

The Philosophy of Man and his Destiny among the Baganda of Uganda

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Abstract

At colleges and universities around the world interest in area studies remains strong. African studies are also gaining momentum lately, but mainly in such areas as politico-economic development and social change. A scientific study of the continent, its people, institutions, cultures, history and philosophy of life still lags behind other area studies. *African* philosophy is particularly, noticeably excluded in Asian, American and European universities. One of the reasons is the popular Western European conception of Africa, and the other is the lack of a systematic literary deposit on African philosophy. These two reasons have been responsible for the portrayal, over the centuries, of African philosophy as inferior, vague, distorted or even non-existent. In this paper I take a peep into the rich, albeit largely unwritten philosophy of man and his destiny among my mother tribe, the *Baganda* of Uganda. I argue that even those traditional African societies like *Buganda*, which may boast of no wealth of philosophical literature, had and have their own concept of life in which everything around them becomes meaningful.

1. Introduction—the question of African philosophy

There have been many romantic and prejudiced views in the past about the existence and nature of African philosophy. Indeed, “Many of the greatest thinkers of the modern era, including David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson, considered Africans and their descendants to be so intellectually handicapped as to make them philosophical invalids, incapable of moral and scientific reasoning.”¹⁾ David Hume is for instance reputed to have written:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men, to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was any civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures among them, no

arts, sciences.... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.²⁾

For Hume then, black Africans and other non-white species were inferior, and therefore their philosophy was inferior, vague, distorted or even non-existent. Their ways of thinking had no meaningful principles of life.

For Thomas Jefferson, although he is known to have been a consistent opponent of slavery his whole life, he believed that the enslaved blacks were “naturally inferior” and “as incapable as children”. He thought thus that white Americans and enslaved blacks constituted two “separate nations” who could not live together peacefully in the same country. This is the very reason he advocated for abolition. His belief in the necessity of abolition was, as it were, intertwined with his

racial beliefs.³⁾

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a central figure in modern philosophy, argued that different nations have different aesthetic and moral sensibilities; and that the Germans are at the top of his classification with a “fortunate combination” of both the “sublime” and the “beautiful” feeling (thus surpassing the Englishman and the Frenchman who each seem to have predominately only one half of the feeling). The African, on the other hand, is at the bottom, and Kant concurs with Hume⁴⁾ that “the African has no feeling beyond the trifling”.⁵⁾

Many writers and thinkers from the European Enlightenment thus associated reason and civilization with “white” people and northern Europe, while “unreason and savagery were conveniently located among blacks and non-whites outside Europe, in, for example, the ‘Dark Continent’ of Africa.”⁶⁾ To many non-Africans, Africa was no better than a monstrous jungle, and an African for them was regarded as a mere object. In the preface to Placide Temples’ classic, “Bantu Philosophy”, Prof. E. Possoz associates European colonial rule in Africa and its origins, the Scramble and haggling over the continent’s territory, to that attitude of aversion with regard to the indigenous peoples of the so called ‘Dark Continent’:

“Up to the present, ethnographers have denied all abstract thought to tribal peoples. The civilized Christian European was exalted, the savage and pagan primitive man was denigrated. Out of this concept, a theory of colonization was born, which now threatens to fail everywhere.”⁷⁾

With the danger of sounding apologetic, therefore, contemporary African voices like to brush off that image of their motherland and herald in a new era of what they call the “African Renaissance.” Former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, speaking to a Japanese audience in Tokyo in 1998, quoted Pliny the older: *‘Ex Africa semper aliquid novi’* (‘Out of

