

Full Length Research Paper

'You have no past, no history'ⁱ: Philosophy, literature and the re-invention of Africaⁱⁱ

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Africa has been a victim of misrepresentation since the advent of colonialism. This paper, which is largely based on textual analysis, examines how African philosophy and literature intersect in an attempt to bring about a better understanding of Africa in both the West and Africa itself. The study argues that the intersection of literature and philosophy in African literary discourse we witness is an inevitable consequence of the historical events (including colonialism) that conspired to condemn the continent—as a body—to subjection in the Western world of thought, and the response that this reality solicited from Africans facing the challenges of the Western engineered modernity. The study examines the writing of some of the pioneering modern African writers who have tried to undermine ideas propagated by philosophers such as Hegel—in a typical Eurocentric tradition—to undermine Africa, a continent they hardly understood. The objective is to show that through literature, African writers were able to reveal more about African thought than what has been readily acknowledged.

Key words: Africa, African literature, African philosophy, intersection, African discourse.

INTRODUCTION

From the outset, the study makes reference to two Africas: the one the West helped to create which has been a subject of a lot of controversy and misinterpretation, and the one that could be called the real-for lack of a better word-Africa that exists outside the Western conception, and an Africa that still remains least understood. This distinction is vital in understanding the premise upon which this article is based because many of the problems that arise in the study of Africa through various disciplines-including philosophy and literature, the focus of this article- expose the knowledge gaps, arguably, on the basis of these two Africas, the kind of knowledge they represent, and the challenge they raise for those seeking to reconcile the two to end up with a

harmonious whole. The concept of the two Africas can be traced to colonialism and the colonial mentality that made many Europeans interpret Africa from a certain perspective, oblivious to the reality within and amongst Africans themselves. In this regard, Mudimbe (1985:175 to 176) succinctly observes that the "history of knowledge in Africa and about Africa appears deformed and disjointed" mainly because of "its own origin and development" since the "discourse which witnesses to Africa's knowledge" talks about "unknown societies [largely] without their own 'texts'". Indeed, for the most part the input from the Africans themselves had for a long time remained absent from the discourse on the *created* Africa. Eventually, what emerges is two scenarios of how

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other people perceive Africans (that is, outsiders looking in), and how Africans view themselves (insiders looking at themselves). This article builds on the debates on Africa, with particular reference to the two “Africas”—one invented and imagined and other the actual one that survives regardless of the misconceptions and denigration of the West.

The challenge African intellectuals such as writers, philosophers, and even politicians have faced since the mid-twentieth century appears to revolve around making the *real* Africa—the Africa that is least understood—become known to the outside world in an attempt to correct the largely distorted Western ideas associated with the *created* Africa. As such, the article argues that the intersection of literature and philosophy in African literary discourse appears to be an inevitable consequence of the historical events that conspired to condemn the continent—as a body—to subjection in the Western world of thought, and the response that this reality solicited from Africans facing the challenges of the Western engineered modernity.

To situate the article’s argument, Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel’s (1899) *The Philosophy of History*, offers some interesting nineteenth century views on Africans. Though the view is esoteric, too reductive, and does not entirely and categorically represent all Western thought, what it does is present a problematic scenario for Africa representative of slanted Eurocentric thought. Hegel in this regard has been chosen since such ‘lofty’ thinking might not be casually dismissed as wishful thinking. Moreover, Hegel has been chosen because of what he represents in Western thought. In the *Philosophy of History* Hegel notes:

The Peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas—the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law—in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, and Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro [...] exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character (1899: 93).

Despite his misgivings about “Africa”, Hegel does acknowledge in this quotation the “difficult to

comprehend” the African character. This admission also hints at *the unknown* to the West, at the very least. However, before relating what he says to the primary theme of this article, it is worth further considering what else Hegel says about Africa. After dismissing Africa primarily Sub-Saharan Africa for what appears to be an issue of inconvenience—as not worth “to mention [...] again” because the continent “is no historical part of the world” with “no movement or development to exhibit,” Hegel further notes:

Historical movements in [Africa]—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there and important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of World’s History (1899: 99).

Experts in philosophy would argue that Hegel did define the terms under which he made these misconceived notions about Africa, and here he, in fact, desperately and painstakingly explains why the northern part of the African continent should not belong to the archetypal African world. From these two quotations, we can see the kind of atmosphere African intellectuals found themselves in at the turn of the twentieth century.

