

Why African (Akan) thought has no concept of race: An anti-essentialist cultural meaning of personhood

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Abstract

The race question has emerged in full force in recent times in the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Europe's anti-immigration posture, the social fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic inside and outside of China and the ongoing Russo-Ukraine Conflict. What does it mean to be racist? Is it simply a one off act or the product of a deeply embedded philosophical assemblage? When an African or Chinese (noted perennial victims of racism in history) acts in a manner deemed racist how do we make sense of this? Is it reasonable at all to describe it as reverse racism? This work brings African (Akan) and Confucian thought into a philosophical dialogue on the still raging and burning question of racism in order to offer some perspectives on the questions posed.

Key words: Racism, Africa, Akan, Confucianism, The Legon Tradition

Introduction: Modern African philosophy as a tradition and the matter of race

This work seeks to add to a conversation initiated by Xiang (2019a; 2019b) on the problematic of the concept of race being alien or not to philosophical traditions. In other words, to understand why racism came to so profoundly shape the modern

world (Mills, 1997), we must turn to philosophical ideas and their dispositional impacts. Through the Legon Tradition of African Philosophy (TLTAP), the African perspective on this is brought into the conversation and necessarily so in ways contemplated by Asante and Chai's (2013, p.121) "conference of ideas" in which African, Asian, Western and other philosophies engage in some of the most important, if fractious, conceptual claims.

Ajei (2018) introduced the idea of what he termed "a Legon tradition of African philosophy." The tradition refers to the whole corpus of work a trio of philosophers, namely Kwasi Wiredu, William Abraham and Kwame Gyekye who were based at the University of Ghana and "exerted decisive influence on its philosophical orientation and the development of the current corpus of African philosophy" (Ajei, 2018, p.1). Reflecting on this tradition, Ajei (2018, p.1-3) lends or better still, attaches a rather beguiling modesty to this extensive and path breaking body of work in both political and normative philosophy when he avers that "From their thoughts and orientation has evolved what I term a "trans-modernist" philosophical praxis. I have argued elsewhere that their normative emphasis configures a coherent discourse that justifies joining them into a tradition of Ghanaian political philosophy. I limit my ambitions here to asserting their role in pioneering a nascent Legon tradition of normative philosophy." While I understand this modesty, I make a humble plea for a necessary departure from it. The works of the trio in question have made such an indelible intellectual imprint on Africa and the wider world as to have spawned a still thriving industry of intense debate and engagement. In other words, the tradition is easily identifiable and recognized. Linguistically, the indefinite article "a" in the English language is used to refer to a person or thing that is not identified or specified. Given that works of the trio are very much identifiable and specified, I want to apply the definite article "the" to Ajei's coinage and introduce "The Legon Tradition of African Philosophy (TLTAP)," as a well-established and significant sub-field of Modern African

Philosophy (MAP). But just what is Modern African Philosophy (MAP)? This is a pertinent question that needs unpacking as a necessary prolegomena to the task at hand.

Modern African philosophy (MAP) was born in crisis. This crisis was linked, to borrow Wiredu's (2002, p.53) words, to "the well-known historical raptures in the African experience." These "historical raptures" presented two interlocking claims; the second of which was logically derived from the first. The first was that traditional African societies (those African societies that Europeans encountered before colonization) had no philosophical capacity. The second was that the term modern African philosophy was at best a misnomer. These two claims must be connected to a persistent and insidious view derived from Western theories of race which asserted that reason was exclusively European and therefore philosophical thinking among Africans as a people was not just alien but non-existent. In the last 70 years these dubious views have been well and truly dismissed. On the first claim Wiredu's (2002, p. 53) response is well worth quoting in full:

Ignorance, due perhaps to geographical distance or racist conceits, may have engendered such questioning in some foreign minds. But any African of the slightest philosophical sensitivity, raised within an African culture, must be aware, at least, of the wealth of philosophical apothegms in our folklore. These emanate not from the void but from the brains of individual thinkers. **Thus the existence of philosophy in our traditional culture is a given.** (emphasis added).