Africa always something new’). Mbeki, sighted in Meredith⁸⁾, referred to “the past glories for which Africa was renowned: the pyramids of Egypt; the Benin bronzes of Nigeria; the obelisks of Aksum in Ethiopia; the libraries of Timbuktu in Mali; the stone fortress of Zimbabwe; the ancient rock art of South Africa.” He argued that “when I survey all this and much more besides, I find nothing to sustain the long-held dogma of African exceptionalism, according to which the color black becomes a symbol of fear, evil and death.” Mbeki was speaking as a politician and salesman, trying to attract foreign investment and make the new ‘Rainbow Nation’ and Africa as a whole an important global trading partner. He was thus appealing for recognition of the “New Africa” systematically freeing herself from the scourge of civil wars, ridding herself of dictators, and rediscovering her economical potential. On the philosophical and literary front, Africa needs both a beginning and a renaissance. She needs a beginning in the sense that a tremendous volume of our philosophical and cultural heritage has never been written, and is therefore not known to the outside world. This has given rise over the centuries to the assertion that no philosophy is pre-eminent in the African’s systems of thought and living experience in general. Africa also needs a renaissance because the sharp knife of euro-centrism cut so deep at the dawn of the colonial era that all the values that characterized our African heritage became as good as useless. The Eurocentric approach, which, as Burjor Avari argues, has dominated all our intellectual thinking during the last two centuries, marginalizes concepts, motivations and actions springing from the non-European world. He notes for instance that “political philosophy is conceived to be a discipline designed in Europe by Europeans.”⁹⁾

Today, after more than a century of negligence and alienation, it is incumbent on us African scholars to trace with all scrutiny possible, that clear, complete and positive conception of man and the universe that is indigenous with the

African mind. It is incumbent on us to revisit, appreciate and organize into scholarly materials, the basic principles, and even a system of philosophy, on which the intellectual conception of the universe among our primitive peoples rests.

The purpose of the current study is therefore to trace the philosophical-anthropological wealth of the Baganda (also known as the Ganda) tribe of Uganda in general, and their mentality with regard to man's spirituality, self-transcendence and immortality in particular. A secondary objective is to put forward the case that social philosophy cannot be the monopoly of particular cultures, and that it would be a fallacy to think that such a philosophy is only what has been written down. This study seeks to underline the fact that even our rather primitive ancestors had a philosophy of life with a rich bounty of speculation and artistic emulation. It is true they didn't systemize their thinking in the manner the western world did with theirs. They lived in very poor and literary handicapped situations, and many still live that way. Nevertheless, the Baganda, like other Bantu peoples of Africa, have always had meaningful, albeit unwritten principles of life.

This essay is organized as follows: the next section is a brief presentation of the Baganda as a people, as a tribe, as a nation, and as part of the current state of Uganda. Next, the main question of this thesis, the question of the Ganda views of man and his destiny, will be discussed at length. Finally, in the conclusion, the case will be put that philosophy is universal as a discipline even where there is no systematic literary deposit.

2. The Baganda (Ganda) of Uganda

2.1 Etymology

The *Baganda*, also called *Ganda*, are the largest Ugandan ethnic group, representing almost 17% of the population. The title Baganda or the Ganda (singular *Muganda*) people is originally indigenous, and was applied by the people to themselves long before the Europeans came. Etymologically, this name comes from

the Luganda word *Omuganda* which means a bundle. It signifies unity, and it may account for the brotherhood the inhabitants of Buganda are well known for. There is a baffling unity deeply rooted in the very etymological basis of the Baganda. Expressions and names connected with the word *Omuganda* are portrayed as throwing some considerable light on this fact. Sayings like "*Kamu kamu (akati) gwe muganda*" (= one little twig together with others makes a bundle), are used to suggest that when individual Baganda are put together, the whole ethnic group of united Baganda (i.e. *Muganda* = bundle) is obtained.¹⁰ Ganda (tribal) names of people and villages such as *Kagganda*, *Kaganda*, *Kiganda*, *Ssemaganda*, *Nnakiganda*, and many other names, all indicate that the term actually belongs to the culture of the Baganda. Such originality is for our purposes vital as it implies a culturally bound mass of ideas and concepts.

