Received: 4 July 2022 | Accepted: 13 September 2022

DOI: 10.1111/phil.12319

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Doing African political philosophy from a universalist perspective

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Abstract

There has been a strong impetus to set the definitional parameters of study in African political philosophy and theory. Many scholars advance the idea of a discipline intended to provide lessons that stem from "original" African moral, ideological, and political traditions. Often, these traditions and their ideas are presented as holding categorical moral substance in so far as they are seen to be specific to a culturally essentialist understanding of "Africa." In turn, an influential part of the literature estimates the normative value of the intellectual ideas and arguments afforded by a varied historical, socio-cultural and economic African geography by the degree to which, in being tethered to a seemingly homogenous, "culturally African" influence, these ideas can be opposed to a "Western" equivalent. In this article, I argue that the effects on the discipline of attending to, and being defined by, this cultural essentialism are at best unclear, at worst detrimental. I aim to contribute to the side of those who advocate a universalist perspective to the study of African political philosophy and thought, and who argue for jettisoning an unhelpful dichotomy between "West" and "African," in favour of a methodological, conceptual and historical specificity that allows the discipline to be truly useful to itself and to others.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The attempt, in an influential part of the literature, to define African political philosophy and thought by essentialist ethno-cultural criteria is unhelpful to the methodological, thematic and analytical innovations and imaginative experimentations that ought to invigorate the young discipline (Kiros, 2001b, p. 1). In the first part of this article, I highlight and query this definitional impetus. In the second part, I articulate an alternative guidance that is beginning to inform a bold crop of scholars, whose work is guided by what might broadly be termed a "universalist perspective." By critically interrogating and developing the normative ideas that continue to evolve from specific and historically specified African spaces and political practices, scholars informed by a universalist perspective attest to the fact that in the shaping of its philosophical and intellectual ideas, Africa is not—has never been—stagnant (Kiros, 2001b, p. 2). Such an approach brings undistracted analytical focus to the normative lessons of varied African geographies and historical experiences, for theirs and our own sakes. The aim of a universalist perspective in African political philosophy and thought is not to fulfil the field's aspiration to global hegemonic dominance, but to disrupt the very concept.

2 | "AFRICA" VERSUS "THE WEST"

The following is the start to a well-cited article in the field of African political philosophy:

> In the literature on African ethics, one finds very little that consists of normative theorization with regard to right action, that is, the articulation and justification of a comprehensive, basic norm that is intended to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones. By "African ethics" I mean values associated with the largely black and Bantu-speaking peoples residing in the sub-Saharan part of the continent, thereby excluding Islamic Arabs in North Africa and white Afrikaners in South Africa, among others. The field lacks a well-defended general principle grounding particular duties that is informed by such values and that could be compared to dominant Western theories such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons. (Metz, 2007, p. 321)

So begins Thaddeus Metz's highly regarded work. In one of the more explicit calls that those who propose to do such a thing as African political philosophy frame their thoughts in the opposing terms: "African" versus "Western," Metz goes on to examine the ways in which past attempts to elucidate an exclusively "African" ethical system have failed because they have been 'too Western' or 'too vague' to be considered "African" enough. His definition of a specifically "African" ethics being one that emerges from 'African soil and differs from what is widespread in the West' (Metz, 2007, p. 322).

In his ethno-cultural focus, Metz is not alone. He proceeds in a still–influential line of thinking that it is meaningful and necessary to define or prove what is "culturally" or essentially "African" about African political philosophy and to find normative weight in its ideas by the extent to which these can be juxtaposed in rivalry to a "Western" canon (Gyekye, 1995; Metz, 2012a, 2012b). In the more recent literature, and even in that part which explicitly rejects anthropological accounts of what is "African" on the basis of fuzzy understandings of "African culture," theorists seem to still, perhaps inadvertently, perpetuate the understanding that there are ideas that are not "African" because they are too much "Western."[1]

For instance, Motsamai Molefe has recently argued for rejecting a secular humanism as the basis of African ethics. In doing so, he challenges Kwame Gyekye on Gyekye's own terms that for a principle to be accepted as "African" it must trace to some facet of African "culture" or history. Molefe argues that Gyekye's humanism must be rejected since it is grounded in an understanding of autonomy, about which Molefe states: 'it is obvious to me that the notion of autonomy, which is a dominant Western moral concept … is foreign to Africa.' I am unclear as to what such a claim can have to do with the author's stated methods of analytic philosophy—is there not a single validly "African" moral understanding predicated on some form of autonomy among the many moral traditions that constitute an African canon? (Kiros, 2001a).

