

# IN DEFENCE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to defend African philosophy in its singularity, as opposed to African philosophies in its plurality. African philosophy argues that there are recognisable common traits among Africans, whereas African philosophies as a concept counters this notion, claiming that Africans hold different philosophies, hence generalising about them is impossible. The existence of African philosophy is a contested terrain sparked by colonialism. Failure to defend African philosophy is a recipe for perpetuating the thinking that African indigenes do not have a philosophy. There is also a risk that their worldview could be lost in globalisation and internationalisation. My reaction is mainly inspired by Davison (Davison, Z. 2022. African philosophy: A nebulous label for demeaning indigenous philosophies of people of Africa. *Journal of Philosophy and Culture* 10(1): 1–9), who refutes the notion of African philosophy but supports African philosophies. In this article, I draw from the existing literature on African philosophy mainly contributed by higher-education-based scholars, including those in the Diaspora. The concepts of *philosophy* and *African* are critical; I describe them to advance my argument. I then tackle critical issues surrounding African philosophy, such as the nebulosity of the concept, the historical-political and spatial-cultural connotations, and modernist and postmodernist lenses applied to Africans. Most importantly, I provide examples of common traits among Africans to support my defence of the concept. My conclusion is that African philosophy does exist and is defensible. The article contributes to the African philosophy versus African philosophies debate; this is also important for learning and conducting research about African philosophy in higher education. African scholars should not be blind to the commonalities identifiable in African worldviews that can be used to defend African philosophy.

**Keywords:** African philosophy, diaspora, indigenous, dark-complexioned, culture

## INTRODUCTION

African philosophy is a much-debated concept that continues to elicit reactions from African scholars to how it has been reported on by Western Europeans. The reactions are polarised between the proponents and the opponents of African philosophy. Recent reactionists include Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi (2020) and Dladla (2021) who argue in favour of African philosophy, and Manji (2019) and Davison (2022) who argue in favour of African philosophies

instead of African philosophy. Davison's (2022) main arguments are: the nebulosity of the concept of African philosophy (in its singular format) in terms of its claim of homogeneity of the people on the African continent; the use of the concept by dark-complexioned African academics in the Diaspora and on the African continent to prove their academic worth; the dichotomisation of dark-complexioned Africans in Southern Africa and light-complexioned Africans in Northern Africa; philosophy as owing its development to Europe; the spatial-cultural view of African philosophy; the difference between the philosophies of countries which were never colonised and those who were colonised; and the dismissal of the pre-systemic era's philosophy.

This poses the question of the existence of a single African philosophy. Providing an answer to this question will not only contribute to the debate on the concept but will also help influence the direction of learning and research about it in higher education. Note that the contention in this article is between African philosophy in its singularity and African philosophies in its plurality and their applications on the continent in these senses. I note with interest that several authors who are pro- and anti-African philosophy use the term "African philosophy", instead of "African philosophies" (e.g., Eze and Metz 2016; Metz 2017; Wiredu 1998; Waghid 2016).

In this article, I contribute to the discourse by writing in defence of African philosophy. Taking this position is mainly triggered by Davison's (2022) dismissal of African philosophy in favour of African philosophies. Davison (2022, 1), a theory of education expert at Morgenster Teachers' College in Zimbabwe, launches his challenge to his fellow African scholars who keep to African philosophy: "The dark-complexioned African academics have written profusely about 'African philosophy' and are consequently causing some confusion in the philosophic realm". He argues that African philosophy is a nebulous concept that is unfit for ascribing homogeneity to the people on the African continent, thus claiming that "the concept 'African philosophy' should not be taken simplistically, just as a label of a philosophy" (Davison 2022, 1).

The crux of Davison's (2022) criticism is what he refers to as the dark-complexioned African academics in the Diaspora who have embraced the concept of African philosophy to prove their academic worth in the higher-education space. He extends his argument to the "dark-complexioned indigenes of Africa" (Davison 2022, 1). Those who are opposed to this view hold that rather than proving their academic worth, African academics want to reaffirm the cultural roots with which they identify as a collective, which were derogated and nearly destroyed by Westernisation, slavery and colonialism (Ukwamedua 2017, 96) – they are academics in their own right who engage the issue in the higher-education space; they do not have to prove their

academic worth through the concept. It is in this light that African philosophy is defended in this article. I submit that the political dimension surrounding this debate is inescapable (Ukwamedua 2017, 96) considering the history of contestation of African philosophy between Western and African scholars.

Therefore, in this article, I argue that African philosophy is not a nebulous concept, and I will justify this idea. My defence of African philosophy is a contribution to the field and to learning about it in higher education. Hence, I respond to these questions: What is African philosophy? Does it in fact exist? What are the justifications for African philosophy? To answer these questions, I will describe the concepts of “philosophy” and “African”, which are crucial to the discourse about African philosophy (Ukwamedua 2017). This is followed by a response to the argument of the nebulosity of African philosophy and the related concepts of negroids and negritude, which are derogative to Black Africans who are part of the societies on the African continent. The discussion is extended to the historical-political and spatial-cultural connotations that affect indigenous Africans. Then I examine the modernist and postmodernist lenses through which civilisation is applied to indigenous Africans and those in the Diaspora. My argument leads to the proposal to embrace African philosophy. My discussion is supported by examples that help to justify African philosophy, as many existing studies are example-poor, which leaves their arguments shaky to some extent. Some studies also do not explain the concepts of “philosophy” and “African”, which are critical to the debate on African philosophy.

