Overview

Since its inception in the mid-20th century, African Philosophy has become a full-fledged academic discipline. Many readers and anthologies, introductions, and other paedagogical publications have been published, along with a great number of texts striving to give an overview of the field, often in comparison with Western philosophy or with philosophies from other regions of the world. African Philosophy has branched out to cover the philosophical activities of various groups: of people of African origin in the Diaspora (mostly the US), called "Africana Philosophy", the philosophical thought of African women ("womanism"), African aesthetics, ethics, etc. This course gives an introduction to this discipline. In the first part of the term, we will look at "ethnophilosophy" as the discourse that started African Philosophy, based on the assumption that African thought is fundamentally different from Western philosophy. This belief shows in the oppositions through which African philosophical thought has been defined and characterized: communal, collective thought has been opposed to Western philosophy's individual thinkers; emotionality to the West's analytical spirit; African concepts of time as circular and lacking a distant future dimension to the West's linear concept of time, etc. It is in reaction to these generalizing and often racist and/or Eurocentric conceptions that Africa's "professional philosophers" have launched their project of "conceptual decolonization" (Wiredu). In the second part of the course, we will explore the ideas of some of these "professional philosophers". The Sage Philosophy project of the late Henry Odera Oruka, which directly addresses the objections raised against "ethnophilosophy", will be a transition to the study of the thought of prominent contemporary African philosophers, such as Kwasi Wiredu, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Paulin J. Hountondji, and Kwame Anthony Appiah. In an expressive phrase coined by Kwasi Wiredu, this is "African Philosophy in the making": looking for inspiration in African cultures, while firmly seated in Western-style philosophical discourse, its methods and standards. The topics that the course will examine include race, time, (economic, societal, intellectual) development, the connexions between African traditions and politics, and the possible links between African Philosophy and other expressions of ideas in Africa, in particular literature and film.

This class will provide an introduction to the debate on philosophy in Africa: the question of its possibility and existence, the question of the difference between African and Western modes of thought, and the suggested classifications of the existing texts qualifying as African philosophy. It will look at the relationship between Francophone and Anglophone African Philosophy and at the relationship of African Philosophy to other "regional" philosophies, in particular Latin American philosophy. It will also look at the place of African Philosophy among other philosophical streams and other disciplines, in particular Africana Philosophy (philosophy of black people in the Diaspora, especially the U.S.A.), Intercultural Philosophy, and Post-Colonial Theory. Last but not least, the class will ask why "finding" an African philosophy is important (or not) and what we really mean by "philosophy".

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Much of the discussion on African Philosophy hinges on the putative distinction of African ways of thinking from European ones. The foundation upon which this distinction is predicated is, to most thinkers, race. The concept of race, understood as biological reality that determines cultural expression, has largely influenced the way the African continent has been approached and theorized; it was abused as a way to justify both slavery and colonialism, and it has been at the base of hypotheses that strive to trace manifestations of advanced culture to foreign influences (cf. "Hamitic Theory"). The revindication of race is at the heart of theories reclaiming the African self, both in the New World (Harlem Renaissance, indigenisme, cubanismo) and on the continent itself (Black Personality, Afrocentricity, négritude). Few philosophers have expressed views about the differences between the races in a more comprehensive and sophisticated manner than Léopold Sédar Senghor. Also, few thinkers have been more influential and received more critical reactions than Senghor. This class will be devoted to a reading of Senghor's writings and a discussion of the criticism of his works within African Philosophy.

The Kenyan priest, John S. Mbiti, presented an analysis of the "African concept of time", maintaining that the Africans were unable to conceive of the distant future (beyond about two years from now). In addition, the present time ("Sasa") was a constant repetition of events that took place in the distant past ("Zamani"), thus precluding the possibility of anything really new happening. This, of course, was a major challenge to the notion of economic and societal development, because development means a constant, progressive improvement in time. Mbiti supported his views with compelling linguistic and anthropological evidence. In this class, we will examine Mbiti's arguments. We will also look into other conceptualizations of "African" time and specific ethnic versions of time concepts and time reckoning. In addition to this, we will explore the relationship between the underlying conceptions of time and development.