The Commission on Philosophy of the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists held in Rome in 1959, raised this issue in its resolution (Gyekye, 1995, p.33) "... the West has claimed a monopoly of philosophic reflection, so philosophic enterprise no longer seems conceivable outside of the categories forged by the West ..." Painstaking work, however, undertaken in

recent decades, by both African and non-African scholars have mapped African philosophical activity going back into antiquity. Obenga (2004, pp.9-14) underscores this when he argues that “the history of African philosophy follows the natural contours of the continent’s general history.” Obenga (2004) provides a breakdown made up of five periods encompassing “Ancient Egyptian Philosophy,” “the Philosophers and thinkers of Alexandria, Cyrene, Carthage and Hippo,” “the Philosophy of the Maghreb,” “the Medieval Philosophical Schools of Timbuktu (University of Sankore), Gao and Djenne” and “Modern and Contemporary African Philosophy”. In this work, I focus on MAP exertions which date back to the days of the Ethiopian philosopher, Zera Yacob (who wrote his famous treatise *Hatäta* in 1627) and Ghanaian-German philosopher Anto Wilhelm Amo (his thesis, *The Apatheia of the Human Mind*, [written in 1734 and translated from the Latin by the Ghanaian philosopher William Abraham] critiqued Descartes’ conception of the mind) who studied and taught philosophy (1727-1747) at three leading German Universities, Halle, Wittenberg and Jena. In a sense, then, MAP which has been in gestation and development in the last three centuries can be said to have reached maturity as it heads into its fourth century in our time.

But the key question to ask now is just what MAP is? We follow Gyekye’s (1995) take:

By modern African philosophy, I refer to the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary African philosophers, but which reflects, or has a *basis* in African experience, thought categories and culture. This being so, the distinction between traditional and modern African philosophy cannot be hard and fast. For some of the elements or categories of traditional thought, because of their outstanding qualities, their persistent influence, or their inseparability from the cultural life and thought of the people, will naturally

find their way into the modern African philosophical syllabus. (pp.32-33)

In my view, the Gyekye position represents the most sophisticated take thus far on the seminal debates on what constituted and constitutes MAP. Gyekye (1995) arrived at this position through rigorous interrogation of prior knowledge. He challenged quite adroitly positions canvassed by, in particular, Wiredu (2004), Hountondji (1983) and Bodunrin (1981). Hountondji quite exclusively faces Gyekye's ire at its most caustic. In his award winning work (awarded the Melville Herskovits Prize for the most significant Africanist publication in 1983), *African Philosophy, Myth and Reality*, Hountondji (1983) contends that MAP need not concern itself with African philosophical categories and concepts to be African: "The African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating it and transcending it, are producing authentic work"(p.53-54). Here Hountondji proffers a geographical criterion for determining what passes as MAP. This critique was part of his larger take on what has come to be known as ethnophilosophy in the disquisitions on MAP. Gyekye's formidable rebuttal to this is to point out that Hountondji is making a call for MAP to simply exist to expand the boundaries of Western philosophy; that is, to be content with being, if anything at all, at best derivative. This could not pass muster for Gyekye (1995) for in his view:

... the philosophy of a people is invariably a tradition. But a tradition requires that its elements (or most of them) be intimately related to the mentalities and cultural ethos of the people who possess the tradition, that these elements be related among themselves in a meaningful way, that they endure and be sustained, and that they be the subject of continuous pruning and refinement (note that I do not rule out the possibility of

alien elements enriching a tradition, but such a tradition must already be standing on its own two feet, as it were). (p.36-37)

Gyekye (1995) clears the muddy waters with further elaboration on his position above:

I submit that a respectable tradition of philosophy in Africa will be established only when modern African philosophers engage on the field, primarily, of African conceptual schemes, only when African philosophical arguments are presented with concepts and categories derived from African thought and experience as the elements of philosophical activity. This prescription is suggested by knowledge of the history of philosophy in other cultures of the world. Acquaintance with that history shows the difficulty of basing African philosophy purely on the Western tradition of philosophy. (p.37)

Confucian conception of personhood and racism

In a forcefully argued work, Flikschuh (2014) points to the conceptual black out imposed on Africa when it comes to normative theorizing at the global level when she reflects on the abysmal lack of knowledge of non-Western philosophical traditions by Western thinkers. She makes a case for what she describes as philosophical fieldwork corrective “By ‘philosophical fieldwork’ I mean a type of **conceptual discovery** – philosophical as *non-empirical* fieldwork. By ‘distant others’ I do not mean the ‘global poor’ but our academic peers who work within moral and political contexts distinct from ours and whom **we tend not to consult in our global theorising: distant intellectually as much as geographically. The particular distant peers I have in mind here are African.** I am interested in how African theorists might think about the idea of a possible global normative order.” (p.1, emphasis added)

