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## *On Latin American and African Philosophy: History, Topics and Issues*

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### **Abstract:**

In this article we compare and contrast Latin American Philosophy and African Philosophy in terms of history, currents and themes. We present an overview of both philosophical traditions in which we describe the methodologies and movements associated with each tradition respectively. We end by suggesting potential areas for further collaboration between the two traditions based on the similarities and differences suggested by our presentation.

**Keywords:** Latin American Philosophy; African Philosophy; History; Currents; Themes.

### **Introduction**

In this article, we present the historical, political and cultural contexts surrounding the philosophies of Latin America and Africa. Our goal is to prepare the groundwork for dialogue between the two philosophies in terms of traditions, debates and topics. Our approach is largely descriptive in comparing our respective philosophies and we take as our starting point some methodological controversies pointed out by Bello (2004) in African philosophy, but which can also be used to understand Latin American philosophy. According to Bello, the key tensions or contradictions in these traditions are between universalism and particularism, modernity and tradition, and philosophy and language. The root of these controversies lies in the methodology and relevance of African philosophy and Latin American philosophy, as well as their relationship with philosophy in general and with Western philosophy in particular (see Bello, 2004, p. 263).

Particularism vs. Universalism: The particularist conception argues that African/Latin American philosophy deals with a specifically local theme, topic or problem. For Bello, our philosophies must be concerned with the critique of ideas, which involves a serious study of our cultures and their philosophical heritage, and that this study must be critical and reconstructive (universalist tendency). "Every philosophizing involves affirmation, explanation and justification" (Bello, 2004, p. 264).

Modern versus traditional: the tension between these two categories plays out across many debates including controversies about oral philosophy, ethnophilosophy, "popular" philosophy, common philosophy, traditional philosophy, written philosophy, contemporary philosophy, modern philosophy, professional philosophy and nationalist ideological philosophy. The sources of our philosophy are varied: proverbs, maxims, tales, myths, letters, poetry, motives of art and cultural practices such as worship and sacrifice. The problem is, according to Bello, whether these sources can be called philosophy or just source materials for philosophizing, because the ideal of philosophy contains statements, explanations and justifications (see Bello, 2004, 265).

We have other contradictions in our philosophies, but for us it is sufficient to point out some problems and challenges for our continents. We agree with Bello that the challenge is to develop a pluralist philosophy that can inspire our "research programs in various areas of philosophy, including logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy and history of philosophy. Such programs will be based on our culture and other philosophical traditions, Eastern or Western" (Bello, 2004, p. 272). Pluralist philosophy is an opportunity to organize our philosophical communities as a public sphere of recognition in the African Philosophical Community and in the Latin American Philosophical Community.

## **1 - Latin american philosophy**

We will reconstruct Latin American philosophy (abbreviated to: LAP) in three dimensions: history, problems and topics <sup>1</sup>. The LAP begins around 1550, when the Spanish conquerors founded the first schools in Latin America and began to teach and publish philosophical treatises. Recently, there is an interest in including pre-Columbian thinking in the LAP, but the texts are often fragmentary. Post-Colombian thinking in traditional thinking is classified as part of Western philosophy, but there is a literature that discusses the identity and originality of the discourse. Anyway, it can be said that the LAP is original and derived. LAP's impact outside Latin America was small, although the liberation philosophy has had some impact on North America and African countries. The main topics were about ethnicity, social identities, social issues such as the liberation of poor people. We

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<sup>1</sup> The main reference in this part is the article from Gracia, Jorge and Vargas, Manuel, "Latin American Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/latin-american-philosophy/>>.

present, at first, an overview of the history of LAP, after describing the problems and some topics of this philosophy.

### **1.1 – Historical-political context of Latin American philosophy**

According to Gracia / Vargas (2018), the history of LAP is divided into five periods: pre-Columbian (Amerindian religious cosmologies), colonial (scholasticism), independence (philosophy of the beginning of modernity and Enlightenment thinking), nationalist (positivism) and contemporary.

a) Pre-Colombian period: It is characterized, in structures of cosmological religious narratives, Amerindian religious cosmologies, which are often fragmentary and often second-hand information. There are disputes over this period whether it can be called philosophy or something else or proto-philosophical reflections (see Nuccetelli, 2001, ch. 3; Mignolo, 2003). According to Nuccetelli (2017), the pre-Columbian, colonial and independence period is called non-academic philosophy. She considers pre-Columbian works as protophilosophy, that is, non-academic. It is at the beginning of the 20th century that philosophy acquired contemporary academic dimensions, including the institutional standard, which it classifies as a type of academic philosophy (see Nuccetelli, 2017, p. 1-2).

b) Colonial period: This period starts in the sixteenth century with the arrival of European. The philosophy is marked by Scholasticism by the Spanish and Portuguese clergy, that is, the work produced was cast in the framework used in the Iberian Peninsula and their medieval predecessors, earlier medieval philosopher-theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. These are the main figures of this period: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Francisco Suárez, Francisco de Vitoria, Antonio Rubio, Juan de Zumárraga and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

c) Period of independence: Modern philosophy and the Enlightenment (French philosophy and liberal political ideals) in the 18th century influenced the struggle for the independence of the Latin American peoples. The wave of independence spread across the continent, such as Simón Bolívar (Venezuela), Miguel Hidalgo (Colombia), José María Morelos (Mexico), José Martí (Cuba). It is in the 19th century that it will consolidate the new countries separated from the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Nations want to progress and develop, so the philosophy for that was positivism. Positivist ideas emphasize empirical science and pragmatic solutions. Inspires the official philosophy of the state of several nations, for example, the Brazilian flag uses the positivist slogan: "Order and progress".

