

A SHORT HISTORY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY, BY BARRY HALLEN

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A Review by Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo

African philosophy is a relatively young discipline whose existence started receiving recognition in some universities (mostly in Africa) in the late 60s/early 70s. What gave impetus to this recognition were the publications of John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*, Janheinz Jahn's *Muntu: An Outline of the New Culture*; the translations of Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* and Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. What was common in the texts was their explicit assertion of the existence of African philosophy and more importantly, their unpacking of it. These texts changed the course of the then ongoing debate from whether there existed African philosophy to the question of what the exact nature of African philosophy was. Today, African philosophy has tremendous amount of relevant literature to draw from. These include comprehensive anthologies and detailed monographs meant to situate African philosophy in its historical context and discuss major figures and traditions in it. Some of them identify and focus on specific themes and issues relevant to African philosophy, and in some instances make comparative studies with similar themes in Western tradition. Besides the anthologies and monographs, there are countless numbers of well researched and written articles that are published in journals all over the world.

Among the myriad of literature on African philosophy, Barry Hallen's *A Short History of African Philosophy* occupies a special position; a position it shares with D. A. Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Samuel Oluch Imbo's *An Introduction to African Philosophy* is not far off from this location. Like Masolo's text, Hallen's publication, as its title suggests, is an exercise in the history of African philosophy. However, Masolo's text is more detailed and rigorous in its approach and analyses of issues. Nevertheless, Hallen's publication is just as encyclopaedic. It presents a commend-

able panorama of African philosophy. It incorporates the views of a wide variety of African philosophers, scholars and intellectuals. Anyone with an interest in joining the field of African philosophy will no doubt find Hallen's publication to be most useful and quite resourceful. For those already in the field, Hallen's text is refreshingly novel. This is largely due to the concise fashion in which he has unpacked and coherently repackaged the various discourses on African philosophy.

The text consists of nine chapters. Chapter one is basically an explication of the documented reflections of African figures of historical importance. These are: the Egyptian Ptahhotep (lived around 2400 BCE), the Abyssinian Zar'a Ya'aqob (1599–1692 CE) and Ghanaian Anton Wilhelm Amo (1703–1765 CE). This chapter acts as a good and appropriate starting point to the study of African philosophy in that it serves to show that philosophical thinking in Africa predate the so-called 'modern' era. However, Hallen does not engage the Afrocentric argument that ancient Greek philosophy and science were directly derived from Egyptian civilization. Given the historical purview and interest of the chapter, it would have been fair for Hallen to give some concentration on the discourse rather than the single paragraph that he accords the debate.

Chapter two titled "Twentieth-Century Origins" revolves round four texts: two from the Francophone (Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* and Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*), and the other two from the Anglophone (Abraham's *The Mind of Africa* and Mbiti's *Africa Religions and Philosophy*). Horton's two-part essay "African Traditional Thought and Western Science" is also touched upon, and according to Hallen it is the belief of several philosophers in the African context that this essay is what

"led to a more deliberate development of African philosophy as an independent academic discipline" (p. 180).

This chapter is fairly brief, perhaps unacceptably too brief especially if one has in mind a reader who is trying to find some grounding in African philosophy. The views of the authors are mentioned just in passing without any substantial and meaningful explication, yet the works of the authors play a central role in the history of African philosophy.

Chapters three and four titled "Rationality as Culturally Universal" and "Rationality as Culturally Relative" respectively, actually constitute the

backbone of the text. The two chapters are antithetical and accurately capture the old and ongoing debate as to whether philosophy is (or should be) universal or relative. Chapter three consists of the views of those philosophers considered to argue for a model or paradigm of cognition or understanding that is universal to every human culture. This chapter therefore explicates the thoughts of those who defend the thesis of rationalism as a cultural universal. These are Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye and 'Segun Gbadegesin. Chapter four, in contrast, is an explication of the view that holds rationalism as culturally relative. Defenders of this view believe that there are elements of African cognition that are sufficiently unique or distinct to somehow set it apart.

The major complaint against the so-called Universalists is that by placing undue emphasis upon the supposedly common or universal elements of African cognition, these uncommon features are underrated and fail to receive the recognition they deserve and the credibility they merit as alternative pathways to understanding (p. 35).

The thoughts of Godwin Sogolo, Akin Makinde, V. Y. Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah are presented as representative of this view. Barry Hallen is quite sympathetic to this view and locates two of his texts (*Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* and "*The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful*": *Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture*) within this tradition.

At the end of chapter four Hallen cautions that the distinction between the universalists and the relativists is one of emphasis rather than that of kind (pp. 44-45). The universalists, the reader is told, prefer to begin their analyses on the basis of a presumption that there must be a shared rationality. The relativists, on the other hand, believe that this kind of commitment should be avoided or delayed until sufficient piecemeal, detailed, concrete, empirical analyses of specific elements of the African intellectual heritage have been undertaken and the results assessed. This, Hallen believes, would put on hold the ever-pervasive influence of the paradigm of rationality that is treated as a virtual sinecure of Western philosophy. A good number of readers are bound to find Hallen's distinction between the universalists and the relativists quite intriguing for it seems to run counter to the conventional understanding of the two terminologies.

Chapter five "Ethnophilosophy and Philosophic Sagacity" is devoted to

the views of Paulin Hountondji and H. Odera Oruka. This chapter, just like chapter two, is fairly brief. Though the title of the chapter has the word 'Ethnophilosophy' as one of its major conjunctive components, this is somehow misleading for what Hallen actually does is present Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy. One would wish that he spent more time explicating the views of the so-called ethnophilosophers rather than just mention their names since, at any rate, his treatment of their views in chapter two is also merely passing. There is no question that Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy and Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity would be more appreciated if reasonable amount of time had been devoted to ethnophilosophy.