Hegel is an interesting reference point here not because he was right—far from it because even his strongest adherents would not admit so, but because Hegel signified how the West generally perceived Africa at an intellectual level as literary works of the imperial adventure novels of the time promoting the similar ideas, values and ideals which can easily be dismissed as simply *fiction*. Indeed, Hegel’s philosophical views on Africa hints at the core of the attitudes of nineteenth-century Europe toward what Westerners generally deemed as *their* understanding of Africa as influenced by Eurocentric thought. These attitudes and beliefs pushed African intellectuals—philosophers, writers and other like-minded people—towards aesthetics and philosophy aimed at presenting the side of the ignored part of Africa.

Wole Soyinka’s singling out Hegel in his 1986 Nobel Literature Prize speech when he became the first Black African, the award demonstrates how profoundly such Eurocentric thought has haunted Africa. In his lecture aptly titled “This Past Must Address Its Present”, Soyinka cited part of the first quotation presented earlier as his “favourite example” to explain how in Hegel “Eurocentric racism evidently found a formidable intellectual basis”. Soyinka (1986) insisted that he mentioned this “banal

untruthfulness” because of the continued belief today amongst “those who insist that the pinnacle of man’s intellectual thirst is the capacity to project this universality in the direction of a Super-Other.” Soyinka’s remarks serve as a timely reminder that even today, the concept of two Africas—the *one we believe we know* and *the one we do not fully know*—persist, with a dire need to reconcile the two.

It is in this apparent paradox that the relationship between philosophy and literature in the African context is being examined in this text-based qualitative analysis. The texts included in this study are only a fraction that could be used as textual evidence; moreover, they have been purposively selected because of what they represent as interventionist texts in the discourse on Africa. The sampled texts are primarily from some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa because of how contentious the representation of this region has been in Eurocentric thought as epitomised by Hegel’s postulations. Moreover, the texts were largely authored by Africans writing within settler codes such as Gordimer (1974), could not have been included in the discussion since, as her novel *The Conservationist* demonstrates she has also been influenced by the African landscape and belief system. Indeed, this is true when one considers the integration of the “amatongo” (ancestor worship) belief system in the novel.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines philosophy as a “[c]ritical examination of the rational grounds of our most fundamental beliefs and logical analysis of the basic concepts employed in the expression of such beliefs.” This definition rather than the one for aesthetics or the philosophy of literature, which focuses on the art itself helps to show the relationship between the broad discipline of philosophy and not just the esoteric part that centres only on the aesthetics, for example, dealing with questions of what constitutes art and literature in the African context. As philosophical inquiry has been central in the intellectual history of many civilisations, can we confidently assert that a “critical examination of the rational ground of [Africa’s] most fundamental beliefs and logical analys[e]s” had been employed in the colonial Western conception of sub-Saharan Africa? Recent developments in philosophy, and what early modern African literatures help to illustrate indicate otherwise. Oruka’s (1991) ‘Sage Philosophy’, is one such case in point. This article does not intend to go into a detailed discussion of their ideas but to sample some of the views to illuminate on the contentious issues surrounding the two “Africas”.

Sub-Saharan Africa, which Hegel inadvertently singled out for denigration, has slightly over ten percent of the world’s population. In this region, there are more than one thousand ethnic groups with diverse beliefs and cultural systems. Despite what has been said about

these peoples, they continue to exist within their own world view and their own interpretation of Truth and Being. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin (1989) refer to this scenario as the “Empire writ[ing] back” in the book of the same title. This writing back is an inevitable consequence of the conflict between the created and the real Africa, and how they are antagonistically projected. In this regard, African writers and philosophers have attempted in post-colonial discourse since the mid-twentieth century to “reclaim the past” and make known to the world the history and philosophy of the African peoples hitherto largely ignored or misunderstood in Western discourse as part of the Western attempt to define “the other,” or to use Hegel’s words, to make the “Unhistorical” “Historical” in addition to revealing the *developed* African spirit. Soyinka would insist that a tiger does not have to announce its “tigrity” but pounces, but in the overall scheme of things, African writers and philosophers found themselves in a situation where they had to do something about the Africa they were told they lived in.