Even in Molefe's more forward-looking work, then, we are met with a wholly unspecific notion of a unitary 'sub-Saharan tradition' (Molefe, 2015, p. 60) in contradistinction to an equally homogenous "Western" 'culture' (Molefe, 2015, p. 68). The reader is left to assume that the distinctions between the Ancient Greek, Roman, Germanic, French, Dutch and Anglo-American philosophical traditions, are as superfluous as the distinctions between the Igbo, Gikuyu, Abyssinian, Akan, Yoruba, and Zulu moral traditions, or indeed that any one or two of these can be contrived as portraying the breadth and depth of the African canon, or that of some imagined line below the Sahara Desert—only approximately half of whose population could even be described as "Bantu" (Williamson & Blench, 2000). This is a term that itself includes such a level of indigenous ethno-linguistic variation that one wonders, besides enabling a cultural essentialism, what positive work "Bantu" could be doing in the hands of political philosophers and theorists.

One question presented by this seemingly open invitation that scholars who want to be taken seriously as African political philosophers first prove what is *uniquely* or *essentially* "African" about their ideas, is: for whose benefit? Is the work of scholars really improved by their first having to ensure and express the ways in which whatever argumentation they aim to advance fulfils the imaginary, and quite unprovable, criterion of having had no historical or contemporary influence from outside the Continent—be this in terms of imagined and reimagined ethnic identities, arbitrarily drawn and redrawn geographical boundaries or in those of even more porous intellectual ones?

Perhaps more important than the effect of the essentialist agenda on the work that African political philosophers seek to advance is its effect on the work it enables us to leave alone. In setting out to establish that norms and values such as "community"—in Metz's case, conceived as an homogenous set of beliefs applicable to an apparently equally homogenous group of "sub-Saharan Africans" distinguishable only in philosophically uninteresting ways—are more uniquely attached to a seemingly stagnant "African" socio-political normativity, some scholars appear to leave aside the necessary work of explaining *why* and *when* certain norms and values have been particularly useful to specific sets of Africans during specific and specified socio-historical circumstances (Getachew, 2019a). An additional consequence of this methodologically and historically unspecific theorising is the equally false mythologising of an apparently homogenous "Western" canon filled with ideas that belong exclusively, or mostly, to "them," and which "we" cannot touch.[2]

The impetus to engage in the definitional agenda is understandable. First, as Uchenna Okeja correctly notes, there is 'a specific deficiency in political theory [and philosophy], namely, its lack of engagement with African political thought' (Okeja, 2012, 2019a, p. 565). Second, as Okeja further notes, the colonial legacy has made it challenging, yet necessary to 'reconstruct the ideas and norms that informed traditional [African] political institutions' (Okeja, 2019b, p. 565)—not only for the sake of African political philosophy in particular but for the benefit of philosophical understanding in general. Third, left uninfluenced by the intellectual endeavours of African and other political philosophers and theorists, too many of the so-called "classical" ideas and normative understandings that

currently form the bedrock of a supposedly universally minded discipline would go unchecked of their inherent biases.

Let us take briefly, for instance, the liberal tradition in Anglo-American political thought that includes, among numerous others, John Locke's notions of liberty and equality. It is unclear the extent to which Locke's understanding that no man can be held subordinate to another or that men are not 'for one another's uses' (Locke, 1980, S.6) is circumscribed by a more restricted, material understanding of property particularly so far as that property is guaranteed by what Locke takes to be an adequate vision of the civil state (Armitage, 2004; Ivison, 2003, p. 92). The greater the extent, the more Locke's equality is, most truly, an equality between the property-owning few, and his liberty more importantly theirs, also.[3] What, then, is the meaning of an equality and a liberty that, in its basic tenets, is unclear in its application to all persons? And that, further, seems to be fully operational for those to who it most clearly applies only to the extent that the 'natural' rights of these few should be protected by the continued subjugation of the conveniently defined poor, propertyless, and enslaved?[4]

From a normative perspective, such theoretical constructions require unremitting critical examination. But here, the aim of the scholar in African political philosophy is not necessarily to go out and find some supposedly unique "African" norm that she can present in contradistinction to this supposedly "Western" idea, only to leave the latter uncritically standing alongside her "alternative" African norm, as if the former were simply one of a valid number of logical understandings from which society should be left to choose in its intellectual considerations of the normative matter.

