



Barry Hallen. *A Short History of African Philosophy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. vii + 134 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21531-4; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34106-8.

Reviewed by Charles Verharen (Department of Philosophy, Howard University)

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Always Something New out of Africa: In Philosophy, Too

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Barry Hallen promises a very short history of African philosophy accessible to the general reader. He apologizes in advance to the African philosophers whose “entire corpus of writings” may be unfairly labeled because of the brevity of this work (p. 1). However, a great virtue of the brief volume is its method of dividing African philosophy into manageable and provocative categories. The book began its life as an overly long chapter on “Anglophone African Philosophy” for Kwasi Wiredu’s *Companion to African Philosophy* and blossomed into a first-rate introduction to African philosophy. However, professionals in the field of philosophy and in Africana studies more generally will also find the book rewarding. With over a quarter century of experience with African philosophy, both on the continent and in America (at Morehouse College where he serves as chair and as a fellow of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard), Hallen brings a wealth of experience to his subject.

Hallen has a gift for knowing what to pick and what to exclude. Against critics like Appiah and Lefkowitz, he includes a brief description of ancient Egyptian philosophy. He judiciously avoids the debate “over whether Egyptian culture was the progenitor of Western philosophy” to concentrate on the moral philosophy of Ptah-hotep (pp. 4-5). He also draws a nice comparison between the values that Ptah-hotep particularly emphasizes and the moral epistemology of the Yoruba discussed in his joint research with the late J. Olubi Sodipo of Nigeria. He is careful to point out that the striking resemblances between ancient Egypt and contemporary Yoruba moral philosophy need not imply cultural diffusion. He also includes a brief description of the Ghanaian philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo (c. 1703-1765) who received “the equivalent” of a doctorate in philosophy from the German University of Wittenberg, and wrote a disser-

tation on the “Rights of Africans in Europe” (pp. 9-10). Hallen mentions Amo’s second dissertation, a critique of Descartes’ dualism and mind-body interaction.

Unfortunately Hallen’s brief treatment of the Ethiopian philosopher, Zar’a Ya’aqob (1599-1692), does not compare Ya’aqob’s methodology of *hatata* with Descartes’ method of universal doubt and analytic reduction. The word *hatata* springs from a root meaning reducing to small pieces by grinding, and Ya’aqob’s systematic method of doubt spared neither Christian nor Islamic doctrine.[1] A fundamental aspect of Ya’aqob’s method is his emphasis on the “light of reason” that guides the intellect in its philosophical inquiry. Ya’aqob’s twin emphases on analytic reduction and the light of reason begs for comparison with Cartesian methodology. Moreover, the two philosophers were near contemporaries (Descartes: 1596-1650). Hallen is not to be faulted for failing to make the comparison since there is no current impetus for research on the intersection of African, Middle Eastern, and European philosophical traditions, although Hallen does propose a research program that will examine African oral literature for its philosophical content. He thereby sets the stage for the great rift that has separated African philosophers from the mid-twentieth century to the present: the question of what should count as philosophy in Africa.

For Hallen the most powerful expositor of the view that “traditional” African thought is philosophical in the most robust sense is Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu. Hallen devotes over three pages of his excellent bibliography to Wiredu’s extraordinary research. According to Hallen, Wiredu believes that “all of humanity shares certain basic rational attributes” and a study of the workings of that rationality “should be assigned the highest priority for those committed ... to a vision of philosophy that truly crosses cultures” (p. 22). Wiredu struggles against the view that African cultures are “traditional” in the sense that “virtually every major element

of African ... culture was inherited from a distant past, is preserved relatively unchanged in the present, and will be passed on as normative to the future" (p. 17).