The chapter titled "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" is a follow up of the discussions in chapters three and four. More accurately, the chapter shows that there are some fundamental convictions in common between African analytic philosophers who defend relativism and their hermeneutic colleagues. To introduce the chapter, Hallen ably presents the views of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. This is something positive given that phenomenological-hermeneutical methodological tradition has frequently been criticised as excessively dense and difficult to interpolate. The views of some three philosophers who advocate a hermeneutical approach to African philosophy is then explicated. These are Theophilus Okere, Okonda Okolo and Tsenay Serequeberhan. Relevant works of three African philosophers Lewis Gordon, Lucius Outlaw and Robert Bernasconi are also briefly discussed. The starting point of most hermeneutic philosophers is the conviction that European imperialism and colonialism violently and profoundly disrupted Africa's social, cultural and political continuity and integrity. In order for Africa to redeem itself, African philosophers must define and interpret African values. They should not let the "other" continue playing the leading role for them. More specifically, they should

"...single out what aspects or elements of the *mélange* are to be valued and reaffirmed as a social basis for a progressive African social, political, and cultural heritage that will be a worthy tribute to that remarkable continent" (p. 61).

In the last paragraph of the chapter, Hallen advises African analytic and hermeneutic philosophers not to follow the antagonistic footsteps of their

Western counterparts, but to work together given that they share common concerns and interests. These should be explored to the mutual benefit of both approaches (p. 71).

In chapter seven titled “Socialism and Marxism”, Hallen discussed the category of philosophical thinking by African philosophers, intellectuals and political figures who have been identified as socialists or Marxists. This includes the thoughts of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral, Oladipo Fashina, Olufemi Taiwo and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba. While the thoughts of Nkrumah, Nyerere, Cabral and Wamba-dia-Wamba are presented as being fundamentally concerned with the question of political and economic emancipation of Africa using Marxism or socialism as a passage, those of Fashina and Taiwo are general scholarly exercises in Marxist theory. It is therefore not surprising that the referred to works of Fashina and Taiwo hardly get space in discussions of African philosophy unlike the referred to works of the other four.

Chapter eight titled “Philosophy and Culture” is an attempt to present the views of those scholars, most of whom do not have academic qualifications in philosophy, who argue that Africa should define itself in or on its own terms regarding methodologies, subject areas and issues without reference or deference to any alien culture. For then, and only then, will Africa’s cultures be on a position to speak for themselves about what philosophy should or should not mean to them (p. 91). Hallen then very briefly mentions the views of Asmarom Legesse, Wole Soyinka, Okot p’Bitek and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Thereafter he goes ahead to give a fairly elaborate exposition of the views of Paget Henry, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Ifi Amadiume and Nkiru Nzegwu. Besides Henry, the views of the other three are presented from the standpoint of the issue of gender. Despite some differences amongst them, they concur that in (some) African societies, unlike the Western society, gendering is not of fundamental importance, and hence the West has misunderstood and misrepresented Africa given their conceptual framework that assumes that gendering is the fundamental social distinction. A drawback of this chapter is the brief manner in which the views of Soyinka, p’Bitek and wa Thiong’o are presented. Given their international stature and standing in academia, it would have been only fair if more space were allocated to them. Otherwise the chapter is quite interesting and those philosophers and scholars who have not had the benefit of living for a considerable period in the continent would

without question learn something about matters of gender in Africa.

Besides the views of philosophers and scholars explicated in the previous chapters, in chapter nine, Hallen presents other texts on and of African philosophy. The list is quite exhaustive. It includes texts by D. A. Masolo, John Pittman, Emmanuel Eze, Richard Wright, Tsenay Serequeberhan, Parker English and K. M. Kalumba, Albert Mosley, P. H. Coetzee and A. P. Roux, and Samuel Oluoch Imbo. He also gives a list of journals on African philosophy (some of which are still on print and others that are out of print). He also points to some Web sites that are devoted to African philosophy.

Barry Hallen's *A Short History of African Philosophy* is not just another addition to texts on African philosophy. As already indicated in the second paragraph, it occupies a unique position; a position it shares with D. A. Masolo's *Africa Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Both beginners and experts in African philosophy would find the text to be very resourceful because of its extensive coverage. I can immediately see that any course in African philosophy would find it to be irresistible. A weakness of the text that I have already mentioned more than once, is that the views of some philosophers and scholars are not sufficiently presented and discussed. The excuse given by Hallen in the introduction of the text is that when he embarked on the manuscript, he meant it to be a chapter in a text that was to be edited by Kwasi Wiredu. The length of the paper turned out to be unacceptably too long and upon advice and encouragement from Wiredu, Hallen turned the overweight chapter into *A Short History of African Philosophy*. I would now encourage Hallen to seriously consider the possibility of further turning *A Short History of African Philosophy* into *A (Long) History of African Philosophy*. By so doing he would do justice to the views of those philosophers and scholars whom he just mentioned in passing.

Everything considered, Barry Hallen should be commended for the objective and consistent fashion in which he presents the diverse views and ideas of so many philosophers, intellectuals and political figures. Despite the fact that he is more sympathetic to some views and standpoints, he has desisted from joining head-on in the debates. His major objective being to present the reader with unbiased explications and information so that the reader may engage his or her rational scrutiny.