African Philosophy (UG) and (PG)

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.

Teaching
10 weeks teaching with 3 contact hours per week (2 hours lecture and 1 hour tutorial). The course is taught in Term 1 and focuses on philosophy in Africa that is expressed in European languages. The course "Afrophone Philosophies" (UG) and (PG) builds up on this course in Term 2, focusing on the area of philosophies in African languages.

UG students taking this course should have completed either of the introductory courses on African culture or African languages, "Culture in Africa" (155900838) or "Language in Africa" (155900867). Exceptionally they may take "African Philosophy" without having taken either of these courses, after a consultation with the course convenor.

PG students must take this course together with the course Afrophone Philosophies (PG) if they wish to take it as a major. The course can be taken on its own as a minor.

Course objectives (UG)
- acquire solid knowledge of African Philosophy, its history, main topics, and its relationship to other philosophical discourses in the world (European philosophies, Intercultural Philosophy, Latin American philosophy, etc.)
• develop the ability of fundamental reflection and critical analysis of central philosophical issues
• develop a critical approach to the underlying cultural presuppositions of philosophical discourses
• develop oral presentations skills (gain practice for giving conference papers)
• develop writing skills (learn to produce high-quality academic articles)

Methods of assessment (UG)

TWO oral presentations of 10 minutes, one in the first half of the term and one in the second half of the term, discussing the essay topics prior to the submission of the essays. The students are required to prepare handouts and/or a short Powerpoint presentation for at least one of these presentations. The presentations should include a brief mention of the readings for the essays. These presentations are intended to help the students develop the practice of giving a conference paper. The presentations will account, respectively, for 5% and 10% of the total mark.

TWO written analyses of readings of 500 words, to be submitted on the day of the lecture in Week 5 and in Week 11. Each of the analyses should cover ONE of the weekly topics covered respectively in weeks 1-5 and in weeks 7-11, the topics should be different from the essay topics, and the analyses should cover the required readings (listed under Readings) relevant to the topics. Each of the analyses will account for 10% of the total mark.

ONE essay of 2000 words to be submitted on Day 5 of Week 7 (after Reading Week), valued at 25% of the total mark, and ONE essay of 2500 words to be submitted on Day 5 of Week 1 of Term 2, valued at 40% of the total mark. The topics of the essays will be chosen individually by each student but based on a consultation with the course convenor and approved by the course convenor. The essays help the students develop the skills to write essays and academic papers. The first, shorter essay provides an opportunity to get early feedback so that BA students can improve their writing for the second, longer and higher valued essay.

Course objectives (PG)

• acquire solid knowledge of African Philosophy, its history, main topics, and its relationship to other philosophical discourses in the world (European philosophies, Intercultural Philosophy, Latin American philosophy, etc.)
• develop the ability of fundamental reflection and critical analysis of central philosophical issues
• develop a critical approach to the underlying cultural presuppositions of philosophical discourses
• learn to to give conference papers
• learn to to produce high-quality academic writing

Methods of assessment (PG)

ONE 20-minute oral presentation of the essay topics to be presented in the tutorial before the submission of the essays. The students must prepare handouts and/or a Powerpoint presentation as a basis for the oral presentation and must discuss the basic bibliographical sources for their essays in the presentation. This presentation is intended to help the students develop the practice of giving a conference paper and will account for 20% of the total mark.

TWO written analyses of readings of 1000 words, to be submitted on the day of the lecture in Week 5 and in Week 11. Each of the analyses should cover ONE of the weekly topics covered respectively in weeks 1-5 and in weeks 7-11, the topics should be different from the essay topics and should discuss ALL the required readings (listed under Readings) PLUS at least TWO additional readings of about 30-50 pages each (selected from Additional Bibliography or independently found by the student) on top of the required readings. Each of the analyses will account for 10% of the total mark.
ONE 5000-word essay to be submitted on Day 5 of Week 1 of Term 2. The topic of the essay will be chosen individually by each student but based on a consultation with the course convenor and approved by the course convenor. The essay will account for 60% of the total mark. Only one essay is required for MA students, who are expected to have the practical essay-writing skills at this stage, to enable them focus and in-depth reading.