While Wiredu recognizes the possibility of a "folk philosophy" that may be uncritical, unreflective, and lacking in arguments, he insists that only a Western cultural ethnocentrism would reduce all African literature and orature to a primitive folk philosophy in advance of a philosophical investigation to back up the claim. Hallen presents an excellent exposition of Benin philosopher Paulin Hountondji's critique of folk philosophy or "ethnophilosophy." For Hountondji, ethnophilosophy strips the act of philosophizing away from the individual and assigns it to the group, localizes philosophizing in the past rather than the present, and reduces justification to the authority of tradition. If ethnophilosophy were regarded as a subset of ethnography, Hountondji would have no objection to its practice. But in Hallen's words, if ethnophilosophy is "introduced as ... African philosophy, a demeaning and subversive double standard is introduced that excuses African thought and philosophy from having critical, reflective ... rational, scientific, and progressive content produced by individual thinkers in any significantly cross-culturally comparative sense" (p. 51). Against Hountondji's critique, Hallen recounts a research program that moves beyond folk philosophy or ethnophilosophy to "sage philosophy." Hallen cites another Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, who argues that all cultures include philosophers as those "who reflect deeply and critically about fundamental questions of human experience." Gyekye also actively engages in philosophical "fieldwork," having dialogues with "sages" who are living exemplars of philosophy in action (pp. 27-28). Gyekye joins the late Kenyan philosopher, Odera Oruka, in setting up a research program in "sage philosophy" or "philosophical sagacity." In Gyekye and Oruka's model, folk philosophy becomes sage philosophy when critical individuals in a culture analyze customary beliefs on the basis of criteria like non-contradiction, practicality, and correspondence with experience—criteria that are universal across cultures (pp. 52-53).

To mount an argument against this universalism, Hallen musters the support of the American philosopher W. V. O. Quine who claims that there can be no rigorous method to establish the universality of the meanings of words across culture. *A fortiori*, there can be no universal criteria for judging the merits of theories across cultures, according to what is called Quine's indeterminacy thesis of radical translation. Given Quine's hypothesis, Hallen insists on the possibility that "each natural human language is a unique creation that has its

unique conceptual elements—ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, etc.—that are a product of the human creative genius in that particular culture or society" (p. 37). Hallen cites Nigerian philosopher Godwin Sogolo as an exponent of the view that African cultures are unique and must be studied with philosophical methods that are unique to African cultural contexts (p. 40). In Sogolo's words, "African thought demands the application of its own universe of discourse, its own logic and its own criteria of rationality" (p. 42, italics deleted). The controversy between those African philosophers who claim that rationality is culturally relative versus those who claim that rationality is culturally universal continues to the present. A great merit of Hallen's book is to single out this controversy for the attention it richly deserves, and to present his exposition in succinct, compelling language.

Perhaps the greatest merit of the book is its synoptic character. Alain Locke insisted that philosophy's distinctive method was its panoramic vision.[2] Hallen's work is an exemplar of Locke's method in action. The intensity of focus that Hallen achieves on the question of philosophy's nature is remarkable. Hallen distills this wisdom with a quote from African American philosopher Lewis Gordon: "Now although [a] governing fiction suggests at first that 'real philosophy' is Western, there is a logic that can show that African philosophy is broader in scope than Western philosophy because it *includes* the Western in its self-articulation. In *practice* Western philosophy may be a subset of African philosophy" (p. 68, Hallen's italics in part).

Hallen's two penultimate chapters remind us of the importance of returning to Africa herself to conduct our philosophical investigations. The chapter on "Socialism and Marxism" reminds us that Africans have practiced forms of socialism long before Europeans. African American philosopher Anthony Bogues goes so far as to claim that the Congolese slaves, who defeated Napoleon's forces in Santo Domingo, advocated gender equality, labor unions, and community ownership of the means of production in their 1799 efforts to reinvent Haiti's post-slavery economy.[3] The chapter on "Philosophy and Culture" strikes a blow against Afrocentric "unanimists" who would argue for a homogeneity across African cultures with respect to gender relations in African communities.

In his superb chapter on sources for African philosophy, Hallen singles out the limitations of his own work. He praises Kenyan philosopher D. A. Masolo's "detailed and comprehensive history of African philosophy,"

African Philosophy in Search of Identity, admitting that he cannot do justice to this masterpiece in his own “brief historical synopsis” (p. 108). However, his conclusion captures the most important reason for reading this volume: “if anything, this narrative—incomplete and fragmentary as it may be—serves to demonstrate how dynamic, eloquent, and original a field African philosophy has become” (p. 112). The dynamic and eloquent quality of Hallen’s own book make it indispensable for beginners as well as professionals in the fields of Africana studies in general and philosophy in particular.

Notes

[1]. Claude Sumner, *The Source of African Philosophy: The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1986).

[2]. L. Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

[3]. Anthony Bogue, Panel Discussion on Afro-Caribbean Philosophy, Fourth Alain Locke Conference, Howard University, April 5, 2003, Washington, D.C.

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