The intersection between African literatures and philosophy is valid for two reasons: first, African literary works offer opportunities for learning about African philosophy; second, since African philosophy has remained contestable in the sense of the *created* Africa, Africa needs modern philosophers to articulate what constitutes African philosophy or to provide insights on philosophy in Africa. It is not enough to read about philosophy in Africa in the works of fiction; the philosophy also needs articulation by the professionals. The implication is that there were two concurrent forces developing more or less simultaneously—first generation modern African writers writing about the history, beliefs, attitudes and practices of their own people, and first generation modern African philosophers trying to show how African philosophy has existed in different African societies.

As part of these efforts, African writers begin a process of interpreting and recording the African thought in modern African (1988) fiction, especially considering that the *text* that Mudimbe refers to has for the most part remained oral in most of the sub-Saharan societies. Orality is one aspect that defines a swathe of territory dubbed “terra incognita” (Gerard 1990:19). It suited Hegel and his philosophising to exclude the northern part with its known and documented civilisation from the southern part that he so blatantly denigrates. Joseph Conrad’s (1900; 1995) *Heart of Darkness* also focuses on this part of the African continent. The northern part and Ethiopia, with its known written culture would not fit into this modicum. In this challenge of re-writing the past and reclaiming the philosophy of African peoples, African writers and philosophers in their respective fields help to re-define the African peoples’ identities because both groups share the post-colonial concerns of operating on the margins of the centre of Western discourse. As a

matter of fact, Eze (1997) identifies “the brutal encounter of the African world with European modernity” as “single most important factor that drives” “(post) colonial African philosophy,” “an encounter epitomized in the colonial phenomenon” (4). The “brutal encounter” is another feature that African literatures and philosophy share. Indeed, the scars of this brutal encounter have permeated every fabric of the African continent and have spared no discipline. In other words, the brutal encounter in itself has provided a framework through which African writers and philosophers operate.

Before many people in earnest started reading about modern African philosophy from the writings of the professionals, some of the first generation modern African writers such as Chinua Achebe, one of the foremost African writers, had produced literary works such as *Things Fall Apart*, an archetypal African novel, published in 1958 and *Arrow of God* published in 1964 that highlight the African social dispensation and belief systems in fact readers find the latter novel too anthropological for a work of fiction. There are many other pre-Achebe non-fiction works that also presented ideas about the African social dispensation and cosmology, but these do not fit into the scope of this discussion. Achebe's inaugural novel *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates that African traditional societies had law and order and belief in the Supreme Deity. In fact, the novel also counters the portrayal of Africa in books by Western ethnologists and historians as—according to African philosopher Onyewuenyi (1991: 31)—“Africa of the savage Africans who did nothing, developed nothing, or created nothing historical”.

What Western writers generally chose to include and ignore in the *created* Africa, especially in the colonial discourse, had a lot to do with biased perceptions with their root in racialism. To counter some of the racist portrayals of Western literatures such as Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1977), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1951), Achebe and other African writers did not only present Africa from a more sympathetic and much more realistic outlook but also opted to emphasise aspects of the African socio-economic and cultural dispensation in their representation of Africa what many colonial European writers had de-emphasised or misinterpreted in their *created* Africa. This counter-approach is significant because in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1995), for example, as Achebe aptly points out in “Racism in *Heart of Darkness*” deliberately avoids giving the Africans a language and only does so in a spot where they confirm their cannibalistic nature.

Similarly, Cary's *Mister Johnson* creates a romantic hero who passes for an African, who fails to reflect the Nigerian character. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel about what some people would call a clash of African and European cultures in the advent of

colonialism, a British District Commissioner observes that in “many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa,” he has learned that it was beneath his position to attend to “undignified details” such as “cutting a hanged man from the tree” because such an act “would give the natives a poor opinion of him” (Achebe, 1958: 179). And naturally, in the book [...] he planned to write he would stress that point. [...] The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write an entire chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