## **THE CONCEPTS OF “PHILOSOPHY” AND “AFRICAN” DESCRIBED**

### **Philosophy**

The point I make in this section is that a region or a continent can have its own philosophy that is premised on cultural, belief, religious, etc commonalities (Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi 2020). Although Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi (2020) are opposed to the idea of commonalities, this article defends this idea with examples of commonalities. The mere fact that these authors accede to the idea of African philosophy suggests the existence of such commonalities. To properly answer the question of whether African philosophy exists, we must first understand philosophy itself. Ukwamedua (2017, 91) describes the concept etymologically, pointing out that it consists of the words *philos* (which means love, love of, friend, to love) and *sophia* (which means wisdom). The Greek word *philosophia* therefore means the love of wisdom; thus, a philosopher is a lover or friend of wisdom (Ukwamedua 2017, 91). According to Ukwamedua (2017, 91–93), philosophy:

- is ontological knowledge of beings, their cohesion and interactions;
- is the science of things, human and divine and their causes;
- is discovery of the ultimate, which is knowledge;
- is the only science, which is the science of itself and of other sciences;
- is an activity of criticism and clarification, the science of all sciences;
- concerns itself with problems of the knowledge of the universe; the question of social relationships, beliefs and self-knowledge;
- is a critical enterprise, thus a criticism of criticisms, and an activity that seeks logical clarification of thought; and
- is thinkification – thinking upon thinking or thinking upon thought.

Ukwamedua's (2017) description and application of philosophy to Africans help to address the question about the existence of African philosophy. Philosophy can be defined as "a special form of rational and critical activity that relies mostly on wonder and experience of reality" (Ukwamedua 2017, 93–94). Indigenous Africans express a unique worldview – they have their own understandings of the world that are different from those of European cultures and other regions of the world. African philosophy must be informed by the African experience (Anthony 2014, 93). A critical aspect, among others, which characterises African philosophy is the tied spirituality or belief system and epistemology, to which Western scientific thought does not subscribe because of its epistemicide (i.e., hunger to discredit or "kill" alternative epistemologies). It can thus be argued that Western science has initiated problems in African history, particularly the history of philosophy (Gumbo 2003; Mkhwanazi 2017).

According to Mkhwanazi (2017), different philosophies exist, such as African philosophy, Western philosophy, Chinese philosophy, and Indian philosophy. These were also noticed in a dialogue that Eze and Metz (2016) had with Wiredu – at some point, Wiredu responded thus: "However, people like the Indians ... have a tradition of philosophy". Anthony (2014) asks, "[I]f philosophy is a universal enterprise, then what makes a philosophy African?" Dladla (2021) adds to the argument: "Indeed, if it is a fundamentally human undertaking, then why would there be a doubt concerning the existence of African philosophy?" Philosophy, according to Anthony (2014), stems from culture; thus, culture particularises philosophy as European, Indian, Chinese, or African. Mkhwanazi (2017) argues that there is African philosophy just like there are other philosophies, such as Chinese philosophy and Indian philosophy. This argument strengthens my position on African philosophy. Also, Westerners acknowledged African philosophy, by affirming that the indigenous people of Africa exhibited a different worldview

from theirs (Mkhwanazi 2017, 4).

## **African**

Davison's (2022) dismissal of African philosophy is questioned against the background of the description of the concept of "African" in this section. While it can be argued that African societies are not the same, they have underlying similarities that support African philosophy. These similarities must be acknowledged. This connects with Ukwamedua's (2017) description of the concept of philosophy and Mkhwanazi's claim about different philosophies. Alongside Mkhwanazi's reasoning about philosophy, Idang (2015, 97) writes about the "underlying similarities shared by many African societies which, when contrasted with other cultures, reveal a wide gap of difference". The material and spiritual culture of African people is another key aspect presented by Idang (2015, 100): "Africans do share some dominant traits in the belief systems of their various values that mark them out from other peoples of the world." Waghid (2016) emphasises the bond between African and philosophy when he states that African philosophy is "a reasoned and culture-dependent concept" (2016, 11).

During my travels to other countries on the continent, such as Swaziland, Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, I noticed these common traits and practices, for example how people prepare their food, collectively organise and carry out their activities, dress traditionally and express *Botho/Ubuntu* as an African moral theory (Etieyibo 2016). My most recent experience was when I attended the Sixth Annual International African Association of Science and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Conference from 7 to 9 June 2023 in Namibia. Ideas were shared about the beliefs, knowledge, practices, etc that cut across African cultures and ethnicities. Our discourses as conference delegates from different African countries revealed similarities in these respects. In these discourses, I many a time heard African scholars (including myself) identify with knowledge and practices expressed by their fellow Africans: "Ah, it is applicable in my culture, too!" In line with this, Idang (2015, 100) claims that a Nigerian culture would be closer to a Ghanaian culture than it would be to an Oriental culture or the Western culture of Europe. In his article titled *African culture and values*, Idang (2015) highlights the centrality of values in African culture that support African philosophy – social, moral, religious, political, aesthetic, and economic values. These are outlined thus in the context of this article:

- Social values, such as festivals, games, sports and dances: It is not easy to separate some social values from religious, moral and political values. For example, the games *ampe*

(Ghana), *mbube-mbube* (South Africa), *kudoda* (Zimbabwe), and *nyama-nyama-nyama* (Kenya) are similar in structure, repetition, the roles of players, collective participation, etc.