TLTAP is a compelling paradigm case of the thoughts and perspectives of distant African others which in my view should provide vital grist for engaging some of the weighty philosophical matters such as racism. Ajei (2018) has provided a seminal account of the TLTAP through a review (drawing out the family resemblances) of the work of its three main architects; the Ghanaian philosophers Willie Abraham, Kwesi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye. In the TLTAP, these philosophers provide a generally coherent account (even if they differ at some points in their conceptions which is to be expected) of metaphysics (ontology), epistemology (method) and moral theory which draws from the Akan, and therefore African cultural framework, and world view. But this account dialogues with the modernist (decidedly Western) framework, while navigating delicately away from it; what Ajei (2018) describes as “trans-modernism” (p.12). Before I lay out my argument that Akan thought (encapsulated in the TLTAP) as a paradigm case of African philosophy is conceptually immune to racism (thereby undercutting the view that race-consciousness and racism is part and parcel of being human; that is, a veritable human trait) I will trace out briefly the lucubration proffered by Xiang (2019a; 2019b) on the same problematic as a basis for a discursive engagement.

Xiang’s (2019a) argumentation pivots around how personhood is framed. Drawing on the Western philosophical canon, Xiang shows that Western personhood proceeds from a substantive essence. This substance ontology which is derived from Aristotelian thought marks out the “limits on the kinds of changes that an individual substance can undergo” (Dupré & Nicolson, 2018, p.5). Seibt (2018) acknowledges this in his view that “From Aristotle onwards, ontology has been under the spell of what I have called the ‘myth of substance’ - set of unreflected presuppositions for ontological theory construction that prescribe a focus on static entities, mainly a dualism of particulars and universals, as the most ‘natural’ way to describe

the structure of the world” (p.113). This substance ontology is subsequently appropriated and applied in the biological realm and comes to frame a racial metaphysic via hypostatization, reification and determinism (Xiang, 2019a, p.2). Here race comes to define immutable characteristics, an essence, against which any subsequent cultural, moral and therefore empirical manifestations are totally immune. Ajei (2018) describes this aptly as “a prejudicial streak at the core of the metaphysics of modernism, which projects the being of the Western human as ontologically superior to other forms of human existence, and as exemplifying human being-ness *per se*.....” (p.4). In other words, to be human is to possess this Western essence; not possessing it, the fate of non-whites (to borrow Mills’ [1997] phrase) is to be non-human.

Major Western thinkers have not just bought into but propagated such notions of race in their descriptions of Africans as less human because they do not bear this European essence. Hume (1887),¹ one of the leading lights of the Enlightenment was one:

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many

¹It must be noted that this quotation is the revised version of an earlier one in which Hume gleefully championed the racial superiority of whites relative to all other races. In this revised version he decides to narrow down his racist description to Africans. Some scholars (Immewahr, 1992) have tried to pass off Hume’s racism as a casual event to be easily brushed off because it appears as a footnote in his work. But this has been robustly countered by sober scholarship which shows that Hume’s racism was actually well cultivated; see for example Zack, 2017; Gates, 1987; Garrett & Sebastiana, 2017; Garrett, 2000.

countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.² (p.372)

In the work in question, Hume (1887) was obviously on an intense frolic disparaging Africans: “You may obtain anything of the Negroes by offering them strong drink; and may easily prevail with them to sell, not only their children, but their wives and mistresses, for a cask of brandy” (p.137). On Hume’s racist apologetics, Garrett and Sebastiana (2017) note and quite poignantly that:

First, the note to “Of National Characters” cannot be considered philosophically insignificant insofar as it is connected with Hume’s central ideas about moral and natural causes. In addition to drawing on an already existing essay, Hume’s maintenance of the note through all of the lifetime editions of his *Essays*, and careful revisions – despite convincing criticisms – strongly suggest that the ideas it expressed mattered to Hume. Second, it is not possible to isolate Hume’s racial observations from the ongoing debate about national characters, the natural history of humankind, and political economy, which was at the heart of the European Enlightenment. (p.41)

This record is quite ironic given that Hume’s work on empiricism raised needling challenges against this substance ontology by privileging the sensible qualities of things and thus insisting on their regular concurrence. Immanuel Kant, the (in)famous German scholar of the Enlightenment, who during that epoch will vigorously talk about man and intone *sapere*

² The original quote which Hume (1887) subsequently revised is presented here: “I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.”(p. 452)

*aude*³ was actually concerned about *racialized man* and will develop an elaborate raciology on this. Eze⁴ (1997) provides a fascinating excursus on this in which an external *phlogiston* and an internal “talent” encode and codify an immutable, ahistorical essence defining the inferior place of Africans on a specie-class scale atop of which is the “first race,” (p.118) the “very blond”(p.118). Eze (1997) argues then that

Kant’s preoccupation can be summarized as: an exercise in the sympathetic study of European humanity, taken as humanity *in itself*, and a demonstration of how this “ideal” or “true” humanity and its history is *naturally* and qualitatively (spiritually, morally, rationally, etc.) and quantitatively (bodily, physically, climatically, etc.) superior to all others. (p.117)

