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**Book Review: African Philosophy, a Historic-Hermeneutical Investigation Of The Conditions Of Its Possibility.**
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**Abstract**

*The need for this work has arisen as a result of the persistent and honest “search for an African Philosophy” (p.1), by Black Africa, which is closely identified with and readily traced back to “the ongoing artistic and intellectual renaissance in Black Africa” (Ibid. p.1). The author of this book holds that “Philosophy is a unique cultural form” (Ibid p.1) it should not “be confused with other forms such as myth, weltanschauung and religion” (Ibid. p.1). Instead, some standards or criteria need to be fulfilled if African Philosophy is to be a reality. He buys the view that Philosophy “grows out of a cultural background and depends on it” (Ibid. p.1) and that “discovering and studying this relationship will also be the condition for the development of a Black African Philosophy” (Ibid p.1). The book, is divided into five chapters, with pages numbering up to one hundred and thirty five (135), excluding the introduction which has eight (8) pages. The contents of each of the five chapters are carefully and lucidly epitomized, such that one gets the stuff in the book without having gone through the body of the work. The introduction leaves no reader in doubt as to what conclusive argument the philosophical venture would make. In the conclusion, the reader is reassured of the lesson the work had successfully put across.*

**Keywords:** *Africa, Black development, Black Africa, Black philosophy, Renaissance*

**The Review**

This book, first and foremost undertakes a critical look at the work of some authors, such as Placid Temple's – La Philosophie Bantoe; Alexis Kagame's – La Philosophie Bantouruandaise de l'être and, John Mbiti's – African Religion and Philosophy, who have claimed for the African the existence of a traditional philosophy. He enumerates a catalogue of pertinent criticisms leveled against them by some brilliant scholars. He gives the most pertinent as coming from Paulin Houtondji.

The author strongly criticizes Temple's work as a systematic substitution of the word “magic” by the word “force” (p. 5). “In short, La Philosophie Bantou is the theory of magic promoted to ontological status” he argues (ibid p. 5).

Taking a critical look at the works of other protagonists of African traditional Philosophy, especially John Mbiti's African Religions and Philosophy, he writes: “Just as Temple has tried to found a Bantu Philosophy from a general consideration of the culture, Kagame, from an analysis of the Language, so has John Mbiti

endeavoured to found an African Philosophy from the consideration of the African idea of time” (p. 9). ‘Thus’, the author continues, “Mbiti’s thesis labours, like that of Temples and of Kagame, under the presumption of the existence of a collective philosophy common to all Africans here, and because they have a certain conception of time” (p. 11).

Against these authors, the book holds that “far too much has been taken for granted.... Far too little was done by way of a preliminary investigation and definition of terms” (p. 11). Dissatisfied with their naivety and simplistic assumptions it suggests that their main fault is a “fault of method” (preface page v). The book maintains that any attempt at discovering an authentic African Philosophy, which is not coupled with a fundamental investigation and a scrupulous definition of terms, is an exercise in futility.

The book considers the problem of philosophy in relationship to culture as a problem of hermeneutics: “What will be said to define philosophy and relate it to culture will evolve around the subject of hermeneutics” (p.15).

It is against this background that the author undertakes an extensive study of the subject, hermeneutics, especially as it relates to the views of Paul Ricoeur, and Martin Heidegger.

He talks about Ricoeur’s three stages of interpretation, which could help link philosophy and culture. The stages are: The phenomenological stage, the hermeneutic stage and, the reflexive stage (p. 17). Ricoeur sees hermeneutics as a method.

The book, at this point, traces the history of hermeneutics up to Martin Heidegger. It surveys some of the philosophers who treated hermeneutics. Schleiermacher, for instance, saw it as “the doctrine of the art of understanding “ (ibid p. 23). Heidegger himself “considers hermeneutics as man’s way of being” (p.16). He holds that “understanding was indeed the original and fundamental way of life of Dasein (man)” (p. 29).

The book also pays attention to Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology.

The author insisting further that the problem of philosophy is mainly no other than that of hermeneutics, develops a consistent and conclusive argument to demonstrate the avowed relationship of the two subjects through a systematic and deep study of Martin Heidegger’s theory of hermeneutics. He writes: “By spelling out the details and implications of Heidegger’s theory of hermeneutics, that area of meaning where the theory of Being and the theory of man meet, we shall be able to see very clearly how culture and philosophy are related, and how philosophy evolves from culture” (p. 32).

After a brief study of Phenomenology, the author is able to establish with an amazing clarity that “phenomenology of Dasein is hermeneutics” (p. 36) and that ontology, phenomenology, and philosophy are intertwined (p.37).

The author suggests that our whole existence together with philosophy is an interpretation. He writes, “in short, our existence is hermeneutical” (ibid).

Here, the author also takes “a more concentrated and sustained analysis of some key notions in Heidegger’s fundamental Ontology” (p. 41). He begins this with the analysis of the word Dasein: “For fundamental ontological reasons, Dasein has been chosen as the term for man. Dasein is man but man considered from point of view of his being” (p. 41).

The book makes an assessment of “Heidegger’s understanding of two of the three components of Being-in-the-world..., the world and Being-in”. For as it puts it, “This study will throw more light on the thesis of the relativity of all giving of meaning and all interpretation” (p. 43).

