

**A SHORT
HISTORY
OF
AFRICAN
PHILOSOPHY**

**Barry
Hallen**

This book is a publication of
Indiana University Press
601 North Morton Street
Bloomington, IN 47404-3797 USA

<http://iupress.indiana.edu>

Telephone orders 800-842-6796
Fax orders 812-855-7931
Orders by e-mail iuporder@indiana.edu

© 2002 by Barry Hallen

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The Association of American University Presses' Resolution on Permissions constitutes the only exception to this prohibition.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hallen, B.

A short history of African philosophy / Barry Hallen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-253-34106-X (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-253-21531-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Philosophy, African—History. I. Title.

B5305 .H35 2002

199'.6—dc21

2001006883

1 2 3 4 5 07 06 05 04 03 02

DEDICATI

The Historical Perspective

The characterization of Africa's precolonial indigenous cultures as significantly ahistorical in character has been dismissed as patently false. The significance of the word "primitive," as originally used by *non*-Africans to type Africa's cultures, was that those cultures could serve as contemporary exemplars of how human beings had lived in primeval and pristine times, "before" recorded history (Kuper 1988).

This false ahistorical stereotype had profound consequences for Africa's status vis-à-vis philosophy as an international enterprise. "Early" human societies anywhere in the world were not thought to have developed the capacity for the intellectual reflection definitive of this supposedly sophisticated discipline. Therefore Africa's indigenous cultures were, in both principle and fact, disqualified from occupying a place in the philosophical arena.

The response on the part of many African philosophers, scholars, and intellectuals to this falsely a-historical, as well as deeply offensive, typing of the cognitive significance of their civilizations has been sustained and vigorous. The fact that these efforts have only recently begun to have recognizable consequences in and on the Western academy would probably be cited by those same individuals as further evidence of how profound the influence of this demeaning caricature of Africa's cultures was on the rest of the world and, in some cases, on Africans themselves.

In this introductory chapter, attention will focus primarily upon two significant sources of philosophical thinking from the African historical context that predate the so-called 'modern' era: Egyptian texts that date back as early as 3000 B.C. and a collection of treatises from Abyssinia (a country that consisted essentially of what is today Ethiopia and Eritrea) that were produced during the seventeenth century A.D.

A Short History of African Philosophy

4

The claim that examples of philosophical texts existed in ancient Egypt is sometimes misleadingly overidentified with the school of thought that has come to be known as Afrocentrism. And Afrocentrism itself is sometimes unfairly and one-dimensionally typed as an attempt to inflate the international importance and influence of ancient Egyptian culture totally out of proportion to the "scientific" evidence for it. But from both a historical and cultural point of view, the reaffirmation of ancient Egypt as an integral part of the African continent constitutes a rejection by African¹ scholars of those who have used the Saharan and Nubian deserts as a kind of "iron curtain" between the "black" African cultures to their south and the "non-black" (but somehow also "non-white") peoples to their north (Obenga 1992). At worst, the qualitatively different characteristics of the civilizations thereafter attributed to these two groups are said to have transposed racism from the modern to the ancient world. At best, they are said to disregard the history of the commercial and cultural exchanges that always took place between the peoples of north, west, east, central, and south Africa.

It is impossible to characterize all of the literature currently associated with Afrocentrism with a set of simplified generalizations. Afrocentrism is probably best known in Western scholarship for its arguments that both the form and content of ancient Greek (and, hence, eventually European/Western) philosophy and science were derived directly from Egyptian civilization (Ben-Jochannan 1994; Diop 1974; James 1954; Obenga 1995). This in turn has generated a concerted response from Western classicists (academics who specialize in Greek and Roman civilization) that the character of Greek thought and civilization was, in these respects, fundamentally different and distinctive from that of their Egyptian counterparts and that consequently no such fundamental linkage or crossover can be established. (Basically, the Greeks are distinguished by their "abstract" and "reasoned" thought, while Egyptian thought is characterized as "regimented" and "practical" [Lefkowitz 1996; Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996]). Somewhere on the stormy seas that contain these contending forces also lies the work of the American scholar Martin Bernal, whose prospective 8-volume *Black Athena* (1987-) aims at presenting sufficient empirical evidence to establish the importance of ancient intellectual interactions between Greek, Semitic Mediterranean, and African peoples once and for all on an acceptably scientific basis.