d) Contemporary period: This period begins in the 20th century, with the fight against positivism until the emergence of Latin American professional philosophers. From 1910 to 1940, there was a period of founders who opposed positivism, such as Francisco Quesada, Francisco Romero (Argentina) and Farias Brito (Brazil). They were influenced by Henri Bergson and José Ortega y Gasset, who visited Latin America in 1916 and introduced the thinking of Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann et al. The aim of scholastic thinkers was the apologetic defense of the faith; for liberals, the end was political emancipation; and for

positivists, the goal was national integration and economic and social progress (see Garcia/Vargas, 2018, p. 5-6).

The 1940-1960 generation is a group that received a formal education in philosophy at the university. "Previous philosophers had been self-taught in another profession, but taking philosophy out of personal interest" (see p. 6). Latin American philosophers implemented exchanges that resulted in a growing awareness of their identity. It allowed to promote and spread the knowledge of the thought and the philosophical dialogue of the LAP among the philosophers.

The political history of Latin America is marked by oppression. It begins in the colonial period, continues in the struggle for independence and, in the middle of the 20th century, military regimes took the power of states by force through coups d'état. "The result was the same: intellectual abuse, violation of rights necessary to search for philosophical ideas, lack of freedom of expression and manipulation of educational institutions and scientific research for political and ideological purposes" (see Gracia/Vargas, 2018, p. 7).

To summarize the generation of the founders, French vitalism was used as an instrument to combat positivism. The next generation, with Ortega, incorporated German philosophy and the ideas of phenomenology and existentialism (Heidegger and Sartre). Scholasticism is, at the same time, renewed; there are also sympathizers of philosophical analysis and Marxism, Thomism and various versions of nationalist and culturalist philosophy (see Gracia/Vargas, 2018, p. 8).

According to Gracia / Vargas (2018), in the 1960s, LAP is characterized by: "(1) critical interaction with philosophical ideas from outside Latin America, (2) increased dialogue in Latin America and (3) institutionalization of philosophy" (see p. 9). During this period, the increase in philosophical activity, the number of new journals, congresses, philosophical meetings prove the emergence of professional philosophy at LAP. Four philosophical currents deserve special attention:

a) Socialist and Marxist thinking: Latin American Marxism takes many forms: (1) the end of imperialism, neocolonialism and class oppression; (2) a form of socialist humanism; (3) a conception of philosophy committed to understanding the world and its transformation.

b) Philosophical analysis: Analytical philosophy developed quickly, but it is criticized because it lacks sensitivity to social problems. It is difficult for outsiders to be able to fit into this methodology and follow rigorous argumentation, language analysis and the use of symbolic logic.

c) The philosophy of liberation: begins in the early 1970s with a group of Argentine philosophers (Arturo Roig, Horacio Cerutti and Enrique Dussel). Liberation philosophy shared ideas with liberation theology (Catholic ideas), the economic theory of dependency. The main characteristics of the liberation philosophy are the emphasis on economic autonomy, as opposed to economic dependence, the political regimes to defend the interests

of the poor and indigenous populations, and to develop their own philosophical thinking with new categories (see Gracia/Vargas, 2018, p. 11).

Philosophy of liberation has a practical aim: liberation, that is, a critique of colonialism, imperialism, globalization, racism, and sexism, which is articulated from out of the experience of exploitation, alienation and reification, in the name of the projects of liberation and autonomy (see Mandieta, 2016, p. 1). In other words, Latin American Philosophy must be a philosophy of liberation that aims at overcoming dependence, domination and subordination (see Mandieta, 2016, p. 7). The philosophy of liberation emerged out of both world historical and regional socio-historical contexts. According Mandieta there are some matrixes: The Economic Matrix – The Theory of Dependence; The Religious Matrix - The Theology of Liberation; The Educational Matrix – The Pedagogy of the Oppressed; The Literary-Artistic Matrix – The Boom and the Muralists; The Sociological Matrix – The Sociology of Liberation (see Mandieta, 2016, p. 7-10).

The Philosophy of Liberation has four currents: 1) The Ontologist by Rodolfo Kush and Amelia Podetti; 2) The Analectical by Enrique Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone; 3) The Historicist by Horacio Cerutti, Arturo Roig and Leopoldo Zea; 4) The Problematicizing by Horacio Cerutti, José Severino Croatto, Hugo Hassmann and Salazar Body (see Mandieta, 2016, p. 10 – 13).