- Moral values characterised by various beliefs and customs: These are to be observed by each member of society; they guard the people's living and ensure long life. The values are deeply rooted in spirituality and commonality, and are premised on religious episteme, community, ancestral worship, and taboos (Husien and Kebede 2017). Myths, stories and proverbs are critical in teaching about morality. They guard sustainable and educational development among indigenous communities and can protect children from bad influences. For instance, the Tswana proverb "*lemphorwana la bojalwa ga le fofe*" means "he who loves liquor will not progress".
- Religious values, with a belief in a Supreme Being: Many Africans believe that the spirit does not die with the physical body. Their values hinge on the knowledge of the existence of good and evil, which society must be informed and taught about. Revering God, which Western scholars claim to be non-existent in African societies (Husien and Kebede 2017) guides their values. This is based on the strong acknowledgment of a tripartite relationship between spirituality, humans and nature (Gumbo 2020), with God being the Creator of all. Hence, certain parts of nature are regarded as sacred and should be guarded and preserved. Mistreating nature is suicidal in African thought and belief.
- Political values that recognise institutions with respected heads: Each family has a head, as is the case with each village. This structure was intact prior to colonialism. Disloyalty to a leader was likened to disloyalty to God. Such a village structure insulated the morality and care of the people; a homestead with several designated huts (houses) for parents, boys, and girls ensured security, care and unity among the people.
- Aesthetic values with their own concepts of beauty and ugliness: For example, the Western model of beauty is that of slim bodies, whereas Africans may not have an issue with big/fat bodies. Aesthetics inform people's arts and crafts, with commonalities displayed in the open market.
- Economic values marked by cooperation: Friends and relatives assist in doing tasks without payment. It is an investment in the same assistance that might be needed in the future. When one member of society is in difficulty, the other members do not look away, but come to help him/her – a practice encapsulated in the popular idea of "I am because you are".

Therefore, to a large extent, communality, or some degree of commonality, defines an African (Ohihon 2021). Gyekye (1992; 1995; 1997) thinks this is to cage in an individual's personhood in a community, thus denying an individual their choices. However, an African individual enjoys their individuality as a member of a community – it is an individuality whose identity and meaning of existence are mirrored in the community. According to Ndofirepi and Shanyanana (2015, 1), “in African socio-ethical thought, the sense of self is developed in communitarian social constructions”. The authors invoke the Shona *ukama* (i.e., relationality) to express the brotherhood [sisterhood] of sharing and finding peace through the love of all in the extended family or clan; the “family is based on boundedness and the relationality of traditional African society” (Ndofirepi and Shanyanana 2015, 4). My take is that defining an individual within the context of their community is an important aspect of expression and belonging, not necessarily creating a passive being who cannot decide for themselves. Using the term “Afro-communal approach”, Metz (2017, 65) captures the profundities of commonality thus:

“That is, the sort of communion that is to be prized is the ideal of people sharing a way of life by thinking of themselves as a ‘we’ and engaging in cooperative projects, on the one hand, and by caring for others’ good by seeking to help them, often out of sympathy and for their own sake, on the other. Such a conception of communal relationship, often captured with terms such as ‘harmony’, ‘cohesion’, or even a broad sense of ‘love’, differs from the most influential contemporary forms of communitarianism in the West.”

While I fully agree with Parker's (2003, 30) reaction to communalism and *Botho* (the concept that we are all “human through our relations with other humans”), Metz's assertion above helps clarify the differences between the African and Eurocentric values.

The concept of “African” was coined by Europeans, who used the term to refer to the people who belonged to the “dark continent” (Manji 2019). According to Manji (2019, 53), this categorisation of the people as “Africans” was derogatory and dehumanising, and the intention was, therefore, to dismantle their cultures, languages, histories, and capacities to produce, organise, tell stories, invent, love, make music, sing songs, make poetry, produce art and philosophise. According to Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi (2020), the experience of indigenous Africans, which is built on these critical aspects, forms the bedrock of African philosophy. Indigenous Africans were reduced to people with “no identity”, a cultureless people, and thus othered.

I was personally othered during my schooling because my teachers perpetuated racism – and I cannot blame them because that is what apartheid aimed to achieve through them. When the class teacher closed the attendance register at the end of the quarter, he/she asked learners

to stand as he/she called them by the locally recognised ethnic categories of Batswana, Bapedi, Basotho, etc. Those like me with a Shona surname were called last: “And others!” The aim of the colonial education system was to dismantle the African brotherhood and sisterhood, to de-Africanise and Westernise them. On a national scope, the then-apartheid government in South Africa used the homeland system to achieve this mission – there was Bophuthatswana for Tswanas, Gazankulu for Tsongas, Ciskei for Xhosas, etc.