Although it would be noteworthy poetic justice for a discipline—philosophy—that was once denied to Africa to have in fact originated there, this book will not concentrate on the debate over whether Egyptian culture

1. I use the term "African" to refer to scholarship that is specifically concerned with the African continent and its cultures. "Africana" is a more inclusive term for scholarship related to both Africa and the diaspora.

was the progenitor of ment of historical cor integration of Egyptian history provides. This to the Nigerian anthropation of Cheikh A gendering in the Africa

In an attempt to b technical or scholarly thought *in general* sho

I use the term *philoso study of causes and l specifically to study th nians were learned a they could have devel principles had they c nature of reality in abs philosophy was inven (Lefkowitz 1996, 188*

One fundamental ob against this definition merit of some of the l ture. Also, because of bias, it ignores discip of legitimate philosop point of view this de cific, based essentially tably, by Western phil

It makes sense to tion. The specific tex gies of Egyptian and, "The Moral Teaching but scholars seem to a dom (Fifth Dynasty)

The heart of Ptah- (for lack of a better w forms of behavior as text's philosophical si using a variety of fo

2. Surely those "causes at
3. Why not "The Moral l
4. An alternative abbrevia reference to Jesus Christ.

was the progenitor of Western philosophy. Here I will emphasize the element of historical continuity and development that, for example, the reintegration of Egyptian and Abyssinian thought into Africa's intellectual history provides. This point will also be discussed in Chapter 8, in relation to the Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume's critical evaluation and adaptation of Cheikh Anta Diop's theories relevant to the historical issue of gendering in the African cultural context.

In an attempt to bracket any underlying ethnocentric biases, on purely technical or scholarly grounds why has it been maintained that Egyptian thought *in general* should be typed as pre- or non-philosophical?

I use the term *philosophy* in the more specialized, modern sense, to mean *the study of causes and laws underlying reality*² or *a system of inquiry designed specifically to study those laws and causes*. The ancient Egyptians and Babylonians were learned and had what we would now call advanced civilizations; they could have developed *an abstract terminology* for discovering causes and principles had they chosen to do so. But they did not *study and analyze the nature of reality in abstract, nontheological language*. This specialized notion of philosophy was invented, so far as anyone knows, by the ancient Greeks. (Lefkowitz 1996, 188–189; my italics)

One fundamental objection that contemporary Africana scholars raise against this definition is that it is factually false and ignores the intellectual merit of some of the literature that has been inherited from Egyptian culture. Also, because of the definition's blatant metaphysical or ontological bias, it ignores disciplines such as ethics or moral philosophy as elements of legitimate philosophical enterprise. And one reason for this is that the point of view this definition represents is too narrow and culturally specific, based essentially upon a paradigm that once was embraced, most notably, by Western philosophy.

It makes sense to consider the hard evidence that supports this objection. The specific text to be considered here is included in many anthologies of Egyptian and/or African literature and is frequently referred to as "The Moral Teachings of Ptah-hotep."³ Various versions of the text exist, but scholars seem to agree that Ptah-hotep was an official of the Old Kingdom (Fifth Dynasty) who lived c. 2400 B.C.E.⁴

The heart of Ptah-hotep's manuscript consists of thirty-seven principles (for lack of a better word) that define and, more importantly, justify certain forms of behavior as being moral (*Maat*). A complication in assessing the text's philosophical significance is that it has been translated into English using a variety of formats—as poetic verse (Asante 2000), as imperative

2. Surely those "causes and laws" could constitute as well as underlie "reality."

3. Why not "The Moral *Philosophy* of Ptah-hotep"?

4. An alternative abbreviated name for the conventional dating system that does not make reference to Jesus Christ. "B.C.E." stands for "Before the Common Era."

maxims (Gunn 1909), and as an essay (Hilliard 1987). For purposes of the present discussion the essay format is preferable because a sentential rendering highlights the underlying reasoning more clearly.

