Afrophone Philosophies Syllabus, p. 1

Afrophone Philosophies (UG) and (PG)

Overview
Afrophone philosophies (i.e. philosophies in African languages) are the philosophical discourses in African languages: the (oral or written) texts that are the channels of philosophical thought in Africa. In order adequately to approach and to understand these philosophical expressions in African languages, an interdisciplinary approach is indispensable, one which is informed by and draws on the methods and data from a range of disciplines: linguistics (textual analysis, semantics, translation studies), anthropology, history, literary theory and poetics, aesthetics, post-colonial studies, and others more. As we will be working with texts, we will especially profit from the insights elaborated in literature studies: the analyses of orality, performance, narrativity, theory of text and of genre, etc.

After a general lecture on the role of language and of genre in the expression of philosophical thought, in the first half of this course we will be looking at how "professional philosophers", i.e. thinkers who have articulated a scathing criticism of "ethnophilosophy", engage with communal thought. We will look at several case studies: the thought of the Akan, the Yorùbá, and the southern African concept of ubuntu. We will also look at a mutation of this concept in Swahili culture, utu, as elaborated by several Swahili intellectuals.

In the second half of the course, we will look at original writings in African languages. We will explore the existentialist novels of Swahili and Shona writers (Euphrase Kezilahabi, William Mkufya, Ignatius T. Mabasa) and the critical reactions to Western philosophy (epistemology, metaphysics) in the work of these authors. These fictional writings are not only explicit discussions of various philosophical issues, but they are also directly relevant in a broader context of cultural debate in/on Africa. They warn against the pitfalls of cultural essentialism - a constant danger in the understanding and self-understanding of African cultures. They contribute to the discussions, initiated from different standpoints by Senghor and by Mudimbe, on an African epistemology. They also pose general questions about philosophy and religion, for example regarding the role of free will in religious behaviour, the nature of reality, the being of God, and many others.

To conclude the course, we will look at the systems of esoteric knowledge found in Francophone West Africa and the reactions to these in non-fictional writings in Wolof and in Bambara as well as in contemporary artistic productions (films, fiction in African languages).

Teaching
10 weeks teaching with 3 contact hours per week (2 hours lecture and 1 hour tutorial). The course is taught in Term 2. The course "African Philosophy" (UG) and (PG) is a pre-requisite for this course. Exceptionally students may take "Afrophone Philosophies" (UG) (PG) without having taken "African Philosophy", after a consultation with the course convenor.

PG students must take both units if they wish to take this course as a major. The course can be taken on its own as a minor, after a consultation with the course convenor (regarding the issue of "African Philosophy" being a pre-requisite for this course).

Course objectives (UG)
- learn philosophically to analyze texts in several African languages (in translation), against the backdrop of the cultural contexts where these languages are spoken
- learn critically to reflect on the role of genre in expressing philosophical ideas
- 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)**

ONE oral presentation of 20 minutes to be given in the second half of the term, presenting the selected essay topics prior to the submission of the essays. The students are required to prepare handouts and/or a short Powerpoint presentation for this presentation. The presentation 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 presentation will account for 20% 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 4500 words to be submitted on Day 5 of Week 1 of Term 3, valued at 60% 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.

**Course objectives (PG)**

• learn philosophically to analyze texts in several African languages (in translation), against the backdrop of the cultural contexts where these languages are spoken
• learn critically to reflect on the role of genre in expressing philosophical ideas
• 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 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 3. 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.
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**Week 1: The languages and genres of philosophy**

If we wish to study philosophical thought expressed in the medium of African languages ("Afrophone philosophies"), we have to explore several fundamental issues. The debate hinges on the issue of language: why is Afrophone expression important? What are the differences in expressing ideas in European and in African languages? We must also question orality and writing as channels of philosophical expression: is writing a prerequisite for philosophy? What are the qualities of orality that contribute to the expression of philosophical ideas or that are obstacles to the development of philosophical thought? These questions converge in the question of the role of genre in the expression of philosophical thought: given the absence of a discourse called "philosophy" in most Sub-Saharan African languages, what texts do we approach to find philosophical thought? Even more importantly, how do we approach different genres as philosophy? What methods do we need adequately to analyze the specific genres that are employed to express thought in African languages? In this introductory class, we will also address the relationship of philosophy and philosophical thought to other domains of intellectual pursuits and scholarship: religion and cosmology, oral and written literature, non-fictional texts (historiography, ethnography).

