

# African Philosophy And Its Role In Shaping Global Culture

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## Abstract:

African philosophy deserves special attention and increased efforts in exploring its components and shaping frameworks in contemporary thought. The history of thought in Africa, especially in the Black Continent, requires the awareness and commitment of humanity to embody a distinctive philosophical character that outlines new dimensions in the realm of global thought and culture. Such a comprehensive understanding of African philosophy in the context of historical development is essential. Moreover, this historical development requires attention to the fact that it is not merely a search for truth, but should serve as its core nucleus.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, African, history, civilisation, identity

## Introduction:

The exploration of historical writings on African philosophical thought is a project that calls for a reformation of modern perspectives on the truth of human civilisation, which has witnessed the contributions of Africans. These contributions have been overlooked because the existence of African philosophy has long been marginalised. Today, however, no researcher can argue against its active presence among other philosophical traditions. African philosophers have worked to establish Africa's presence and to show that African philosophy is a tragic philosophy comparable to other philosophies worldwide. If wonder is the starting point of Greek philosophical activity and the foundation of Western philosophical development, then the shock that served as the

starting point for African philosophy is equally valuable. It is worth noting that philosophical wisdom in Africa predates human existence, for philosophy is a gift given to all human beings on earth by virtue of their capacity for abstract thought and reason. Consequently, the continent has a rich and fascinating philosophical history<sup>1</sup>.

Many works have been written on the history of philosophy in general, with a clearer focus on Western philosophy. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no clearly defined works on African philosophy that have the same aim as the voluminous books that document Western philosophy over decades and examine its intricacies and details. For more than two centuries, European intellectual discourses have consistently asserted that there is no cultural or intellectual role for black Africans, and that Egyptian civilisation is in itself a Middle Eastern civilisation that has nothing to do with black Africa. They claim that black Africa has no written language and that its entire heritage is oral, characterised by jungle culture and pagan magic<sup>2</sup>.

Provocative and controversial arguments have been put forward by certain Western philosophers who reject the logic of recovering the truth of the world around them and going beyond the limits of their own thinking, in an attempt to formulate a narrow philosophical vision that incorporates racist expressions that have nothing to do with the realm of wisdom. Consequently, in an effort to shed light on some important and diverse aspects of the aforementioned discourse, it is necessary to engage in serious dialogues that do not presuppose erroneous preconceptions that can limit thinking to a sterile perspective incapable of evolving as required. The strategy of analysis and criticism remains a fundamental pillar in the study of the historical frameworks that have been produced and revised, both in the past and in the present, with the aim of uncovering the truth sought within the knowledge justifications of various Western philosophies and their methodological, intellectual and discursive foundations. This approach places African philosophy at the forefront, attempting to prove or disprove the existence of African philosophy. We will therefore approach the subject in

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<sup>1</sup> - Du'a Abdul Nabi Hamed, *African Philosophy: Defending Identity in the Face of Colonial Imagination*. Retrieved from: <https://www.alquds.co.uk>, March 2020. Accessed on: 5 March 2023 - 15:30.

<sup>2</sup>- The same

three stages: first, we will deal with the concept of African philosophy as an inescapable necessity, followed by an exploration of the context in which this philosophy emerged, and finally an examination of its various currents. What is the concept of African philosophy and how can it be identified?

### **The concept of African philosophy:**

The precise analysis of the concept of African philosophy rests primarily on the task of uncovering the definition of philosophy itself, which may remain at the level of implicit assumptions as one of the broad meanings that philosophy can have, distinct from others. The prevailing opinion among ordinary people and many thinkers, such as Samuel Oluoch Imbo and others, is that philosophy is an inherently difficult subject. They believe that philosophers use strange and obscure words, or worse, they believe that these philosophers may use ordinary words but within a framework that is not easily accessible or understandable. Consequently, they do not reach the purpose of these philosophers, and it is not easy for them to determine exactly what the philosopher is doing, even though everyone knows that their subject matter and purpose have no practical application. Most of them are based on abstraction. Therefore, what will be discussed will not only be controversial, but may generate even more controversy because we are not only trying to arrive at a definition of philosophy, but specifically to define African philosophy.