The principal themes and debates in Philosophy of Liberation are about the question of populism, the question of the subject, the question of utopia, the question of history and the question of democracy and social order (see Mandieta, 2016, p. 13 – 15).

d) The history of philosophy: There is the elaboration of works and periodicals specialized in history and thought of some historical periods of philosophy, for example, periodicals on the Middle Ages and research on Scholastic Colonialism (Roberto Pich in Brazil) (see Gracia/Vargas, 2018, p. 13).

## **1.2 – Problems and Topics**

We present some issues that concern to LAP and philosophers today, such as the rights of Amerindians, the identity of the people, philosophical anthropology, Latin America's philosophical identity.

a) The rights of Amerindians: In the middle of the 16th century, there was a great debate by several philosophers, theologians and legal theorists about the validity of the Spanish wars of conquest. For example, Francisco Vitoria's theory of just war. The problem was whether indigenous peoples were natural slaves or not. On the one hand, Juan G. Sepúlveda defended the Spanish Crown's right to impose its legal and religious practices on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. On the other hand, Bartolomé de Las Casas insisting on the full rationality of indigenous peoples. In the 1990s, philosophical work on ethnic identity and political representation of indigenous populations flourished (see Gracia/Vargas, 2018, p. 14).

b) **The Identity of the People:** It is a challenge for Latin America to find identity. The Iberians imposed a colonial unity, but after Africans were brought to South America, the question of identity and the discussion of the rights of Amerindians, later African slaves, extended to Iberian born versus American born European. The issue became critical during the period of independence. On the one hand, there was who defended nations of population that was diverse in race, culture, and origin. They proposed a national unity based on a mixed population under ideals of political self-determination, such as Bolivar and Marti. On the other hand, after independence, positivist philosophers, like Sarmiento, advocated policies that favored European immigration as a path to development and progress. These policies were based on a negative view of Amerindians and Africans. But the failure of positivist ideas opened up the unity of mixing the various races that make up the Latin American populations (see Vasconcelos and Zea), that is, the cultural unity of these populations provided the basis for Latin American identity (see Gracia/Vargas, 2018, p. 15).

c) **Philosophical Anthropology:** In Latin America, the positivist approach had a strong influence on the scientific conception of the human being. Against this view are the antipositivists who developed philosophical anthropology in three trends: a vitalist anthropology, an anthropology of the spirit and an existentialist / Marxist (see Gracia / Vargas, p. 15). The vitalist view was influenced by Bergson, who argued that the human being is conscience, does not mean a deterministic or mechanistic view of the world. The main followers were: Vaz Ferreira (Uruguay), Alejandro Deústua (Peru), Antonio Caso (Mexico), Enrique Molina (Chile) and Alejandro Korn (Argentina).

Ortega y Gasset's visit to South America introduced a different approach to philosophical anthropology based on Husserl, Dilthey, Scheler and Hartman. The most important defenders of this vision were Samuel Ramos (Mexico), Francisco Romero and Risieri Frondizi (Argentina), Francisco Miró Quesada (Peru) and Leopoldo Zea (Mexico). Existentialism / Marxism grew from the 1950s to the 1960s, with the most important philosophers being Carlos Astrada (Argentina), Vicente Ferreira da Silva (Brazil). (see Gracia / Vargas, 2018, p. 16).

d) **Latin America's Philosophical Identity:** The question is to know what your identity consists of or if you have any special and original characteristics. There are at least four different approaches: universalist, culturalist, critical and ethnic. 1) Universalist means similar to science or has science as a model. In this case, philosophy needs to be universalist, that is, its problems, method and conclusions are common, regardless of particular circumstances. This is the deficit of the LAP, according to some philosophers. 2) For culturalist thinkers, the truth is from a perspective and depends on a point of view, that is, the method depends on a cultural context. "Philosophy is a historical company, not a scientific one, concerned with the elaboration of a general point of view from a certain personal or cultural perspective (Garcia / Vargas, 2018, p. 17). 3) The critical approach considers philosophy a result of social conditions, that is, the educational infrastructure (universities, departments, etc.) and the constitution of a philosophical community of

mutual recognition. 4) The ethnic approach understands the LAP as a philosophy produced by the Latin American people, although this group be in different places, circumstances, problems and adopt different perspectives and methods. “This approach seeks to understand how Latin American philosophy can be universal, particular and authentic” (Garcia / Vargas, 2018, p. 17).

### 1.3 – Brazilian Philosophy: Themes and Periods

In this historical description of Latin American philosophy, Brazilian philosophy is not included, it means that its themes, issues and periods are not presented in this context. Why does it happen? Was the political problem the cause of such a separation, that is, the struggles between the two empires: Spain and Portugal? Was it the problem of language or geographical colonialization? We are not going to explain this problem now, however, we will present a brief Brazilian history within the same Latin American philosophical history <sup>2</sup>.

**a) Thinking in Brazil – Colony:** Timm (2003) situates the initial matrix of education and formation of Brazilian thinking from the model of Portuguese civilization. “It is a matrix of intellectual control that tends to continually reproduce itself” (Timm, p. 37). Pombal’s reform is inserted within the Portuguese Enlightenment that is characterized by “a pedagogicism, translated into a government’s political program” (id. p. 38). This period may be marked by two highlights: a book and a thinker. Nuno Marques Pereira’s (1652-1728) book has the following title: “*America’s pilgrim, in which several spiritual and moral discourses with several advices and documents against the abuses that are introduced by the diabolic malice in the State of Brazil.*” The thinker is Antonio Vieira, who through *Letters* and *Sermons* shows the contradictions of Colonial Brazil such as slavery and the use of religion to legitimize and cover injustices and cruelties against Native Americans and Blacks. Pombal wants to modernize the country through Enlightenment, Nuno Pereira introduces an advisory normative speech to the State and Vieira maintains the criticism of the colonial *status quo* based on a masterly slave structure.

