

Exorcising Hegel's Ghost: Africa's Challenge to Philosophy*

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Anyone who has lived with, worked on, and generally hung out with philosophy as long as I have and who, and this is a very important element, inhabits the epidermal world that it has pleased fate to put me in, and is as engaged with both the history of that epidermal world and that of philosophy, must at a certain point come upon the presence of a peculiar absence: the absence of Africa¹ from the discourse of philosophy. In the basic areas of philosophy (e.g., epistemology, metaphysics, axiology, and logic) and in the many derivative divisions of the subject (e.g., the philosophy of ...) once one begins to look, once one trains one's eyes to apprehend it, one is struck by the absence of Africa from the disquisitions of its practitioners. Now, I don't want you to get me wrong, for it is very easy to point out that Africa is neither the only region nor the only one whose discourse never shows on philosophy radar screens. It could be said that Indian, Chinese, Mayan, Inuit or Indonesian philosophies never appear either. That is true, but I would argue in what follows that although these others too may constitute an absence in the way that I have described it, they make their presence in other ways. It has always been the case that one might find references to Asian philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, and the like in the philosophical taxonomy. This was never the case with African philosophy until very recently and such limited references as exist are the product of the last twenty, or at the most twenty-five, years. Even then, a good part of the current mention is preoccupied with issues of pedigree. Is African Philosophy philosophy? Or of the conditions of its possibility, or whether it ever was, is, or is a thing of the future? Perhaps others who know the comparative literature better can inform us whether or not questions of the sort just identified ever formed part of the discourse of Indian Philosophy or Chinese Philosophy. Worse still, even among those who are most generous in their deployment of the term "African Philosophy", their purview does not extend beyond the corpus of work that has been produced by contemporary professional philosophers. So we are talking about a quite significant peculiar absence.

For us laborers in the intellectual vineyard, the peculiar absence is very telling and jarring. For example, I remember once saying something concerning African Philosophy in a third-year philosophy of law class that I taught a few years ago. One of the students assumed a puzzled look and said, in effect, "I hope you do not take offense at what I am about to say, but when you referred just now to 'African Philosophy' it was the first time I've ever heard anyone put those two words together in a phrase."

This encounter took place in Chicago and it was rich in ironies. In the first place, Chicago's population is almost evenly divided between whites and blacks. So think of my student's putative view of his African-American fellow citizens' intellectual capabilities. In the second place, I happen to teach in a Jesuit university, a significant order in the Catholic Church.

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/2.pdf>

Meanwhile, Africa is one of the few areas of the world where the Catholic Church is enjoying its most spectacular growth especially in terms of recruitment to the ministry. But there we were. The student, who is probably Catholic, had absolutely no clue about African contributions to global culture, including the fact that the future of his Church may depend upon African priests.

In **all** areas of philosophy, basic and derivative, Africa is a peculiar, almost total absence. This absence can be explained in several ways. One explanation might be that Africans have no philosophy or that nothing they do or say or write has any resonances in philosophy. Such an explanation would be counterintuitive. Were we to grant for purposes of argument that Africans have no philosophy, it is absurd to suggest that nothing in the African world resonates for or in philosophy. It is an abject understanding of philosophy that would resort to such a desperate move to save itself. Yet one cannot help the feeling that denials of both types--Africans have no philosophy, or nothing Africans do holds any interest for philosophy--have played a very large role in the absence we identify.

Another explanation might be that philosophy is simply not interested in what those blighted Africans think, say, or do. As a Yoruba proverb has it, the mouth of the poor person is no better than a machete; the only thing it is good for is to cut a path through the bush. Here we come to the big question: *Why is there so little, if any, respect for and, as a consequence, interest in African phenomena and their philosophical resonances* ²? Different answers are possible. I would like to argue that the roots of the peculiar absence may be traced to a signal event in the history of philosophy and that this event may actually be the inspiration for the absence, but before I introduce this single event, a word of caution is in order.

I do not suggest that there is a mega or mini conspiracy to shut Africa out of the discourses of philosophy. Nor am I saying that if we asked any of the participants in these discourses they would trace the ancestry of their views to the source that I am about to identify. Indeed, I contend that the random appearance of the exclusions that constitute the peculiar absence, and the fact that one cannot point to any study that specifically traces its genealogy in the way that I propose, may deceptively suggest that this is a mere accident. But accidents have causes and the identification of one such cause below is meant to induce us to look more closely at other elements of the tradition that is indicted herein.