Many different forms of behavior are discussed—some are discouraged, some are commended—and I encourage readers to refer to the original text itself (Hilliard 1987) for a more comprehensive statement of them. One scholar has summarized the forms of behavior that are commended as “respect for proper speech, respect for elders and leaders, ritual remembrance, good behavior, absence of arrogance, lack of threats, absence of gossip, submission to authority, pursuit of truth, attainment of justice, generosity, self-control, impartiality, avoidance of hasty speech, masking one’s inner feelings, and good listening skills” (C. Lehman as quoted in Asante 2000, 41). For most of the thirty-seven principles Ptah-hotep also provides reasons, often in the form of potentially adverse or positive consequences, why a particular form of behavior is to be discouraged or commended, as in the following:

25. If you are mighty and powerful then gain respect through knowledge and through your gentleness of speech. Don’t order things except as it is fitting. The one who provokes others gets into trouble. Don’t be haughty lest you be humbled. But also don’t be mute lest you be chided. When you answer one who is fuming, turn your face and control yourself. The flame of the hot-hearted sweeps across everything. But he who steps gently, his path is a paved road. He who is agitated all day has no happy moments, but he who amuses himself all day can’t keep his fortune. (Hilliard as quoted in Hord and Lee 1995, 28)

What is intriguing is the repeated emphasis Ptah-hotep gives to a more select set of values that have also been outlined in the work on Yoruba⁵ moral epistemology done by Hallen and Sodipo. Again and again, Ptah-hotep stresses the importance of “good speech,” which is defined as: (a) accurately recording/reporting what one personally has seen or heard (“Listen carefully” [Hord and Lee 1995, 27]; “Just keep to the truth. Do not exceed it” [26]; “Give the message exactly” [26]). And (b), when contributing new ideas to a discussion, expressing oneself in a thoughtful and perceptive manner (“The trusted man is one who does not speak the first thing that comes to mind” [26]; “Speak when you know that you have a solution” [28]; “Be deliberate when you speak so as to say things that count” [31]). Again and again, Ptah-hotep stresses the importance of self-control, internal as well as external (“Self-control will be the match for . . . evil utterances” [25]; “Gain respect through knowledge and through your gentleness of speech. . . . When you answer one who is fuming, turn your face and control yourself” [28]).

5. The Yoruba are an ethnic group inhabiting present-day West Africa, mainly southwestern Nigeria, whose distinctive culture has attracted the attention of many scholars. See Chapter 4 for discussion of the Hallen-Sodipo approach to philosophy in the African context.

These values are enunciated as principles, as well as in the company of them. The accords affirm them as moral values that have epistemological consequences. One relied upon is a moral permissibility control is in an optimal surroundings and, hence, to give advice (if needed) about it.

The fool who does not [have a thought], he can do nothing. He looks at harmfulness and detests and is blamed for it. His food is evil speech. The officials who say, “The things that he does because of his [italics]”

Though these similarities in epistemology are striking, a direct philosophical transition took place. This is an interesting search. For the moment, Ptah-hotep’s society was also a part of Yoruba—the spoken word was status because of the moral character.

The most prominent African philosopher was a man named Zar’a Ya’aqob. He was produced during his lifetime in the *Zar’a Ya’aqob*. In the original, this term, *hatata*, will draw out its implications.

Zar’a Ya’aqob was a religious philosopher. He was a Christian faith but, as he was also a Christian sect (Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism?). These conflicting faiths, these conflicting faiths, have been one of the motivating powers of reasoning or of sectarian relationship with

All men are equal in the eyes of his creatures; he did not create them for mercy, another for justice. Punishment cannot exist

The Historical Perspective

7

These values are enunciated in no less than fifteen of the thirty-seven principles, as well as in the introductory and concluding passages that accompany them. The accompanying text makes it clear that Ptah-hotep affirms them as moral values because they promote truth, and therefore they have epistemological consequences as well. A person whose word(s) can be relied upon is a moral person, and vice versa. A person who maintains self-control is in an optimal state to be an objective observer of his or her surroundings and, hence, to correctly understand, record, report, and offer advice (if needed) about what is going on.