**Readings**


**Additional bibliography**


**Week 2: "Look who's thinking": philosophy and proverbs**

Oral literature, in particular proverbs and divination verses (especially the Yorùbá Ḣà corpus), have been exploited in African Philosophy as a source of "authentic" African philosophical ideas and evidence of African philosophical activity. Yet, the ways in which these corpuses of sayings, proverbs, or oral verses have been utilized in philosophy often remain far from being convincing: to say that "there are no crossroads in the ear" is a "formulation of the principle of noncontradition" (Gyekye 1995: 7) or that "a medicine does not go two ways" is "a direct expression of the law of the Excluded Middle" (Oluwole 1999: 93) seems, to say the very least, to be making problematic shortcuts between proverbs and logic. Similarities have been pointed out between the fragments of Greek Pre-Socratic philosophers and proverbs. But many methodological questions regarding the approach to proverbs and other oral texts have been left unanswered. For example, what is the unit of philosophical interpretation? The whole corpus of proverbs? Or an individual proverb? Or selected sets of proverbs? Who selects them and what criteria should be employed in this choice? How do we account for the contradictions between individual proverbs? For the inherent polyvalence of proverbs? Whom do we ascribe this philosophy to? Is it ethical to ascribe philosophies to ethnic groups (the "myth of primitive unanimism", criticized by Hountondji)? Who is the "author" or who/what fulfills the "author function" (Foucault) as the unifying element resolving conflicting meanings and interpretations? We need to know how to deal with genre-specific
qualities of texts before we can reflect on their "philosophical content", and this is particularly relevant for oral sources. This lecture will examine the approaches to orality and oral texts, especially proverbs, in African Philosophy and constitute a foundation for our further debates on conceptual systems attributed to ethnic groups or speakers of specific languages.

Readings

Additional bibliography

Week 3: The "Akan conceptual scheme"
Arguably no other ethnic group or nation has been more represented in African philosophy than the Akan of Ghana, thanks to the many renowned philosophers who are of Akan origin. The "Akan philosophical tradition" has been discussed by Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Kwame Gyekye, and others; Akan philosophical concepts have been compared to Ewe concepts (Dzobo 1992) and to Yorùbá philosophy (Gbadegesin 1991). The Akan have their own philosophical anthology - a collection of philosophical texts authored by Akan philosophers (Kwame 1995). On many levels this prolific activity challenges the idea of ethnic philosophical traditions as monolithic bodies of thought that all speakers of the language and originating in that particular culture unanimously adhere to. These above-mentioned Akan thinkers are "professional philosophers", critical of "ethnophilsophy" and its assumptions. However, if we examine the way they describe their nation's philosophical thought, we see that the dangers of ethnophilsophy lurk on every page. This raises questions about ethnophilsophy and ethnic thought as such: is it at all possible (and necessary) to avoid the pitfalls of ethnophilsophy? What other ways are there to draw on African intellectual traditions? The topic of this lecture is the qualities and problems of collective thought, as they manifest themselves in the writings of Akan professional philosophers.
Readings