African philosophy often encompasses different concepts from different philosophers. Nevertheless, the term is constantly renewed in relation to the philosophical thoughts, works and figures that constitute "the culture of the African people". It refers to the philosophy produced by philosophers of sub-Saharan African descent, whether they lived inside or outside the African continent. African philosophy excludes the philosophy and thinkers from North Africa with lighter skin tones who have engaged in the study and research of what experts have historically recognised as Islamic philosophy in North Africa and, more recently, as modern and contemporary Arab thought. On the other hand, philosophers and thinkers from central, southern and western Africa remain largely unknown to most Arabic readers<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>- "The Violence of Said Ali, African Philosophy: Searching for Identity and Opposition to Western Centrality, Maton Magazine, University of Moulai Tahar, Saïda, Algeria, 02.01/04/2023

African philosophy is therefore an African product, presenting African perspectives to the world and using methodologies that distinguish it from other philosophical traditions. It is based on the understanding that every cultural environment influences the thought patterns of its people. Although it is associated with African thought and is considered exclusive to Africa and Africans, African philosophy is open to universality. This justifies its place in the broad field of philosophical inquiry. African philosophy represents the philosophical trajectory produced by the indigenous peoples of Africa and their descendants, including African Americans. It addresses a wide range of issues similar to those found in Eastern and Western philosophies.

**The historical origins of African philosophy are long,** though undocumented and unwritten. It ranges in nature and form from ancient times to the postmodern era. Discussions about the existence or nature of African philosophy began in the 1970s and continued until the early 1990s. Therefore, any serious discussion of African philosophy must have a thorough understanding of its history<sup>1</sup>.

The African philosophical community is part of the history of human civilisation, where the philosophical community is no longer able to philosophise in isolation from other philosophical communities. Thus, the African history of philosophy, as much as it is philosophical, is a history of Africans themselves, their autobiography, but it is also part of the autobiography of humanity as a whole. Giving Africa a historical character is part of giving the whole of humanity a historical character<sup>2</sup>. There is no longer any doubt about the existence and nature of African philosophy. We see that its teaching in universities and institutes has become a realistic and necessary reality, both at the African level and at the global level. Consequently, in order to study the contribution of African philosophy and the challenges it has faced under the longstanding Western domination, it is necessary to examine the main intellectual and historical milestones in order to understand the conditions that gave rise to this philosophy and

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(P: 33)

<sup>1</sup>- Ednin E. Etieyibo, "Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy," Palgrave Macmillan, South Africa, 2018, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>- John Murungi, "African Philosophy: Illumination," Springer, 2017, pp. 49-50.

made it the object of interest of many thinkers and philosophers worldwide.

### **Classifications:**

#### **The Historical Milestones of African Philosophy:**

African philosophy, like other philosophical traditions, has been categorised into divisions similar to the Western tradition that we are familiar with in our studies of Western philosophy, such as ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary periods. These divisions have formed a significant area of debate and controversy between proponents and critics, each presenting their arguments in support of their respective positions. On the one hand, proponents have a strong perspective on the historical nature of African philosophy, providing evidence for its existence and defending its presence in various parts of the African continent prior to colonisation. On the other hand, critics argue that what is called ancient African philosophy is an outcome, not a reality. They claim that ethnic philosophy, Christianity and Islam in the medieval period, which some scholars classify as African philosophy, led to the emergence of a distinct philosophy. While these philosophies originated in Africa, with notable African thinkers and writers who supported them, critics argue that they are not African in content or form. This has led to numerous problems and debates between these two intellectual schools of the time.

#### **The dialectic of civilisation and history:**

African philosophy is an essential feature of contemporary philosophical discourses and an indispensable tool in shaping global culture. In order to define its concept and value, it is first necessary to explore the precise definitions of the fields of knowledge that revolve around the concepts of civilisation and history, since they are closely linked. Civilization undoubtedly emerged as a historical phenomenon, born from the depths of the discipline of history. If every civilisational achievement requires time for its completion, time becomes a fundamental element of history. Moreover, both concepts are concerned with human experience. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that the study of the historical and civilisational roots of the African continent often leads to an inherent failure of comprehensive understanding. Modern research has provided only fragmented and often undocumented glimpses, even when presented in a particular chronological order. The African continent remains relatively unknown in terms of sociology,

ethnicity and hidden natural treasures. Its true history remains unwritten because it has been written mostly by non-African and non-Arab pens, such as the British, French, Portuguese and others. The history of European colonisation from the mid-19th century to the early 1960s has overshadowed and stamped a non-African character on African authenticity. It did not, however, erase the roots and origins of the continent, which began to emerge for scholars as the colonial veil began to lift. Newly independent countries began to embrace their ancient roots, shaking off the dust of the colonial era to reveal their African essence, which was to return to its original state and chart a new course different from that desired by the colonisers<sup>1</sup>.