The fool who does not *hear* [listen, observe, and speak with care and forethought], he can do nothing at all. He looks at ignorance and sees knowledge. He looks at harmfulness and sees usefulness. He does everything that one detests and is blamed for it every day. He lives on the thing by which one dies. His food is evil speech [things that are not true]. His sort is known to the officials who say, "There goes a living death every day." One ignores the things that he does because of his many daily troubles. (Hilliard 1987, 30; *my italics*)

Though these similarities between Ptah-hotep's ethics and Yoruba moral epistemology are striking, that does not necessarily mean that a process of direct philosophical transmission or exchange between these two cultures took place. This is an issue that would require much more in-depth research. For the moment, what it may indicate is the extent to which Ptah-hotep's society was also an oral (as well as literate) culture, and hence—as in Yoruba—the spoken word was deliberately assigned a heightened moral status because of the manner in which its truth-value reflected a speaker's moral character.

The most prominent Abyssinian philosopher of the seventeenth century was a man named Zar'a Ya'aqob (1599–1692). The remarkable text he produced during his lifetime has as its English-language title *The Treatise of Zar'a Ya'aqob*. In the original Ge'ez language, it is known as the *Hatata*. This term, *hatata*, will deserve careful consideration because of its methodological implications.

Zar'a Ya'aqob was a religious man who had been educated in the Coptic Christian faith but, as his manuscript indicates, was also familiar with other Christian sects (Catholicism), Islam, Judaism, and Indian religion (Hinduism, Buddhism?). Indeed, it was the dilemma of choosing between these conflicting faiths, all meant to worship God, that appears to have been one of the motivating factors in his decision to rely upon his own powers of reasoning or understanding to promote his own personal non-sectarian relationship with that God:

All men are equal in the presence of God, and all are intelligent, since they are his creatures; he did not assign one people for life, another for death, one for mercy, another for judgment. Our *reason* teaches us that this kind of discrimination cannot exist in the sight of God. . . . But Moses was sent to

or purposes of the
a sentential ren-

are discouraged,
o the original text
ent of them. One
ommended as "re-
ual remembrance,
bsence of gossip,
ustice, generosity,
sking one's inner
d in Asante 2000,
also provides rea-
onsequences, why
mended, as in the

h knowledge and
pt as it is fitting.
ighty lest you be
you answer one
ame of the hot-
ly, his path is a
nts, but he who
quoted in Hord

p gives to a more
work on Yoruba⁵
and again, Ptah-
ch is defined as:
has seen or heard
to the truth. Do
d (b), when con-
a thoughtful and
not speak the first
y that you have a
o say things that
importance of self-
the match for . . .
and through your
uming, turn your

mainly southwestern
scholars. See Chapter
African context.

teach only the Jews. . . . Why did God reveal his law to one nation, withhold it from another? At this very time Christians say: "God's doctrine is only found with us"; similarly with the Jews, the Mohammedans, the Indians and the others. Moreover the Christians do not agree among themselves: the *Frang* [Europeans, Catholics] tell us: "God's doctrine is not with you, but with us. (Sumner 1976, 12; my italics in part)

Consequently, Zar'a Ya'aqob tells us, "People took me for a Christian when I was dealing with them; but in my heart I did not believe in anything except in God who created all and conserves all, as he had taught me" (Sumner 1976, 24).

What is philosophically remarkable about this text is the prominence, indeed primacy, it assigns to human reason or understanding as the arbiter, or agency, responsible for what a person decides to accept as true:

But truth is one. While thinking over this matter, I said: "O my creator, wise among the wise and just among the just, who created me with an *intelligence*, help me to *understand*, for men lack wisdom and truthfulness." (Sumner 1976, 7; my italics)

God indeed has illuminated the heart of man with *understanding* by which he can see the good and evil, *recognize* the licit [right] and illicit [wrong], *distinguish* truth from error. (Sumner 1976, 10; my italics)

Man aspires to know truth and the hidden things of nature, but this endeavour is difficult and can only be attained with great labour and patience, as Solomon said: "With the help of wisdom I have been at pains to study all that is done under heaven; oh what a weary task God has given mankind to labour at!" Hence people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers and shy from any [critical] examination. (Sumner 1976, 8; Sumner's brackets)