Though Europeans used the term “African” derogatively to refer to indigenous Africans, I accept to be called an African because that is Europeans’ acknowledgment of the difference between the philosophy that Africans exhibit and theirs. Ironically, Europeans generally referring to people from Africa and those of African descent as “Africans” is sufficient proof that there is an African philosophy. I note that though Manji (2019), like other scholars such as Davison (2022), does not subscribe to the idea of African philosophy as a general concept, he does refer to African indigenes. He only needs to notice that Europeans’ claim to be the originators of African philosophy was in fact an affirmation of its existence. A worldview is formed from people’s perceptions of the world around them.

I follow Ukwamedua’s (2017, 94) description of Africa: A geopolitical and sociocultural entity englobed as the continent of Africa. Ukwamedua’s (2017) description covers the north, middle, and south of the continent, including the old Afro-Islamic Egypt and sub-Saharan, Central and Southern Africa. Ukwamedua (2017) also includes Africans in the Diaspora in his definition, for example, Afro-Americans and Afro-Asians. This is despite Europe’s attempt not to classify the north of the Sahara as Africa (Manji 2019) because they wanted to claim it as their own. Informed by the foregoing descriptions of “African” and “philosophy”, my working definition in this article is stated as follows: African philosophy is how African people view the world with some degree of common cultural, religious, belief, etc traits and *Ubuntu*.

## **IS THE CONCEPT OF “AFRICAN” MURKY?**

In this section, I argue that “African” is not a murky concept. Europeans’ treatment of the concept is what makes it appear murky or nebulous, which scholars like Davison (2022) should notice and refute. It is important to clear the myth of murkiness. In this section, I do this by addressing issues of spatiality, temporality and racialism which are attributed to the concept of “African”. As stated in the foregoing section, “Africa” as a concept, was coined by European intellectuals. Mudimbe (1988, in Davison 2022, 3) attests in this regard: “Africa is an invention of Europe”. Furthermore, the European missionary, Placide Tempels, in his 1945 book *La philosophie bantou* claimed that he was the father of African philosophy (Davison 2022). The concept was used with the intention to “civilise” African indigenes by European standards and

culture. This is expressed in the European universalist approach captured by Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi (2020, 5): “Western European values and culture are the standard through which humanity is measured. The assumption is that Western European values, culture, and philosophy are qualitatively superior to all non-Western philosophical values and culture.” Such a notion was advanced by supercilious Eurocentrists who fallibly claimed that “as far as the East is from the West, so far is Africa removed from philosophy” (Ukwamedua 2017, 95). I argue that it is in this sense that Tempels claimed fatherhood over African philosophy because otherwise, no one could start a true philosophy for a people of a particular region by themselves. This is confirmed by Datta (2018), who cites one indigenous participant in his study *Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in indigenous research* – a researcher may not claim that they have discovered knowledge; they can only learn from the knowledge holders. One becomes aware of the philosophy because it exists in the people. They exhibit a certain worldview that is different from the external observer’s philosophy. Okolo’s claim (1990) (in Davison 2022, 3) that “African philosophy started with Placide Tempels which he documented in his book, *Bantu Philosophy*” is unfortunate, because it feeds European colonial thinking, is self-undermining and lacks the self-reflection that Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi (2020) advocate for in African philosophers. What must be noticed, is that Europeans coined the term “Africa” to facilitate their own colonial intentions.

Davison (2022) draws from Pheko’s (2012) argument that Africans’ civilisation preceded colonialism. Pheko (2012) refers to Egypt’s innovation in lettering. Other noteworthy innovations and technologies from the continent are accounted for by Gumbo, for example in agriculture (2003), metallurgy, food, tools (2015) and mining (2020). Thus, the hunger to “civilise” Africans has been misplaced.

While Davison (2022) is opposed to the idea of African philosophy, he submits that the term “African” covers the sub-Saharan people who are called negroids. This suggests that they, as part of the continental society, must be characterised by an African philosophy. The next section describes negroids and negritude to add to this argument.

## **THE CONCEPTS OF NEGROIDS AND NEGRITUDE APPLIED TO INDIGENOUS AFRICANS AND AFRICANS IN THE DIASPORA**

This section describes the European-engineered concepts of “negroids” and “negritude”, and their application to indigenous Africans. It ties to the defined concept of “African”: “A Negro is a person of dark complexion or race, who has not accomplished anything and to whom others are not obligated for any useful service” (Garvey 1923). Davison (2022) describes the colonial engineering of the European philosophy concerning black people through the involvement of

the terms “negroids” and “negritude”. With its etymological roots, “*negro*” (from Latin *nigrum/niger*, meaning black) and “*nègre*” (from French), the term “negroid” was derogative and applied to the Black people of Africa who were considered barbaric and unqualified to be civilised (Davison 2022). This term led to the reactionary concept of “negritude” (blackness) (Manji 2019), a framework used to critique the racist misconceptions about African indigenes, thus raising Black Consciousness across Africa and its Diaspora (Davison 2022). According to Davison (2022), negritude became a philosophy that opposed colonialism and denounced Europe’s labelling of Africans as inhuman; it confronted European philosophic ethnocentrism.

