

# **PEDAGOGY AND THE IDEA OF RIGHTS IN THE WRITINGS PTAH HOTEP: IMPLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES ON AFRICAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

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**Abstract:** It has also been proposed that the factors that engendered African political theorizing are tied to frustration and quest to stamp an authentic African identity. Through the method of critical analysis, this study argues agrees with this point but insists that the various political theories marshalled by African independent fathers and African political philosophers are not strictly original but may be traced to ancient Egypt, particularly, some of the moral principles of the Egyptian sage Ptah Hotep which has implications for political philosophizing. This may not be easy to discern since these foremost African scholars were employing Western-styled philosophical training to establish the existent and application of political philosophy in Africa, hitherto colonization and subjugation. This study employs the discourse on human rights in the writings of Ptah Hotep and the African ideological philosophers to argue that the entire discourse of the latter are similar to old wine in new jar.  
**Keywords:** Africa, Education, Hermeneutics, Human Rights, Political Philosophy.

## **Introduction**

African political philosophy has come to be recognized as one of the impeccable aspects of African philosophy. The latter's existence had hitherto raised dusts. It is not wrong to then say that African philosophy not only is but African Political Philosophy as well. It is therefore the task of this paper to make an expose of the contents and the current debates persistent in African philosophy. Before we however set out to fulfil this task, it should be borne in mind that every philosophy is not void of cultural influence and the amassing of the world-views of a community plays more role in making an individual a sage philosopher rather than a mere culture philosopher. In this regard, this essay chronicles the moral teachings of the Egyptian sage, Ptah Hotep and the implications of his thoughts on political philosophy that is indigenous to the African mind.

Afterwards, we take a look at the thoughts of Kwame Nkrumah and the current debates in African political philosophy in contemporary times. It is the intention of the essay that a concise grasp of the origin, meaning, nature and the current debates in African political philosophy would have been comprehended.

We may ask: What are the general directions of discourse in African political philosophy today? Are they in anyway fundamentally different from the anti-colonial and post-colonial structuring of African states, which defined the trend of nationalistic ideological discourse? Are there views that can be authentically called ‘philosophical’ as well as ‘African’ in the works of scholars that are brandished ‘nationalistic ideologists’ in Oruka’s typology? Who can be termed an African political philosopher? Are there female African philosophers who have made significant contributions within and outside Oruka’s nationalist-ideological trend? What are the new (emerging or well established) issues and orientations in contemporary African political philosophy? This paper is an attempt to respond to the above posers by locating and bringing to the fore, an emerging trend in current African political philosophy. The discourse employs the ideas of Sophie Oluwole and Francis M. Deng to reveal the current thematic trend in African Political Philosophy.

To realize this feat, this paper employs the method of critical analysis of terms and concepts. This is aimed to examine concepts whose implications are usually taken for granted. A perusal of each of the concepts informs us about more of what is usually taken for granted.

### **Clarification of Terms and Concepts**

The first term that needs to be assessed is the question of who and what is African. According to B.S Cayne (1992, 15), an African is someone “pertaining to Africa or a native of Africa.” What this simply means is that the word Africa has an implication for the expression of a geographical entity. Does this mean that someone who is not a native of Africa is not an African? This is not always true. Claude Sumner, a Canadian by birth claims to be Ethiopian by choice. St. Augustine, an African by birth, contributed mainly to Western philosophy. So, it is clear that the amorphous characterisation of the African philosophy may be unsettled

for some time.

Philosophy, as the etymology informs is clearly the “love or pursuit of wisdom” (Cayne 1992, 755). Again, there is an implication of this term. Does it mean that anyone who studies philosophy must necessarily be wise? Theodore Oizermann has usually raised an objection to this form of conception (Oizermann 1973). Are all wise men necessarily philosophers? Though these questions are not exhaustive, they are very germane when we consider the next operational term in this schema.

If we accept the idea that politics is “the art and science of the government of a state,” (Cayne 1992, 777) then it is safe to infer that every group of persons that have formed a society has one way or the other being involved in politics. To then say that Africans lack the ability and innovation of political cohesion, as some Western intellectuals hold, is the opposite of the truth.