The District Commissioner ironically can be reduce into a paragraph material which Achebe has used for an entire novel, hence giving his audience limited access to information on Africa. Thus for Achebe, instead of turning this people's history and wellbeing into a “footnote” in history as many Western writers had done, he writes an entire novel detailing the African way of life, sensibility, spirituality and intellectualism, something that is even more apparent particularly in *Arrow of God* projecting more or less a similar period as *Things Fall Apart*. Neither does Achebe romanticise the social dispensation of the Igbo cosmology since the narrator also raises concern over the questionable slaying of Ikemefuna as a sacrifice to the gods and the throwing away of twins in the evil forest. The suicide the passage refers to comes after the protagonist's return to his clan only to find that “things have fallen apart” since the advent of colonialism has put a knife on the centre that held his society together. The first question this raises in relation to this novel is: If, indeed, sub-Saharan Africa did not have “Law,” why then does Umuofia banish Okonkwo from his clan for seven years as punishment for breaking the code of his society's values? The second is: where does one situate Igbo metaphysics if the Igbo did not have a belief system of note? These rhetorical questions simply undermine what Hegel and other Eurocentric scholars professed about Africa on the “Unhistorical” dimensions as the continent with its rich heritage has never been *tabula rasa*.

Achebe's maiden and archetypal African Anglophone novel also presents pre-colonial traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices, and a social dispensation that survived mostly through oral tradition. Though not a philosopher, Achebe manages to record not only his people's history and anthropology, but also their philosophy. By representing his people's traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices with fidelity, Achebe manages to underline the philosophy inherent in the Igbo cosmos. The belief system of the Igbo brings to light the personal god, *chi*, progressing to a supreme deity, the

benevolent creator, *Chukwu*, who created the visible universe (*uwa*). Achebe's fiction could be classified as part of fictions seeking to reclaim Africa's past and offer perspectives that would otherwise be dismissed as inconsequential or given superficial treatment in Eurocentric representation. More significantly, this work of fiction—though not necessarily a historical account in the real sense of the word—manages to reveal the profoundly religious nature of the Igbo people and how they interpreted truth and being.

These traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices of African peoples that found their way into African modern fictions did not occur by accident. They are ready-made materials that African writers found appropriate from their respective society. In this regard, Mbiti (1970)—a pioneering historian of African philosophy—underscores the centrality of the traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices of African peoples, arguing that ignoring their deeply religious nature “can only lead to a lack of understanding African behaviour and problems” and religion constitutes “the strongest element in traditional background” that “exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned”:

1. Mbiti defines African philosophy as “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life”
2. Mbiti's conception, hints at the presence of African philosophy in these traditional African societies since time immemorial.

In fact, his definition can be used to refer to what Achebe and other African writers produce as reflections of the philosophy of the people they represent in their fiction. As Onyewuenyi (1991) points out in “Is there an African Philosophy?”, “we can and should talk about African philosophy, because the African culture has its own way of establishing order” and has “its own view of life,” “the starting point of philosophy” (38). Because these traditional societies had ready-made materials in terms of traditional thought and belief, prominent African writers such as Soyinka depends on Yoruba, Achebe on Igbo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, an African writer from Kenya in East Africa, on Gikuyu metaphysics to explore in their fiction the thinking of their people and to make sense of their social dispensation and cosmology. The fact that they found “complete” ready-made materials in their society, representing their people's cosmology and social dispensation attests to the existence of a complex way of life that Hegel and many of his like-minded Eurocentric scholars and philosophers had failed to appreciate.

Ngũgĩ's *The River Between*, a novel published in 1965 representing the conflict that ensued as Christianity encroached upon the traditions and beliefs of the Gikuyu in Kenya, also illustrates how the African languages bear

testimony to the pre-colonial existence of traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices. After all, in the nomenclature of the African peoples, missionaries did find ready-made concepts that apply to the conception of Truth, Being, and Providence. *The River Between* shows that the Gikuyu believed in the Supreme Deity, Murungu, the same name used to refer to the Judeo-Christian God in Gikuyu. For example, the novel talks about the big Mugumo tree, a religious symbol in traditional religion, as a “mysterious” and “holy and awesome,” “ancient,” “a sacred tree,” “a tree of Murungu” (God) (Ngũgĩ, 1965: 29). When referring to the Gikuyu religious practices, Waiyaki the novel's protagonist considers the “ignorance of his people” who worshipped “Murungu, Mwenenyaga, Ngai” the Gikuyu deity whom the “unerring white man had called [...] the prince of darkness” (Ngũgĩ 29). And yet these same names also refer to the Creator (“Mwenenyaga”) or God (“Ngai” or “Murungu”) in the local Gikuyu language. In a Gikuyu song deliberately published in Gikuyu in the novel written in English “Ngai”—the denigrated local deity—also refers to Lord Jesus Christ. The interest here is not to liken Christianity to the Gikuyu traditional belief, but to highlight the pre-Christian existence of the Gikuyu cosmology that allowed the locals to describe the natural order of the universe and make sense of it as they lived in harmony with their environment. In other words, at the level of conception, many of the early European philosophers generally ignored the metaphysics of the Africans, which in retrospect could have helped them understand Africans, and hence help fill their knowledge gaps with empirical evidence. Instead, they had pandered to the commonplace Eurocentric beliefs seeking to dismiss Africa as “Unhistorical” when the opposite is actually true.

