelties, and some cruelties are even denied or disclaimed until today. Identity and consciousness play an important role not only for history, but also for philosophy, and it becomes extremely important when one wants to deal with African philosophy. Philosophy concludes critical thinking on different levels, but what makes a philosophy “African”? Is African philosophy only written by an African? Or is African philosophy also philosophy which was exported to Africa? Shall African philosophy be reasoned in an African language to overcome colonial past? If a European or American analyses the traditional thoughts of Africa and develops them, does he act in the sense of African philosophy? Or in other words: Are non-Africans able to do African philosophy?

Interestingly, these questions were already long overcome in many other fields. Europeans exported philosophy to America. Asian philosophy came to Europe and there are many philosophers that also incorporate Asian thoughts of pattern or Asian philosophy in general. In the very past, philosophy and theology were a parallel field, but philosophy secularised itself from theology and there is no need to believe in God, neither is there the need to reject God.

African philosophy however had a certain struggle. Nsame Mbongo points out: “Le dépeuplement des Amériques, consécutif au génocide indien, poussa l’économie capitaliste naissante à bouleverser la démographie africaine en vue de l’exploitation des vastes terres du Nouveau Monde. Un faux problème prétendument fondamental se posa alors à la conscience européenne : les Noirs étaient-ils réellement des hommes ? En d’autres termes : étaient-ils capables de rationalité et de spiritualité ? La réponse qui permettait à l’esclavage de se parer d’une certaine légitimité morale consistait à leur dénier ces facultés ou qualités réservées à l’homme seul. Dès lors, il était clair que ne pouvant penser, l’Africain ne pouvait pas non plus
disposer d’une histoire de la pensée, et encore moins d’une histoire de la philosophie : la reine de la pensée. Plus encore, on ne saurait parler de civilisation en Afrique noire, puisqu’un peuple doit développer une capacité de réflexion élevée pour être civilisé.” (2013: 8). The Western world did see black people not only as ‘not even’, but also as not capable of reasoning. As such, the rich history of African tradition, whether in spirituality, theology or philosophy was ignored for centuries. Instead, Africans were hunted like animals and shipped around the world to work as working tools in slavery. This, however, shall not mean that there were no African philosophers in history. And therefore, “La problématique de l’africanité s’est nettement réajustée au cours des XVIIIe, XIXe et XXe siècles, grâce à des acteurs et penseurs novateurs, tels Toussaint Louverture, James Africanus Horton ou Cheikh Anta Diop. Mais le problème reste presque entier s’agissant de la place et du rôle qui reviennent à la philosophie africaine antique, médiévale et moderne dans le continent et au-delà.“ (Mbongo, 2013: 8). In the 18th century, a man simply named Amo became the first philosopher of African origin in Germany. He was given the name Anton Wilhelm by his masters, was baptized, received a great education and studied at the University Halle-Wittenberg. Anton Wilhelm Amo published a human rights charta for black people in 1729 (*De iure Maurorum in Europa*). In 1734, he wrote his dissertation *De humanae mentis apatheia* and received the possibility to teach in Jena in 1740. Anyways, because of his philosophical positions, he was attacked by conservatives and even became a victim of racist attacks, and therefore decided to return into his homeland Ghana (Mbongo, 2013: 128). After that, people never heard of him again. His literature was mainly ignored by Western scholars and he did not receive the position in history that he should have been granted. His human rights charta went missing and is lost today.