**b) Thinking in Brazil – Empire and Republic:** The modernization of the country advances with the arrival of the Royal Court to Rio de Janeiro and an according updating in scientific and literary information. A surpassing of the mere reproduction of imported philosophical handbooks begins to an elaboration of thematic axes, such as eclecticism, positivism, scientificism and Bergsonism.

a) *Eclecticism:* The founder of eclecticism, Victor Cousin, intends to disclose what is there of truth in every school of thought, that is, he aims to find a little truth in each and one of the philosophies. Antônio Pedro de Figueiredo (1822-1859) translated Victor Cousin’s work into Portuguese under the title of “Course on Philosophy,” distributed in three volumes. His admiration for Cousin’s Eclecticism resulted from a view on this philosophy as

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<sup>2</sup> The item Brazilian Philosophy is part of a lecture - “Brazilian Philosophy: Times, Themes and Types” - which Agemir Bavaresco gave in the “UJ Philosophy Colloquium” at the University of Johannesburg, on February 12, 2020.

expression of progress and modernity. Eclecticism marked Brazilian thinking from 1840 to 1880, a slave-based society, “with its conciliatory theses it served to the appeasement of the growing cultural and social tensions of the Empire” (id. p. 45).

b) *Positivism*: Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, has his motto imprinted in the Brazilian flag: “Order and Progress.” This is already a token of the influence of Positivism that aims to order experimental sciences, considered the ultimate model of human knowledge, instead of metaphysical or theological speculations. In Brazil, we have the so called ‘orthodox positivists’ who follow the positivist religion (Benjamin Constant, Botelho de Magalhães etc.) and the positivist thinkers and politicians who follow the principles to apply them to the country.

c) *Scientificism*: The term “scientificism” emerged in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The natural sciences apply the scientific method of investigation and control. Inspired by this method—positivism—it replaces philosophical, theological or common sense explanations with the method of the sciences. Brazil is influenced by the monist scientificism advocated by Haeckel, which proposes the unity of the universe without opposition between spirit and matter. The “Recife School” welcomes scientificism, its members being followers of Comte’s positivism, Haeckel’s monism and Herbert Spencer’s evolutionism. Among them, Tobias Barreto, Silvio Romero and Clóvis Bevilacqua stand out.

d) *Bergsonism*: Henry Bergson’s philosophy is a critique of positivism and its deterministic scientificist manifestations. It proposes the affirmation of liberty in face of the scientific and philosophical schools that aim to reduce human being’s spiritual dimension to predictable and controllable laws, such as natural laws. In Brazil, Raimundo de Farias Brito is the main contender against positivism, affirming that “matter is a function of the spirit” (id. p. 53).

**c) Thinking in the 20th Century and in Contemporary Brazil:** Timm describes many philosophical trends that have influenced Brazilian philosophical thinking in the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among which we should highlight (see p. 56-75): Neopositivism and symbolic logic (Pontes de Miranda); culturalism and historicism (João Cruz); neo-Thomism and Christian Spiritualism (Leonel Franca, Armando Câmara, Alceu Amoroso Lima, Ernani Maria Fiori and Henrique Cláudio de Lima Vaz); Marxism and neo-Marxism (Caio Prado Júnior); the existential thinking of Vicente Ferreira da Silva; questions of aesthetics (Anatol Rosenfeld and Gerd Bornheim); the political, literary, economic, pedagogic and sociological thinking in articulation with philosophy. (i) authors: Plínio Salgado, Florestan Fernandes, Paulo Freire, Darci Ribeiro, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Gilberto Freyre; (ii) research centers: Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros (Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies) (ISEB) and the Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning) (CEBRAP).

Among the many fields of research, Timm points to the following (see p. 91-95): ethics and political philosophy (fundamentals of ethics, applied ethics); aesthetics and philosophy

of art; Brazilian and Latin-American philosophy; phenomenology and hermeneutics; epistemology (analytic philosophy, philosophy of science, logics, philosophy of the mind); philosophy and applied social sciences; philosophy and literature; philosophy of education; philosophy and psychology; history of philosophy (ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary).