I have argued elsewhere¹¹ that culture and religion for a true African are inseparable; that they are one and the same. Such a strong cultural originality can help us to assimilate the religious philosophy of our inquiry with some sure basis. The cultural unity displayed by this short etymological survey is also very important in so far as it reflects the continuity and unity of the purpose that the Baganda philosophy of man entails. Such an etymology could go further to express the underlying element in the mind of the Ganda, which is explained by their deep need for ethical goodness as a necessary condition for maintaining unity among themselves and with the ethically good dead relatives, who alone qualify in the august rank of "ancestors". This is important for our present survey. Already from the day-to-day meaning of the people and their life, we note a meaning in life—a meaning that apparently is not tied to this present life, but has further implications pointing to some continuity that we can already interpret as self-transcendence.

2.2 Language and people

Luganda is the language spoken by the

Baganda, and so by this Muganda author, and it is classified among the Bantu languages, which have inflexions with a tendency towards agglutination. Thus, the meaning of the static root, or stem, is determined by the use of initial vowels, prefixes, infixes and suffixes which denote various meanings of words.

The language of the Baganda, Luganda, has been one of the factors in their tradition that has helped to fill the gap left by the lack of written records. Their language is so much cherished, as one of their proverbs runs: “*Ozaayanga omubiri n’otozaaya lulimi*”, meaning: “One may expatriate the body, but not the language.” The Baganda have quite many other proverbs, sayings, anecdotes, fables, riddles and idioms, used to express their philosophy of life, often with a hint on the notion of the ultimate end of man.

Sadly, like many other ethnic groups in Africa, the Ganda people, as a social structure capable of fulfilling the basic life needs of its members, is considered by some authorities to be disappearing especially in urban and modernized areas. Nevertheless, the Baganda still consider their ethnicity a very important factor in the sense of identification, psychological commitment and historical membership. Their clan structure, for instance, is considered a very important set of identification codes. Clans serve to maintain the social structure of the Baganda, as well as to safe-guard other related elements that portray their philosophy of life. About the Baganda, as a people who belong to the great Bantu family, Roscoe has noted that they are perhaps the most advanced and cultured tribe of that family:

“in their dress and habits, they were superior to any of their neighbors, while their extreme politeness was proverbial. They were very careful of their personal appearance, and their homes too had a neatness and tidiness in structure and finish, with certain cleanliness in their surroundings, which lacked in the adjacent tribes. Their manners were courteous, and they displayed a high

sense of hospitality and love for neighbor, precipitating a high level of fraternal concern and social consolidation.”¹²⁾

3. The Ganda views of man and his destiny

The question at stake is how the Baganda view man beyond the physical and social existence they value so much. Do they see more in man than the material body, and hence, more in man beyond his grave, or does death mark the end of all and everything?

Traditional Classical Philosophy, from the ancient Aristotelian definitions to contemporary concepts, views man as the Human Being whose nature is by all accounts paradoxical. Man is a being who is simultaneously spirit and body, closed and open, existent and yet to be achieved. Man is a complex of a being in a state of tension between the two principles of its composition, between himself and his fellow man, between himself and his God. With that understanding, the most comprehensive name traditional philosophy has given to man’s being to express his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way is “an individual possessing a spiritual nature”.¹³⁾ To adequately answer the same question with regard to the mentality of the Baganda would require an exhaustive study of their anthropology. Nevertheless, a few brief remarks on the Ganda idea of man should suffice for our purposes here. After all, without a systematic literary deposit on the Baganda, we can only rely on the scattered but critical paradigms embedded in their traditional folklore.

3.1 *The origins of man*

The Baganda do not seem to have speculated much about the origin of man. The question was never systematically treated. It was rather treated in stories. One overriding view, however, is that the idea of the sacred origins of man is everywhere clear. The Baganda philosophy in this respect apparently had a big similarity with the general Judeo—Christian views concerning the origins of mankind. One would easily think that

the theory is not baseless that the origins of the Baganda were in the fundamentally Christian old kingdom of Aksum (present-day Ethiopia), where Kintu, the first Muganda, is thought to have descended from¹⁴⁾

Ganda ontology, like the account of creation in the (biblical) book of Genesis, makes reference to some divine personality, referred to as *Ggulu* in the vernacular, and in whose connection man and his proceedings get a sacred endorsement. *Katonda of Butonda* (Creator God) is always used to refer to a creating God—a God who “creates from nothing”—and this is exactly what the verb *kutonda* (to create) means. Man, under the circumstances, has a divine origin among the Baganda. Man is himself also a divine being special among beings, and consequently the Baganda give man a sacred destiny.