Modern African philosophy started in the beginning of the 20th century. Prethinkers like Edward Blyden (1832-1912) pointed out that the ‘white race’ has no supremacy over the black, and called for equality of all people. Marcus Garvey (1887-1912) promoted a first form of Panafrikanism stating “Africa for the Africans”. They restored the self-honor of black people, their awareness and consciousness, however Garvey had to face a lot of criticism, since his views promoted ‘black purity’ and advocated that Africans should go back to Africa to stay ‘pure’ which is racist. His main opponent Du Bois defended that the world should be for everyone and denied the aim of racial segregation (cp. Kiss, 2001; CRF, without year; Confrancesco, 2000). Indeed, Panafrikanism played an important role for Socialism which has an important tradition in modern African philosophy, since it guarantees equality for everyone. People of all races, ethnicities and religions shall live peacefully together with the same
opportunities and equal worth. Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) advocated that whole Africa shall form one nation. Nkrumah lived in the United States for ten years himself and when he returned to Ghana in 1947, he organised strikes and boycotts and once elected president, he consolidated an authoritarian rule (Fischer, 2016). Soon after “The country’s economic problems multiplied. Most of the 50 state-run companies were poorly managed and lost money. Many of Nkrumah’s pet projects were huge buildings built to boost national prestige. They were hardly ever used. [...] The cost of living spiraled upwards driving angry citizens out on the streets. There were strikes. ‘We had to queue up at the stadium to get our ration of sugar,’ recalls Mike Ocquaye, a Ghanaian professor of politics. ‘The factories that Nkrumah built didn’t work. We were expected to run before we could walk,’ he said. Political scientist Kohrs believes that Nkrumah’s vision of transforming his country and the rest of Africa was eventually his undoing. ‘If you wish to modernize a country, you have to persuade the people to go along with you. That is something which he forgot. Nkrumah wanted to turn Ghana into a modern state, but he wanted to do it too quickly.” (ibid.)

Unlike Panaficarianism which was mainly promoted in the English-speaking world, French African philosophy founded the Négritude and focussed on “le Neger-Sein” (a term coined by Senghor) describing the pride of ‘being a Black’. The main founders are Senghor (1906-2001) and Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) who wanted to push away Africanism from eurocentric views and pointed out that Africa is rich of traditions and plurality of which Africa shall be proud of. Unlike Panaficarianism it does not focus on “one Africa”, but points out that like Europe or America, Africa is so diverse that it cannot be subsumed as one unity. Seeing all Africa as one and the same is a view from colonialism in which Africa is seen as diverseless, uneducated and uncivilised. Therefore, the Négritude wants to show that exactly the opposite is the case and that Africa has a great history of an own strong educated mentality which brought treasures to the African civilisation.

Despite Panaficarianism and the Négritude, another form of philosophy was established right after World War II called Ethnophilosophy. The term goes back to the idea, that several ethnicities already had their traditional philosophies and that they should be researched and revived. As Séverine Kodjo-Grandvaux points out: “Le livre du père missionnaire belge Placide Tempels publié en 1945 sous le titre La Philosophie bantoue est probablement le premier texte dans lequel le terme « philosophie » est appliqué à une réalité africaine. Cet ouvrage est souvent estimé comme inaugurant l’histoire de la philosophie africaine, ou tout du moins son « archéologie ». C’est-à-dire ce qui a permis à la pensée philosophique africaine de se poser en tant que telle, soit en continuant de manière plus ou moins critique le travail
amorcé par Tempels, soit en considérant le courant initié par Tempels - malgré lui - comme extérieur à la discipline philosophique et s’apparentant davantage à l’éthnologie.” (2013: 26). However, the term “ethnophilosophie” goes back to the Beninese philosopher Paulin Houtondji in 1969 (ibid.).