Xiang’s (2019a) response to all this is that Confucian thought does not harbor this substance-essentialist conception of personhood and therefore avoids the racialism trap inherent in the Western metaphysic of personhood:

proof of one’s humanity lays in the empirical proof of evidencing culture, humaneness is not an unobservable quality prior to its physical manifestation (in culture). Under this view, there is no substance behind appearance; there is appearance, and that is all. The truth about the self is not some hidden essence behind the welter of its expressions, the expressions of the self (through cultural media) *is* the truth about the self. It is precisely because the Confucian view *only* cares about one’s actions/work, that it does not commit the same fallacies as that of racial theorists like Gobineau. Given

³“dare to know”

⁴ Eze (1997, pp.125-127) is at pains to distinguish in Kant’s anthropology an essentialism in two parts. On human nature he argues that Kant at best presents a normative essentialism; this he reluctantly concedes. In Eze’s view Kant’s most strident essentialism is evidenced in his raciology as alluded to already. One wonders whether this distinction does not bristle with questions. I will raise one here: does the racialized essence not entail a normative essence making the distinction superfluous?

this *empiricism* which makes no statements about qualities prior to their manifestation, this philosophy *assumes* the equal potential of all human beings for taking up culture. The Confucian canon holds that embodying culture/performing actions according to social norms is *constitutive* of the self. Humaneness is thus a moral category to be achieved as opposed to a natural kind that one is born under. (p.3)

At this juncture, the question to explore is Africa's take on this to further consolidate the view that racism is not a universal tendency. I turn to that in the next section.

TLTAP's conception of personhood and racism

TLTAP articulates a humanistic ethics in which human beings are held to be primary agents for shaping and lending meaning to the world in ways which expressly reject any exclusively theistic basis for normative judgements. This is captured in a descriptive and normative conception of a person, *Onipa*, in Akan. *Onipa* is made up of *sunsum* (personality principle), *okra* (life principle), and *mogyva* (blood principle). The *okra* is the speck or spark of the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) in the *onipa* that Gyekye (1995) describes in his understanding of the Akan metaphysic as what "appears to be a universal spirit, manifesting itself differently in the various beings and objects in the natural world" (pp. 72–73). This speck or spark lends equal moral value to every human being African or not and undercuts the race inflected essentialism of the Western modernist ontology the logic of which insists that "a person's essence is assumed to be a priori, and her empirical manifestation, such as cultural competence and moral actions, are subordinated to this essence. Instead of complex relationships such as a person's education, upbringing, and historical experiences serving to explain why that person is as they are, explanation is attributed to a single, material, hidden thing; causal efficacy inheres in the thing itself

” (Xiang, 2019a, p.3). Wiredu (1997) held forth well on this point:

Here it might be of greater immediate interest to see what, in addition to mind, the Akans conceive to be involved in the constitution of person. There is, most visibly, the assemblage of flesh and bones that form the body (*nipadua*, literally, person tree). But reason the Akans, something must make the difference between a dead, inert, body and a living one. ***This they attribute to an entity called the okra, which they consider an actual particle of the Supreme Being. Since in respect of the divine constituent all persons are exactly alike, they are all deserving, in equal measure, of a certain dignity and respect, a notion which motivates a strong notion of human rights.*** (p.126, emphasis mine)

The *mogya* is held by the Akans to be given to the child by the mother and provides the basis for lineage (matrilineal) and, more important, *abusua* (clan) identity.

In the Akan rendering, then, the *onipa* is linked by consanguinity and the life force from *Onyame* (Supreme Being) to “the cosmic, divine, human and natural aspects of reality” (Armah, 2006, p. 211). This conceptualization does not obliterate the *onipa* as an individual but rather serves to reinforce it by highlighting the centrality of social bonds as well as connections to other entities such as the ancestors, nature and the yet unborn which constitute the greater Akan world. Indeed, for Wiredu (1996), *onipa* in the Akan construct is also about a lifelong becoming in which “personhood is not something you are born with but something you may achieve [a clearly empirical and therefore non-antecedently derived process as Xiang (2019a) also intimates], and it is subject to degrees, so that some are more *onipa* than others, depending on the degree of fulfillment of one’s obligation to self, household, and community” (p. 160). Gyekye (1997) grapples with the supposed smoldering

of individuating tendencies in the Akan notion of person and introduces the most compelling model of the person and society of the TLAP thinkers, “moderate communitarianism” (p.36). Gyekye argues that the Akan worldview gives “accommodation to communal values as well as to values of individuality, to social commitments as well as responsibility to oneself” (p.76).