When we put together each of the analysed concepts from the perspective of our subject matter, questions that this essay would concern with materialize easily. Firstly, is there an African philosophy? Is it not the case that political philosophy is a derivation of philosophy and even ethics where serious efforts and emphasis are given to “moral examination of political concepts?” (Gewirth 1977, 2) This not only call into question the existence of political philosophy that is indigenously African but it also raises the dust regarding some moral underpinnings employed to assess political concepts. In this connection, does the African have an indigenous means to assess their political life that is distinctly theirs? Various scholars have come to recognize that this question is closely tied to the existence or non-existence of African philosophy, a debate that raged decades back with the acceptance albeit grudgingly by some that there was and is African Philosophy (Hallen 2002). Let us now focus on the emergence and present status of African Political Philosophy.

### **African Political Philosophy: Past and Present**

In this section, the focus is to establish the existence of political philosophy as an aspect of philosophy that has both a past and present. The past tainted and haunted by the lack of materials and texts and which boasts of only a few. It may also be stressed that since it has been agreed

that there is a philosophy that is uniquely African, there by extension there is African political philosophy. The present has to do with how scholars who are Africans and non-Africans have contributed to the tradition of African political philosophy within and outside Africa.

Before we delve into the ancient Egyptian thoughts on political philosophy, it would be helpful to commence with a rationale whether or not ancient Egypt has a philosophic background which does not necessarily have to correspond to philosophy as we know it today. This is why Mary Lefkowitz (1996, 188) opines that:

I use the term philosophy in the more specialized, modern sense, to mean the study of causes and laws underlying reality or a system of inquiry designed specifically to study those laws and causes. The ancient Egyptians and Babylonians were learned and had what we would now call advanced civilizations; they could have developed an abstract terminology for discovering causes and principles had they chosen to do so. But they did not study and analyse the nature of reality in abstract, non-theological language. This specialized notion of philosophy was invented, so far as anyone knows, by the ancient Greeks.

The above idea has also been corroborated by Princewill Alozie (2004, 1) when he informs that “the learned societies of ancient Egypt did not personalize the results of scientific research. The Greeks, not only did they personalize whatever success that was made, they also plagiarized what the ancient Egyptians had assembled without acknowledging the sources. This accounts for the numerous books attributed to Aristotle’s genius.” What this implies is that history does not recognize the genius of the ancient Egyptian society which was a black civilization. This is why J. Jorge Klor De Alva laments that “as is well known but quickly forgotten, the victors ordinarily write history. The losers are usually silenced or, if this is impossible, they are dismissed as liars, censored for being traitors, or left to circulate harmlessly in the confined spaces of the defeat” (Klor 1991, xi). It is high time we roused from this slumber, by employing the sayings of Ptha-hotep to justify why there had been an African political philosophy traceable to a sage.

The specific text to be considered here is included in many anthologies of Egyptian and/or African literature and is frequently referred to as

“The Moral Teachings of Ptah-hotep.” Various versions of the text exist, but scholars seem to agree that Ptah-hotep was an official of the Old Kingdom (Fifth Dynasty) who lived c. 2400 B.C. The heart of Ptah-hotep’s manuscript consists of thirty-seven principles (for lack of a better word) that more importantly, justify certain forms of behaviour as being moral (*Maat*). A complication in assessing the text’s philosophical significance is that it has been translated into English using a variety of formats—as poetic verse as imperative (Asante 2000). For most of the thirty-seven principles Ptah-hotep also provides reasons, often in the form of potentially adverse or positive consequences, why a particular form of behaviour is to be discouraged or commended, as in the following:

25. If you are mighty and powerful then gain respect through knowledge and through your gentleness of speech. Don’t order things except as it is sitting. The one who provokes others gets into trouble. Don’t be haughty lest you be humbled. But also don’t be mute lest you be chided. When you answer one who is fuming, turn your face and control yourself. The flame of the hot-hearted sweeps across everything. But he who steps gently, his path is a paved road. He who is agitated all day has no happy moments, but he who amuses himself all day can’t keep his fortune (see Hord & Lee 1995, 28).