Matemba’s (2021) emphasis that the late 1800s missionary George James visited Malawi stands squarely against Davison’s (2022) claim that James’ explanation of Africans within the philosophical framework only referred to the light-complexioned people of North Africa (Davison 2022, 5). The fact that fewer than ten countries were situated north of the Sahara Desert suggests that the colonialists were selective in their demarcation of Africa for their own intentions – they meant to claim that part of Africa for Europe. By implication, they would claim the Egyptian innovations as theirs. The attempt to divide “North Saharan Africa” and “South Saharan Africa” is historically tied to the use of Moroccan and Algerian troops by France to occupy Germany or save France from extinction (Garvey 1923). Garvey (1923) argues that if these troops did not play a role, they would have been called negroes as usual, “but now that they have rendered themselves useful to the higher appreciation of France, they are no longer members of the Negro race, but can be classified among a higher type”. Garvey’s argument suggests that once a Black man achieves something, he is classified among a higher type (of achievers) and is no longer a member of the negro race. Garvey also relates the attempts to describe Ethiopians not as African negroes, but as dark-coloured races that showed a mixture of Black blood. This was after Professor George A. Kersnor returned from the Harvard-Boston expedition to the Egyptian Sudan (Garvey 1923). In his encounter with Ethiopians, he recognised their wisdom and described them as genius and of high culture. This teaches us something about colour not being the only determinant used by Europeans to decide who is negro and who is not. If you achieve as they do, they may forget about your skin colour and regard you as of high culture.

## **AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY UNDERSTOOD THROUGH HISTORICAL-POLITICAL DYNAMICS**

A historical-political stance cannot be avoided when entertaining debates on African philosophy. I have shared my views on the spatial aspect as a definer of African philosophy. Europeans demarcated the continent based on two main motives: to claim the North-Saharan

region as part of Europe, and to allocate the countries in the South-Saharan Region as “slices of a cake” for strategic colonial ruling. This was fuelled by an unbridled hunger to loot the African resources and markets. An account of the scramble for Africa is outlined in the book titled *The long-run of the scramble for Africa* (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2013), reviewed by Ouma (2012). Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2013) show that colonialism left a ravaging legacy of violence against, and territorial changes pertaining to the ethnicities that were partitioned and that these territories are now resident to the “poor” and the “uneducated”. Their local traditional markets and education were destroyed by capitalism and Western education systems that colonialism brought to the continent. Carmody (2011), in the book titled *The new scramble for Africa*, points out a turn in the tide to what appears to be a new colonialism stemming from the East, disguised in the BRICS partnership, especially by China and India.

My take is on a georeferenced Africa compared to other global regions or continents. I defend African philosophy from this perspective. The uniqueness of the geographical features and nature of the African continent compared to other continents deserves to be acknowledged – animals, plant species, and weather patterns. African philosophy stems from the tripartite relationships between nature, humans and spirituality (*Botho* – a unifying concept). Wiredu (1995) and Gyekye (1992) espouse the fundamentals of *Botho*, that is, harmonisation, norms, ideals and moral virtues which include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect, and concern for others. It was through how indigenous Africans relate to and manage the environment that African philosophy was shaped and continues to be shaped, for example, totems that are tied to certain animals to protect and maintain the cultures (Gumbo 2020). My totem is an Elephant from the Shona cultural root, and I have learned that the same totem is used by other ethnic groups such as the Ndebeles in Mokopane in Limpopo Province of South Africa, much as the Crocodile totem is shared by many other cultural groups. This attests to the common cultural traits that seep into African philosophy. The animals that are used as totems are treated as sacred.

The colonial experiences of indigenous Africans contributed immensely to African philosophy – African academics partly discuss their experiences of colonialism. Smith (1999), writing in defence of the Māori people in New Zealand, argues that our story is decolonial. In fact, Davison (2022, 4) confirms that “the cultures and the philosophies of the indigenes of Africa have been defined with reference to the temporal aspect which is hinged on colonialism”. While I argue that African philosophy hinges on *Botho*, it encapsulates a decolonial story.

Davison’s (2022) claim that philosophy developed from the European context ironically justifies African philosophy, because Europeans were comparing African philosophy with theirs. My view is that European philosophy exists and is shaped by colonialism, individualism,

capitalism and a logical-mathematical view of life; African philosophy, in contrast, is shaped by communalism, socialism, and a holistic view of life – *Botho*. What Davison (2022) seems not to realise, is that African philosophy has outlived the Europeans “discovering” it – they did not discover it; they became aware of it, but denied themselves the opportunity to learn more about it and the people inhabiting it. That is why it is particularly important that indigenous Africans not only tell their decolonial story but also make every effort to concretely counter any attempts to recolonise Africa and support irredentism. It is important for students in higher-education institutions not only to learn about African philosophy but to use their African worldviews to conceptualise philosophy.