So far I have spoken of philosophy as a generic term. It has not been identified with any particular area or tradition. It is time to so identify it. We are talking of Western Philosophy. This should not be a surprise. It is only insofar as Western Philosophy has passed itself off as Universal Philosophy that we may talk of the peculiar absence. It is only insofar as we confront, or have to deal with, or inhabit a world constructed by Western Philosophy that we are forced to think of an absence and of how to make sense of it. And we must confront our absence from the history of this tradition because, no thanks to colonialism and Christianization, we are inheritors and perpetrators of this heritage. Additionally, given that the "West" presents itself as the embodiment and inventor of the "universal," we must protest even more loudly that its universal is so peculiar and that its global is so local. That is, the West, in constructing the universal, instead of truly embracing all that there is, or at least what of it can be so embraced, has merely puffed itself up and invited the rest of humanity, or the educated segment of it, to be complicit in this historical swindle.

I submit that one source for the birth certificate of this false universal is to be found in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*³. The architectonic of exclusion that the history of Western Philosophy manifests, especially in the form of the peculiar absence, is contained in the Introduction to that book which one commentator has described thus: "the Philosophy of History remains the heart and center of Hegel's philosophy"⁴. I would like to suggest that this text is one possible source for an explanation of the peculiar absence. It is as if Hegel's successors have somehow internalized his injunctions and have adhered strictly to them ever since.

Hegel is dead! Long live Hegel! The ghost of Hegel dominates the hallways, institutions, syllabi, instructional practices, and journals of Euro-American philosophy. The chilling presence of this ghost can be observed in the eloquent absences as well as the subtle and not-so-subtle exclusions in the philosophical exertions of Hegel's descendants. The absences and exclusions are to be seen in the repeated association of Africa with the pervasiveness of immediacy, a very Hegelian idea if there be any⁵. Given this association, we can see why Africa is where Nature, another very Hegelian category, rules in its blindest fury in form of famine, or the continual recrudescence or persistence of disease and pestilences of unknown origins and severe repercussions, or "intertribal" wars that on occasion bring genocide in their wake, or in unrestricted "breeding", or in ____ --you may fill in the blank⁶.

Africa is the land that Time forgot, a veritable museum where there are to be found the relics of the race, the human race, that is: hence the anthropological preoccupation with hunting down (very apt phrase) exotic practices, primitive rituals, superceded customs.

According to legend, the African continent is suffused with gods, the Yoruba pantheon alone is reputed to have four hundred plus one! Yet, curiously, Africa lacks God. It is the land where, in light of the prevalence of disease and pestilence and war, death is a lived experience but not a philosophical challenge. Ultimately, it is the land where there is a surfeit of Traditional Thought but, amazingly, no philosophy. I have chosen just a few of the themes that are considered the perennials of philosophy anywhere--Nature, Time, Evolution, Ritual, God, Death-- to show that one can find some possible source-heads in Hegel for how subsequent non-reference to Africa came to be framed. Let us go to the text.

According to the plan of *The Philosophy of History*⁷ there is no "African World." But there is Africa in the book and we shall come to it momentarily. In a style with which we are much too familiar by now, the author announces in the Introduction: "The subject of this course of Lectures is the Philosophical History of the World. And by this must be understood, not a collection of general observations respecting it, suggested by the study of its records, and proposed to be illustrated by its facts, but Universal History"⁸.

Notice how Hegel proclaims to give us the World without the slightest hint that his might represent just one way of telling the story of the world, that this telling may be a victim of its teller's *parti pris* which may not exclude possible other tellers' *parti pris*. No; such modesty would have been unbecoming of a writer who had the temerity to say later in the same text: "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning"⁹. Europe is the end of History in at least two senses: 1) it is the end, as in the terminus, the point beyond which there is no other, the culmination of all that came prior to it; and 2), it is the end, as in the goal, the purpose, the final product to the achievement of which all

earlier efforts were tending. On either interpretation, the triumphalist import of Hegel's assertions are unmistakable. And the object of the Philosophy of History is to bring to "the completion of History ... the simple conception of Reason; that Reason is the Sovereign of the World; that the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process"¹⁰. But what is History itself?