Tempels pointed out that Bantu metaphysics turns around a vital force and there is no idea without force and even further “The concept of force is bound to the concept being even in the most abstract thinking upon the notion of being” (Mbaegbu, 2015: 221). Tempels therefore comes to the conclusion that “force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force” (Tempels, 1959: 51). Mbaegbu comes to the conclusion that “Bantu ontology apart from its dynamic character, differs greatly from the static views of many Western philosophers, particularly those who reduce reality to being with individuated, discrete existences or substances existing in themselves and isolated from others [as] For in Bantu ontology the concept of separate beings of substances, to use a scholastic term which exists side by side, independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought” (2015: 222). To further understand the insight that Tempels received from the Bantu, it is worth to mention what he originally wrote down about force and how he perceived it: “Force, the potent life, vital energy are the object of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and to the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery or magical remedies. The Bantu will tell you that they go to a diviner to learn the words of life, so that he can teach them the way of making life stronger. In every Bantu language it is easy to recognize the words or phrases denoting a force, which is not used in an exclusively bodily sense, but in the sense of the integrity of our whole being. […] In calling upon God, the spirits, or the ancestral spirits, the heathen ask above all, ‘give me force’. If one urges them to abandon magical practices, as being contrary to the will of God and therefore evil, one will get the reply, ‘wherein are they wicked?’ What we brand as magic is, in their eyes, nothing but setting to work natural forces placed at the disposal of man by God to strengthen man’s vital energy. When they try to get away from metaphors and periphrases, the Bantu speak of God himself as ‘the Strong One’, he who possesses Force in himself. He is also the source of the Force of every creature. God is the ‘Dijina dikatampe’: the great name, because he is the great Force, the ‘mukomo’, as our Baluba have it, the one who is stronger than all other. The spirits of the first ancestors, highly exalted in the superhuman world, possess extraordinary force inasmuch as they are the founders of the human race and propagators of the divine inheritance of vital human strength. The other dead are esteemed only to the extent to which they increase and perpetuate their vital force in their
progeny. In the minds of Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate.” (Tempels, 1959: 31)

As such, we can conclude that the Bantu believe in a Highest God followed by the noble ancestors or clan founders. The communication appears throw the ‘Living’, such as magicians or probably priests. After that, animals and non-animated things follow in the hierarchy. So we can conclude that the Bantu have the hierarchy God – Ancestors – Living human-beings – Animals – Plants – Non-animated things. It is astonishing that the African view on forces shows a lot of parallels to the early Greek views, as well as the traditional Asian views such as in Daoism and Hinduism. Especially in Daoism, where everything goes back to one force, the Dao, which then can be found in everything and which is manifested in everything. Also the parallel to the Hindu idea of a supersoul as dynamic force or the Greek ‘worldsoul’ – a soul in which everything can be found – can be drawn attention to.

On an anthropological level Tempels points out that: “When we differentiate in man the soul and the body, as is done in certain Western writings, we are at a loss to explain where ‘the man’ has gone after these two components have been separated out. If, from our European outlook, we wish to seek Bantu terms adequate to express this manner of speaking, we are up against very great difficulties, especially if we are proposing to speak about the soul of man. Unless under European influence, the Bantu do not thus express themselves. They distinguish in man body, shadow and breath. This breath is the assumed manifestation, the evident sign, of life, though it is mortal and in no way corresponds with what we understand by the soul, especially the soul as subsisting after death, when the body with its shadow and its breath will have disappeared. What lives on after death is not called by the Bantu by a term indicating part of a man. I have always heard their elders speak of ‘the man himself’, ‘himself’, ‘aye mwine’; or it is ‘the little man’ who was formerly hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man; or the ‘muntu’, which, at death, has left the living.” (1959: 37).

All students of philosophy in Africa nowadays have to study Western philosophy at first, which as a result means that they are better educated than students in Europe or America, as students in the West mainly have to deal with Western ideals, such as the soul-body-problem, religious critics and secular ethical questions, while African students have been educated from a different aspect from childhood, and therefore are more capable to see things from more aspects. To them, an animal is not just a product for mass consum, to them ecology in forestry is not just a question of climate, but for them a tree is a soul as well. Even further, climate change is not just something you can regulate up or down, to them the whole climate has to be seen through the aspects of nature. As such, their insight on such questions is much deeper.
and profounder than the – on the surface more reasonable – Western views. Even though the Western methods often are seen as more reasonable as they are secularised from any outer influence, such as the belief in God or destiny as a basis for how to see the world and thus pure mental conscious reasoning, it is exactly the traditional conservative elements in African philosophy that makes its reasoning so much more effective in certain points.

