

Ethnophilosophy, African

Ethnophilosophy refers to bodies of belief and knowledge that have philosophical relevance and which can be redescribed in terms drawn from academic philosophy, but which have not been consciously formulated as philosophy by philosophers. These bodies of belief and knowledge are manifested in the thoughts and actions of people who share a common culture.

Most of the literature on ethnophilosophy is written about African cultures. Ethnophilosophy's most immediate African antecedents include Leopold Senghor's philosophy of *négritude* and the writings of the Belgian missionary to the Congo (later Zaire), Placide Tempels. Ethnophilosophy examines the systems of thought of existing and precolonial African communities in order to determine what can be the ideal forms of 'authentic' African philosophy and praxis in the emerging postcolonial situation. In addition to the pioneering work of Senghor and Tempels, this school is represented in the writings of philosopher Alexis Kagamé (1956) and theologian John Mbiti (1969) among others, many of whom were regarded as Tempels's disciples.

The central themes of the work of these disciples include assertions that there is a unified 'Bantu philosophy' and that its fundamental categories are manifested in features of language such as grammar, or features of culture such as cosmology and ritual. According to many of these authors writing about Bantu philosophy, the boundaries between self and other are not as rigid as in Western philosophy. Also, interdependence rather than competition is a primary social value and the human and nonhuman world is animated by a 'vital force', which underlies the perception of reality.

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1 Defining ethnophilosophy

The literature defining African socialism can be included in the ethnophilosophical approach. This is a body of materials combining Marxist social and economic theories with *négritude's* politics of difference. Two works by Nyerere ((1968a, 1968b) reveal that these political accounts share with other works of ethnophilosophy the thesis that the central values of Africa are communal rather than individual (see [Ethical systems, African](#)). The definition of ethnophilosophy is complex and ambiguous because it arises out of a basic ambiguity in the definition of philosophy itself. The idea of philosophy refers to two related but separable orders of discourse. The first order is located in the forms of talk and action found among the ordinary members of society and elaborated by them in the course of their everyday life and activities. In common parlance, a person, group, historical period or culture could be referred to as having a philosophy when the systematic nature of their moral judgments, the ontological notions that underlie their view of the world, the ways in which they argue and the criteria of evidence and truth that are exhibited in their arguments are under discussion. Usually the philosophy attributed to a person or social entity is not consciously held or espoused, but is part of the tacit set of conventions that make discourse intelligible.

The second order of discourse is dependent on the first order and uses first-order discourse to develop a self-consciously critical order of discourse that is philosophical in a narrower sense and is perceived as

having the capacity to correct the flaws of first-order discourse. This is the critical aspect of second-order discourse, but it can also have a speculative side that has not always been acknowledged by the analytic movement which has dominated so much of the history of modern philosophy.

The second problem in defining philosophy as second-order discourse returns to the basic question of defining ethnophilosophy. In a sense all philosophy is culturally shaped and socially determined. It is doubtful that any form of discourse is independent of its cultural and social contexts. If that is so, then all thought, even second-order thought, is shaped by such aspects of the lives of thinkers as their identity, social relations and the culture they share in common with their audiences and interlocutors. From a sociological and anthropological point of view all philosophy is ethnophilosophy. The distinction between first- and second-order thinking, while useful as a means of distinguishing modes of thought used within a single setting, does not help a great deal in specifying the defining features of philosophy believed to transcend the cultural and historical contexts in which they were elaborated.

These observations suggest a second definition for ethnophilosophy which arises more from the practices of philosophers than from the definitions they themselves have offered: ethnophilosophy is a term used to describe the bodies of belief and knowledge defined by colonized people whose institutions cannot easily be assimilated into models derived from the Western experience in general and the Enlightenment in particular, notably those historical contexts out of which the modern discipline of (Western) philosophy emerged and from which it draws its specificity. From this point of view the ambiguity that created ethnophilosophy has little to do with the people to whom the term is applied and much to do with the social contexts from which a specialism such as philosophy is derived.