What is intriguing is the repeated emphasis Ptah-hotep gives to a more select set of values that have also been outlined in the work on Yoruba moral epistemology done by Hallen and Sodipo. Again and again, Ptah-hotep stresses the importance of “good speech” (see Hallen 2002, 6). This clearly shows that given the emphasis placed on morality, there is no doubt that such precepts would inform a political set up. Ptah-hotep boasts of a lot of principles which can be interpreted to imply a political philosophy.

These values are enunciated in no less than fifteen of the thirty-seven principles, as well as in the introductory and concluding passages that accompany them. The accompanying text makes it clear that Ptah-hotep affirms them as moral values because they promote truth, and therefore they have epistemological consequences as well. A person whose word(s) can be relied upon is a moral person, and vice versa. A person who maintains self-control is in an optimal state to be an objective observer of his or

her surroundings and, hence, to correctly understand, record, report, and offer advice (if needed) about what is going on.

The fool who does not *hear* [listen, observe, and speak with care and forethought], he can do nothing at all. He looks at ignorance and sees knowledge. He looks at harmfulness and sees usefulness. He does everything that one detests and is blamed for it every day. He lives on the thing by which one dies. His food is evil speech [things that are not true]. His sort is known to the officials who say, "There goes a living death every day." One ignores the things that he does because of his many daily troubles (see Gilhard et al. 1987, 30).

Barry Hallen (2002) sees a lot of affinity between Ptah-hotep's ethics and Yoruba moral epistemology but that does not necessarily mean that a process of direct philosophical transmission or exchange between these two cultures took place. This brief excursion into the moral thoughts of Ptah-hotep is intended to substantiate our thesis that the existence of a moral philosophy traceable to an ancient African sage implies that such moral precepts are germane for political philosophy.

With the advent of colonialism on the African soil and the call for political independence, several scholars sprang up. These have been schooled in the Western-styled philosophy and they tried to reveal that there is political philosophy that is unique to the African albeit from their professional training in Western philosophy. This is what Emmanuel Oduasa (2019) means when he insists that most of these minds ended up casting spell on African scholarship as they saw Western scholarship as the universal and absolute character that philosophy in all places must comply with. These individuals were termed the national-ideological philosophers by the late Henry Odera Oruka. Among these giants, we shall give a brief attention to Kwame Nkrumah. It must however be mentioned that Frantz Fanon played an instrumental role in the development of political philosophy in the modern period in Africa (Appiah 1998). In his paper, "Four Trends in Current African Philosophy," Odera Oruka (1990) identified ethno-philosophy, philosophic sagacity, professional philosophy and nationalistic ideological philosophy as the defining trends that have contoured the discourses on African philosophy. The earlier political reflections, thoughts and juggling of African nationalists and scholars

in the mid-1950s to the 90s have been described by Odera Oruka as the ‘African nationalist ideological philosophy.’ This trend is an attempt in the area of African political philosophy; it consists of works with focus on evolving new and unique political theories that are pro-independence and anti-colonial in nature; traditional and authentic in identity; as well as first-order reflections on how best to arrange African collective life, political institutions and social practices.

The viewpoint of Consciencism is that philosophy arises from and operates within the context of a given society. This viewpoint asserts that “philosophy always arose from social milieu and that a social contention is always present in it” (Nkrumah 1960, 10). Nkrumah was in search of an ideological catalyst for development. An ideology that shall be a synthesis of traditional and modern elements, that is, a synthesis of past and present.

As regards the thinking of the community, Consciencism enjoins that we wage a relentless war against mysticism, magic and all those views which postulate the supernatural in an attempt to explain phenomena and events around us. If there is any phenomenon which we cannot explain, then this must be due to the fact that our knowledge is still limited. We cannot go by way of claiming that the phenomenon is supernatural and hence inexplicable in terms of human reason.

Overall, Consciencism and Nkrumah’s ideological system, philosophical consciencism, serve as a basis for explanation of his increasingly unpopular decisions as a national leader. Consciencism seeks to explain Nkrumah’s Africa - a colonial philosopher’s experience of postcolonial Africa. It seems that his actions more often than not reflect the ideology that he has himself derived from socialism, the philosophical consciencism.