Because these traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices, as well as linguistic nuances regarding African thought existed in African traditional societies, both the African writers and African philosophers draw from the same pool of oral literary traditions and belief system. In fact, Irere (2001), argues that “there is an obvious sense in which oral literature can be considered to be the ‘true’ literature” (31) primarily because it remains the most widely spread form of expression through which African sensibilities are most readily attuned. Indeed, it remains the most dominant mode of expression that continues defining and redefining African ways of life beyond the esoteric view of elitist discourse. Indeed, much of the African knowledge and thought, which writers and philosophers exploit in their bid to both understand African thought and espouse African philosophy, are encoded in the oral traditions of the African peoples in which traditional African philosophy also resides. These are the basic raw materials for their ideas and expression of African sensibilities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, these have largely been passed on through the word of mouth, hence making orality centrifugal to understanding African

ways of life.

Oruka (1990) notes that the absence of written records regarding the past philosophical activity of many Africans should not “limit the sources from which we could detect traces of such activities” (60). Hence both African writers and philosophers in their own way have tapped into the mine of knowledge that the oral traditions engender as part of their attempts to come up with interpretations that reflect the African spirit and thought. In the process, these African writers and philosophers attempt to Africanise knowledge and thought. To do so, as Mudimbe (1988) points out in *The Invention of Africa*, “they have to first think about the form, the content, and the style of ‘Africanising’ knowledge” and how to integrate “traditional systems of thought and their possible relation to the normative genre of knowledge” (x). After all, these beliefs help us to understand something about the *real* Africa.

In an ironical twist of fate, modern African philosophy has benefited from the pioneering writing of Father Placide Tempels (1965), whose interpretation of the Baluba culture in *Bantu Philosophy* initially published in 1945 exposed the limits of classical approaches to the study of African ethnography, local rationalities and African philosophy. For the first time, a European philosopher referring to traditional African thought as “Bantu Philosophy”. Actually this “Bantu philosophy” is a misnomer and should only read Baluba Philosophy as he only studied one ethnic group and there are diverse ethnicities and belief systems within the continent albeit with some commonalities. This qualification is vital as in Africa there is a multiplicity of cultures and belief systems that cannot be reduced into just one philosophy. Usually it is this reductive approach to the diverse cultures of the African peoples that has also resulted into the lumping all its subcultures into a unitary whole without divergences. What is significant here, however, is that Tempels’ intervention treats “Bantu Philosophy” as an intellectual product rather than as “savage mentality” or “primitive thought” hitherto common terms among many of the Western anthropologists. In this regard, Tempels explains: “Behaviour can be neither universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of the things which surround him, of existence, life, death and the life beyond” (Tempels, 1945; 1965, 19). Tempels bears testimony to the existence of philosophy in African traditional societies. Although Tempels’ project was geared towards “civilising” Africans, something critics have not hesitated to pounce on, he does something that many of his counterparts in the West tended to ignore—alerting the West to the ignored and much maligned philosophy of ethnic and indigenous African groups.