I have learnt more while living alone in a cave than when I was living with scholars. (Sumner 1976, 17)

Behold, I have begun an inquiry such as has not been attempted before. You can complete what I have begun so that the people of our country will become wise with the help of God and arrive at *the science of truth*, lest they believe in falsehood, trust in depravity, go from vanity to vanity, that they know the truth and love their brother, lest they quarrel about their empty faith as they have been doing till now. (Sumner 1976, 24-25; my italics)

In the course of his reflections upon the torturous process of critical reflection itself, Zar'a Ya'aqob also evaluates a number of more worldly issues: fasting, celibacy, scholarship, solitude, equality of husbands and wives, and justice, to name a few. But what is of greater philosophical interest is the critical methodology that underlies all of these reflections, the methodology that has come to be identified with the Ge'ez word "*hatata*."

As Claude Sumner, the philosopher who has undertaken extensive translation, study, and commentary upon the work of Zar'a Ya'aqob puts it:

"Now the root . . . by rubbing, to grind cal reality to the fig to search into or t spect" (Sumner 19 similarity between philosophical appro lytic philosophy," b the originality of ; nothing more than mainstream twentie

Zar'a Ya'aqob hi times in his treatise responsible for its a which, Sumner tell descending ratio, of 'thoughts' and 'doct which sheds clarity belongs to all men. (Sumner 1978, 107) overall:

Inquiry and reaso intellectual power purely philosophic application of the the power of comp exercise of the rea quires a vital impo mits the discrimin: lies which are perj has been transmitt brought up. It is th are intellectually b

Yet another Afric losopher Anton Wil through which he a that he was awarded University of Witte

6. William Abraham's ' Philosopher in Europe,' Asante and A. S. Abarry account of Amo's life an the text.

The Historical Perspective

“Now the root . . . *hatata*, originally signified ‘to reduce to small portions by rubbing, to grind.’ Its meaning has progressively passed from the physical reality to the figurative application of: ‘to question bit by bit, piecemeal; to search into or through, to investigate accurately; to examine; to inspect’” (Sumner 1978, 95). It is tempting to assign meaning to the obvious similarity between these root meanings and the contemporary academic philosophical approach that has come to be known as “analysis” or as “analytic philosophy,” but the temptation should be resisted lest one underrate the originality of Zar’a Ya’aqob’s thought by summarily reducing it to nothing more than a curiosity insofar as it becomes an anticipation of mainstream twentieth-century academic philosophy.

Zar’a Ya’aqob himself uses the term *hatata* no less than twenty-one times in his treatise (Sumner 1978, 94). And the human faculty primarily responsible for its activation or application is designated by the word *amr*, which, Sumner tells us, “usually has the meaning of ‘reason’; and, in a descending ratio, of ‘intelligence,’ ‘understanding,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘science,’ ‘thoughts’ and ‘doctrine(s).’ In Zar’a Ya’aqob, reason is presented as a light which sheds clarity on the object it focuses upon. It is God-given, and belongs to all men. It enables them to distinguish truth from falsehood” (Sumner 1978, 107). Sumner characterizes the role of reason in the *hatata* overall:

Inquiry and reason are linked up as activity or process together with the intellectual power which is at their source. “The light of reason” . . . is purely philosophical and positive. It is the very means or condition for the application of the inquiry to any specific problem. The *hatata* presupposes the power of comprehending and inferring, an intellectual activity, the due exercise of the reasoning faculty or of right thinking. Such an activity acquires a vital importance in the philosophy of Zar’a Ya’aqob . . . since it permits the discrimination between the results of independent thinking and the lies which are perpetuated among those who accept indiscriminately what has been transmitted to them by the social environment in which they were brought up. It is the light which dispels the darkness that blocks those who are intellectually blind. (Sumner 1978, 104–105)

Yet another African figure of historical importance is the Ghanaian philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo (c. 1703–1765). Although the circumstances through which he arrived in Europe are not clear,⁶ it is a matter of record that he was awarded the equivalent of the doctorate in philosophy from the University of Wittenberg in Germany on October 10, 1730. Amo became

6. William Abraham’s “The Life and Times of Wilhelm Amo, the First African (Black) Philosopher in Europe,” in *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*, edited by M. K. Asante and A. S. Abarry (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), provides an excellent account of Amo’s life and work. It has also served as my basic reference for this segment of the text.

quite well known in European academic circles of the time, and after finishing his formal education he taught in several German universities before returning to his native Ghana.