From all of the above, Kwame Nkrumah believes in the African past which is egalitarian and materialistic as opposed to the idea of capitalism which is idealistic. He therefore takes strongly the idea of African Socialism by conversing for communalism. In other words, Nkrumah continued to maintain the view that communalism is characteristic of African society. In his own words:

Socialism, therefore, can be and is the defence of the principles of communalism in a modern setting. Socialism is a form of social organisation, which, guided by the principles underlying

communism, adopts procedures and measures made necessary by demographic and technological developments. These considerations throw light on the bearing of revolution and reform on socialism. The passage from the ancestral line of slavery via feudalism and capitalism to socialism can only lie through revolution: it cannot lie through reform. For in reform, fundamental principles are held constant and the details of their expression modified. In the words of Marx, it leaves the pillars of the building intact. Indeed, sometimes, reform itself may be initiated by the necessities of preserving identical fundamental principles (Nkrumah 1963, 73-4).

The above are the prime claims of Consciencism set out in a very brief manner. This does not mean that Nkrumah's philosophy is not without its own problems. It is doubtful if Africans are strictly materialistic and also egalitarian as he wants us to believe. A perusal of the African mind would reveal that Africans take seriously, the idea of the supernatural and suprasensible. More so, with history informing us about the formation of some principalities, where kings and monarchs reign, the question and supposition of egalitarianism as holds by Kwame Nkrumah is flawed. This attempt is however laudable on the grounds that it is established that political philosophy is not alien to the African mind.

In recent times, African political philosophy has moved beyond the discourses articulated by Julius Nyerere, Sedar Senghor, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah to the question of methodology and terms employed in the torrent of discourse that there are. Let us concern with the thoughts of Sophie Oluwole (2003) on democracy and rights.

Two basic popular but erroneous views on democracy, in Oluwole's submission, are discussed in many of her works. One, contrary to the popular conception of democracy as the "government of the people, by the people and for the people," which has led to the common view that democracy itself is a form of government; Oluwole does not conceive democracy as such. She faults this popular definition not just on the basis of the ambivalent construal of the term "people" but essentially on the ground that "the definition gives no inkling about the specific structure of the political organization in a particular society" (Oluwole 2003, 419). The second erroneous view of modern times, which Oluwole observes and

discusses through the hermeneutic method, is that a monarchy cannot be democratic.

With respect to the first issue, democracy, in her view, adequately understood, is a theory that sets some basic [socio political] principles according to which a good government, whatever its form, must be run (Oluwole 2003, 420). Such principles, which as she notes, exist in all African traditional societies include those of justice, freedom, equity, accountability, rule of law and liberty. These social principles are universal criteria for distinguishing between good and bad governments. In other words, they are features of democracy that are not culturally specific, and whose abrogation inevitably produces tyranny.

To give a few examples; accountable government, the citizens' rights to decide, speak and organize are essential to free political expression. The universality of these principles notwithstanding, Oluwole notes that African conception of her own interest, hopes, aspirations, etc. may determine her own peculiar pattern of democracy without violating any of the principles of freedom, liberty, rights and justice as these are embedded in democracy generally.

It is against this background that Oluwole attempts to study *in situ* the principles underlying the cultural, political, economic, social and justice institutions in an African culture, with a view to showing explicitly, the understanding of existing axioms within the historical African culture. Concentrating on the Yoruba, Oluwole hermeneutically explores a quantum number of the principles of democracy and human rights in the peoples' oral tradition.

Her conviction is that such approach will allow us to discover the democratic nature of political organization in pre-colonial Yoruba culture; it will also open our lenses to the principles that guided social relationship in the people's cultural milieu. She believes also that through a hermeneutic understanding of such principles, and the adherence to them, we can arrive at an authentic socio-political African theory that can be used as basis for the entrenchment and development of democratic norms in contemporary Africa. She is against the culture of swallowing hook and sinker some foreign democratic patterns and paradigms and equally opposed to the idea of going back to everything traditional.