We have been told that History is a rational process, that it tends towards an end, and that it is the object of philosophy to apprehend this movement in its various stages. The ultimate subject of History is Spirit and the essence to which it tends, towards the realization of which its movement is directed, is Freedom. But to make this journey, Spirit gets itself embodied in Peoples, Nations, Volk, and peoples are to be judged by how much and in what way they have apprehended this essence of Spirit in them. This is the way Hegel put it:

According to this abstract definition it may be said of Universal History, that it is the exhibition of Spirit in the process of working out the knowledge of that which it is potentially. And as the germ bears in itself the whole nature of the tree, and the taste and form of its fruits, so do the first traces of Spirit virtually contain the whole of that History. The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit--Man as such --is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free. They only know that one is free. But on this very account, the freedom of that one is only caprice; ... That one is therefore only a Despot; not a free man. The consciousness of Freedom first arose among the Greeks, and therefore they were free; but they, and the Romans like wise, knew only that some are free--not man as such. Even Plato and Aristotle did not know this. The Greeks, therefore, had slaves; and their whole life and the maintenance of their splendid liberty, was implicated with the institution of slavery: a fact, moreover, which made that liberty on the one hand only an accidental, transient and limited growth; on the other hand, constituted it a rigorous thralldom of our common nature--of the Human. The German nations, under the influence of Christianity, were the first to attain the consciousness, that man, is free: that it is the freedom of Spirit which constitutes its essence ¹¹.

Hence the conclusion: "The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature it is our business to investigate"¹².

We have to fast forward at this point. Although the passages that I have cited hold promise of some fecund analyses, this is not the occasion for them. A few deductions may be made, however. For instance, for Hegel, only a few peoples are what he calls "world-historical" peoples. These are peoples who may rightly be adjudged to belong in History and to participate in its march towards that attainment of its final end. The "Orientals" caught a glimpse of Spirit and therefore made history only through the despot. The Greeks and the Romans saw it some more but missed out on the works. As it turns out, thanks to Christianity, only the Germans or northern Europeans saw Spirit in its full glory and secured a patent on Freedom as a result.

The picture is not yet complete. The Spirit of a People is the subject of History. But Spirit also requires space within which to unfold itself and enact its drama. To that extent, we must as part of the Philosophy of History be interested in its "Geographical Basis". "It is not our concern to become acquainted with the land occupied by nations as an external locale, but with the natural type of the locality, as intimately connected with the type and character of the people which is the offspring of such soil. This character is nothing more nor less than the mode of and

form in which nations make their appearance in History, and take place and position in it"¹³. Although Hegel went on to warn that we should not make too much of Nature, he insisted that "the type of locality" does remain intimately connected with how much and in what way people apprehend freedom:

In the extreme zones man cannot come to free movement; cold and heat are here too powerful to allow Spirit to build up a world for itself. Aristotle said long ago, 'when pressing needs are satisfied, man turns to the general and more elevated.' But in the extreme zones such pressure may be said never to cease, never to be warded off; men are constantly impelled to direct attention to nature, to the glowing rays of the sun, and the icy frost. The true theater of History is therefore the temperate zone; or rather its northern half, because the earth there presents itself in a continental form, and has a broad breast, as the Greeks say ¹⁴.

This completes the exposition of the nature of History, its philosophical study and its enabling conditions. Having shown why the New World could not be considered part of History--at that time--Hegel proceeded to examine the "three positions of the globe with which History is considered: Africa = Upland; Asia = the contrast of river regions with Upland; Europe = characterized by the mingling of these several elements"¹⁵. From this point on, and for the next nine pages, we are treated to a harangue, a collective libel against Africa which, I insist, anticipated even if it did not inaugurate the different exclusions and show the possible antecedents in Hegel's "Introduction".

Many who read this are familiar with the phrases: "Africa South of the Sahara," "Sub-Saharan Africa," "Black Africa." They also probably know that Egypt is not in Africa; it is in the "Near East" or the "Middle East". "North Africa" is really not Africa. And in what must remain an incredible feat of geographical sleight of hand, South Africa suddenly became an "African" country in April 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela and the overthrow of the bastard apartheid regime. Certain behavioral consequences follow from these identifications. I shall say more about them in a moment. For now let us turn back to Hegel.