Thinking about the history of African civilisation raises several issues that require attention and review. These are issues and questions that have not been sufficiently and accurately explored by scholars of African philosophy, especially since the chronological focus of African history has tended to concentrate on events that coincided with the invasion of European explorers, rather than on earlier events. As a result, there are gaps in the periods of this history, especially with regard to the entire past of the African continent. This makes the writing of African history a challenging task due to the lack of comprehensive written records and archaeological evidence covering all areas of African thought, as some fair-minded historians, thinkers and philosophers have observed. As a result, the historical study of the African continent unfortunately fell into the hands of foreign adventurers, sailors, writers and amateur historians, most of whom never ventured beyond the coastal borders of the regions.

In view of the above, and in pursuit of further challenges to the recognition or denial of a particular civilisation or historical culture, it is necessary to formulate intellectual concepts about the meaning of "civilisation" and the meaning of history. In the light of modern conceptual approaches, it does not seem sufficient that there is a consensus among various semantic means to convey the desired meaning, without considering the potential ambiguity or confusion of these concepts for the reader. In order for a researcher in this field to form a general judgement about the civilisation of a society, he must be familiar with all aspects of that civilisation, including science,

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<sup>1</sup> - Roukz, Youssef. "Black Africa: Politics and Civilization." University Institute for Studies, Publishing, and Distribution, 1st edition, 1986, p. 57.

literature, art, religion and politics. However, this research becomes very complex and it is almost impossible to gather and make a comprehensive judgement on the civilisation of a society without enormous intellectual effort and scholarly acquisition at the same time<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, it seems necessary to reflect on the nature of the concept of civilisation and history in order to understand the relationship between them, despite the complexity of the research and questions surrounding this issue. It is important to address cognitive problems in research, starting from its components and details, in order to arrive at logical and rational judgements that correspond to the reality and practicality of the matter. There is a close relationship between the study of civilisation and philosophical thinking, since theory must fulfil the task of synthesising the various elements that the researcher gathers about civilisation. It is essential for the researcher's philosophical thinking to assist in the formulation of the general judgement that he arrives at, as long as the emphasis remains on detailed research that increases the precision of the judgement without providing its content or substance. This reliance on philosophical thinking adds both complexity and depth to the study of civilisation<sup>2</sup>.

#### **The relationship between civilisation and history:**

It can be observed through the perspectives of many researchers who have studied civilisation as an important concept and subject. Historians who are interested in a comprehensive history that focuses on all aspects of life, not just politics, have recognised the close relationship between civilisation and history, despite some differences between them. Both share a common foundation, which is humanity itself. Human beings are the active framework behind every historical event, possessing knowledge of the facts and their causes. In addition, both civilisation and history involve various aspects of cultural activity that contribute to reshaping and complementing previous periods. History is the story of humanity in the universe, tracing its journey through time, while civilisation embodies this story on both material and non-material levels over centuries<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>- Zakariya Fouad, "Man and Civilization," p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>- The same

<sup>3</sup>- Qasim Abdou Qasim, "The Concept of Civilization in Historical Studies," in: "Renewing Social Sciences: Constructing a Cognitive and Civilizational Perspective on Ideas and

Civilizational actions occur in specific places and times, establishing a strong relationship between history and civilisation. With each passing day, human beings create or develop a culture or civilisation in their environment. Thus, history has been a civilisational concept from its earliest beginnings. If man is the creator of history, he is also shaped by it. On the other hand, human beings are both creators and products of civilisation. Therefore, history is a concept of civilisation, just as civilisation is a concept of history<sup>1</sup>.