Additional bibliography


**Week 4: The philosophy in/of the Yorùbá language**

The Yorùbá of Nigeria boast an impressive body of writings on "their" philosophy and also here similar criticism applies as that which we raised in relation to the "Akan philosophical tradition": we are dealing here with "philosophy" attributed to a collective entity - the totality of people speaking one of the many dialects of Yorùbá. This week's lecture continues the reflection started last week: are there ways to go around this problem of collectivity in philosophy? The Yorùbá case study offers an interesting solution in the form of the project of philosophy extracted from language. Barry
Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo applied the methods of Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy to Yorùbá language and formulated "Yorùbá theories" of the self, of knowledge and truth, or of moral values. In the lecture we will critically examine Hallen and Sodipo's suggestions. We will especially look at the interface of semantics and philosophy: where does one end and the other begin? Can we say that the meaning of a word is the "philosophy" of the speakers of the language from which the word is taken? Who is the philosopher, then, if all speakers of the language have access to these meanings?

Readings

Additional bibliography

Week 5: Ubuntu
This week will explore the concept of ubuntu (humanity, personhood), a concept with narrow links to central moral concepts in many African cultures (the related words in other Bantu languages inevitably carry moral connotations, cf. the Swahili utu or the Shona (h)unhu, but the concept is important also in West African cultures, e.g. the semantics of the Yorùbá expression for "person", ènìyàn). Ubuntu is seen as a form of "African communalism" (the priority of community over the individual) and is summarized in a few proverbs that exist in several Bantu mutations, most famously motho ke motho ka batho (Tswana) or umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (Xhosa, Zulu) - "a human is human through people". The philosophy of ubuntu has had an immense societal and political impact due to the way it was employed in the reconciliation process in South Africa. This lecture will therefore also explore the aspect of social and political relevance of African philosophical ideas, in particular the possibility to use "traditional African philosophy" in contemporary political and legislative processes.

Readings
Additional bibliography


Week 6: Reading week

Week 7: Anthropology of philosophy: the Swahili context

In this week we will start moving away from anonymous philosophical concepts and approaching texts authored by known and named individuals. The project of the German philosopher and anthropologist, Kai Kresse, consists in the study of philosophical texts by individuals identified as prominent intellectuals within a specific cultural context. Kresse conducted his fieldwork in Mombasa, Kenya, and concentrated on the work of three Swahili poets and religious thinkers, Sheikh Ahmed Nabhany, Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, and Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir. We will study the concept of utu in the work of Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, as analyzed by Kresse, and examine the tradition of employing poetry to express philosophical ideas in Swahili culture. We will also look at this concept of utu as elaborated by several other writers from different epochs of the development of Swahili literature (George Mhina, Asha Kunemah, Kyallo Warmitila, etc.).

Readings

HANDOUT WITH TRANSLATIONS OF SWAHLI POETRY distributed by the convenor of the course


Additional bibliography


Week 8: Existentialism in Swahili and Shona

For many reasons, in particular for its capacity to express African historical oppression and suffering and for its analysis of the concepts of alienation and authenticity, existentialism has, implicitly or explicitly, played a major role in African literature and scholarship in general. A number of authors have been inspired by the ideas of existentialism and employed them in their creative writing. In this lecture we will analyze four Afrophone novels, Euphrase Kezilahabi's *Kichwamaji* (1974) and *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* (1975), William Mkufya's *Ua la Faraja* (2004), and Ignatius T. Mabasa's *Mapenzi* (1999), the first three in Swahili and *Mapenzi* in Shona (interestingly, the word in the Shona title, *mapenzi*, meaning "lunatics", means "love" in Swahili!). The novels depict individuals exposed to oppressive conditions of many kinds: physical or mental disease (hydrocephalus, HIV/AIDS, madness), cultural and intellectual alienation, the experience of war, hunger, rape. They philosophize about the human condition in different ways, showing despair or seeking hope, lacking a meaning of life (in the absence of religion or of political ideology) or claiming there are ways to transcend the limits of individual life through procreation or in creative work. In this class look at the manifestations of existentialism in these novels. Additionally, we will compare the novelistic expression of existentialism with the expression of existentialist ideas in literary texts of other genres, such as song lyrics and poetry.