According to Hegel, "Africa must be divided into three parts: one is that which lies south of the desert of Sahara--Africa proper--the Upland almost entirely unknown to us, with narrow coast-tracts along the sea; the second is that to the north of the desert--European Africa (if we may so call it)--a coastland; the third is the river region of the Nile, the only valley-land of Africa, and which is in connection with Asia"¹⁶.

The reader may begin to see what agenda Herr Hegel had in mind in resorting to the taxonomy contained in the passage just quoted. Recall that he had said earlier that in the "extreme zones man cannot come to free movement" and that "the true theater of History is therefore the temperate zone." Were North Africa to be included in Africa, Hegel would have had to deny that History found a station there. But such a denial would have flown in the presence of incontrovertible evidence of the many civilizations that had been domiciled there for millennia. It would have meant denying the glory that was Egypt, Carthage, Cyrenaica, and so on. He was not prepared to go this far. So why not reconfigure the geography so that Egypt is intellectually excised from Africa and make it safe for History? And there are indications in the text that this was the course that Hegel was compelled to take: The second portion of Africa is ... --Egypt; which was adapted to become a mighty center of independent civilization, and therefore is as isolated and singular in Africa as Africa itself appears in relation to the other

parts of the world. The northern part of Africa, which may be specially called that of the coast territory ... lies on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic; a magnificent territory, on which Carthage once lay--the site of the modern Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. This part was to be--must be attached to Europe ... ¹⁷.

We are not told what Hegel meant by his statement that the northern part of Africa was "to be attached to Europe." Hegel had no doubt that this job deserved completion and that part of Africa must be attached to Europe. And it has remained attached to Europe ever since. The phrases that I adumbrated earlier manifest this sundering of Egypt from Africa and its forcible attachment to Europe in the imagination of both Hegel and his descendants. There are other manifestations of this attachment. For example, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, for a long time did not have an African pavilion. Yet this did not prevent it from having a very impressive display of artifacts from Ancient Egypt as part of the "Near East" pavilion!

Having severed Egypt from Africa and making it safe for History, Hegel was free to zero in on what he called "Africa proper" and single it out for an extremely malicious libel, the outlines, if not the exact content, of which have continued to structure the understanding of Africa in the consciousness and institutions of Hegel's descendants. According to Hegel,

Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained-for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World-shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself-the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition ¹⁸.

We can now see why it was so important for Hegel to excise Egypt from Africa. It would have been not merely incongruous but also false to say of an area that enfolds Egypt, Carthage, and so on within its boundaries that it "is the Gold-land compressed within itself" or that it is "lying beyond the day of history." Egypt must be separated so that the racist attack to follow will have a veneer of respectability. How strong that veneer is can be seen in the persistence of this view of Africa in the imagination and discourses of Hegel's descendants.

It should be noted that Hegel had earlier written that "Africa proper--the Upland [is] almost entirely unknown to us." Yet that did not stop him from proclaiming that Africa proper "is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night". It would not have occurred to Hegel, and it still does not occur to his descendants, that there is nothing African about the "dark mantle of Night" that they remark but that it is the mantle of their own ignorance. And while this ignorance might have been excusable in Hegel's time, it is execrable now. But writing under the darkness of this mantle, Hegel went on to inform us of these Africans proper: "The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas--the category of Universality" ¹⁹.

Given the agenda that Hegel had, there was no way that he could have come to a different conclusion about the African character. Had he availed himself of the material available in Europe at the time he was writing respecting African achievements, he would have been forced to a radically different conclusion. More significant is the fact that consistent with the practice that still dominates discourse about Africa in Euro-America, the irony completely escaped Hegel that he had puffed his peculiarity into a universality and that giving up the principle, universality, which naturally accompanies all their, that is, European, ideas may indeed be

required if the African world is to be treated with the requisite respect for its integrity and heteronomy. Treating Africa with respect for its integrity and heteronomy does not translate into the kinds of deductions that Hegel proceeded to make about the African situation. Let us examine some of them.