### **THE SPATIAL-CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

Language is a powerful aspect of cultural identity that must be included in debates on African philosophy (Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi 2020). Davison’s (2022) deliberation on languages in his article under the spatial aspect is therefore a much-welcomed consideration. It fits well into his criticism of African philosophy. Noteworthy is that he claims that “the colonialists found that the indigenes of the African continent had their indigenous languages, hence cultures and indigenous philosophies” (Davison 2022, 3). I could not agree more, except that he does not acknowledge the commonality that exists among the languages; this gap adds to my argument about African philosophy. In South Africa, for instance, language can be used to illustrate this claim based on cultural groupings, the main ones being the Nguni and Sotho groups. The Nguni group consists of the Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele and Swazi people, while the Sotho group consists of the Tswana, Northern Sotho and Southern Sotho people. Belonging to or knowing one language within each of these groups makes one able to converse across the subgroups owing to the degree of similarity between these languages. Another illustration concerns the similarity between some syllables in the Venda and Shona languages. Wentzel (1981) explored these similarities between Venda and Karanga, as a dialect of Shona. When growing up, I witnessed this similarity in the conversations of my father (a Shona) with the Venda people, for example in the words *chikoro*, *zvikukwana*, *musikana* (Shona) and *tshikolo*, *zvikukwana*, *musidzana* (Venda), with similarities even further afield, for example in the Swahili word for a girl, *msichana*. Ministerial Committee (2003) appointed by the South African Ministry of Education in 2003 reported “that the languages in pre-colonial Africa were successful modes of communication for meeting the range of societal needs”. It is against this backdrop that African philosophers must bring African languages into the discourses in research in the field (Gwaravanda and Ndofirepi 2020). We may not make full sense of African philosophy until we decolonise its languages as well (Wiredu 1998). Philosophical conversations with knowledge holders, especially the elders, are enriched by the language itself. The Ministerial Committee

(2003) further claims that traditional societies accumulated and interpreted knowledge across areas such as astronomy, medicine, philosophy and history – “knowledge(s) are a manifestation of how philosophy organizes cultural understandings on the African continent” (Waghid 2016, 11). Gumbo (2015) gives an illustration of the historical phenomenon of a stone astronomical observatory created in Kenya on the edge of the Lake of Turkana.

Yet another illustration of commonalities concerns the social mores governing birth, death, and marriage or weddings. These events are mostly community activities that oblige community members to be involved in one way or the other, mostly without regard to the affinity one has with the person affected. For instance, attending a wedding or funeral of a person in the community one is acquainted with, is a moral obligation that does not require an invitation, nor is it understood as an intrusion into the private space of the affected. For those events that require an invitation, all are invited. For a wedding function in particular, the aunts are tasked with hoisting a white flag on a tree or pole at the gate to signal the invitation of community members to the function. Mostly, this expresses that in most African societies or African philosophy, ontologically and normatively, being human is seen in relation to the condition of the other, without necessarily sacrificing individual autonomy. These practices are guarded by *Botho*.

Even Tempels affirmed that the dark-complexioned indigenes of Africa were cultural (Davison 2022, 3); thus, they were philosophical. According to Davison (2022, 3), their “human equality and dignity had not been considered due to the long period of exploitation, humiliation and subjugation”. It is the same Tempels (1959, 21) who claimed: “Anyone who claims that primitive people possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men”. The Ministerial Committee (2003) claims that the African languages were disturbed by the colonial attempts to anglicise them and by the introduction of literacy that disrespected the value of these languages. The languages knitted in culture reflect the unity (*Botho*) of the people on the continent – a bond that is not easy to break. They must be revitalised in higher education and research discourses, down to application. Davison (2022, 4) cites Lord Macaulay, who during his address to the British Parliament on 2 February 1835 considered the difficulty of colonising such people whose philosophy is deeply rooted in culture and language:

“I have travelled across the length and breadth of Africa and I have not seen in this country such a high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation which is her spiritual and cultural heritage and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Africans think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.”

The goal was to assimilate, deculture and re-culture African people, who were described as primitive, backward and uneducated, into the English culture. The British education system was used as the main tool to discard the traditional education system described by Tedla (1995). Tedla (1995) frames this traditional education system within Sankofa, an Akan concept that means “return to the source and fetch”. Tedla advocates the revaluing of this traditional education system. The West dismissed any opportunities for acculturation because of its selfish motive, thus denying Westerners an opportunity to gain experience of the African culture and languages.

Higgs and Smith (2002) and Waghid (2016) claim that philosophy is culture-specific. What needs to be acknowledged here is the cultural ethos that binds indigenous Africans together, considering the examples that I have provided. It is not enough to confine the discussion to cultural differences and deny the similarities between them. Davison (2022) argues that because countries such as Ethiopia and Liberia were never colonised, their philosophies would not be the same as those who were colonised, if colonialism were a reason for civilisation. This claim is subject to scrutiny. Despite these countries not having been subjected to colonialism, they were not spared from its influence because the aim was to universalise colonialism – so much so, that they share in the decolonial story. I have realised this through my involvement with Ethiopian doctoral students who are enrolled at the University of South Africa (Unisa) as part of the Unisa–Ethiopia Ministry of Science and Higher Education partnership. Besides presenting research workshops to these students, I supervise some of them. A couple of students raised issues related to colonialism in their theses, for example *A model for indigenizing the basic education curricula for the Gamo ethnic group in Ethiopian primary schools* (Yimam 2016) and *Multicultural teacher education in Ethiopia: Insights from ethnicity and gender* (Yishak 2014). We co-published a book chapter titled *Multicultural teacher education: A tale of teacher education programme from Ethiopia* (Yimam and Gumbo 2017), and an article titled *A stand-alone, blended or restructured approach to the indigenization of curriculum? A critical perspective* (Yishak and Gumbo 2015). I also experienced *Botho* in my interactions with the students – they showed respect (especially towards the elderly), unity, an urge to help each other, etc.

