

African Philosophy—Sample Syllabus

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Description and Objectives

We will study the wide-ranging philosophical perspectives available in African philosophy. Over the past five decades, African philosophers have taken on core philosophical issues relating not only to the African experience of colonialism and post-colonialism, but also core metaphysical, ethical, and political concepts. We will begin the course with an overview of what the late Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Orika called the four trends (later six) in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, nationalist-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy, and an important trend begun with fieldwork by Orika himself, sage philosophy. We will also immerse ourselves in the history of African philosophy by reading several chapters of Barry Hallen's helpful *A Short History of African Philosophy*. Having grounded ourselves in the general history of African philosophy, we will note that African philosophy's history is still in question. Does it begin with the thought of Egyptians such as Ptah-hotep, as Cheikh Anta Diop claims? Is there a continuous line of thought between pre-colonial societies in Africa and the philosophies on the continent today? In addition, in the present day, is there an underlying "unanimism" among African philosophers such that one can speak of an *African* philosophy?

We will see that a number of philosophers we study this semester question any "unanimism" among not just African philosophers, whom we would expect to disagree with one another, but also among the very different societies and cultures on the African continent. As such, what "African philosophy" means, as Orika's "four trends" make clear, is at issue. After learning the four trends in African philosophy, we will read Orika's work on sage philosophy, which argues that indigenous thinkers fall into two categories in rural Kenya, namely those who reproduce the ideas of the past and those who can reproduce these ideas while critiquing them. The latter, for Orika, are sage philosophers and show that African philosophy, past and present, is not simply to be found in the shared cultural views of African ethnic groups, as ethno-philosophers implicitly argued. We will turn from Orika to the versions of ethno-philosophy on offer from Placide Tempels and John Mbiti. With Kwame Gyekye's "Tradition and Modernity," we will see the intertwining of received traditional ideas and new philosophical concepts that make up the present-day experience of being African. For Gyekye, tradition and modernity are not antithetical, and we must be wary of any suggestion that what is modern is to be identified with the West, with other cultures, such as those in Africa, adhering simply to traditional values. In Kwasi Wiredu's "Are there Cultural Universals?" we will see that a number of African philosophers have claimed that African philosophy addresses not just the African experience of enslavement and colonization, but also directs our attention to universal concerns. If African philosophy is to be a *philosophy*, Wiredu has long argued, then it must attend to universal ideas such as truth and personhood, which Wiredu explores through Akan philosophical concepts. We will also look at Appiah's comparison of Western and Akan views of personhood, as well as Didier Kaphagwani's overview of personhood in a variety of African societies.

The most widely read area of African philosophy has been African political philosophy. We will first review the Negritude movement, which grew out of the Harlem Renaissance in the United States. We will then turn to Fanon's influential work in *Wretched of the Earth*, including his critique of Senghor's ideas on negritude. We will end the course with a consideration of different versions of communitarianism on offer by African philosophers such as D. A. Masolo and Kwame Gyekye, which each sees as a corrective to the

hyperindividualism of Western philosophy. This communitarian ethic, Richard Bell claims, is central to understanding the influential work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa following the fall of Apartheid in the 1990s.

There are two main goals for your participation in this course: (1) to become acquainted with the philosophical practices and figures we will cover this quarter, and (2) to gain an overview of major ideas and practices in African philosophy.

Requirements

Reading: You **must** read the assigned texts prior to class and it is highly recommended that you read these texts at least twice. Given the breadth of this survey course, it will be important for you to keep up with the readings and bring to class any questions you have about the texts. Use a dictionary to look up words that you don't understand, and come to class with any questions you have. This is a reading-intensive class, as you will see below. You should do your best to keep up with the assignments from the beginning since it will be difficult, if not impossible, to catch up later on.

Quizzes and Discussion Papers (35%): Quizzes will be given as either in-class tests or pre-assigned discussion papers to ensure that everyone is keeping up with the readings. Often, there will be extra credit points offered and, in the past, only a few students have not managed to increase their overall grade with their quiz average (including extra credit points). There will be no make-ups for the quizzes, though extra assignments can be used to make up for missed quizzes.

Class Participation (25%): You will be expected to attend each class having read the relevant materials and able to comment upon them to other members of the class. Your participation grade will be assessed with the following in mind: (1) attendance (no more than three absences during the semester, no exceptions) and (2) level and quality of participation. If you are shy, you will need to get over this rather early in the class, given the importance of class participation in your overall grade. In addition, you are expected to sign up for one of the readings below and provide a handout to the class for that reading. It should only be about 2 pages in length (single-spaced, please) and you should make enough copies or printouts at the computer lab for everyone in the class. This handout is worth 5 points on your grade.

If you suffer from any disabilities, such as a social phobia and/or a physical or mental condition, which you believe may impede your progress and participation in the course, either with regard to the class itself or quizzes and exams, please let me know as soon as possible. I have worked with students with special circumstances before and I will be glad to do so again to make this classroom as inclusive as possible.

Final Paper (40%): The final examination will be cumulative and no make-up will be available. If you have kept up with the reading, asked questions during class about difficult passages, and met with me when the need arose, then you will have little difficulty with the final paper.