According to Hegel, Africans lack the category of Universality. This arises from the fact that they are one with their existence; they are arrested in immediacy. This means that they have not separated themselves from nature. "The Negro," Hegel wrote, "exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state"²⁰. As such, the African is shorn of the idea of a self that is separate from his needs and, simultaneously, has no knowledge of "an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual Self"²¹. Under this conception, central to religion is the idea of transcendence²², the idea that there is some reality that is beyond us, beyond our understanding, before which we submit ourselves in supplication; in short a *Mysterium*. This *mysterium*, however conceived, is the concern of Theology and of the Philosophy of Religion to reveal, to make sense of, as a condition for unearthing the place of humans in the scheme of things. In other words, Africans supposedly lack any *Theos* to the revelation of whose *Logos* Philosophy is dedicated. For Hegel, Negroes are mired in sorcery, worship of graven images that are easily perishable, and worship of the dead²³. They do not possess a *mysterium*; they lack transcendence, and are without a *Theos* whose *Logos* they might have constituted a philosophy to reveal.

That was Hegel. How do things stand with his descendants?

One would be hard pressed to find any text in standard Philosophy of Religion²⁴ in which African Religions are represented. Nor would one find too many anthologies and textbooks on world religions in which African religious practices rate a significant, if any, mention at all. The absence is a manifestation of the kind of absence Hegel inaugurated. The primary reason is that for most of the writers concerned, even when they cannot be understood to have been directly influenced by Hegel, his rationalization for denying religious status to African religious practices is adequate²⁵. For the most part the reasoning is that there are those things that Hegel already talked about and some others that represent, at best, further explications of his submissions. African religion is dismissed as *ancestor worship* or *spirit worship*.

This should not surprise us. In the tradition that framed Hegel's theoretical postulations, abstraction is privileged and highly rated; historical phenomena attract little spiritual significance. But in Yoruba religion, the ancestors that are supposed to be the recipients of supplication range from forebears in remote antiquity to the parent who recently passed away. Such a tradition in which those who lived recently are regarded as deserving of reverence cannot expect to have its claim to religious status taken seriously by another which considers this practice as bereft of transcendence or *mysterium*.

Related to this is the idea that African gods are infinitely expendable and are vulnerable to swapping. Finally, it is alleged that the proliferation of gods, polytheism, in African cultures is a mark of backwardness of the One *Mysterium*, the Being than which Nothing Greater can be Conceived! Thanks to this mindset, every time that an African intellectual writes about "African Religion" he/she is called upon to justify the attachment of the epithet "African" to the substantive "Religion". We are bogged down in arguments about pedigree that it should be obvious we cannot win.

The reason is simple; pedigree arguments always serve an imperialist purpose. The person who demands to be convinced that what his interlocutor is canvassing deserves to be admitted to the hallowed spaces that bear the name "religion", or some other equivalent, already presupposes that *his* characterization is unproblematic, is not particular, is universal, and therefore, supplies the metric by which all others must be measured. Even when it is unintended, especially when it is unintended, this sort of demand smacks of the kind of bastard Universality that we already encountered in Hegel at the beginning of his enterprise. Additionally, neither Hegel nor many of his successors who are quick to dismiss African religion can be said to know from the inside the phenomena they so eagerly dismiss. In the absence of some thorough investigation of the meanings of the practices concerned, the logic that animates them, and what theoretical analyses are offered by the intellectuals of the culture concerned, one could not tell whether or not the destruction of the icons of individual gods is construed as the destruction of the gods themselves. It is as if one were to accuse, as many Africans did when they first encountered Christianity, Christians of cannibalism every time they participate in the Eucharist.

In the final section of this paper, I shall provide some analysis that shows that Yoruba intellectuals did not think that their gods and the icons in which they are represented are one and the same. Unfortunately, the same attitude as Hegel's continues to dominate the mindset of his successors: pronouncing judgment on the basis of inadequate or nonexistent evidence or prior to an examination of the evidence. That in the closing years of the twentieth century we descendants of those libeled by Hegel are still being challenged by Hegel's descendants to show *only on terms acceptable to them* that we are part of the concert of humanity is an indicator of how strong the cold hands of Hegel remain more than a century after his death.

A closely connected idea that has remained firmly entrenched in the consciousness and practices of Hegel's descendants is that the African does not possess a knowledge of the immortality of the soul. Nor does he exhibit any awareness of or respect for justice and morality. Hegel again set the tone for his descendants. According to him, because the African is without the consciousness or recognition of a "Higher Being" that would have "inspire[d] him with real reverence"²⁶, he installs himself as Supreme Being, possessed of the power to "judge the quick and the dead". "The Negroes indulge, ..., that perfect contempt for humanity, which in its bearing on Justice and Morality is the fundamental characteristic of the race. They have moreover no knowledge of the immortality of the soul, although specters are supposed to appear"²⁷. From this lack follow the many manifestations of this contempt for humanity, cannibalism being the most offensive.