In eighteenth-century Europe, the discipline of philosophy still included a wide range of subjects (sciences as well as humanities) under its umbrella heading. Still, the specific topics to which Amo addressed himself are a matter of record and are of special interest in at least one respect for the manner in which they relate to and express his Africanity. This is especially the case with his first dissertation, which would have secured him a degree in both public and private law. Its theme, if not its title, is "About the Rights of Africans in Europe." Although the original manuscript has so far not been located, the contemporary Ghanaian philosopher William Abraham (1996) has used secondhand historical records to reconstruct Amo's basic argument.

This amounted to a critique of slavery, more specifically of the African slave trade. Drawing upon Europe's proud heritage of the Roman Empire, Amo seems to have argued that Rome was justly famous for eventually awarding all of her population—domestic and "foreign"—Roman citizenship. In principle, this made the entire population free and equal citizens of Rome, including those who lived in Africa. Therefore, Amo argued, Europeans were violating their own cultural heritage by enslaving human beings whom their own culture, as both Roman and Christian, had once recognized as free and equal and no different from themselves.

Amo's second (doctoral) dissertation, which is now to be found in the libraries of a number of universities, was a severe critique of the 'modern' French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes is probably best known for his thesis of dualism—that the human being is a composite of a material substance (the body) and an immaterial substance (the mind). Descartes also maintained (which plain commonsense would say is obvious) that the (immaterial) mind experiences physical (bodily) sensations (pain, etc.). Amo suggested this was somehow problematic, inconsistent, or even a contradiction in terms. And, indeed, how two fundamentally different substances could interact became one of the more celebrated weak points of Cartesian philosophy, underscored by Descartes' having recourse to the lowly pineal gland as the point at which immaterial mind and material body somehow intercommunicated.

A passage from an address made by the rector (president) of the University of Wittenberg on the occasion of Amo's successful defense of this second dissertation gives some idea of the high regard in which he was held:

He won the affection of the Order of Philosophy to such an extent that by the unanimous vote of the Fathers [examiners], he was decorated with the laurels of philosophy. The honour won by the deserts of his ability, of his outstanding uprightness, industry, erudition, which he has shown by public

and private exercise best and most learnedly shone out. . . as the moderns, he interpreted with profound intellectual ability (433–434)

There is yet another virtual mountain have been indiscriminately is the case that turn up their noses at that included myths, of the title "philosophy"

This is an issue that is being chapters. For the philosophers, as well as their continent's oral say that it would be just as philosophy, either. The actuals largely agree is philosophy in the work as presently constructed common ground if cultural significance. eration in that regard Africa was not said to

That cultures which are different in other respects are conventional in presenting in philosophical Africa's cultures have pathic scholarship that The oral literature of to receive the attention literature (A Bekederemo 1991), *Lawino* (p'Bitek 196 thousands of monuments eration and analysis

7. Kenyan writer Ngugi affirm that it represents a (1998, Chapter 4).

The Historical Perspective

and private exercises, he increased with praise. By his behaviour with the best and most learned, he acquired great influence; among his equals, he easily shone out. . . . Having examined the opinions of the ancients as well as the moderns, he garnered all that was best, and what he picked out he interpreted with precision and with lucidity. This work proved that his intellectual ability was as great as his powers of teaching. (Abraham 1996, 433-434)

There is yet another dimension to the history of philosophy in Africa—the virtual mountain of historical texts, still incompletely catalogued, that have been indiscriminately labeled African “oral literature.”⁷ For it certainly is the case that academic philosophers were for long predisposed to turn up their noses at the suggestion that an anonymous corpus of writings that included myths, legends, poetry, song, and proverbs was truly worthy of the title “philosophy.”