Another ethnophilosophical approach on Bantu philosophy was conducted by Rwandan philosopher **Alexis Kagame** (1912-1981) who tried to find a philosophy by analysing Rwandan oral transmissions and history. As Nelson Udoka Ukwamedua states: “Kagame worked among the Banyarwanda people. The people of Rwanda are collectively called Banyarwanda, and their language is called Kinyarwanda. So, he sought an interpretation of the philosophy of being of his people through a linguistic ethnophilosophy. He got preoccupied with elucidating the philosophy of being through the study of the Kinyarwanda language. In setting out to do this, Kagame used a category that is akin to the systems of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas and Kant. He maintains that in Kinyarwanda, all terms are divided into groups and classes, and the substantive are not divided as in other languages. He discovered eleven such classes of words in Kinyarwanda under which terms and words can be grouped. Kagame thinks that each of these words is made of four elements, which have some philosophical role depending on the class to which the word belongs from which are derived the four general categories of speech. This is laced with a Thomistic tradition. In addition to the Thomistic Aristotelian classification tradition, Kagame build on something familiar to speakers of Bantu languages. The classes are of human beings, for things animated by magic, including trees, tools, fluids, animals, places, abstractions etc. the class of a word can be recognized by a sound or group of sounds which preceded the stem and this Kagame calls determinative. Kagame stated that the stem is ineffectual without the determinative in Bantu language. It was from this that Kagame brought out the four categories of African philosophy. All that exist in the universe of being and becoming is summed up under any of these categories. [...] The stem is Ntu but, it is not particular without the determinatives which gave the categories their distinctive characters and understanding. According to Kagame the categories of African philosophy are;

- **Muntu** – ‘Human being’ (Plural: Bantu)
- **Kintu** – ‘Thing’ (Plural: Bintu)
- **Hantu** – ‘Place and Time’
- **Kuntu** – ‘Modality’” (2011, 252 f.) This linguistic approach gained a lot of attention, however, it shows that Kagame used a synthetic method to find the traditional philosophy. In other
words, he used the skills of Western philosophers such as Aristotle and Thomas of Aquin to find and rediscover an original indigenous African philosophy.

Paulin Houtondji rather rejected a strong ethnophilosophical approach, and prefers a synthesis between ethnophilosophical questions and modern philosophical approaches. In recent times, he focussed on the question what makes a study “African”. What does a field has to fulfill to be “African” enough to be called as such (Houtondji, 2009). He further points out the problem that when there is talk about an African discipline, it is often determined to be “on” or “about” Africa, rather than “coming from” Africa or being “produced by” Africans (ibid.).

The concern which Houtondji points out is the experience he made when reading books on African philosophy where “authors usually assumed that Africans themselves were not conscious of their own philosophy, and that only Western analysts observing them from without could give a systematic account of their wisdom. Father Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary working in the former Belgian Congo, must be credited for giving the most explicit formulation of this assumption” (ibid.). It is probably for this reason that Houtondji questions ethnophilosophy as valid method, since it separates the system of thought of an ethnicity from the worldwide global ties of philosophy, as if there was a “we” and “they”.