2 African ethnophilosophy

Both African socialism and more strictly philosophical works of ethnophilosophy celebrate the subordination of the individual to the community that they argue is central to African culture and philosophy. On the surface this position appears to be radically non-Western and opposed to the emphasis on the adversarial individual in Western thought and culture. Actually it accepts a distinct opposition between individual and community that is not only Western but profoundly rooted in nineteenth-century utilitarian thought. The primary difference between utilitarian thinkers and ethnophilosophers on the subject of the individual and community is that the direction of causation is reversed. In the philosophy of the social sciences, for example, the utilitarian position known as 'methodological individualism' asserts that collective and communal forms are reducible to calculating individuals. In ethnophilosophy, by contrast, individuals are reducible to (or explicable in terms of) communities (see [Holism and individualism in history and social science](#)).

A number of contradictions are exhibited in ethnophilosophical writings. First and foremost, they remain profoundly descriptive and nonjudgmental, that is noncritical, about African traditions and customs. But they are generally offered in the service of a discourse that is powerfully critical of colonial rule and culture. This is the basis for the reproach aimed at ethnophilosophy by the African philosophers Paulin Hountondji (1983) and Kwasi Wiredu (1980), that critical discourse cannot exempt one side from the criticism it levels at the other side.

What is even more important, however, is the criticism that ethnophilosophy is oppositional without being radical. On the surface ethnophilosophy is robustly anti-colonial, yet it still accepts the basic categories in terms of which colonial culture defines other cultures and peoples. It attempts to re-evaluate them instead of seeking to criticize the grounds out of which colonial discourse emerges, such as the distinction between culture and civilization, or the primitive or 'traditional' and the 'modern'.

Thus, it appears that ethnophilosophy has two contradictory aspects. It is a critical discourse that defines itself in opposition to colonialism, yet it begins by accepting the colonial categories of traditional and modern. The most significant difference between the original colonial categories and their use in ethnophilosophy is that instead of treating them as diametrically opposed in the colonial fashion, ethnophilosophy tries to merge them by re-appraising indigenous values as worthy of attention and then accordingly discovering the traditional in the modern.

Ethnophilosophers tend to be scholars trained in the West who work on materials derived from outside the cultural contexts in which they were trained. The context and structure of their work engages them in an activity that is culturally hybridized. Since many of them are Africans, the hybridity also works in the other direction, from Africa to the West. Ethnophilosophers have occasionally used the hybrid nature of their cultural productions to create knowledge that is itself hybrid by arguing that characteristics of Western intellectual history can be found in African traditional thought. For example Alexis Kagamé (1956) argues that African thought utilizes Aristotelian and Thomistic elements. Placide Tempels (1959), arguably the father of ethnohistory, even founded a Catholic religious movement in the Congo (later Zaïre) based on the convergence of Bantu philosophy and Christianity.

The literature on ethnophilosophy does not usually combine discussions of ethnophilosophy proper with accounts of the writings on African socialism and Afrocentricity. The notable exception is Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1982) which examines nationalist themes and assertions about the person found in pan-Africanism, the counterhegemonic discourses on race and the literature on African philosophy (see [Pan-Africanism](#)). Appiah's work represents a rare attempt to take a stance which acknowledges the ways in which philosophical discourse emerges from cultural and historical conditions and is manifested in a range of materials that include but are not limited to philosophy. By avoiding the increasingly sterile debate about whether African discourse has a second-order dimension, Appiah is able to discuss philosophical aspects of a broad range of materials in a way that has escaped the grasp of philosophers more concerned with the boundaries of their discipline.

Perhaps the most notable characteristic of the ethnophilosophy school was its characterization of philosophy as a kind of collective narrative. Ethnophilosophers treated African philosophy as a narrative whose content is revealed through various codes, such as myth, symbolic systems and religious and ordinary language. In this sense, although African philosophy was represented as an innate form of indigenous expression, it could only be recovered and re-evaluated from a hybridized postcolonial present. This is another example of ethnophilosophers' ambivalent mediation between two points, the 'traditional' and the 'modern'.

3 Ethnophilosophy and the politics of culture

The political implications of ethnophilosophy are also displayed in the idea that traditional knowledge is or was collectively produced and appropriated. This central theme of ethnophilosophy suggests that individuals cannot be free; that in a society where knowledge is a collective product, cultural criticism is not possible. This in turn raises fundamental questions about personhood, agency and the possibility of change.