**d) Intellectual Models or Types in Brazilian Philosophy:** In this part we follow Ivan Domingues's book—*Philosophy in Brazil* (2017)—that provides a description of models of intellectuals in the history of Brazilian philosophy according to the political, economic, social and cultural context. Domingues proposes five models of intellectuals within a temporal framework and five argumentative steps: 1) The colony and the social structure composed of three actors: the master, the slave, and the Jesuit clergyman, in which there is a “bifurcated structure” between master and slave. 2) Post-colonial society (monarchy and old Republic) maintains the bifurcated structure even with the end of slavery, emerging the “foreignized dilettante intellectual, having as emblematic figure the bachelor of Law” (Domingues, 2017, p. 52). 3) The post-1930 revolution period through the beginning of the sixties, characterized by “a ramified social structure” in which the urban Middle Class arises with a new intellectual actor characterized by the specialization in a specific branch of knowledge named by Domingues as ‘scholar’ or ‘expert’. In the case of philosophy, this period is identified with the arrival of the French Mission to USP (University of São Paulo). 4) The post-1964 period keeps the ramified social structure and the implantation of the National Post-Graduate System (SNPG) occurs, led by CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel), resulting in the universalization of the specialized intellectual and now the first so called public intellectuals in philosophy arise. 5) The current period is, for Domingues, ‘the inventory of the possibles’, that is, of new intellectual experiences. For him, there will be a continuity of the specialist in the academic scene, but countering the globalized cosmopolitan intellectual. The public intellectual had the national political dimension of the modern nation whereas the globalized intellectual tends to be found within universalism (see p. 52).

Domingues works with two hypotheses in his research: a) that of the institutional/cultural deficit in the colonial period of Henrique Lima Vaz, Leonel Franca and Cruz Costa, that is, according to Vaz, “the colonial society did not present enough cultural density that could feed a philosophical reflection as an exigency or expression of the culture” (Id. p. 53, note 12); b) and the distinction between system of literary works and its episodic manifestation as used by Antonio Candido in literature, which Domingues applies to philosophy. Domingues follows Weber in constructing ideal types of intellectuals for each period of Brazilian political history as is seen bellow. There are five idealized types linked to the contexts of the social structure, the impact of the structure on the culture and the mentality, the constitution of the philosophy and its instrumental, articulated to the historical and philosophical dimension in each type (see p. 66-67): The Organic Intellectual of the Church, The Foreignized Intellectual, The Engaged Public Intellectual, The Specialist Intellectual (Scholar, Expert), and The Globalized Cosmopolitan Intellectual.

## **2 – African Philosophy**

Giving an overview of African Philosophy is made complicated by the lack of any uncontroversial or widely accepted criterion for determining what does and what does not count as ‘African Philosophy’. Indeed the hunt for such a criterion, following closely on the heels of the question of whether there is an African Philosophy, is one of the most divisive and fraught foundational problems engendered by the continent’s philosophical history. In what follows we want to give readers unfamiliar with African Philosophy a representative picture of the topics and problems discussed under the ambit of African Philosophy. At the same time we are also sensitive to the danger of becoming a target for those with some insight into the controversies surrounding African Philosophy and who are always ready with one of two dismissive questions: “Yes, but is it really Philosophy?”, or “Yes, but is it really African?”.

We think the opportunity to compare and contrast African with Latin American Philosophy instead of its usual comparison with Western Philosophy, allows us more wriggle room to break free of the contrived controversies imposed by these questions. This is because the first question is often a proxy for the attitude that Western Philosophy represents the epitome of philosophical thinking and so any tradition or practice that is sufficiently dissimilar to Western Philosophy, or offends the values associated with Western Philosophy, must be excluded as Philosophy proper. The mirror image of this sort of parochialism, embodied in the second question, is the insistence on rejecting as African anything that does not emanate from a philosopher whose ethnicity cannot be traced back to sub-Saharan Africa, or if the ideas being touted cannot be directly linked to cultural practices and traditions associated with the continent’s indigenous practices.

With this in mind we attempt to steer a middle course as we present the historical background to the tradition of African Philosophy and explain some of the controversies and schools of thought that have become synonymous with the term ‘African Philosophy’.

### **2.1 – African Philosophy in Historical Context**

The best way of dealing with the question of the origins of African Philosophy is to recognize that it is comprised of two aspects. The first aspect concerns the inherent human tendency to philosophize, to ponder upon the mysteries of the universe and existence. As with humans on all other continents, there is no legitimate reason to doubt that Africans, since the emergence of groups of humans on the continent, have engaged in meditations, discussions and debates that were of a philosophical nature. In Barry Hallen’s (2002) account of the pre-history of African Philosophy he provides examples of philosophizing extending from Ancient Egypt to early modern thinkers such as the Ethiopian Zera Yacob. While it could be argued that Africa suffers from a lack of philosophical resources as compared to other continents when it comes to recorded philosophizing, largely due to its tradition of oral transmission of knowledge, this first aspect generates no real controversy about the origins and nature of African Philosophy. This is because the early history of philosophical thinking in Africa is mostly consistent with the way philosophizing came into existence and evolved anywhere else in the world. In this sense, then, there has always been

an African Philosophy just as there has always been a Western, Chinese, or Indian Philosophy.

The second aspect concerns the intrusion into the consciousness of the global community of philosophers in general and Western scholars in particular, of the idea of Africa having its own Philosophy. This second sense of the 'birth' of African Philosophy speaks to African Philosophy as a separate and independent system of Philosophy. The most prominent early source of controversy related to this second aspect was the publication of Father Placide Tempels's book *Bantu Philosophy* in 1945. In the book Fr Tempels, a Belgian Christian missionary, taps into his experience working with the Baluba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. His stated aim in the work is to improve his understanding of African Philosophy, especially African metaphysics, in order to become more adept at converting Africans successfully to Christianity.