This is an issue that will be discussed at greater length in the succeeding chapters. For the moment it is sufficient to suggest that most African philosophers, as well, would have reservations about labeling the whole of their continent’s oral literature, literally, “philosophy.” But that is not to say that it would be justifiable to reject the whole of that amorphous corpus as philosophy, either. One thing upon which Africana scholars and intellectuals largely agree is that the criteria used to define what is and what is not philosophy in the world today are unfairly biased by and for “philosophy” as presently construed by Western culture. There may have to be *some* common ground if the word “philosophy” is to continue to have cross-cultural significance. But Africa, in particular, has not received just consideration in that regard. In fact, as was pointed out at the beginning, initially Africa was not said to have produced any philosophers or philosophy at all.

That cultures which were significantly oral in character, or somehow different in other respects, produced forms of literature which are not conventional in present-day Western culture need not mean that they are lacking in philosophical content or substance. In so many respects, it seems, Africa’s cultures have not benefited from the kinds of exhaustive and empathic scholarship that are being lavished upon other parts of the world. The oral literature of the African continent, therefore, has not even begun to receive the attention it merits. Elements of that corpus such as Ifa divination literature (Abimbola 1975, 1976, 1977), *The Ozidi Saga* (Clark-Bekederemo 1991), *The Myth of the Bagre* (Goody 1972), and the *Song of Lawino* (p’Bitek 1966) are just four random selections out of the literally thousands of monumental expressions of ideas that deserve careful consideration and analysis before they can be dismissed (as has effectively been

7. Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o recommends replacing this term with “orature” to affirm that it represents as significant an intellectual accomplishment as so-called literature (1998, Chapter 4).

the case) as quintessentially "religious," as quintessentially "mystical" or "mythical," as quintessentially *non-philosophical*.

Before bringing this chapter to a close, three points remain to be made. The first, and most obvious, is that philosophy in the African context did and does have a history. The documented reflections of individuals such as Ptah-hotep, Zar'a Ya'aqob, and Anton Wilhelm Amo are impossible to deny or to ignore. And the heritage they (and other thinkers too numerous to do justice to here) have bequeathed to their continent and the world deserves the recognition it for so long has been denied.

A second point relates to the importance African scholars themselves attach to the reintegration of Egyptian civilization with Africa's overall cultural heritage. African scholars who specialize in Africa south of the Sahara, so-called black Africa, would be deeply offended by any intimation that the intellectual reclamation of Egypt is an attempt to bolster, to upgrade, the cultural sophistication of their own indigenous cultures by associating them with "mighty" and "glorious" Egypt. In fact, those "other" African cultures or civilizations have their own integrity and have no need of an Egyptian connection to elevate the status of their civilizations. What they do need is for that integrity to be recognized and appreciated by scholarship and the world generally. To paraphrase V. Y. Mudimbe (1988), much of Africa still waits to speak for itself, but who is ready to listen?

A third and final concern is to provide some form of transition to the next set of chapters (2-7), which is devoted primarily to contemporary (twentieth-century) academic (university-based) philosophy in a select number of African countries. European colonialism as well as genuine intellectual curiosity have exposed and attracted a number of African scholars to Western philosophy. In addition, a much smaller number of Western academic philosophers have taken a special interest in philosophy in the African context. As the two major colonial powers in Africa were Britain and France, it has become conventional to refer to the countries on the African continent that have had to, in some measure, come to terms with these two European languages and the cultures they represented as "Anglophone" and "Francophone" respectively. (Chapters 2-7 will pay more attention to the history of academic philosophy in Anglophone Africa.) How African and expatriate philosophers have come to terms with relating to Western philosophical traditions, which some defend as universal and others challenge as culturally alien, is another important dimension to the ongoing story of what "philosophy" will eventually amount to in the African context.

Academic philosophy
bulent intellectual c
in the English-lang
dition, which provid
discipline than its E
of the competing cla
philosophy as advoc
verse variety of dis
pology, missionary a

Placide Tempels's
([1949] 1959) and v
are not sufficient rea
readership of its lat
That Africans of a E
as expressions of "vi
torily radical altern
proach was shortly t
and best-selling Eng
the German scholar
dimension to the "v
theory of Negritude
and Leopold Sedar
of the African intel
tive consequences,
enough to cause ma
even derogatory of
selves are said, by T