

# A Companion to African Philosophy

Kwasi Wiredu (ed)  
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*Review by Trevor Curnow*

Who is the most famous African philosopher? Opinions may well vary, but I doubt if the name of Augustine of Hippo would be the first one to cross most people's minds. This reflects a problem that runs right throughout this book: what is African philosophy? Is Africa a continent or a culture? The geographical definition of Africa may be the simplest, but is it the best? To what extent should the philosophical output of the Africaners of apartheid South Africa be seen as part of African philosophy? Or would it be a form of racism to argue that the work of philosophers who were born in Africa and spent all their lives there cannot count as African philosophy because of the colour of their skin?

A few basic facts emerge from the essays presented in this volume. First, whatever one may think of the philosophical accomplishments of the ancient Egyptians, during the GrecoRoman period at least, Africa was a hive of philosophical activity, throwing up such major names as Hypatia, Origen and Plotinus. Second, the replacement of Christianity with Islam across vast areas of North Africa led to a fresh, but similar, philosophical impetus. Third, the colonial period and its aftermath created a situation where the philosophy formally taught in African educational establishments is predominantly (perhaps still overwhelmingly) 'Western'. I can hear some personal testimony to this. When I taught philosophy at the University of Khartoum in the 1980s, the only courses that strayed from Western philosophy were those that covered Islamic philosophy. 'African' philosophy was not on the syllabus.

The problem, as many people see it, is that for much of its history over the past two thousand years or so, most of Africa has seen very little intellectual activity that could easily be characterised as philosophy, assuming that Western philosophy is used as a benchmark. This might not be so bad in itself but some anthropologists made things worse by seeking to label what was happening in Africa as the manifestation of some kind of 'primitive' mentality. To say something is different is one thing, to say it is inferior is quite another. Not surprisingly, some responded by insisting that what had been going on in Africa all this time *was* philosophy. It was just that it looked different from Western philosophy. However, there was an understandable temptation to set the bar far too low, so that something might count as philosophy in Africa even if what to all intents and purposes was the same thing did not count as philosophy elsewhere. To put it at its crudest, everyone espouses a basic metaphysical outlook on the world, because everyone has a sense, however unarticulated of how they think the world works. But most would argue that there is a considerable distance between being a tacit subscriber to a metaphysical system and being an active metaphysician.

The forty-seven essays in this excellent volume explore these issues in a number of different ways. The first, and longest, section looks at the history of philosophy in Africa from ancient Egypt through to the end of the twentieth century. The next, and shortest, section addresses some methodological issues, and the contribution here of A.G.A. Bello is particularly illuminating. The next four sections are thematically arranged. The first deals with logic, epistemology and metaphysics, although these areas are dealt with through a handful of essays on selected topics rather than general overviews. The second deals with the philosophy of religion and the third with ethics and aesthetics. Many may find the fourth the most interesting, dealing as it does with politics and exploring general theoretical issues in a specifically African context. Finally, the last section of the book looks at some 'special topics', although they are not so much 'special' as difficult to fit in elsewhere.

The most obvious audience for this book will lie among those with a particular interest in African philosophy. Both those new to the topic and those who already have a background in it will find this a valuable resource.

However, in seeking to answer the question ‘What is African philosophy?’ the book also has a great deal of light to shed on an even more fundamental question: what is philosophy? Seen that way, this is a book for everyone.

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