This means that the work acts as something of a Rorschach test for thinkers interested in African Philosophy. On the one hand, thinkers committed to decolonization view the book as a contribution to the colonial project, and thus see it as a problematic starting point for African Philosophy. On the other hand, Tempels is given some credit for being an early defender of the view that Africans have their own unique tradition of philosophical thinking. *Bantu Philosophy*, as flawed and controversial as it is justifiably portrayed as being, remains significant because its explicit attempt at identifying a uniquely African mode of thinking forced a conversation (Diagne 2016; Hountondji; 1996), both within Africa and outside, about the nature of African Philosophy. The fallout from this conversation influenced the divisions in African Philosophy still used today and which we expound on in the next section.

## **2.2 – The major orientations in African Philosophy**

In this section we follow the taxonomy developed by Kenyan Philosopher Professor Henry Odera Oruka (2003). For those who work in African Philosophy today, these categories are becoming slightly stagnant and timeworn. Nevertheless, they do point to some leading differences in the approaches people have taken in African Philosophy, and are thus useful for those new to the field navigating their way through the various topics and problems discussed under the rubric of African Philosophy. Unlike the case with Latin-American Philosophy, these should not be construed as formal historical movements in African philosophy. In fact, these characterisations of these orientations in African Philosophy are typically formulated by the opponents of the trend in question, and thus point to their shortcomings.

a) *Ethnophilosophy*: Some of the earlier discussions of *Bantu Philosophy* identified its ethnographic outlook and methodology as one of its most significant features. Tempels went about his investigation into African thought by attempting to describe the beliefs and worldview of an entire culture, in a manner that rendered the work more of an anthropological or ethnographic study than a philosophical one. This feature of his work and the style of characterizing African Philosophy it gave rise to, is thus described by its detractors as 'ethnophilosophy'.

There are a number of good reasons to doubt the usefulness of the ethnophilosophical approach as the exemplar of African Philosophy. For one, it is premised on assuming that the culture one studies and draws one lessons from, is representative of all the cultures across the continent. This assumption of linguistic and conceptual hegemony is a particularly dangerous one to make for a continent as diverse as Africa. However the main point of contention raised by opponents of ethnophilosophy is its uncritical, or anti-rationalistic nature. Oruka (2003, p. 143), for example, bemoans the fact that while all cultures have both critical and uncritical components, advocates of ethnophilosophy would have us believe that in the case of Africa it is the uncritical folk beliefs of its cultures that constitutes its Philosophy. Bodunrin (1981, p. 162) also calls out ethnophilosophy for foregrounding the emotional appeal of cultural beliefs and practices over rational argumentation. It is this reduction of its Philosophy to folk mythology that its detractors object to, and it is in the interests of correcting this misperception that some of them put forward philosophic sagacity as an alternative to ethnophilosophy.

b) *Philosophic Sagacity*: The most interesting aspect of the sagacity movement in African Philosophy is its note of individualism in a field that is dominated by communalism. It proceeds by identifying sages, or figures of wisdom, in African societies, and then probing them for insights on philosophical issues. The insights that these sages provide is often markedly different from the communal beliefs of their wider societies. Here is Oruka, who is justifiably considered the main popularizer of sagacity, explaining its basis:

Among the various African peoples one is likely to find rigorous indigenous thinkers. These are men and women (sages) who have not had the benefit of modern education. But they are none the less critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgements by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus. They are capable of taking a problem or a concept and offer a rigorous philosophical analysis of it, making clear rationally where they accept or reject the established or communal judgement on the matter.  
(Oruka; 2003,143-144)

In other words the sagacity movement proceeds by identifying African Philosophers in the form of sages, and then characterising African Philosophy as the body of knowledge emanating from those sages, and not from traditional African societies in general. In fact it is the contrarian knowledge that counts as philosophical according to African Sage Philosophy, as explained by Masolo:

While philosophic sages may still share with others some customary practices and beliefs, or aspects of them, unlike other members of their community, they emphasize rational explanations and justifications of courses of action. They owe greater loyalty to reason than to custom for its own sake. As a result, not only are sages often a source of new knowledge, but they are also a catalyst to change within their communities.  
(Masolo 2016)

This makes these insights different from mere folk mythology, the object of study for ethnophilosophers, and renders the knowledge gleaned from these sages genuinely philosophical.

One significant criticism of Oruka's approach is Peter Bodunrin's (1981; p. 162) argument concerning the method of extracting these philosophical insights from the sages. Oruka's method involved professional philosophers interviewing sages and asking them some leading questions in order to extract the critical and philosophical aspects of their knowledge. But Bodunrin points out that when this exchange happens, the professional philosopher is not just a passive recipient of the sage's insights. The questions the interviewer chooses to ask are derived from and influenced by his background as a professional philosopher. Thus the product of the interviewing process, and by implication the product put forward as African Philosophy, owes as much to the outlook of the professional philosopher as it does to the sage being interviewed.

c) *Nationalist-Ideological Philosophy:*

The debate raging in the aftermath of *Bantu Philosophy* took place against the backdrop of African states gaining independence from Western colonizing powers. Given this context, it is no surprise that political considerations influenced philosophical thinking in Africa and instigated the trend of conceiving African philosophy as a variety of liberation philosophy. The major difference between African liberation philosophy and the liberation that came out of LAP is that in the Latin American case the theorists of liberation philosophy were philosophers who weighed in on political issues. In the African case, liberation philosophers were statesmen and politicians such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara and Senegal's Leopold Senghor.