The idea that African thought is collective and unchanging has been accepted by some of the critics of ethnophilosophy. Hountondji (1983) and Wiredu (1980) argue that the capacity for change depends on three elements of Western Enlightenment inheritance lacking in traditional societies: individual freedom, abstract theory and openness to alternative theories and interpretation. In their view traditional philosophy appears to reject these features of thought. Wiredu (1980) identifies these with science and sees hope for

this redemption in the application of analytic practice as people seek new methods and solutions to old problems. Hountondji (1983) proposes that this redemption takes as its foundation Althusserian neo-Marxist notions which he believes govern the mobility of knowledge through history. Both regard the individual as the agent of change through social and cultural criticism. In other words, Wiredu and Hountondji defend the colonial and postcolonial as the new spatial and temporal realities not to be ignored by Africa.

This counter-critique ranks the West above the traditional as they separate the past from the present. This is because the influence of the past on the present should be minimized to avoid anachronism. In effect, it offers an alternative representation of the hybrid postcolonial social and cultural condition.

The critique of ethnophilosophy began around the 1960s after the first works of ethnophilosophy were published. Among the first critics of ethnophilosophy was Franz Crahay (1965). In his paper 'Le Décollage Conceptuel: Conditions d'une Philosophie bantoue' (Conceptual Launch: the Terms of a Bantu Philosophy) he argued that the colonial distinction between the traditional and the modern is analogous to the distinction between 'constructing myth' and 'practising philosophy'. This distinction is in turn similar to the metaphysical distinction between form and matter. Although form and matter make complementary contributions to the identity of things, they none the less remain conceptually distinct in nature and function. According to this perspective philosophy like form is of the mind. It deals with those elements of thought in which experience as event and practice is presented in and to our minds. It deals with ideas, related to and distinct from the particulars from which they derive. Though it is a human practice, philosophy diverges from other human practices such as customary ways of living and traditional (or any) group behavioural patterns.

Like matter, myth, tradition, custom and mores are glued to the sensual mode of experience. Their language remains unabstracted from the metaphors and experiences of everyday life; they are sociologically immediate and concrete. In this sense Crahay (1965) argues that while philosophy frees itself from its conceptually limiting fixation with sociological conditions by 'taking-off' to a free, or universal conceptual level, ethnophilosophy remains trapped in the closed confines of sociological structures and relativism like anthropology. In anthropology the argument that African systems of thought have been closed was developed by Robin Horton (1967). He argues that the nature of African social structures prevents African thought treating society and nature as abstract rather than personalized. In his view social relations are the idiom for thinking about natural elements, not vice versa.

The difficulty with the critics of ethnophilosophy, as well as with the alternatives developed by scholars such as Horton, is that by reserving criticism for themselves, the authors of this literature also reserve the role of criticism for the Western trained philosopher. This position implicitly supposes that traditional African society is still collective and so cannot regenerate itself by means of social and cultural criticism. From a political point of view the strategy of constructing a subject who can only be represented by an other is characteristic of nationalist thought and assertion, where some political actor or writer sets themselves up as the voice and representative of an emerging collectivity which can not speak for itself. The parallel between ethnophilosophy and nationalist discourse is not accidental. The guiding assumption of ethnophilosophy, that philosophical notions can be held unconsciously, requires a conscious agent to represent and lead the mass of ordinary Africans to a different world and a better life. This political project shared by ethnophilosophy and many of its critics is unmistakably nationalist and modernist. It is organized by ideas about progress and divides the social world into two classes, citizens who are critically self-aware agents and subjects who have yet to acquire the cultural apparatus that would enable them to become citizens. The debate about whether Africans and others possess second-order modes of thought also exhibits modernist premises about critical self-awareness, but is more concerned with the

relationship of philosophy (as an emergent profession) with society than with how cultures should be classified. Ethnophilosophy brings together two usually separate cultural arenas: professional discourse and cultural discourse. The result sheds light on unresolved issues in the definition of philosophy, as well as problems of how cultures are classified and ranked.