Cheating: I have failed students in the past for plagiarism, and I will not hesitate doing so again if necessary. There may be those of you who will be tempted to cheat on the quizzes, homework, and/or the final examination. Don't. I've caught cheaters in the past and have

failed them for doing so. **If you are caught cheating in this class, no matter the assignment, you will be failed for the course.**

REQUIRED TEXTS:

A Short History of African Philosophy (ISBN: 0253215315)
In My Father's House, K. A. Appiah (ISBN: 0195068521)
Understanding African Philosophy, Richard H. Bell (ISBN: 0415939372)
Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon (ISBN: 0802141323)

The following texts will be made available as part of a course packet:

- H. O. Oruka, "Four Trends in African Philosophy," from *Sage Philosophy* (Nairobi: African Center for Technology Studies, 1991)
- H. O. Oruka, "Philosophical Sagacity," from *Sage Philosophy* (Nairobi: African Center for Technology Studies, 1991)
- Gail Presbey, "African Sage Philosophy and Socrates: Midwifery and Method," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, V. 42, N. 2 (June 2002)
- D. A. Masolo, "Tempels and the Setting of Ethnophilosophy," *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994)
- D. A. Masolo, "Cultures without Time? Mbiti's Religious Ethnology," *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994)
- Kwame Gyekye, "Tradition and Modernity," from *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Polycarp Ikuenobe, "The Parochial Universalist Conception of 'Philosophy' and African Philosophy," in *Philosophy East & West*, V. 47, N. 2 (August 1997)
- Kwasi Wiredu, "Are there Cultural Universals?" from *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996)
- K. A. Appiah, "Akan and Euro-American Concepts of the Person," *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. Lee Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Didier N. Kaphagwani, "Some African Conceptions of Person: A Critique," *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, ed. I. Karp and D. A. Masolo (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000)
- Leopold S. Senghor, "On Negrohood: Psychology of the African Negro," *African Philosophy: Selected Readings*, ed. A. Mosley (New York: Prentice Hall, 1995)
- D. A. Masolo, "African Communitarianism and Western Communitarianism," *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. K. Wiredu (New York: Blackwell Publishing)
- Kwame Gyekye "Person and Community: In Defense of Moderate Communitarianism," *Tradition and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Lucius T. Outlaw, "African 'Philosophy'?: Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges," *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996)
- Peter Gratton, "What's in a Name? African Philosophy in the Making," *Philosophia Africana*, V. 6., N. 2. (August 2003)
- Tseney Serequeberhan "The African Anti-Colonial Struggle: An Effort at Reclaiming History," *Philosophia Africana*, V. 6, N. 1 (March 2003)

ASSESSMENT:

You will be assessed a final grade in this class based upon a combination of your quiz, paper, and in-class discussion grades:

Class Participation (Including handout for one of the readings)	Quizzes and Discussion Papers	Final Paper:
25 points	35 points	40 points

Reading Assignments:

Please note: the syllabus will be revised during the course and you must attend class to ensure that you know the assigned materials.

Assignment

- Week One: African Philosophy’s History**
A Short History of African Philosophy (chapters 1-2)
 “Four Trends in African Philosophy”
Understanding African Philosophy (chapter 2)
- Week Two: Philosophical Sagacity**
 “Philosophical Sagacity,” H. O. Oruka
 “African Sage Philosophy and Socrates: Midwifery and Method,” Gail Presbey
Understanding African Philosophy (chapter 5)
- Week Three: Ethnophilosophy and Its Critics**
 “Bantu Philosophy,” Placide Tempels
 “African Religions and Philosophy,” John Mbiti
- Week Four:** “Tempels and the Setting of Ethnophilosophy,” D. A. Masolo
 “Cultures without Time? Mbiti’s Religious Ethnology,” D. A. Masolo
In My Father’s House (chapter 2)
 “Postscript” to *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*
- Week Five: Tradition and Modernity**
 “Tradition and Modernity,” Kwame Gyekye
- Week Six:** *In My Father’s House* (chapters 6-8)
- Week Seven: African Philosophy or African Philosophy (Particular or Universal)**
 “The Parochial Universalist Conception of ‘Philosophy’ and African Philosophy,” Polycarp Ikuenobe
 “Are there Cultural Universals?” Kwasi Wiredu
- Week Eight: African Conceptions of the Person**
 “Akan and Euro-American Concepts of the Person,” K. A. Appiah
 “Some African Conceptions of Person: A Critique,” Didier N. Kaphagwani
- Week Nine: Negritude**
Understanding African Philosophy (chapter 3)
A Short History of African Philosophy (chapter 7)
 “On Negrohood: Psychology of the African Negro,” Leopold S. Senghor
- Week Ten: Fanon**
Wretched of the Earth (introduction and “On Violence”)
- Week Eleven: Fanon Continued**
Wretched of the Earth (“The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” “On National Culture,” and “Colonial War and Mental Disorders”)

Week Twelve: African Communitarianism

“African Communitarianism and Western Communitarianism,” D. A. Masolo

“Person and Community: In Defense of Moderate Communitarianism,”

Kwame Gyekye

Week Thirteen: South Africa, Forgiveness and *Ubuntu*

Understanding African Philosophy (chapter 5)

Selections from the film *Long Night's Journey into Day*

Week Fourteen: African Philosophy's Challenge to Western Philosophy

“African ‘Philosophy’?: Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges,”

Lucius T. Outlaw

“What’s in a Name? African Philosophy in the Making,” Peter Gratton

“The African Anti-Colonial Struggle: An Effort at Reclaiming History,”

Tseney Serequeberhan