And yet, considering the gulf between Western philosophy whose terms have been used to analyse the

created Africa and African philosophy which tries to deal with the fundamental question of epistemology in the real Africa, much depends on the role African philosophers play in propagating what Mudimbe calls “African gnosis” when examining the extent to which one can talk of an “African knowledge” (Mudimbe, 1985:, 149). The concern in this study, however, is not questioning whether there is African knowledge but how African philosophers and writers have attempted to reclaim that knowledge to dispel the unfair marginalisation of Africa in the world of knowledge. In fact, thanks to the efforts of many African philosophers, an African philosophy, seen from an Afrocentric perspective, has been established in African scholarship. This situation is different from the mid-twentieth century when both African literature and African philosophy appeared non-existent in Western discourse and early modern writers had to struggle to bring to light something that was there for all and sundry to see and learn in the sub-Saharan oral African traditions that could have rendered new meaning and insights on Africa had the Europeans had the patience to stop and listen carefully. Although Leo Frobenius, a German explorer and ethnologist wandered throughout Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, he read Pigafetta and Portuguese traveller’s reports, hence neglecting listening to the Africans themselves. His writings with Douglas Fox—*African Genesis: Folk Tales and Myths of Africa*—introduce some African traditional tales and epic into European literature. However, they do not go far enough in bridging the knowledge gaps in Africa. In other words, more listening to the stories of Africans themselves could have helped to fill the European knowledge void.

The ‘void’ created by colonialism and its dismissive approach to indigenous African thought posed challenges to Africans of diverse backgrounds. Indeed, Africans found themselves in situations where they had to find new meaning about life and modernity. Inevitably philosophers, including non-professionals, emerged. The non-professionals—political leaders—appear to have developed what can be called a “practical philosophy” aimed at finding meaning for their people emerging from the trauma of colonialism. These non-professionals include Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (in West Africa), Sedar Senghor of Senegal (also in West Africa) who did study some philosophy, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia (in Central Africa) and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (in East Africa) fondly called Mwalimu (Teacher) in his homeland. Nyerere, a former president of Tanzania, espoused Ujamaa, an African philosophy that emphasised the family, or community, as the driving force of African socialism; Kaunda, the former president of Zambia, promoted a brand of African Humanism, which emphasised man’s potential to help others overcome “the animal in man.” The African statesmen embraced philosophy because they had to think about helping their people find new meaning after the colonialism trauma. As

Wiredu (1980) notes, these leaders had to find answers to questions concerning the suitable socio-political organisation system to catalyse development undermined by colonialism, in addition to restoring national cultural identity condemned as barbaric³ under colonialism. Like in literature, Kaunda and Nyerere found ready-made materials in the traditions and beliefs of their own people, which they integrated in their philosophies as they charted their political course.

Africanising African knowledge, however, remains tricky considering that the end product has to make sense in the modern world. As a result, Wiredu (1980) explains, there is a need to distinguish between philosophy in Africa “as folk thought preserved in oral traditions” and African philosophy as “critical, individual reflections, using modern logical and conceptual techniques” (ix). He stresses this distinction to avoid “some unfortunate consequences” (ix), which may prompt some, particularly in the West to dismiss the former as lacking seriousness without the support of the latter. The synthesis of the two, then, can help balance the “Meta-African Philosophy” with “modern philosophical thinking” in a bid to advance the modern African philosophical tradition (xi-xii). Wiredu also sees “a third possible sense” in which African individuals, mostly in villages, far-removed from modern intellectual influences who possess “critical and original philosophical reflections” “distinct from repetitions of the folk ideas of their people” (37), which unfortunately remain outside the structured philosophical tradition since no one records these ideas.

These undocumented views, in fact, represent some of the dilemmas facing the development of African philosophy that represents the *real* Africa. After all, lack of a written record does not mean absence of an indigenous African thought; overlooking this mine of knowledge found in practically every traditional African society entails ignoring a large chunk of what constitutes African knowledge and philosophy. In the West, unfortunately, they can only work with what has been published, whether in literature or in philosophy. For Africa, written records do not paint the whole picture. Still, those African writers who have bothered to represent Africa in their works of philosophy have helped to illustrate that there is a lot that the West did not know about on Africa in terms of African philosophy and African societies primarily because of their mission was to bring “light” to an already condemned “dark continent”, hence missing out on the rich knowledge spread out all over the continent.

It is evident that, in the process of redefining African history and philosophy, African writers and philosophers need one another because literature remains one of the modes through which the West, whose discourse they

have been trying to counter for many generations, and African themselves can learn about the continent’s history, philosophy and religion. The efforts of both the African writers and African philosophies may in the long run help to synthesise the Africa the West helped to *create* and the *real* Africa that exists regardless of the way the West perceives it, so that we may eventually have a better understanding of Africa.