There are many possible responses to these charges. One is to try to advance evidences that refute Hegel's statements and undermine his arguments. But to do so will be to bow to an intellectual arrogance and an insufferable imperialism that already have seized the high ground of determining the contours of human being and are merely challenging the African thinker to show that she and her people deserve to be admitted to the concert of humanity. This could have been a fruitful way of answering the challenge had it come from the vantage point of knowledge and thorough grounding in the basics and intricacies of the cultures that were being denigrated such that we might say that the challenge arose from a thorough study and was based on a genuine disappointment that, after some serious searching, nothing of value was

found. Unfortunately, this was not the way that Hegel arrived at his challenge. The most that we can say for him is that where he seemed to have cited any evidence, we have cause to consider it to be of dubious value. The lectures on which the book was based were written at a time when the African continent remained largely unknown to Europeans and the darkness that enveloped them in their ignorance about Africa was projected upon the continent in their preferred sobriquet for her: "The Dark Continent". Thus much of what he wrote was fantasy.

But let us for purposes of argument suppose that Hegel had access to archaeological, historical, and other relevant information about Africa. In light of the state of Europe's knowledge of Africa at that time, such a supposition is plausible. In fact, where that is concerned, he represented a serious advance over his successors. One could at least find in his work references to "Dahomey" (even though the practice he attributed to the Kingdom was actually that of Oyo), and "Ashantee" (Asante), a rare occurrence in the writings of his descendants.

The possession of relevant information would be insufficient; interpretations must be offered. Where interpretations are concerned, Hegel's dilettantish glosses on the information available to him are embarrassing. The intricate justifications for the practices against which he inveighed, the nuances of the languages in which ideas of transcendence, or of immortality of the soul, or of justice and morality, and the complexity of life and thought among African peoples, some of whom had created Empires were, to be sure, unavailable to him. To try therefore to respond to the rantings of the uninformed is inadvertently to confer unwarranted respectability on what in more respectable discussions would be considered rubbish.

A different response to Hegel's challenge is conditioned by the need of those who seriously want to learn about Africa and who, while unappraised of the intellectual traditions of the continent, do not *a priori* assume their absence. And for such people help is easily available. The presence of such knowledge seekers in and out of the academy in North America is one good reason to look seriously at what damage is done by the contemporary practices of Hegel's descendants. How do things stand at the present time with respect to reflections concerning immortality of the soul, respect for humanity and its bearing on justice and morality? To what extent do Hegel's descendants take seriously the reflections of Africans on the issues just mentioned?

As with other areas, the peculiar absence asserts itself. It is difficult even now, in spite of recent progress, to find anthologies in which any efforts are made to include materials by Africans or on African responses to the questions raised by immortality of the soul, justice, and morality. When such efforts are made they are half-hearted, tokenist, or so perfunctory that one sometimes wonders why the material is included. In other cases, they are conveniently grouped together with others in a kind of gathering of the unwanted or the marginal. While it is no longer in fashion to assert that Africans are without knowledge of the immortality of the soul, and so on, there remains little to offer the eager seekers after this knowledge in Euro-American academies, especially in Philosophy.

The new form in which the peculiar absence is manifested is in the consigning to areas like Anthropology, Political Science, or Folklore what African materials are available. When this is not the case, African knowledge products are consigned to the dubious discipline of "African Studies." In African Studies the metaphysics of difference is supreme and overarching,

sometimes grotesque efforts to twist African reality out of sync with the rest of humanity--a back-hand way of affirming the African's non-membership of the concert of humanity without having to contend with accusations of racism. Thus the African remains on the edge of humanity's town. As a result textbooks on ethics, law, and metaphysics are unlikely to feature chapters on Africa or references to African answers to the perennial questions that are raised by them.

What is worse, even the limited presence in the form of libel that members of Hegel's generation represented in their writings has been expunged by their contemporary numbers: hence the peculiar absence. Africa is not overtly condemned as it was in Hegel's day; it is simply ignored or made to suffer the ultimate insult of having its being unacknowledged. One is right to wonder whether it is worse to be libeled than to be passed over in silence. All too often, when African scholars answer philosophy's questions, they are called upon to justify their claim to philosophical status. And when this status is grudgingly conferred, their theories are consigned to serving as appendices to the main discussions dominated by the perorations of the "Western Tradition."