Bibliography
In the course outline, essential readings are listed under "Readings". "Additional bibliography" contains resources relevant to the given topics that the students can consult or draw on, especially when preparing essays. Foreign-language publications (in European languages apart from English or in African languages) are included in this section for those with a competence in the specific language(s). Introductory texts, readers, and publications of a general nature are listed below. This list is for general reference only; required readings relevant to the individual lessons are listed under each week.

Basic pedagogical texts: introductions and history

Readers, anthologies, conference proceedings

**Overviews and publications of a general nature**


**African Philosophy in the context of world philosophies**


**Journals**


*Quest* - [http://www.quest-journal.net/](http://www.quest-journal.net/)


*Second Order* - a journal published by the University of Ile-Ife, Nigeria

**Websites**

There are many online resources; the following are among the most helpful:


Week 1: Introduction: is there an African philosophy?
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".

Readings

Week 2: The challenge of ethnophilosophy: Tempels, Kagame
"Ethnophilosophy" refers to the collective thought of ethnic groups or nations. The term was coined by Paulin Hountondji and Marcien Towa as a pejorative designation of the work of certain African and Africanist thinkers, in particular Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Their work is seen as a philosophically impermissible and illegitimate amalgamation of the methods and objectives of ethnography and philosophy. Although the criticism of ethnophilosophy was embraced by most African "professional philosophers", in the further development of African Philosophy it proved that avoiding the pitfalls of ethnophilosophy was harder than its critics imagined at first. Indeed, many writings of the most caustic critics of ethnophilosophy, such as Kwasi Wiredu, effectively return to the methods of ethnophilosophy - although these thinkers would probably object to their work being called that way. In this way, ethnophilosophy continues being both the constantly revisited departure point and the main temptation of African Philosophy. A profound reflection on this concept is key to any work not only on African Philosophy but on other non-European philosophical traditions (in particular, Latin American philosophy). In this class, we will examine the "classical" examples of ethnophilosophy, Tempels's "Bantu philosophy" and Kagame's "Bantu-Rwandan philosophy". We will question the legitimacy of both ethnophilosophy and its criticism.

Readings
**Additional bibliography**


**Week 3: The challenge of race: Senghor**

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, nègritude*). 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.

**Readings**


**Further readings**


**Additional bibliography - Senghor's bibliography**


Additional bibliography - selected works on Senghor


Week 4: The challenge of time: Mbiti

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.

Readings


Additional bibliography


**Week 5: African Philosophy 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, dictatorship of the proletariat, 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).

**Readings**


**Additional readings**


**Week 6: Reading week**

**Week 7: Paulin Hountondji and Kwame Anthony Appiah**

In this week we will study the work of two famous African thinkers: Paulin J. Hountondji and Kwame Anthony Appiah. Each of them represents a different tradition of philosophy: Hountondji is a former student of Derrida, Althusser, and Ricoeur, and his work is firmly rooted in the tradition of Continental Philosophy and has been decisively influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, Appiah is a disciple of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Analytical Philosophy. But the two are close in their effort to bring the two traditions of philosophy together: Hountondji has been extremely influential in the Anglophone world with the English translation of his seminal work, *Sur la "philosophie africaine"*, and Appiah is well-versed in French philosophy. The two also converge in their critical attitudes to ethnophilosophy and race, and their interest in the question of identity.

**Readings**


**Additional bibliography**


**Week 8: Valentin-Yves Mudimbe**

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".

**Readings**


**Additional bibliography**


**Week 9: Henry Odera Oruka**

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.

**Readings**


**Additional bibliography**


Week 10: Kwasi Wiredu

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.

Readings


Additional bibliography


Osha, Sanya. 2005 Kwasi Wiredu and Beyond. The Text, Writing and Thought in Africa. Dakar (Senegal): CODESRIA.


Week 11: African Philosophy and art

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 seemingly 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.
Readings


Additional bibliography