3.2 *Man's constitution*

In this respect too, the primitive Ganda ontology has no definitions or dichotomies. Nevertheless, the view adopted by Baganda folklore is in consonant with the classical, philosophical view that there is much more in man than what the body dictates to and determines for the man's proceedings. Although the Baganda conceive the human being as a unit (*muntu*), they recognize in this unit a composition which bears no little resemblance to the Christian idea of ‘body and soul’. Words like *mutima*, *mwoyo* and *muzimu*, (literally heart, soul and ghost, respectively) are used by the Baganda in various instances of human talk and interaction to describe an element, a special principle which by all means is distinguished from the human body (*mubiri*) as a constituent element of the human person. The fact that the human being is constituted of not merely the body is clear in such Ganda expressions as “*Bazaala mubiri naye tebazaala mwoyo*” (parents give birth to the body but not to the soul). The Baganda therefore believe that the soul is indubitably part of man, and that actually it is this spiritual element that serves in man as the source of all wisdom and understanding.

The Baganda, under the circumstances, refer to this element or principle when referring to human behavior, as in the fore mentioned saying, which literally means that although a child may resemble their parents physically, they may differ in character, and vice versa. The Baganda also often say, referring to people's talking, that “*Gundi oyo by'ayogera ndowooza tabijja ku mwoyo*”, meaning that so and so does not seem to be speaking from his heart; he speaks anyhow; he speaks nonsense. They also say: “*Gundi oyo yakula muwawa, alinga ataliimu mwoyo*”, meaning that so and so behaves as if he had no soul; as if he were only a body. Also: “*Gundi oyo yafa omutima*”, meaning that so and so has a dead heart, meaning they have a spoiled conscience, and are therefore unable to distinguish between what is good and what is bad.

These and other similar ideas therefore underline the singular and unique affirmation that there is a soul—body interpretation of man among the Baganda. They know and admire the existence of both the spiritual and the physiological aspects of man, though they make no rigid dichotomies. The *Muntu*, man, is more than a material body; he transcends it, and this ultimately is his constitution. He is body and soul, and this understanding has repercussions on the conception of man's destiny among the Baganda.

3.3 *Man is self-transcendent, spiritual and immortal*

Mondin Battista has summarized the problem of self-transcendence thus:

“What does man's self-projection towards the infinite mean for him along with his parting from all the levels of being acquired in the varied realms of knowledge, power, pleasure, possessions, and being itself? Who is this promethean who shatters all the chains that matter and that history impose on him? What sense does this unbridled course have that reaches so many high levels, but nevertheless seems incapable of reaching the final level?”¹⁵⁾

There is a vast array of philosophical literature accumulated during these last few decades on the problems posed by self-transcendence.

The Existentialists, for example, were the first philosophers to give decisive importance to the phenomenon of self-transcendence. They saw in transcendence the essence itself of the human being: an essence that consists effectively in the being-outside-of-self-existence projected constantly not to what it already is, not to the past and present, but towards future possibilities.

The Catholics particularly see self-transcendence as a sign of the spirituality of man's being, with the Absolute God as its goal, and therefore possessing an exquisitely vertical and metaphysical sense.

The Marxists on their part see man in his self-transcendence as being not only what he is, but also everything that he is not. For them anyway self-transcendence is not in a vertical but rather horizontal direction—a historical (transcending) without transcendence

The Protestants give self-transcendence a sense that is at once metaphysical and historical. Historical in the sense that self-transcendence testifies to the situation of sin in which man finds himself during his present life: the situation of alienation of the existence from the essence, of nature from grace, and therefore of the tension for the restoration of the unity between essence and existence, of decayed nature with God; a restoration impossible for man, but willed and actuated by the love of God.