## **THE MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST LENSES AS DETERMINANTS OF CIVILISATION: THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY ISSUE**

Davison (2022) touches on modernist and postmodernist theories (the postcolonial/post-imperial perspective). Modernism fronts civilisation and claims that science, reason and technology can be relied on and will solve all the problems of the world (Gumbo 2003).

However, it excludes Africa and regards it as one of the parts of the world that have fallen behind the science–reason–technology bandwagon of development. Africa is downplayed even though the “peoples of the continent were the source of major scientific ideas well before they became adopted by Europe” (Manji 2019, 52), like in medicine, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy (Manji 2019; Gumbo 2015).

Part of the rationale for the dismissal of Africa in terms of scientific and technological contributions to the advancement of this world is that modernism is framed in reason and logic. If the assumption is that Africa is a dark continent and therefore backward in terms of scientific and technological development, Africa is referred to in its unified form – which attests to and affirms African philosophy.

One realises that science had become an ideology (Volmink 1998) through which the West defended its stance against the philosophy of indigenous people. Before postmodernism, it was treated as a discipline and method of knowledge construction. The aim was to keep anything African on the fringes of philosophical discourses and deny Africa’s contribution to scientific and technological development. Most importantly, it (science) disturbed the sustainable development of African communities. Volmink (1998) argues that what science succeeded in doing was overpowering its opponents – it did not convince them, but took over by force, denying argument a space to thrive. Through the universalisation project, science and technology were paraded as essential tools to define modernisation and economic development (Naidoo and Savage 1998). The result was that indigenous knowledge and technology were downplayed and scorned as low-grade. It is therefore evident that science and technology research is a social justice, cognitive and epistemological issue. Western thought, it can be argued, claims that a knowledge base only accepts evidence that can be transformed into knowledge. This is a problem in the conceptualisation of research in higher education (Datta 2018) from which African philosophers must distance themselves. The institutional and structural arrangements of bureaucrats, politicians, donors, mass media, publishing houses, researchers and international consultancies perpetuate this marginalisation (Volmink 1998). Gumbo (2003) asks these pertinent questions: Did not Western science and philosophy start only as thought? Do they not wear traditional connotations? Why do African science and philosophy just get dismissed? Are they not worth contributing to knowledge production? Whose knowledge should receive superiority and whose should not? Lindberg’s (2007) book titled *The beginnings of Western science: The European scientific tradition in philosophical, religious, and institutional context, prehistory to A.D. 1450* attests to this line of thinking about the development of science. In the book, he centres the Greek culture in this development, although he also points us to Egypt’s contribution to the development of science.

## EMBRACING THE CONCEPT OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

The reality of African philosophy must be embraced. Placide Tempels observed spirituality among Africans, which was the basis of this philosophy (Davison 2022, 5; Wiredu 1998). The commonality of indigenous Africans' traits is expressed through their cultural practices and *Botho* supersedes all other elements as a distinguishing characteristic. According to Higgs (2003), discourses on African philosophy have a common set of values, which include communalism, *Ubuntu* and humanism. I submit that we would rather entertain micro-differences of a cultural nature than deny a communitarian view. Scholars such as Metz (2011) support the idea of inculcating a sense of community, even in the current South Africa; it should be framed in the true sense of the African *Botho*, which is reflected in the Tswana adage, *Letlhaku le lešwa le agelwa mo go le legologolo* (a new branch is built on the old one). The crux of philosophy in African communities owes its origin to the wisdom of the elders.

African scholars on the continent hold similar ideas as African scholars in the Diaspora. They have not been taken into slavery elsewhere, but they hold similar views about the indigenes of Africa as enshrined in their philosophy. While I concur with Davison (2022) in his dismissal of the concept “pre-systemic era’s philosophy”, which described Africans’ philosophy as unsystematic, this assertion in itself is an acknowledgment that (1) Africans must have been united in their view of life before the colonists arrived on African soil, and (2) the colonists may have had difficulty in understanding Africans’ holistic view of nature and therefore deemed their philosophy unsystematic. The fact that it was not recorded does not mean that it was non-existent. This argument concurs with the claim that even “the philosophic ideas of Socrates were not documented by him but by other philosophers who came after him, but they were not considered to be pre-systematic” (Davison 2022, 5).

Davison (2022, 5) further makes the critical argument that the philosophy that guided the livelihoods of people since time immemorial should not be given such a label because it is tantamount to saying that the livelihoods of the people were not systematic until the introduction of formal education by the colonialists. Failure to understand such philosophy was the reason for introducing so-called formal education, including the Philosophy of Education, as a discipline in higher-education institutions – qualified as formal, so that they could call the African education system informal. Ironically, Davison (2022) does agree here that it is the philosophy (in its singularity) of the people.