It is clear from the analysis above that TLAP’s conception of personhood like its Confucian counterpart avoids the essentializing⁵ tendency of Western thought and with it the racism trap. In both the African and Chinese traditions there is no a priori substance which is ahistorical, noncontingent and non-protean. For the TLAP, culture and community make the person but this is stringently played out in a lifelong becoming in which one must always maintain their personhood and risk losing it every time. Indeed to succeed at this throughout a lifetime confers on one the enviable title of *Nana* (ancestor). When one is deemed to have acted in a manner that flouts cultural and community values and mores the Akans insist that: *Onye onipa* (one is not a person). The culturalist aspect is most vividly expressed in the *mogya* which ties the person through the mother to the *abusua* (clan). The *abusua* is the powerful ensemble of values, beliefs, customs and history that help shape the human being. It is the first core humanizing ensemble which molds the person in their unending becoming from birth to death. The Akans capture this with the saying *abusua ye dom* (The clan is a crowd); this is a dialectical take on the *abusua* pointing out its criticality (one relies on it through consanguineous ties) but also its limitations (there is a limit to the dependence; people must also rely on themselves in life). The logic of this aphorism derives fundamentally from the overweening value of the *abusua* to being and its seductive power as to require a note of caution. Xiang (2019a) captures the affinities between Akan thought and Confucianism on the unending cultural-moral framing of personhood:

⁵ Dominant Western thought to be more precise against which has emerged robust challenges like postmodern thought.

Human-ness – understood as embodying culture and moral behavior through acculturation – is thus not a given; it is a potential which requires formation to be realized. Transformation through cultural education, or acculturation, takes ontological primacy before any “substance” or any fixed essence that could be assigned to a person. (p.4)

The community in a sense is the *abusua* in a more expansive form. Being human is about moral responsibility to the community and the community to the individual. Gyekye (1995) is worth quoting on this:

Akan thinkers agree that society is not only necessary for human existence, but it is natural to man. This idea is expressed in an already-quoted proverb : When a man descends from heaven , he descends into a human society(*onipa firi soro a, obesi onipa kurom*).....the proverb rejects the concept of the state of nature..... Akan thought, however, sees humans as originally born into a human society(*onipa kurom*), and therefore as social beings from the onset. (p.155)

I have tried to show in the explications above that the expositions of the TLTA reveal the absence of any substantive a priori conception of personhood and deriving from that position, the unmistakable affinities with the Confucian framework worked out by Xiang (2019a; 2019b). I will describe this as the agentive-culturalist conception of personhood which runs counter to the substantive racialist one which, to borrow, Grey’s (2012) words “has been woven into the western consciousness” (p.135). By “agentive” I point to the responsibility for personhood tied irretrievably in both systems (Akan and Confucian) of thought to the individual’s conduct throughout their life span.

Conclusion

I have tried in my analysis above to work out the connections between Akan thought and Confucianism on the question of race. Though separated by obvious geographical distance and for the uninitiated many, philosophical distance too, it will seem that the latter may not be true after all from my analysis thus far. On the issue of personhood and race, Akan thought as robustly explicated in the TLTA, and Confucianism, seem to converge in their anti-essentialist and therefore non-racial rendering. The point here is that these philosophical systems seem to lack the conceptual resources to promote a universal racism consciousness in contradistinction to Western thought. On the contrary, if Akan thought has any universal pretensions at all, this lies in its prescription that all human beings are equal and makes room for differences in a cultural sense as opposed to a racial one with fixed external markers (skin color for example) and internal markers (unchangeable moral value for example). The point here must not be taken to mean that the Akan and Chinese cannot be racist. They can be racist (Amoah, 2021) but that disposition may be too hard pressed to offer a justification that has a provenance in African or Chinese philosophical and therefore ontological sources and resources. Indeed the agentive-culturalist ontological ensemble sketched here provides just that opening and means for acquiring a racist consciousness.

The race question has emerged in full force in recent times in the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Europe's anti-immigration posture, the social fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic inside and outside of China and the ongoing Russo-Ukraine conflict. What does it mean to be racist? Is it simply a one off act or the product of a deeply embedded philosophical assemblage? When an African or Chinese (noted perennial victims of racism in history) acts in a manner deemed racist, how do we make sense of this? Is it reasonable at all to describe it as reverse racism? Is being racist routed through a signature based subscription system (Mills, 1997, p.11) or irredeemably

unavoidable? One hopes this work has contributed through its analysis to finding answers to these questions.

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