On the other hand, there is also a need to acknowledge Africa’s complicity in the paradox of the *created* Africa, the dilemma that has been effectively captured in Soyinka’s (2003) play *Death of the King’s Horseman*. Soyinka claims that this play “is based on events which took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946” as that “year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the Colonial District Officer intertwined with disastrous results set out in the play.” In the play, Elesin, the king’s horseman, destined to accompany the dead king, the Alaafin of Oyo, on a journey to the land of the dead must through his sheer will-power commit ritual suicide as part of the rite of passage to the larger world of the ancestors, which in Yoruba metaphysics links the world of the living and that of the dead. On the eve of his death, however, the king’s horseman chooses to marry a young bride, in fact, his son’s fiancée. Eventually, in the defining moment he does not die as his will *fails* him and the British officer intervenes. To atone for his family and save his community from an inevitable collapse, Olunde, the horseman’s eldest heir who has returned from medical studies abroad to bury his father, dies in his stead. In the dénouement of the play, when the women of the market unveil corpse of the son, the King’s horseman breaks his neck with chains and dies, hence taking with him an unnecessary life of his son. This death scene highlights the futile attempts for by the British Colonial Officer, Pilkins, who—because he cannot ignore this *barbarity of the custom*—intervenes at the precise moment of the Horseman’s intended transition in an attempt to save his life. By the time the plays ends, he realises that instead of saving a life, he has precipitated two deaths. Hence he laments:

O god!
 Can I be blamed for doing justice?
 Is kindness my crime?
 I was trying to save a life—
 And I have caused a double death.
 Man only understands the good he does into himself,
 When he acts for others,
 Good is turned into evil; evil is turned into good!

Although the Elesin attempts to blame the white man for his own failure, Soyinka deliberately changes the original story to make the horseman complicit in his own death (as evidenced by his taking a young bride). As Moore (1980) observes, by letting the Elesin marry a young bride on the eve of his death—hence becoming a

³ In this section, I benefit from Kwasi Wiredu’s insights on early African philosophy presented in his *Philosophy and the African Culture* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana UP, 1966) 145

collaborator in his own doom—Soyinka “leads the audience away from sterile clichés about ‘culture conflict’ towards a more subtle understanding of the event, turning it into a critique of the whole process *by which Africans consented to their undermining of their vision of the world*” (emphasis added). What is not lost in this presentation is the way African, in this case Yoruba, metaphysics are pivotal to not only determining an African way of life but also understanding the complex issues they face as well. Moreover, being complicit in the creation of a contestable Africa does not preclude the African cosmology, which render meaning to the actions of Elesin and Olunde. It is this long-established African belief system and knowledge that help to understand African wellbeing so long neglected in the created Africa.

Conclusion

Although this study cannot claim to be exhaustive in its analysis of the issues pertaining to the intersection between literature and philosophy in the grappling with issues relating to Africa, it does raise some issues that illuminates to the ongoing debate on Africa, particular by considering how the two “Africas” pose challenges to understanding the continent and the multiplicities of its peoples and cultures. The analysis demonstrates how both philosophy and literature have been fields of contestations in the discourse about Africa. It also shows how both literature and philosophy unite in debunking the often myopic, reductive and grossly biased Eurocentric thoughts about the much maligned Africa to bring about a new consciousness and a new understanding about Africa.

Generally, stereotypes about Africa witnessed in the imperial adventure novels in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century that denigrated Africa and its peoples were consistent with the mainstream elevated thoughts of Europeans as embodied in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* and other similar writings. Though changes have occurred and much has been learned about Africa from both African philosophers and modern African writers, there is still a lot that needs to be done before bridging the gap between the *created* Africa—a relic of colonialism and what it engenders—and the *real* Africa that continues to thrive regards of any negative reasoning about Africa and stereotyping. This means there is still a lot that ought to be done to make the real Africa visible to the rest of the world. In this regard, African writers and philosophers should continue ensuring that the *real* Africa does not get swallowed by the *created* Africa in their attempt to bridge the knowledge gap; otherwise they will, like the Elesin, remain complicit in bringing *death* to their peoples’ ways of life and African perception of Truth and Being.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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¹ A common expression in colonial discourse that Chinua Achebe and other African writers often oppose in their non-fiction.

ⁱⁱ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the joint Philosophical Society and English Association Symposium “Philosophy and Literature: Intersections” in New York, USA