What is remarkable and unique about this trend in African Philosophy is that its leaders were active politicians and heads of states. This fact points to both the strengths and weaknesses of nationalist-ideological philosophy, as pointed out by Bodunrin (1981, p. 144-145). On the one hand, the political nature of the work invites the criticism that this movement is not philosophical in the strictest sense. On the other hand, the practical outlook of these men of action meant that their work was largely devoid of unnecessary metaphysical speculation and undue romanticization of traditional beliefs and practices.

d) *Professional Philosophy:*

The final major trend associated with African Philosophy emanates from the conception of Philosophy popular with academic philosophers working in the continent's universities during the post-colonial period. The proponents of this trend, represented here most prominently by Peter Bodunrin, make the case for maintaining the protective core of philosophy as involving, wherever it is practiced, the commitment to "critical, reflective and logical inquiry" (Oruka 2003, p. 145). With this essence in place, the door is opened to define African Philosophy as any work done by Africans with the requisite training in Philosophy, in any of the traditional branches of Philosophy including epistemology, ethics, logic and metaphysics *inter alia*. Acceptance of this leads to the counterintuitive result that a

professionally-trained African philosopher, working on paradigmatically “Western” topics such as logical positivism or Ancient Greek ethics, is still engaged in African Philosophy (Bodunrin 1981, p. 162). Proponents of this view concede that there are inevitable cultural differences in the way African philosophers engage with this work, but the difference does not extend to their basic conception of Philosophy as a discipline (Oruka 2003, p. 145).

However this easy acceptance of the central role of rationality in African Philosophy is not an attitude shared by all professional African philosophers. Professor Mabogo More’s (1996) paper, for example, argued that scepticism about the existence of African Philosophy is motivated by Western philosophy’s tendency to valorise reason and Western scholarship’s tendency to paint everything associated with African culture as irrational and defective. One of the most striking aspects of Professor More’s work is his thorough job of exposing the rampant racism and anti-African sentiment in the work of major figures in the history of Philosophy. He lays the blame for this state of affairs squarely at the door of the valorization of reason, something he points out is supposed to be at the heart of Philosophy’s self-conception. If this is the case, then it becomes more difficult to unquestionably accept, as the professional school does, the central role of reason in African Philosophy’s identity. The question of rationality has also sparked a debate within contemporary African Philosophy about the need to demarcate and develop a unique logic for African Philosophy separate from the classical logic at the heart of Western Philosophy (see Chimakonam 2019).

### **2.3 – African Philosophy in the Era of Decolonisation**

These movements or trends in African Philosophy provided a rudimentary framework according to which the practice of Philosophy on the continent can be understood. However, what was still lacking, before Kwasi Wiredu’s groundbreaking work on conceptual decolonization, was a way of operationalizing African Philosophy in the context of modern academic scholarship. In other words, even if a prospective scholar in the field took on board the lessons of these movements, it still was not clear how best she could take the plunge and start doing some African Philosophy herself. As Wiredu warned:

With the best descriptive criteria for what African philosophy actually is, that reality may still be worthless, incapable of helping Africa to master the arts of modern living and holding her own in the comity or (to be closer to the facts) in the competition of cultures. The quest, then, is not just for African philosophy, but for good African philosophy, and I regard what I call conceptual decolonization as a precondition of that objective.

(Wiredu; 2002, p. 56)

The history of philosophizing in Africa, and the political changes associated with independence and decolonization, thus came together to form a template for the development of a genuinely local, yet rigorous strand of African Philosophy, and the idea of conceptual decolonization was its methodological foundation. The basic idea behind conceptual decolonisation is “... the elimination from our thought of modes of conceptualization that came to us through colonization and remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices.” (Ibid. p.56). In other words, it was an

attempt at resolving the tensions mentioned in our introduction between tradition/modernity, philosophy/language and universalism/particularism, which haunts both LAP and African Philosophy. It did so by insisting on the right of African philosophers to draw, unapologetically, on the resources of their traditional languages and cultures as well as on the resources of Philosophy as taught in colonized educational institutions. By focusing on conceptual decolonization we are not claiming that it is the only way of operationalizing African Philosophy.

The best way to understand exactly how conceptual decolonization is supposed to proceed, is to look at Wiredu's examples of conceptual decolonization in his own work. In one of his earliest arguments using this notion, he drew on the Akan language and its concept *adwene*, the closest analogue to *mind* in English. He pointed out that the way *adwene* is used in Akan entails that it refers to something in the category of a disposition rather than a substance. He uses this fact, along with other independent arguments unrelated to conceptual decolonization, to build a case against the view that mind is substance (Ibid. p. 61).