According to her, "a total dependence on the paradigms and pat-

terms of democracy as practiced in many countries of Europe may not be the only ideal way to progress” (Oluwole 1997, 28) because several traditional socio-political systems in pre-colonial Africa hold some lessons for contemporary Africa. Her urge is the need to critically examine and re-evaluate different democratic systems in Africa pre-colonial times (Oluwole 1997). In this critical exercise, “there is the need to identify, analyse and formulate specific paradigms which respect the positive values in our different cultures and at the same, are not blind to new experiences” (Oluwole 1997, 21). This is important because it will allow us to see better what wrongs need righting and which rights have been wronged by the contemporary system. Not until we have established this, we may be unable to develop cogent new democratic structures and social habits that will satisfy our cultural aspirations as well as development. Another prominent African scholar, Francis Deng looks at democratic participation in the African context. Let us consider his thoughts on the thematic issues that pervades African Political Philosophy.

A concept that is closely associated with human rights is that of democracy, which advocates popular participation in the political, economic, social, and cultural processes of governance (Deng 2004). Increasingly, African countries are facing a call for democracy as a fundamental human right. As with the human rights agenda in general, this raises questions of cultural legitimacy and, in any case, poses a challenge to pluralistic states that are acutely divided on ethnic, cultural, or religious grounds. Because democracy has become closely associated with elections in which Africans tend to vote on the basis of their politicized ethnic or religious identity, its literal application risks creating a dictatorship of numbers, with the majority imposing its will on the minority. For this reason, the suitability of democracy to the continent is being questioned, both within and outside it.

This increasing assault on democracy is based on a narrow definition that places overwhelming emphasis on its procedural aspects, as reflected, for example, in elections, and then uses the negative consequence of this narrow definition to question democracy as a normative concept. A balanced perspective should draw a distinction between the principles of democracy and the institutional practices for its implementation (Deng 2004, 501).

The main point is that while democracy, broadly defined in terms of normative ideals or principles, is universally valued, it needs to be contextualized, by putting into consideration the African reality and making effective use of indigenous values, institutions, and social mores to make it home-grown and sustainable. As already hinted, perhaps, one of the most outstanding characteristics of traditional African society is the autonomy of the component elements of the political and social order (Deng 2004). Related to this is the devolution of power and of the decision-making process down to the local units, down, indeed, to the smallest territorial sub-divisions, such as the lineages and the extended families. Although African societies were characterized by significant differences in their political systems, they all shared this approach, which might be described as a participatory mode of governance.

It has been observed that, “Despite the hierarchical system of traditional governments, most of these entities were generally governed by consensus and broad participation . . . through group representation at the central level and village councils at the local level” (Dia 1996, 39). In the deliberations of the Council, any adult could participate and decisions were reached by unanimity. According to Wiredu (1990, 250), “the chief had absolutely no right to impose his own wishes on the elders of the council. . . . The elders would keep on discussing an issue until consensus was reached.” When important decisions had to be made, chiefs tended to consult village councils (composed mainly of elder lineage heads) and to seek unanimity, even if doing so required very lengthy discussion. “Majority rule, winner take- all, or other forms of zero sum games were not acceptable alternatives to consensus decision making” (Dia 1996, 41).

### **Conclusion**

The case of this essay has been to establish that thought there has been an African political philosophy, lack of written cultures and oral tradition has made Africa unable to mention some schools of thought or point to some sages who articulated political precepts. However, with the development of political discourse from a hermeneutic perspective, this essay shows how such is not a problem pervading African Political Philosophy. After a thorough investigation into the moral teachings of

Ptah-hotep and Kwame Nkrumah, this study proceeds to show that African political Philosophy has moved beyond such rationalisations. In recent times, cross-cultural perspectives of institutions and what they stand for has occupied the attention of African scholars. In this connection, this essay examined the African perspectives to the notions of democracy and human rights from the thoughts of Francis Deng and Sophie Oluwole. In the end it is not the opposite of the truth to conclude that African political philosophy is a field that has come to stay and has a very level of relevance to the quest for equity, development and transformation on the African continent.

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