In this week, we will develop the reflection started last week and look at the relationship between philosophy and the theories of African development. Several approaches to African development can be distinguished. The early "statesmen-philosophers", the first presidents of the independent African states, such as Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Kenneth Kaunda, Jomo Kenyatta, or Léopold Sédar Senghor, sought to develop their nations by a return to a pre-colonial state of society, seen as idyllic and harmonious, free of wars and of exploitation of man by man. They reformulated Marxism, excising all forms of violence (revolution, dictatoriship of the proletariate, class struggle) from it, and suggested theories of "African socialism". Another approach sees philosophy (in particular the logic, precision and methodological rigour it teaches) as the foundation of science and technology. These, in turn, are the foundations of societal and economic development (e.g. Wiredu 1980). The issue of development also raises questions regarding the relationship between African traditions and modernity: what does modernity mean for Africans? Is Africa to adopt the Western forms of modernity, or is there "a third way" (Oladipo 2002)? Philosophers such as Kebede (2004) establish a direct link between development and "philosophical decolonization". Interestingly, also the example of Japan, a highly developed nation yet steeped in traditions, is an inspiration to several thinkers (Ethiopia's "Japanizers", see Clarke III 2004) This week we will study the thought of one of the most influential thinkers in African Philosophy, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe. Drawing on Michel Foucault's project of "archeology of knowledge" and on Edward Said's views on portraying another cultural domain (in Said's case, the Orient) as the West's "Other", Mudimbe focuses on the production of knowledge about Africa in Western scholarship. He calls it the "invention of Africa", to underscore the role of the West in the conceptualization of the African continent. Mudimbe maintains that, since both Western and African scholars have been exposed to this body of knowledge about Africa and have been trained to use exclusively the West's epistemological categories, Africans do not understand and theorize their own rationality within a conceptual framework originating from African cultures themselves. The possibility of an "African gnosis", namely theorizing Africa within an epistemological framework derived from and rooted in the African experience of the world, is Mudimbe's central question. We will revisit this question drawing on texts produced in African languages and valid within a local context, with its own political and economic centres of gravity. We will especially elaborate the question of whether and how local discourses in African languages can really provide the foundation of an "African episteme".

The work of the Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka gravitates around two themes: ethics and law and the project of "Sage Philosophy". Both are very relevant topics in African Philosophy. The Sage Philosophy project has revolutionarized the study of African "traditional" philosophies: it strives to find "sages", i.e. individuals capable of critical and analytical thinking, in the context of "traditional society". The project was innovative for several reasons: for its emphasis on the individuality of the thinkers and the distance it took from the study of the anonymous intellectual "unanimity" believed to prevail in "traditional cultures"; the importance it gave to precise documentation of information about the thinkers as well as the exact formulations of their beliefs, facilitated by the use of a tape recorder; the empirical aspect itself of this study of "traditional African philosophy" - so different from the speculative type of debating Africa's "traditional thought" common until then (or even until now). On the other hand, the project was loaded with a host of methodological and practical difficulties, and we will discuss these in class. Oruka's second focus is ethics and law, i.e. the domains of practical applications of African Philosophy. The issue of ethics gave rise to a major debate among Africa's professional philosophers, questioning the existence of "cultural universals" and the related question of the nature of "truth". The main contributions to this debate were made by Oruka and by Kwasi Wiredu. This topic will therefore spill over to the next week, when we will discuss Wiredu's ideas.

Kwasi Wiredu is the single most famous and studied philosopher of Sub-Saharan Africa. Several conferences and conference proceedings study aspects of his work, but also a few monographs, notably Sanya Osha (2005), have been devoted to this Ghanaian philosopher. Wiredu has written on many aspects of African cultures and their relevance in philosophy. He has also authored several articles elaborating the ethnic concepts of the mind, the truth, or the Akan tradition of thought as such. While these will be studied in more detail in the course on "Afrophone Philosophies", this week we will concentrate on Wiredu's general philosophical contributions to African Philosophy: his ideas about the development of African Philosophy and the comparisons of African and Western philosophy, his theory of truth as opinion, and the views about cultural universals

The concluding week of our course will tentatively explore broader horizons of the discourse on African Philosophy. We will look into the relationships between African Philosophy and other forms of scholarship and creativity, in particular literature and film. We will pose several provocative questions and the seeminly fixed boundaries of our discourse (i.e. African Philosophy as an academic discipline) will become fluid and less clear. Must philosophy be expressed in language? What is the role of embodiment/enactment (the bodily representation of ideas) in the expression of thought? Can a non-verbal expression, say dance, express philosophical ideas (remember Senghor and "dancing the Other")? What can we say about verbally or partly verbally articulated ideas that are, nevertheless, decisively co-articulated through behaviour and bodily action, in a literary or cinematographic narrative? Can philosophy be, in principle, expressed in a fictional account? Are customs and other cultural practices fossilized forms of philosophy? There are two radical ways to answer these questions, both of which strive to show the structural similarity/sameness of various forms of expression and both of which also run the risk of "all cats being black at night": one sees everything as "text" (Derrida) and the other reduces every expression to a form of mimicry or mimesis (Taussig). We will examine these approaches and try to see if there could also be other ways to answer these questions.