Instead, the synthetical path combines traditional systems of thoughts with worldwide adopted forms of philosophy, and in this way integrates the African ideas into the worldwide philosophical system, treating them on an equal level as the old established forms of philosophy in the West. This concern gets clear when Houtondji writes that “African academics doing philosophy in or outside Western universities spent most of their time writing M.A. theses, Ph.D. dissertations, articles, books, conference papers or monographs of all sorts on such topics as the philosophy of being among the people of Rwanda, the concept of time among the people of East Africa, the perception of the old man among the Fulas of Guinea, the Yoruba conception of human being, Yoruba metaphysical thinking, moral philosophy among the Wolof, the Akan doctrine of God, the conception of life among the Fon of Dahomey, etc. I found these topics interesting per se and some of the monographs particularly insightful. But I could not admit that the first duty, let alone the only duty of African philosophers, was to describe or reconstruct the worldview of their ancestors or the collective assumptions of their communities. I contended therefore that most of these scholars were not really doing philosophy but ethno-philosophy” (ibid.). Therefore, Houtondji has the concern that African philosophy, whatever it might be, is drifting towards ethnology rather than philosophy. The synthetic discourse also plays an important role in the works of Ciamalenga who took Rieëur as an inspiration and focussed on language. On such a stance,
one can analyse proverbs and folklore and analyse the symbolism of language. Not just the content of what the author wants to say thus becomes important, but also how he says it and through which styles. Or to put it in short: all kind of interpretation already is a kind of translating the text in its elements. In general, hermeneutic phenomenology also has received a great attention, as the nature of being shall be understood through language and the three stages expression, interpretation, and translation in Hermeneutics (see Essengue, 2015). As Yannick Essengue points out: “Le projet de discursivité, a pris corps comme intuition fondamentale chez Kinyongo lors du Séminaire National des philosophes zairois du 1er au 4 juin 1978 à Lubumbashi. Le point de départ de la discursivité, est avant tout celui de la critique d’une critique, celle faite par les penseurs de la « tendance critique », qui réagissaient à La philosophie bantoue de Placide Tempels. Pour eux, ce qui est désigné par ethnophilosophie, est le lieu par excellence de l’aliénation philosophique de l’Africain.” (2015: 283). Therefore, the hermeneutic method of Kinyongo is used to go back to the true ideas of African philosophy and correct their alienation which was introduced by Tempels. Thus, all in all the synthetical method mainly came to rise as a counteraction to Tempels ethnophilosophy, which was seen more and more as estrangement of African philosophy rather than a tool towards ‘Africanity’.

Elungu Pene Elungu therefore categorizes African philosophy and system of thought in three categories: ethnophilosophy (Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, Basile Juléat Fouda, Niamkey Koffi), the critical tendency (Towa, Eboussi, Paulin Hountondji, Ebénézer Njoh Mouelle), and the ideological tendency (Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda) (cp. Essengue, 2015: 284 f.). However, as shown clearly above, the segregation among ethnic thoughts and Western methodology is finally overcome. Therefore, African systems of thought are introduced in Western reasoning, and Western arguments can be analysed through African views of reasoning. I think it is very important to see Africa and its role in a global view. Analysing the traditional ethnic views is very interesting and insightful, but often drifts towards ethnology. However, many ideas of ethnic systems of thoughts give such a deep insightful and shows alternatives to the static Western thinking that it is important not only to leave this field to ethnology, but also consider African perspectives in the West, same than Africans – due to former colonialisation – use methods from the West. Just using methods from the West to put them over African thinking is very one sided, since it won’t address philosophers in the West. However, if African philosophers show that the problems of the West might be solved differently, if we look through “African glasses” and give African ideas the same value as we see European philosophical tradition, then philosophy from Africa can
have a huge impact on global structures of thinking, same as Asian systems of thought already inspire a lot of philosophers and give them the inspiration to move out of their static glasshouse.

The advantage of Africans in recent philosophical discourses is their large understanding of many aspects of the world. They understand the world from many levels which Westerners are not aware of. At first, they can put inside their understanding from ethnical belief; second, they can put inside their understanding through the study of traditional African philosophy, which is far too rarely addressed to Western students of philosophy; and third, they are acquainted with Western philosophy. All in all, they have three points of viewing, while Westerners often just know Western philosophy, and are even not aware of pre-Christian pagan thoughts and how ancestors thought, as well as folklore.

As a result, African students have much better perspectives to shape the world understanding than Western philosophy does to this day. Therefore, addressing the different streams of African philosophy such as post-colonial political philosophy (Nkrumah, Nyerere), ethnophilosophy (Tempels, Kagame), and synthetical philosophy (Towa, Houtondji, Ciamalenga Ntumba) can give us new insights and new perspectives in a globalised world in which we can learn from each other and tear borders apart, rather than staying in our philosophical tradition and show hate towards others.

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Suggestion for citation:
Schmitz, Timo: A very short introduction into African Philosophy and their main streams, self-published online article, 27 September 2017, [http://schmitztimo.wordpress.com](http://schmitztimo.wordpress.com)