Wiredu's early explication of the Akan concept of mind inspired a response from fellow Akan philosopher Kwame Gyekye, which in turn generated a broader exploration of Akan concepts of personhood (Wingo, 2017). This, in turn, led to discussions and debates about other aspects of the Akan conceptual scheme. Perhaps the most prominent fruit of this line of exploration for those working in African Philosophy, is the debate between Gyekye and Ifeanyi Menkiti about the nature and importance of communitarianism in African thought (see Molefe 2016 and Ikuenobe 2018 for recent contributions to this debate).

Another critical discussion that arose as a result of excavating vernacular concepts was the debate over Ubuntu as a formal ethical theory. In Thaddeus Metz's (2007a) pioneering work, he identifies an ethical outlook, Ubuntu, that he argues is salient throughout communities in sub-Saharan Africa. While there are minor variations in the way this outlook is described across languages and cultures (Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu are the most common terms in Southern Africa), the basic idea underpinning this communal notion is largely identical. The principle is colloquially understood through the isiZulu phrase "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", which translates into English as "A person is a person through other people". What made Metz's work controversial in the eyes of some (see Ramose 2007 and Metz 2007b for the response), was his attempt to flesh out this folk understanding of Ubuntu and develop it as a formal ethical theory in the same way as other mainstream ethical theories had been codified. The debate over the appropriateness of this treatment of Ubuntu still continues today (Etiyebo; 2016). However, this has not stopped the application of Ubuntu as a moral theory in contexts such as Human Rights (Metz; 2011) where African ideas have been largely ignored in the past.

This link between decolonization and the excavation of vernacular concepts has gradually given way to a different conception of the role of African Philosophy in the post-colonial era. This new perspective emerged as a result of the emergence of decolonial social

movements such as the global “Rhodes Must Fall” student protests, which called for the decolonization of education as a central demand. In addition, the epistemic injustice movement, underpinned by the analysis of epistemic injustice in Miranda Fricker’s (2009) book, inspired a new way for African Philosophers to make a case for the rightful place of African Philosophy on the global stage. One example of this approach is Jonathan Chimakonam’s (2017) argument that African knowledge systems as a whole had been unfairly marginalized, and hence were the victims of an epistemic injustice. This approach, best described as epistemic decolonization, reconnects the philosophical project of African Philosophy with the political project of decolonization, as exemplified in the Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2018) book. While epistemic decolonization is still an influential strand in African Philosophy, recent dissenting voices have begun to question the basis for, and the usefulness of, epistemic decolonization (Matolino 2020). However we feel it would be seriously amiss to end without mentioning the increasingly influential field of African Feminism, which poses serious questions about mainstream Western feminism, and which is thus a serious exemplar of African Philosophy and its role in decolonization (Oyekan 2014; Oyewumi 2003).

### **Conclusion: Lessons from the Comparison**

Our survey above is by no means intended as an exhaustive overview of contemporary debates in African Philosophy, and it leaves out some vibrant work in various sub-disciplines in African Philosophy such as African metaphysics, Philosophy of African religion and even African logic. Limited space has meant that we have restricted discussion to areas and debates that fall mainly under the areas of interest of the authors. Limited space also means that we are unable to explore in detail the nuanced points of difference and similarity between LAP and African Philosophy. We will, however, end off by pointing out a few broad areas of comparison that are ripe for future discussion.

The first point of difference between the two traditions is in the way they deal with the question of indigenous people and local knowledge systems. In LAP this is broached as the question of indigenous rights and one gets the sense that the debate still takes place from the perspective of the non-indigenous. This is clear from the types of debates prevalent in LAP in the past, such as the question of whether the indigenous could be considered natural slaves. Indeed it is clear that the identity of LAP, as embodied in its major trends, is conceived as something separate from an indigenous identity, even if it is also conceived in opposition to any European identity. This is very evident in the debate over the identity of the people, where indigenous identity plays a limited role. In African Philosophy, on the other hand, this problem is subsumed under the problem of ethnophilosophy and the problem of finding the appropriate space for indigenous knowledge is seen a problem of tradition versus modernity. The difference in approach is likely due to the fact that in LAP, the indigenous population is a relatively small minority. In Africa, in contrast, indigenous Africans make up the majority, even if their voice has been marginalized in the past because of colonization.

Another contrast is the willingness of LAP to adopt trends associated with intellectual movements in Europe and the West, such as positivism, Bergsonism, and so on. While there are philosophers in Africa who are trained in Analytic or Continental philosophy, these traditions are not as readily translated into their identities as African Philosophers. Indeed African Philosophy is very much characterized as something separate and different from the Western philosophical tradition, even if elements of the latter are adopted within African Philosophy.

Finally, we end on a point of similarity and possible connection. It is clear from the survey of both traditions that the foundational issue for both LAP and African Philosophy is the question of colonization and the appropriate political and philosophical response to decolonization. While there are clear differences in the way these two traditions have attempted to deal with decolonization, the colonial legacy is still very much at the heart of the way our traditions identify themselves and choose the problems and topics they tackle. It is perhaps the question of decolonization, then, that offers the most promising avenue for collaboration and debate between LAP and African Philosophy.

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