All these trends represent that most conclusive interpretation of self-transcendence, the theocentric interpretation. The Existentialists, and almost all other schools of Western philosophy after them, have written verses and prose to celebrate this exclusive characteristic of man with which he continuously surpasses himself, all that he is, all that he wishes, and all that he has. This notion denotes a spatial relation; the relation of surpassing unboundedness, passing beyond, and displacement.

This western mentality is exactly consonant with the Ganda ontology. The view has been affirmed and re-affirmed that Ganda ontology holds a double-principle unit in man, and that it also emphasizes the superiority of the soul as the principle of life, source of wisdom and essence of the man-project. This points to a belief in the perpetual existence of man, in which there is a cycle of pregnancy, life, death and subsequent transition into a universal pool of spiritual existence. This is an idea which the Christian religions have inherited from the western philosophical background, and which the Baganda of Uganda, even in their most primitive milieu, treasured as a vital pointer to the ultimate value of the human person.

The Baganda hold death as a frustrating calamity. This frustration perhaps also explains why Ganda society tends to be over-concerned about the cause of the death of every particular individual. The Baganda say that "*Omuganda teyefiira*", meaning, "a Muganda does not die without a cause". Something or someone must be held responsible and blamed for the deprivation. People must always find and give the immediate causes of death, by far the commonest being magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This outlook on death is found in every African society, though with varying degrees of emphasis. This view of death does not necessarily depend on the pain that often accompanies it, but it depends more often on the mystery surrounding it, and on the consequences to the relatives and friends left behind, and on the often untimely change of state.

On the other hand, Ganda society looks beyond death and sees another life, obscure though, since nobody has returned to narrate its order and proceedings. This is what the Baganda mean when they say: "*Mpaawo magombe gazza*", meaning the underworld gives nothing back.

The Baganda also believe in the existence and activities of the spirits of the dead which they call *mizimu* (ghosts). Stories of appearance of ghosts of dead people are therefore not uncommon

among the Baganda. And if these stories are true, it seems quite reasonable to suppose that they lend support to a belief in an after-life of some sort. Death signifies an end since the deceased ceases to exist physically among his relatives. But it also signifies the beginning of a new life in the world of spirits, the kingdom of the deity, “*Walumbe*”, the god of death.

It can be argued therefore that there was, and there is hope in a future eternity among the Baganda, though they did not so smartly refer to it as heaven. There are several Ganda proverbs which express this thought and belief about death—pieces of ancestral wisdom which were meant to emphasize different specific concepts about the general notion of ‘life after death’. “*Kitaka talya atereka buteresi*” (The soil does not eat, it only stores) is one of such proverbs which demonstrate this philosophy of transition, meaning that the dead are just stored, and death is merely a transitory phase. The Baganda will therefore talk about a person they have just buried that “*munnaffe tumutelese bulungi*” (We have ‘stored’ our friend well)! Moreover, the Luganda word for death is *kufa*, which shares roots with *kufuuka* (to change). It appears then that for the Baganda, a person simply ‘changes’ (*afuuka*) at death, but does not disappear completely. Thus, when the Baganda say “so and so *afudde* (has died)”, they want to suggest that he/she has changed his/her style of living. This is the basis for all the care and respect which the Baganda render to the corpse at death, burial and thereafter. The all-important cult of ancestor-worship is also part of the traditional Ganda society, and it lends support to the assertion that death is not the end of all and everything; it does not even break off the bond that existed between the dead and their friends and relatives, but it transforms the relationship, and intensifies it to a certain extent.

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper has been to show that the Baganda of Uganda have from

of old had their own views about man and his destiny. That although these views were not systematically written down for generations to come, they are well expressed in the Ganda tribal sayings, rituals and social practices. As Onyewuenyi¹⁶ argues, the philosophy of a people has little or nothing to do with the academic exponents of that philosophy. He argues that philosophizing is a universal experience. Every culture has its own world view. If one studies the history of philosophy, one finds there is no agreement on the definition of philosophy. Some say it is the love of wisdom (*philia Sophia*), others a search for truth, still others a sense of wonder. What is generally agreed, Onyewuenyi argues on, is that philosophy seeks to establish order among the various phenomena of the surrounding world and trace their unity by reducing them to their simplest elements. But what are these phenomena? They are, as Onyewuenyi mentions, things, facts, events, an intelligible world, an ethical world and a metaphysical world.