If doing African political philosophy is to have any substantive meaning beyond a geographically-based heckling, it ought to be secured by the uses we make, with methodological clarity, of specified historical contexts and experiences as they have occurred on the African continent—and with the purposeful intent of elaborating new, possibly universal, normative understandings (Okeja, 2019b). This includes problematising and meaningfully developing what would be required to make distinct understandings—including those that we believe have had moral and historical value in African spaces—fit for domestic or universal purpose, or both.[5]

3 | A UNIVERSALIST PERSPECTIVE

It is ironic that those who wish to engage in African political philosophy by insisting on the "cultural Africanness" of the thing seem, also, to aid in perpetuating simplistic generalisations about what defines the vast moral traditions and complexly varied intellectual histories of the numerous peoples that have always made up the African continent. Certainly, there is both a moral and intellectual damage done by the methodological insistence that, at the very least and by certain arbitrarily derived criteria, "Africans" 'are alike to one another to the extent that they are collectively different from anything in the outside world' (Mazrui, 1963, p. 88).

By such a framework, those historical societies that make up an African geography are stripped of the indeterministic variation among them—variation that make them, distinctly and like all others, morally conscious human beings. Connectedly, the denial of their historical, intellectual, ethical and moral relevance to the world inside and outside of Africa (and not only it upon them) runs, unsurprisingly, apace. Consequently, by the essentialist definitional agenda, additional attention is given to those normative and intellectual ideas and arguments—now no longer simply Kantian or Hegelian but, hegemonically, "Western"—that have already had more than their fair share, whilst those that have had too little and yet ought to belong to us all are made falsely narrow, parochial and universalistically insignificant.

What, then, should there be to distinguish African political philosophy and thought? Charting the theoretical contributions of a 'pioneering' postcolonial scholarship on the colonial plantation, Adom Getachew offers one instructive answer:

> Through south/south comparison, the use of conceptual innovation and lateral extension, this cohort of social theorists offered a distinctive mode of thinking through modernity as a site of convergence and divergence. Their comparative historical, sociological, and economic studies of the plantation highlight the uneven and differentiated ways in which societies in the global south had been radically transformed by imperial imposition. In the jettisoning of north/south, West/non-West axes of comparison and in the effort to attend to the specificity of postcolonial political and economic forms, this episode of comparative theorising can inform contemporary projects of globalising political theory. (Getachew, 2019b, p. 41)

This is the kind of work that 'treats geography not as an organising principle that sorts different examples of political thinking by locating them in terms of geographical origin, but instead treats location and geography as subjects of political theorising' (Jenco et al., 2019, p. 39).

The implication of such an approach is not only to examine the universal utility of the intended normative assertions of any geographically contextualised theorising but to further place that theorising into genuine, and genuinely complex, dialogue with other geographies of theoretical knowledge particularly those whose universal significance has been, and often continues to be, under-explored. In the most radical of configurations, African political philosophy ought to be part of a movement to eradicate the notion of geographically located sites of intellectual and normative hegemonic dominance and imposition, including the prospect of its own.

In her work on the early twentieth century Chinese political thinker Zhang Shizhao, Leigh K. Jenco explores another answer when she writes,

> Despite this obvious debt to comparative method, here and in other work I resist the construction of a "comparative" political theory. My resistance stems mainly from the tendency of comparison to preclude the development (if not the examination) of arguments and viewpoints from outside those texts and debates that have marked Euro-American discourse in political theory for the past century … The problem that troubles me here is not the often-noted one in which the construction of markers of difference and sameness enables a culturally imperialistic project … [I]f we … wish to make our thinking about politics less Eurocentric and more capable of comprehending the variety of political experiences across the globe, simply recognizing each other as equals offers few constructive guidelines … It seems to me that the best way to affirm the global diffusion of political theorizing is to act upon it: to develop *from* [non-Euro-American] traditions and *in* [non-Euro-American] modes new possibilities for thinking critically about politics. (Jenco, 2010, pp. 9–10)

From my perspective, this is an insight of unparalleled importance. It is not the task of scholars in African political philosophy and thought to demonstrate the ways in which their work is either similar to, or different from, any other canon (Okeja, 2019b, pp. 572–574). The discipline's task is to delineate and develop its own ethical and normative categories, concerns, problems and questions and to take the discovery and examination of these seriously regardless of whether any others do. And not simply for the purpose of being categorised as "African" in some essentialist exercise in cultural

contradistinction, but because these are categories that have had—and continue to have—substantive meaning and value for large groups universally identifiable as human. By such a methodological focus, also, will a decentred, plural-universalist approach to philosophical inquiry further be grounded. As such, African political philosophy will be most useful to others, when and because it is useful, in the most morally coherent and analytically rigorous of ways, to itself.