Readings

HANDOUT WITH TRANSLATIONS OF PARTS OF NOVELS AND POEMS distributed by the convenor of the course


Additional bibliography


Week 9: The challenges to Western epistemology and metaphysics in the recent novels by Euphrase Kezilahabi

Euphrase Kezilahabi's novels *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (1991) brought a revolution to Swahili literature. Swahili prose fiction, up to the 1990s (and up to the present in the majority of novels and short stories), followed a predominantly realist mode of writing. It was Kezilahabi who started experimenting with the rules of realism in these two novels, disrupting the linear flow of narration, the habitual understanding of space, of personal identity, or of causation. This artistic experimentation has wider philosophical implications, as Kezilahabi explicitly elaborates in his PhD dissertation of 1985. *Nagona* challenges the notions of subject and object (i.e. the basic categories of Western epistemology), while *Mzingile* deconstructs Western metaphysics, as the belief that the being of things (and persons) is determined by "origins", i.e. "essences" or "ideas" in the Platonic sense. We can recall similar ideas presented by African philosophers and writers. The criticism of Western epistemology is in line with Senghor's attack on "Western reason" as an agency that "kills and dissects its object". The idea of "origins" is very relevant in an understanding of all forms of
cultural essentialism, including Nazism or the search for an authentic African "essence" believed to be found in Africa's precolonial past - an effort which guides much of African literature, philosophy, and politics until today. The manifestations of this belief in "origins" are debated by Kezilahabi both in his creative writing and in his dissertation. Kezilahabi's prose fiction is an intriguing combination of simplicity of language and complexity of ideas. We will focus, in this class, on these two novels and on the way the author presents his philosophical arguments using the medium of creative prose.

Readings
HANDOUT WITH TRANSLATIONS OF NAGONA AND MZINGILE, distributed by the convenor of the course


Additional bibliography


Week 10: "The best of all possible worlds"? Conditions of creation, theodicy, atheism, and materialism in Mkufya's Ziraili na Zirani

Mkufya's epic novel, Ziraili na Zirani (1999), is undoubtedly one of the most complex works in Swahili literature. Through the story of an African atheist who organizes a rebellion against Heaven while he is sentenced to eternal torture in Hell, the novel poses, in a highly sophisticated manner, the classical questions of theology and philosophy: the possibility to account for evil in a world created by a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God (theodicy), the nature of sin, the question of the very being of God (the implications of atheism and of religious beliefs), the nature of reality (materialism, idealism), or the question of human freedom and free will in taking moral decisions. The novel has been translated, or rather an expanded version in English has been written by the author under the title of Pilgrims from Hell (unpublished manuscript). This will make it possible for us to discuss the novel in detail and to analyze the contribution the work makes to philosophy and to scholarship in general.

Readings
Mkufya, William E. 2006. Pilgrims from Hell (the author's translation of Ziraili na Zirani). Manuscript, will be distributed by the convenor of the course.


Additional bibliography


Week 11: Esoteric West Africa

French scholarship disclosed Francophone West Africa (esp. Mali, Guinea, Senegal) as the home of secret societies and of esoteric knowledge, such as the striking astronomical and cosmological systems of the Dogon or the Bambara. The region has also been made famous through the art of the griots and versions of epics, such as the epic of Sunjata and other oral narratives of great historical depth. Famous artists, musicians and film-makers, originate from this area and have depicted its cultural riches in their productions. This lecture will explore these diverse forms of knowledge, starting with the observations of French anthropologists, who also perceptibly influenced the modern artistic (cinematographic or literary) depictions of the region's intellectual heritage, and ending with present-day Bambara and Wolof writings, such as Wulale's history of Ségou, fictional depictions of history in the work of Boubacar Boris Diop, or the aphoristic philosophy of Góor gi Usmaan Géy.

Readings

HANDOUT WITH TRANSLATIONS FROM BAMBARA AND WOLOF, distributed by the convenor of the course


Additional Bibliography