Now if we grant this view, then we contend that even those traditional societies like Buganda, which may boast of no wealth of philosophical literature, had and have their own concept of life in which everything around them becomes meaningful. The work of philosophical investigation is not to throw such primitive systems into the dust bin of history, but it is rather to go deep into them and re-define their underlying nuances.

The story of Buganda is the story of many other tribal peoples in Africa. Their philosophy, as Serequeberhan argues, is incarnated in their mythical/religious conceptions and worldviews and it is lived in their ethnic ritual practices. It is their ‘ethnophilosophy’, and Serequeberhan argues further that it should be documented by Europeans and Africans with a Western education.¹⁷ Mbiti echoes Serequeberhan that this philosophy is a reality “which calls for academic scrutiny and which must be reckoned with in modern fields of life like economics,

politics, education and Christian or Muslim work. To ignore these traditional beliefs and practices can only lead to a lack of understanding African behavior and problems.”¹⁸⁾

I hope to have been able to demonstrate to some extent that from our own forefathers we can borrow a lot of intellectual wealth; that although the centuries of existence of the Baganda as a community of *Bantu* have left no critically expounded philosophical theses, we can still argue, from their mythical/religious conceptions, worldviews and ethnic ritual practices, that there is a philosophy pre-eminent in their systems of thought and their living experience in general. Philosophy, in the final analysis, may be relatively new in most parts of Africa as an academic discipline, but as a system of thought, or as habit of reflection, it is as old as human existence on the continent itself.

Notes

- 1) Encyclopedia of Philosophy | 2006 | Mosley, Albert (African Philosophy).
- 2) Hume, D., “Of national characters,” in *Essays Moral and Political*, 1748 (revised and reprinted in several later editions).
- 3) Jafferson, T., “The difference is fixed in nature,” cited in Eze, E. C., *Race and Enlightenment: a reader* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1997), pp. 95–103.
- 4) Eze, *op. cit.*
- 5) Excerpts from his philosophico-anthropological work, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime” (1764), cited in Eze, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49.
- 6) Eze, *op. cit.*, lists many other writers and thinkers. Although he is careful to situate them in their historical, social and intellectual contexts, he ably represents and exemplifies their influential thoughts on race.
- 7) Tempels, P., *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africain, 1945), p. 9.
- 8) Meredith, M., *The State of Africa* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011), pp. 686–687.
- 9) Avari, B., “Ali Mazrui: Friend, Scholar and Visionary,” in the Institute of Global Cultural Studies Newsletter, Binghamton University (Vol. 10 Issue 1, 2013).
Avari, an Honorary Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, was writing on the occasion of

the 80th birthday of renowned African scholar, Prof. Ali Mazrui. Avari’s appraisal of Mazrui is of a scholar with a non-Eurocentric approach built on profound knowledge of the history of the non-European world, and which endows parity of esteem to ideas and facts emanating from that world.

- 10) Bakka, P., “The Ganda Versus Socrates’ view of Good Life” (1984), p. 1.
- 11) In my unpublished Bachelor’s thesis, a comparison between the notion of life-after-death among the Baganda and the Western philosophical interpretation of self-transcendence, spirituality and immortality.
- 12) Roscoe, J., *The Baganda* (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1911), p. 98.
- 13) Mondin, Battista, *Philosophical Anthropology* (Banglore: Philosophical Publications of India for Pontificio Universtas Urbaniana, 1985), p. 197.
- 14) Reference is being made to the common belief that the Baganda came from Abyssinia through the rift valley and the mountains of Elgon.
- 15) Mondin, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
- 16) Innocent Onyewuenyi, “Is there an African Philosophy?” in Tsenay Serequeberhan, ed., *African Philosophy: the Essential Reader* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), p. 37.
- 17) Tsenay Serequeberhan, “African Philosophy: the Point in Question,” in Tsenay Serequeberhan, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- 18) John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1988), p. 1.

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