There may be many more viable answers to the questions: 'what is African Political Philosophy?' and 'What should African Political Philosophy be doing?' It is not my aim here to canvas them all, or even most of them. Suffice to say that the best of these answers will, hopefully, not be produced by those writing articles—similar to this one—in direct response to those questions. But will, rather, be the indirect result of the substantive work produced by experimentally minded scholars who will continue to press ahead in the discipline whilst being entirely unmoved by any instinct to prove the worthiness of their ideas by culturally essentialist criteria.

4 | CONCLUSION

My central argument has been that African political philosophy cannot be defined by so simplistic and illusory a criterion as that a principle happens to be 'common' to a supposed 'majority' of "sub-Saharan Africans," (Metz, 2007, pp. 322–324) a claim inordinately open to both theoretical and empirical disproof. Or that a set of principles, despite being vastly influenced by both African thinkers and by numerous African histories and geographies, is not 'originally' African enough (Martin, 2012, p. 4). That a value or principle appears, and can be justified as more "African" than it is "Western" is—I do not think—very much intellectually or normatively to write home about.

I have not, here, done any degree of justice to the abundance of work that continues to correctly centre both the domestic and universal utility and importance of the myriad philosophical understandings and normative lessons that spring from numerous African geographies and histories. What is clear is that most of these works are distinguished by the justice they do to African political philosophy, thought and history. They neither allow European or Anglo-American philosophical traditions to set the epistemic parameters of their work either by semblance or by distinction, nor do they seek an unilluminating homogeneity aimed at securing for the field the same old hegemonic dominance that has been attained by some philosophical traditions, many among which have achieved particular distinction in their failure to speak for anybody but their most partial selves. The future of African political philosophy, then, is radical.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the editor and two blind reviewers of The Philosophical Forum for their thoughtful comments. I am also grateful to Uchenna Okeja, Fred Hendricks and to the participants of the 2021 Politics of Knowledge Production in African Studies Colloquium where this paper was first presented.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The penetration into popular understanding of such simplistic argumentation is perhaps what has led many, both inside and outside the continent to internalise the racist colonial understanding that such ideas as 'democracy', for instance, belong exclusively to 'the West' and arrived in the African space as pure colonial export. As Ernest Wamba dia Wamba traces, the kind of elite democratic politics that is practiced in many post-colonial states fails not because

Africans do not have pre-colonial experiences of democratic practice but precisely because we have failed to appreciate the depth and inclusiveness of that experience. See Wamba dia Wamba (1985; 1992; 1996); Wiredu (2001).

[2] Although I disagree with Uchenna Okeja that we do not have to take seriously the distinctions between the traditions deemed to be contained in a 'Western' cannon, I agree with him that if scholars are concerned, as they partially ought to be, with the dominance and relevance within African spaces of normative conceptions that are held to have been formally constructed outside of those spaces, the question is not *whether* the latter conceptions can matter to us. If such ideas, whatever they may be, are deemed to contain genuine normative truth, part of the effort of African theorists is to contextualise the importance of those truths and illuminate on *how* they might matter to us, or *how* they might not. See Okeja (2012, p. 665).

[3] See Arneil (1994, p. 609). For further discussion on what Locke means by property and what is required if such theories are to be normatively coherent, see Tully (1980); Olivecrona (1974); Fressola (1981).

[4] The argument about the role of Locke's moral arguments regarding property does not simply regard the nature of internal or domestic political arrangements but extends to claims that his understandings enabled the invasion of foreign lands and the perpetuation of colonial empire on so-called moral grounds. See Ivison (2003, pp. 91–93). Also, Arneil (1994, pp. 602–609), argues that the theoretical work in Locke's *Two Treatises* cannot be divorced from, and were indeed, an attempt to provide normative justification for, 'peaceable colonisation'. See also Tully (1993). For further discussion of Locke's incoherence with particular regards to slavery, see Farr (2008).

[5] For example, in his work on deliberation, Uchenna Okeja provides a good example of the analytical necessity of eschewing the impetus to see the ideas of African political thought as homogenously embedded. He examines important distinctions *within* traditional African deliberative practice and examines what would be required for such practice to meet the requirements of justice both to, and outside, contemporary African political spaces. "Justice Through Deliberation and the Problem of Otherness" (2019a).

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How to cite this article: Ṣóyẹmí, Ẹ. (2022). Doing African political philosophy from a universalist perspective. *The Philosophical Forum*, *53*, 187–194. https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12319