This book is of the opinion that “...man’s ultimate interpretation, his philosophy, will be necessarily historical and culture bound, articulated relatively to his environment and world” (p. 54). It maintains that man’s environment is to suggest the terminology, arouse the questions and predetermine the answers (ibid. p. 54).

The author also enumerates the role of preconceptions and prejudices in philosophy. He employs the aid of H. G. Gadamer to substantiate his standpoints. He remarks: "Without its negative overtones, prejudice is another word for all the background - historical, linguistic, cultural, etc. from which no philosophical speculation..., can be free."

After a convincing reasoning on the relationship of culture to philosophy, the book says "all philosophical discourse is first and foremost an answer to the problems and questions raised within a questioning horizon, which means always, a *culture* (p. 64) (emphasis mine). The author insists further that "There is no reflection except against a background of the unreflected" (p. 65). Note, the 'unreflected' stands for culture.

Continuing in its claim that philosophy stems from culture the text says: "culture plays the role of background, presuppositions and prejudgment whereas philosophy plays the role of foreground, thematic statement and explicit judgment" (p. 65). Culture, it continues, does "channel the philosopher's interpretation as well as offer him infinite possibilities for the creation of meaning" (p. 66).

The author also looks into the question of language with a view to establishing that there exists actually no remarkable difference between it and philosophy; language being an element of culture. And culture, the background of philosophy. He holds that "we do our *thinking*, nay we have all our experience in language. There is no perceptible distance between our language and our experience" (p. 70) (emphasis mine). "Understanding is language bound" (p. 71), he argues. He also asserts that "the mother tongue is no impenetrable barrier that makes objectivity impossible" (ibid p. 71). He buttresses this reasoning by seeking the assistance of Peter Winch: "Our idea of what belongs to reality is given to us in the language we use" (p. 75). By this he maintains that language and philosophy go hand in hand.

The book successfully convinces the reader that "the only way philosophy may develop" is "namely as an interpretative commentary on reality against the guiding, determining, and suggestive background of culture" (p. 81).

Added to these is a survey of history of philosophy to prove or demonstrate that what is philosophy really springs from, germinates, matures or grows out of non-philosophy, "...non-philosophy must stand for the non-reflected, that unreflected baggage of cultural background..." (p. 88), which H. G. Gadamer refers to as prejudgment (*vorurteile*). The gradual appropriation of this unreflected mass, by the reflective reason, results then in philosophy (p. 88).

Hegel's stimulus to philosophize came from rather non-philosophical experience, his intents and purposes were no other than to renovate and revamp society in the standard of the Enlightenment and, as he reasoned at the time, in accordance with the aspiration of the French Renovation (p. 85).

In the same way, Edmund Husserl turned a philosopher by contemplating the hardship encountered by mathematician in trying to fix the real status of number and quantity (p. 84).

Similarly a host of other philosophers, including Emmanuel Kant, began by reflecting on non-philosophy. But then, the author insists that "non-philosophical experience does not of itself suffice for the construction of a philosophy" (p. 86).

The book considering what it captions, "The role of the biblical doctrine of creation in Heidegger's philosophy", points out Karl Lowith's criticism of Heidegger's fundamental questions of metaphysics-"Why being exists at all and not rather nothing" (p. 10) as a philosophical question that has a theological undertone, stemming from the biblical doctrine of creation. Heidegger himself confirms his background: "Without this theological origin, I would never have become a thinker" (p. 106).

Even Greek philosopher is not exempt from this non-philosophical background. This is demonstrated in the body of the study which the book titled: “The elements of non-Philosophy in Greek philosophy, for example, Plato” (p. 106).

At the end of the essay, the triple question: “Is there, can there be, and in what sense can there be such a thing as African Philosophy” (p. 114), is taken care of. The text reads: “In answering these questions a distinctly hermeneutical inquiry appeared to be the best methodological approach. From hermeneutical study, ...we now know that African philosophies are possible” (ibid p. 11). Ricoeur’s and Heidegger’s analysis were explored to reach at this logical conclusion.

The book holds the “A *philosophical interpretation* of the symbols of African *cultures* would be African philosophy” (p. 115) (emphasis mine). It maintains that the African unreflected background could well function as a cultural background for African philosophy.

That text however, insists that philosophy is neither produced from a culture through a mere “mechanical application of hermeneutical rules” (p. 119), nor is it a “mere collecting together of heterogeneous and pre-fabricated elements which belong to a culture” (p. 120).

Philosophical reflections is somewhat a personal venture “a questioning in the first person” (ibid).

In page 121, the author suggests some themes that would give future African philosophers a starting point.

He suggests some also for would-be Igbo philosophers.

## **Conclusion**

After a philosophical glimpse into the origin and pattern of development in philosophy in both Greek and Indian the book maintains that an African tradition of philosophy, emanating from its own resources is not at least an impossibility (p. 127). This book is a scholarly and brilliant exposition of the authentic routes through which Black Africans can as a matter of fact research reach at genuine African Philosophies. It is for its uniqueness that the book recommends itself to all students and lovers of philosophy. The writer strongly recommends this text to all African intellectuals, whose duty it is, to provide mother Africa with a philosophy of her own. Furthermore, we would like to recommend the text to all those patriotic and true sons of Africa, whose hearts’ desire has been to see a truly genuine African philosophy.

**Book Author:** Theophilus Okere

**PUBLISHER:** University Press of America, Lanhan, New York, London.

**This book is rather a philosophical inquiry into the criteria that will make for the possibility of an authentic African Philosophy.**