Having laid out the many ways in which the African is supposed to fall short of the glory of Man, Hegel concluded: "From these various traits it is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been. The only essential connection that has existed and continued between the Negroes and the Europeans is that of slavery ... ²⁸.

From what I have argued so far it should be obvious that although Hegel's descendants no longer brazenly affirm the garden variety of racism that Hegel embraced in their attitude towards African intellectual production, a more benign but no less pernicious variety of racism continues to permeate the relationship between Euro-America and Africa. Of greater relevance for our claim that Hegel authored the frame in which Africa is perceived and related to by his descendants is his declaration concerning Africa's place in the discourse of world history. My argument is that the continuing failure to accommodate Africa, without qualification, in the concert of humanity in ways that this has been done for Asia, for example, illustrates the continuing impact of the reach of Hegel's ghost. Here is Hegel's finale:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it--that is in its northern part--belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History ²⁹.

Let us grant that Hegel's ignorance and crudities reflected in part the state of Europe's knowledge of Africa then. How do we explain his descendants' behavior now? It is only recently that Hegel's descendants began to come back to Africa. For until now, it is as if Euro-American Philosophy had remained in the cold vise of Hegel's ghost. There are many ways in which the peculiar absence reflects the Hegelian declaration of leaving Africa, not to mention it

again. For example all locutions concerning "Africa South of the Sahara," "Sub-Saharan Africa," "Black Africa" are, in their different ways, reflective of the Hegelian insistence that the areas so designated are "Africa proper" that must be deemed of no interest to World History. In this connection, one may cite the ongoing acrimonious debate on the epidermal character of ancient Egyptian civilization.

I argue that *all* efforts to show that Egypt was not an African civilization are geared towards affirming any or all of the following theses: (a) Egypt was not in Africa so it, *prima facie*, could not have been an African civilization; (b) even if Egypt had been an African country, geographically speaking, the principal constructors of its civilization were Hamitic peoples who were not original to Africa. If this is true, then Hegel was right that "Egypt does not belong to the African Spirit;" (c) a combination of (a) and (b). But the debate illustrates another aspect of the peculiar absence. The immediate occasion for the current fulminations over the paternity of Egyptian civilization was the publication of Martin Bernal's *The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Greek Civilization*³⁰. A similar and more original precursor based on first-hand investigation of the evidence conducted by a trained African Egyptologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, had been published earlier³¹. Diop was dismissed and little attention was paid to his submissions in this country. That is, Diop was not even considered worthy of being refuted-- he suffered the insult of being passed over in silence. It took Bernal, who looks right, to generate a storm of protests about the paternity of Egyptian civilization. It matters little that Bernal cobbled his work from secondary sources--he is not an Egyptologist. But he has not only attracted attention, he has managed to spawn a whole new industry devoted to refuting his thesis that Western civilization has afro-asiatic roots.

The declaration that Africa's condition "is capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been" frames all discourses in which Africa is presented as unhistorical, as if its history is one seamless web with no periodization or any of the normal highs and lows of historical time that are characteristic of other areas of the world. Hence the prevalence in discourses about Africa of theoretical shibboleths like "traditional Africa," "precolonial Africa," and so on where what is being talked about would stretch, in the one case, from the beginning of time to when the first white man set foot in Africa or when colonialism was imposed.

Until recently, Hegel's descendants went one better than their ancestor. Because South Africa was for so long under apartheid they kept up the pretense that South Africa was either not part of Africa or was not considered an "African" country! We find the peculiar absence in the repeated disjunctions that one finds between: "ancestor worship" (African) and "religion" (the rest of the world); "tribalism" (African) and "nationalism" (the rest of the world); "traditional thought" or "modes of thought" (African) and "philosophy" (the rest of the world); "simple societies" (African) and "complex societies" (the rest of the world); "lineage division" (African) and "class division" (the rest of the world); "order of custom" (African) and "rule of law" (the rest of the world); etc.³².