While I agree that the philosophy of some Africans (especially those who have been educated at Western universities) has been diluted by the colonialists’ cultural lens, some African scholars have experienced a renaissance and reclaimed their identity. Tagging

philosophy with “ethno-” does not necessarily debase dark-complexioned Africans but is an acknowledgment of their philosophy being unique in the realm of philosophy. Hence, the acknowledgment of Anyamwu stating that “the criteria of Western philosophy present challenges to the methodologies of ‘African philosophy’” (Davison 2022, 6). It is in this light that many renowned African scholars, whom Davison (2022) spends his energy on from page 5 to the end of his article, have written about African philosophy from a communitarian approach. These scholars wrote about certain cultures, but they advanced a bigger perspective of their commonalities. Ukwamedua (2017) is in full support of this idea, compared to Davison (2022) who opposes it. He defends African philosophy, which is formed from indigenous cosmologies and traditional beliefs that are interwoven into complex ritual practices (Ukwamedua 2017). Ukwamedua (2017, 97) argues:

“African philosophy on the other hand articulates and critically reflects on the total experience of the African, on how an African perceives reality and reacts to the experiences and immediate environment. African philosophy thus places emphasis on the African, his world, history, values and the like, and on the significance that these have for him. In general, African philosophy explores particularly how an African experience conceives and interprets nature, society, religion, man, God, human conduct, and lots more. It is an enquiry into two aspects: philosophical and African. As a philosophy, it is philo-sophia, a quest for (African) wisdom.”

Ukwamedua uses “African” in its singularity within a collective context (“I am because you are”). It is an expression of representation that tells how Africans experience and respond to nature. The fact that Wiredu (1995) claims that African philosophy was some sort of community thought or folk thought affirms African philosophy. There is, therefore, logical thinking in communities that is incommensurate with Western logical-mathematical and mechanical thinking; hence, Wiredu’s (1995) criticism that Africans lacked logical, mathematical, and analytical thinking abilities is dismissed, for it judges African thought based on Western standards, failing to acknowledge its uniqueness. Similarly, Davison’s (2022, 7) claim that “the consent by the renowned philosophers that there is an African philosophy is problematic” is in itself problematic. There cannot be scores of African scholars who advance an ideology of African philosophy, yet the idea is considered non-existent or undefendable. African scholars have observed common patterns, practices and epistemologies that are defensible and exist within an African philosophical framework. In fact, Davison (2022) accedes to their intellectual status as “renowned” scholars. Davison (2022, 7) argues further:

“There are books about African philosophy, African traditional religion, African traditional education, African epistemology, etc in which the dark-complexioned African scholars and academics endeavoured to assert their identity and worth by writing about their communities but inaccurately described them as being continental issues.”

This is right, as it asserts the commonality described above and, of course, they are continental issues in terms of the thesis advanced in this article. It is for this reason that I do not feel sorry about the contribution that I have made in addition to these scores of African intellectuals through titles such as *Africanising the curriculum: Indigenous perspectives and theories* (Msila and Gumbo 2016) and *African voices on indigenisation of the curriculum: Insights from practice* (Gumbo and Msila 2017). Davison (2022, 7) is actually right to argue that the “dark-complexioned African scholars and academics were rather emotionally reactive to producing texts that were tagged ‘African’”. I need to point out that their emotional reaction did not mean the absence of rationality. “If Africans are agreed to be human persons of a rational nature, it follows that they do and are capable of doing philosophy” (Anthony 2014, 92). According to Smith (1999), indigenous people’s story is a decolonial story. Whether indigenous people were directly, indirectly, or not colonised, they have and continue to suffer the results of colonialism. Emotionality cannot be dismissed – defined by a holistic view, Africans involve all their profundities in responding to situations. Furthermore, a cry for socio-economic and epistemic justice cannot be dismissed in African scholars’ intellectual works.

## CONCLUSION

African philosophy does exist and is defensible. In this article, I have rebutted the idea of the rejection of African philosophy. As part of doing this, I have described African philosophy based on the concepts of “philosophy” and “African”. Examples were given that strengthen the justification for African philosophy. It must be noted that colonialism and the proposal and legacy of African philosophy left by Europeans have sparked debates by scores of African scholars on the continent and those in the Diaspora on the concept itself, namely on African philosophy (singular) versus African philosophies (plural). Africans should state their own position on the concept, considering the heatedness of the debates in the field. This article is one such position in which I back my stance with some commonalities that exist across African cultures. It is for this reason that, in the final analysis, I argue that African philosophy is not a nebulous concept. The journey does not end here, and I dare say that this contribution will extend the debates on African philosophy. I, therefore, recommend that research should further explore the commonalities that exist in different life aspects of the African people. In addition, seminars and lectures should be conducted in the higher-education space to engage in the concept of African philosophy. University students should not be taught about the concept uncritically – they should reflect deeply on it as it involves their rediscovery as Africans and what they have in common, instead of only focusing on their differences.

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