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Souleymane Bachir Diagne. *The Ink of Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa*, Jonathan Adjemian (Translator). CODESRIA: Dakar & Presence Africaine: Paris, 2016. pp.1-106. ISBN-10: 2869787057.

Reviewed by Tarry A. Chimuka, National University of Lesotho.

The book is both provocative and interesting. It is provocative in the sense that it gives a fresh insight to the story of philosophy in Africa. The history of African philosophy has been characterized by a long absence until the publication of Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* (1959). The book challenges this story and argues that Africa had written works well before colonization! It is also interesting in that it contributes, in some unique way, to the 'History of Philosophy'.

The author reflects on philosophy in Africa. This is discussed in juxtaposition to the history of Western philosophy and the initial denial of African rationality. The author notes that the story of philosophy has been told minus the non-European voice (p.4). Africa was only supposed to be an annexure of Europe through colonization (ibid.). 'History of Philosophy' has placed emphasis on a written discourse and since African thought was largely considered oral, the absence from history is obvious. Africa has from time immemorial been characterized as a form of *terra incognita*. This has led to the marginalization of her languages – the vehicles of thought! (p.5). The net effect of this was Africa offered nothing to the intellectual history of humanity. Perhaps the African could only be useful if moved to the New World (p. 6).

Those who speak of the continent of Africa often divide it into North Africa and Africa South of the Sahara. So where exactly is Africa? Does this manoeuvre constrict the African space both physically and intellectually? However there is some form of consolation in that when speaking of Africa, one needs to refer to the continental sense and also in the diaspora sense (p.6).

Diagne contends that before European conquest of Africa, ancient cities such as Timbuktu, there were prominent African centres of learning. Thus, it is not accurate for Europeans to characterize the continent as having orality of reason (p.7). The author presents the work as a memento or précis (brief summary) of philosophic activity in Africa (p.7). To deal with four main issues – (i.) vital forces (ii.) time (iii.) orality and (iv.) political thought (p.8).

When discussing the idea of life force, the author highlights the importance of Placide Tempels' seminal work, namely *Bantu Philosophy*. The book made 'African Philosophy' an acceptable term in intellectual circles. Tempels maintained that the Bantu (Africans) were sustained by a philosophy of forces. The content of *Bantu Philosophy* was dismissed by Africanist scholars as a tool for political subjugation (p.18). Perhaps the basic claim of the book is that Bantu people subscribe to the notion of vital forces holds (p.19). However, what Tempels says about the Bantu seems to apply to all primitive peoples in many other different cultures. The notion of being as force is universally human, even Christian too (p.27).

Diagne notes the problem of translating philosophy concepts from one language to another. He observes that it is always a morbid challenge to translate from

Bantu languages to European ones. This is something Alexis Kagame had earlier observed. Perhaps later Wiredu too. There are many languages and grammars of philosophy (p.29). There may not be word for word translations for philosophy notions found in European philosophy. Perhaps the time has come to philosophize in African languages (ibid). Since it was accepted that most Africans could not write, their basic philosophic representation of reality was the artistic expression (p.30). It was maintained that African art was primarily a language of forms. The art of Africa was the representation of the philosophy of forces (p.31).

On the African concept of time, Diagne observes that generally Africa is not in the same rhythm as the rest of the world. She is also not developing along the same path and pace as other continents (p. 36). Perhaps a new frame of mind is required for the Africans on time just as that of science revolutionized the late medievalists (p.46). Henri Bergson, for one, insists that the future is what the world will become (p.47).

Diagne shifts his gaze to orality and philosophy. Can one philosophize in the absence of written tradition? How then can we preserve that heritage? Hountondji is sceptical of such a possibility. The need to memorize precludes critical examination. However, it is possible to think critically and philosophically even within an oral tradition. This is what Henry Odera-Oruka and Fredrick Ochieng- Odhiambo have been suggesting with their talk on philosophic sages. Diagne argues that as a matter of fact, it is false to regard Africa South of the Sahara as an oral tradition. Timbuktu negates this story. It would be prudent for scholars to move away from the paradigm which identifies Africa with only an oral tradition (p.56). Diagne could have given us some of these written philosophic discourses. This would have helped a lot to silence those advancing the thesis that Africans were illiterate and incapable of ratiocination.

For Diagne, the view that Africa has progressed from an oral tradition has developed largely out of ignorance of the eminent centres of learning in Africa. There is need to study Muslim centres of learning in Africa for philosophical rendition before the Europeans. Muslim lands existed where written texts were kept exist – Djenne, Timbuktu, Coki and other sites (p.57). A yawning question still exists for Diagne, if these centres were largely responsible for transmitting Greek texts, in what sense are they advancing explicitly African philosophic thought?

According to Diagne, African philosophy has a political dimension developing out of a universal socialism - African socialism (p.62). Chief proponents of this philosophy are: Julius Nyerere, K. Nkrumah, and L.S. Senghor among others. Nyerere for instance advocated for a form of socialism which transcended racial biases and promised to replace capitalism by whatever agent. Nkrumah, on the other hand, advocated for a socialism which harnessed the humanist element found in Africa. He allows for the use of Western philosophical instrument to achieve this goal (p.65). The basic idea in the three thinkers is that African political thought is characterized by egalitarian humanism feeding into community (p.67). However, unlike Nyerere and Senghor, Nkrumah's socialism was materially based (p.68). In the end African socialism came into question just as the world socialism came under attack in the 1980s (p.72). There is thus a new language in the African judicial and political spheres (p.73). This is a new language of democracy without parties as advocated by Wiredu (p.75). For ethnic considerations have threatened to destroy the post-independent African societies. The new emphasis now is on the politics of consensus (p.77). There is therefore need in African political philosophy to work out an acceptable idea of citizenship to enable progress in the continent (p.77).

Diagne concludes the book by noting that, there are several important lessons for Africa today. Individual persons and their unique interests have been largely

ignored in African thought. There is need to address the issue of human rights in Africa. The author sees the issue of human rights as of paramount importance to the continent. Africa has been presented as a region excluded from respect for human rights. Thus, there is need for the development of an African philosophy of human rights (p.79). The proliferation of dictatorships in Africa suggests the emergence of powerful individuals and the marginalization of majority of citizens (p.79). In addition, African culture has been presented as maintaining the view that the individual does exist to serve the community (p.80). Emphasis has been on harmony and duties to others and the wider community rather than on promoting individual views, competition and interests (p.80).

Diagne sees a conflict between the collective and the individualist approach to human rights in Africa. He sees a possible solution to this problem in according space and recognition to individual persons as bearers of rights and suggests de-emphasis on the collective as dictated by African traditions (p. 81). Africans must simply accept the universal declaration of human rights. In doing so, Africans would be asserting themselves in those rights!

Diagne's book makes a unique and significant contribution to the story of African philosophy. If there is any limitation, perhaps one may point at the need to grapple also with other topical issues in contemporary African thought such as the need to close the technological divide, Globalization and the future of the continent, the AU and the enigma of 'The Africa we want.'

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