We have said that Hegel's descendants are beginning to come back to Africa. For the most part they are coming back, not because they have come to acknowledge Africa's full membership of the concert of humanity, witness the preceding divisions just adumbrated, but because many within the Euro-American tradition have begun to put pressure on the dominant

forces in society, especially those in the academy, to begin to put some substance in their much-vaunted commitment to liberal education. Nevertheless, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Africa should be in the curriculum because students of African descent demand that their stories too be recognized or because some misguided elements in the dominant culture insist on learning about other cultures. Others in the academy outside of these categories too should be grateful that the students of African descent have elected to catalyze the bringing of the promise of liberal education to fruition. If it remains true, and I think it is, that the goal of a liberal education is to put before its recipients the study of humanity and its achievements wherever humanity happens to reside, and to create graduates who are required to learn as much as they can of as much as there is to know of as many themes as are available for investigation, then the present situation in which we permit Hegel's ghost to stalk the halls of the contemporary academy must be deemed unacceptable.

I conclude by offering a few suggestions on how the ghost may be exorcised³³. I should warn that this is one mean ghost that will be tough to exorcise. In the past when it was fashionable to be racist, there were many who openly celebrated the sightings of the ghost as a much welcome reminder that Africans should know their place and stay there. How times have changed! The ghost has now insinuated itself into the innermost recesses of the academy and it is more likely now that Hegel's descendants will plead pragmatic considerations for why the peculiar absence persists. Such an explanation would likely blunt the edge of our criticisms because, as we all know, these are lean times and we must deploy limited resources for maximal uses. One can see how the ghost continues to stalk the present: the unspoken assumption is that Africa does not offer a good enough return to justify deploying resources to its study. It is a different strategy but the outcome is the same.

Another way in which the ghost affects the present is in the repeated suggestions that there are no appropriate texts or that none are good enough to occupy our philosophical energies. Recall how Hegel too knew that Africa had never developed even though he acknowledged that the area was "almost entirely unknown to [him]". How do you know without reading or finding the texts whether or not they are good or bad? This subverts a cardinal principle of scientific rationality--that one does not pass judgment in advance of weighing the evidence.

I have refrained in this paper from the usual response of waving before you what Africans have done. Until it is taken for granted that Africa is part of History, that the study of anything cannot be complete unless it encompasses this significant part of the world, no amount of iteration of what Africans have done will move the victims of Hegel's ghost. Until they get rid of the voice of the Hegelian ghost whispering in their inner ear that Africa is not worth it, that Africa has nothing worthwhile to offer, they will continue to botch the challenge that Africa poses to philosophy.

Notes

*This is a revised version of a public lecture delivered to the Association of Students of African Descent at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada, on Friday, 21st February, 1997.

1. Throughout this paper I shall mean by "Africa" the continent and its diaspora.

2. Of course there is interest in Africa's flora and fauna. Safari vacations are always a top draw. This preoccupation with nature in Africa in the popular imagination has its intellectual expression. This will be examined presently.
3. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, introduction C.J. Friedrich (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).
4. C.J. Friedrich, "Introduction" to Dover edition.
5. I shall have more to say about this anon.
6. The same nature in its benign face, wild, beautiful is what attracts safari tourists and safari scholars alike.
7. See Appendix 1.
8. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p.1.
9. Hegel, p. 103.
10. Hegel, p. 9.
11. Hegel, pp.17-18.
12. Hegel, p. 19.
13. Hegel, pp. 80-81.
14. Hegel, p. 80. Emphasis added.
15. Hegel, p.91.
16. Hegel, p. 91 Emphasis added.
17. Hegel, pp. 92-93.
18. Hegel, p.91.
19. Hegel, p.93.
20. Hegel, p. 93.
21. Hegel, p.93.
22. For contrary views, see Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1997).
23. Hegel, pp. 93-95.
24. I shall limit myself to the situation in Philosophy.
25. For those who are interested, see the discussions in E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*; Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*; Olupona, J.K.; Benjamin Ray, *Concepts of God in Africa*; Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*.
26. Hegel, p. 95.
27. Hegel, p. 95.
28. Hegel, p. 98.
29. Hegel, p. 99.
30. Bernal, M. 1987. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. Vol. I, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985. London: Free Association Books; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
31. Cheikh Anta Diop,
32. I have explored the consequences of this difference-dominated way of framing discourses about Africa for the possibilities of genuine learning across cultural divides in

"African and Africanist Scholars, and Knowledge Production in African Studies",
forthcoming.

33. I have done this in some detail in "On Diversifying the Philosophy Curriculum,"
Teaching Philosophy 16, no. 4 1993: 287-299.