### **1- The history of African civilisation:**

The first thought that comes to mind when mentioning Africa is a misconception, as it is often referred to as the "Dark Continent". This name is purely derived from European thinking and has gained popularity. In reality, however, Africa was not as backward as perceived. In fact, there were other regions of the world that were more backward at the time that Africa was flourishing and advancing. For example, when Europeans discovered Australia, its inhabitants were still living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, using stone tools similar to those of the Stone Age. Meanwhile, Africans had abandoned these stone tools thousands of years ago, estimated to be between three and six thousand years ago.

Similarly, Native Americans (called "Red Indians") continued to use modern stone tools until the 16th century. During this period, African farmers used new tools to cultivate the land. In addition, the northern region of the continent enjoyed an Islamic civilisation, while the rest of the continent was organised either under tribal systems or under powerful states that repelled invaders and immigrants from overseas until the 19th century. The real reason for the delay in European penetration of the continent and their control of the gold mines, both in the western and central regions such as Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), was that Africans had a level of organisation and awareness that enabled them to discover these resources and engage in trade. Some argue that the progress made by Africans and their resistance to European

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Experience," Vol. 2, edited by Nadia Mahmoud Mustafa, Dar Al-Bashir for Culture and Science, 1st edition, 2016, pp. 179-181.

<sup>1</sup>- The same



civilisation, which they did not readily accept for a long time, can be attributed to their level of organisation and awareness<sup>1</sup>. Do Africans have a history of civilisation? Has African civilisation made a significant contribution to human civilisation?

#### **African culture and its importance:**

1. What is civilisation?

2. African societies before the colonial era.

If civilisation in any era is measured by the extent to which people have successfully exploited their environment and taken advantage of the opportunities available, then the use of resources by Africans completely contradicts claims that Africans had no civilisation to speak of.

Europeans had limited knowledge of Africa until the Portuguese began their exploration of the continent's northwestern coastal regions in the 15th century. Europeans were unaware of the true cultural and civilisational conditions in Africa and the intricacies of African culture and its significance, except for some information about the pharaonic civilisation that emerged and flourished in Egypt, which had links with Europeans and their civilisation. During these long periods, Africans lived on their own continent, with their own civilisation, philosophy and way of life, adapted to their environment and the demands it placed on them<sup>2</sup>.

In all likelihood, contemporary African societies are not invaders from another continent; they are the original inhabitants. Modern scientific discoveries, which show that Africa is the cradle of humanity, are increasingly disproving the hypothesis that the continent is dominated by Westerners.

From the appearance of Homo sapiens in ancient prehistoric times to the present day, we have been able to trace our origins as a continuous progression. In the early stages of prehistory, the great south-north movement established the African accumulations in the Great Lakes region of the Nile Basin, where they lived for thousands of years.

In prehistoric times, it was they who established the Sudanese-Nubian civilisation that we know as Egypt. It was the first civilisation in Africa (the Dark Continent) and the first in the

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<sup>1</sup>- Ronald Oliver and John Fage, "History of Africa," translated by Aqeela Ramadan, reviewed by Ahmed Sowar, Arab Press Agency for Publishing, 2020, pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>- Shawqi Atallah al-Jamal and Abdullah Abdul Razzaq Ibrahim, "African Civilization," Al-Jumhuriya Book, 2009, p. 187.

world. The development of Europe was halted for almost a hundred thousand years by this early civilisation<sup>1</sup>.

As is well known, Africa is characterised by a human and cultural duality formed by two groups of inhabitants: Caucasians (white race) and Negroids (black race). However, this duality was not separated by natural boundaries. There was an overlap in terms of genetic, cultural, religious and linguistic aspects. This intersectional bridge was gradually built, and the study of this cultural blending allows us to identify means of strengthening African cooperation against those who wish to further divide the continent on the basis of colour, language or religion.

### **Conclusion:**

The African philosophy needs to be recognized for its fundamental contribution to the formation of global culture as part of civilization, which is a social system that enables human beings to increase their cultural production. Civilization is conditioned by a variety of factors. It is not a set of fixed values and standards that appear on the stage of history all at once or as an entity that grows to a certain degree that cannot be surpassed. It is an organic entity, like a human being, arising from accumulated intellectual formations that converge within a cognitive context among different human communities wherever they may be. This allows it to respond to all types of internal and external influences in order to achieve the human goal of self-realization and self-identity affirmation through the alliance that calls for the growth of philosophical thought in different parts of the world.

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