

# Marcien Towa: A New Mind Project

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## ABSTRACT:

In an attempt to build a new philosophical thought, it is natural that multiple and diverse philosophical positions emerge regarding the nature of African philosophy. This corresponds with the process of growth and development experienced by philosophers in Africa, who strive to find common ground that unifies efforts and highlights the uniqueness of the African mind, without undermining the value of intellectual production, whether oral or written. Therefore, this article aims to discuss the effort of Marcien Towa, whose work in establishing a solid foundation is marked by the characteristics and specificities of African philosophy. He addresses various issues that have hindered—and continue to hinder—the process of intellectual construction, such as the idea of Negritude and its relationship to philosophy and ethnicity, which makes any discourse on philosophy either impossible or indistinguishable from Western philosophies. His project stems from the liberation movement from the remnants of colonialism and emphasizes the necessity of conducting deep explorations into the traditions, perceptions, and culture of the African individual, based on the principle of philosophical freedom, in order to arrive at an African philosophy with a unique identity.

**Keywords:** Marcien Towa; philosophy; Africa; Negritude; ethnophilosophy.

## INTRODUCTION:

Most specialists in philosophy are well aware of its history, which has been documented and updated throughout the different historical eras—from Eastern civilizations, Greek philosophy, the medieval period, the modern era, and finally contemporary philosophy. This documentation, as we observe, often follows a geographical extension when speaking of Eastern Asian civilizations, considering them the oldest in terms of chronology, such as Chinese, Indian, Assyrian, and Pharaonic civilizations, etc. The phrase “etc.” here indicates that the list of ancient civilizations remains open depending on the advancement of archaeological discoveries.

Thus, the ethnic principle becomes central when addressing the Greek era, while religion stands as the defining principle of the medieval period, as indicated by terms like “Christian Middle Ages” and “Islamic Middle Ages.” As for time, it was adopted as the main principle in both the modern and contemporary periods. From a quick epistemological reading, we can conclude:

- That the principle of division is not singular, since in every era the main foundational principle of intellectual production becomes the hallmark of that phase.
- That the principle of division is subjective, as it is unrelated to the nature of philosophy itself (geographical, ethnic, religious, or temporal).
- That defining the stages of philosophical thought development is subject to ideologies and their advocates.

The overwhelming number of attempts to include new names of civilizations in the history of philosophy is legitimate and justified. Our article falls within this framework, as it discusses African philosophy through an examination of the project of "Marcien Towa". To address our problematic with objective clarity, we have chosen to answer the following questions:

- What is the concept of African philosophy?
- What is its critical position and intellectual specificity?

- What does Marcien Towa's project consist of?

## PHILOSOPHER MARCIEN TOWA

Marcien Towa was born on January 5, 1931, in the city of Endama, in central Cameroon, and passed away in Yaoundé, the capital of the country, on July 2, 2014. He began school in the capital, Ondama, in 1941. He completed his academic journey by obtaining the baccalaureate certificate in 1955. He then pursued theological studies until 1957, after which he joined the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Caen. In June 1959, he obtained his bachelor's degree in philosophy. In 1960, he succeeded in obtaining the Diplôme d'Études Supérieures (DES) with a thesis titled "Hegel and Bergson," as well as a degree in biology from the University of Paris. Between 1961 and 1962, he taught at the secondary level in Paris. Upon his return to Cameroon, he was appointed professor of philosophy, pedagogy, and its history at the École Normale Supérieure in the capital, concurrently teaching at the military academy.

He received a scholarship from UNESCO and earned an advanced diploma in pedagogy from the Sorbonne University in Paris and a diploma in psychology and pedagogy from the Rousseau Institute in Geneva, Switzerland, between 1963 and 1965.

He returned to his homeland in 1966 and was appointed to the teaching staff at his original post in the École Normale Supérieure in Cameroon's capital. He later moved to the Federal University as a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy. The year 1969 marked his receipt of the Third-Cycle Doctorate from the Sorbonne University, with a dissertation titled "Qu'est-ce que la Négritude?" ("What is Negritude?"). It was at this point that his philosophical career began in earnest, and his name shone through his first two major works. His first book, published in 1971, was "Léopold Sédar Senghor: Négritude ou Servitude?", while the second work was:

"Essay on the Philosophical Problematic in Contemporary Africa"

He continued his philosophical research to obtain a State Doctorate in Philosophy, which he defended in July 1977 at the Sorbonne University, under the title

"Identity and Transcendence." He continued his academic and pedagogical path as head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Yaoundé. His name also became prominent in Cameroonian political life. He passed away on July 2, 2014. Among his most notable works, in addition to those previously mentioned, are:

- An analysis of L. S. Senghor's work, "Liberty I: Negritude and Humanism", published in the Journal of the African Institute of Geneva, 1965;
- "Consciencism: The Emergence of Modern Africa into Philosophical Awareness", published in Abbia, Issue no. 20, 1968, and republished in Presence Africaine, no. 85, 1973;
- "Aimé Césaire, Prophet of the Revolution of Black Peoples", published in Abbia, January–April 1968;
- Essay on the Philosophical Problematic in Contemporary Africa, Yaoundé, Clé Publishing, 1971, 77 pages;
- L. S. Senghor: Negritude or Servitude?, Yaoundé, Clé Publishing, 1971, 115 pages;
- What is Negritude? (doctoral dissertation), published in 1983 in Canada by Naaman Publishing under the title Poetry of Negritude: A Structuralist Approach, 320 pages;
- Identity and Transcendence (State Doctorate dissertation), published in 2011 in Paris by L'Harmattan, within the series African Problematics, 348 pages;
- The Idea of a Negro-African Philosophy, Yaoundé, Clé Publishing, 1979, 118 pages.

## AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY:

The term "African philosophy" is formally unfamiliar to the history of philosophy, yet implicitly, it is strongly present. When speaking of a designation geographically defined by the African continent, we find Pharaonic thought and science, Christian philosophy with Saint Augustine as its pioneer, and thinkers such as Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, Mohammed Arkoun, Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Mohammed Abdu... and the list goes on and is diverse. So why is it that speaking about this philosophy is considered new in terms of discourse and complicated in terms of definition? The scope

does not allow for addressing this issue from all its angles, but we will approach it from the perspective of Marcien Towa.

We begin, therefore, with the third-degree doctoral thesis he obtained from the Sorbonne University in France, entitled "What is Negritude?"

In the introduction to his book "Essay on the Philosophical Problematic in Contemporary Africa," Marcien Towa responds to the question: "Can we speak of African philosophy?" by stating that it is a misframing of the issue. The real question, he says, is: Are Black people truly irrational, far from conception and abstraction, to the extent that the empire of philosophy becomes inaccessible to Black Africa and Black people? <sup>i</sup>

From this point, we understand that what is meant by African philosophy is not the geographical Africa, but rather the Africa shaped by the Western conceptualization, the racialized concept of reason that was established by social and anthropological research. This started from Auguste Comte's division of the stages of intellectual development into three phases: theological, metaphysical, and positivist reason. A principle of evolution was established between these levels, with the third stage being the highest, representing science and positivist thought, produced by civilized, abstract reason, as opposed to primitive reason characterized by the theological and metaphysical.

This is confirmed by the sociologist and anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a member of the Academy of Moral Sciences since 1917, who dedicated most of his research to distinguishing between primitive and civilized reason <sup>ii</sup>. His works are considered foundational in social studies. He depicted the logic, nature, and characteristics of primitive reason as being full of emotionally charged conceptions, personalized states, and metaphysical ideas, in contrast to civilized logic and reason, which are marked by linguistic complexity and conceptual abstraction <sup>iii</sup>.

The body of evidence he relied upon came from Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa—specifically Black African men. Examples include those from Congo, Sierra Leone, the Chagga tribes in East Africa, and Papua New Guinea. As a result, it <sup>iv</sup> came to be declared that Black Africa is among the primary centers of primitive mentality, with all

scientific evidence confirming its inability to engage in civilized reasoning.

Thus, African reason was classified as a "thing among things," as Frantz Fanon expressed in his book "Black Skin, White Masks", in which he tried to establish a foundational principle to understand ethnicity and racism in their phenomenological and existential dimensions. He emphasized that despite his insistence on defining the concept of things and striving to be at the core of this world, he discovered that "he was merely a thing among many things in this world" <sup>v</sup>.

Speaking of African philosophy therefore entails speaking about racism, ethnicity, and Negritude, which makes the problem of African philosophy more of an existential issue than a purely intellectual one. All philosophical schools starting with the rationalism of René Descartes representing the French school, Thomas Hobbes representing English empiricism, Hegel representing German idealism, and William James representing American pragmatism agree that there is no philosophical production outside the framework of Western civilization.

The book entitled "Bantu Philosophy" by Placide <sup>vi</sup> Tempels, published in 1945 in its original French version and in its English translation in 1957, marked a major turning point in the development of African philosophy. It introduced a new type of thinking that was entirely different from Western philosophies, as it addressed oral culture as preserved through language, highlighting it as a dimension of African philosophical identity. It laid the first foundational stone for philosophy expressed in local languages <sup>vii</sup>, which carry the thoughts and philosophical visions of the Black African mind—the languages <sup>viii</sup> spoken by many African intellectuals.

In that book, Placide Tempel's promoted ideas and principles of unity and love among all people. However, this positive image presented by the Belgian-born priest was linked to Christianity, which drew harsh criticism from Bernard Matolino in his book "Philosophical Racism in Tempel's". He, along with many other African philosophers among them François Towa rejected Tempel's thesis. In comparing Bantu philosophy to Western philosophy, they reaffirmed the ability of the African mind to rival the Western mind in producing logical thought. They saw his project as an attempt to equate and

merge the two under a broader goal of elevating Christianity. Moreover, his distinction of Bantu reasoning came at the expense of logic itself, ultimately causing more harm than benefit, as it reinforced notions of the primitiveness of African thought<sup>ix</sup>.

For this reason, his attempt was classified as a failure when compared to the project of distinct and independent African philosophy. According to Marcien Towa, Tempels fell into a state of “active consciousness”—a form of intellectual movement through which the thinker tries to overcome or transcend a particular situation by working to improve upon their initial condition. This is understood as a form of conquest, where the practice of philosophy in Africa becomes a project for the conquest of freedom—freedom understood as essential for humanity in general and for the African human being in particular<sup>x</sup>.

From this point, the issue of ideology was raised with Kwame Nkrumah, in his 1964 work entitled “Consciencism”, where he addressed the necessity of African unity in order to achieve liberation and strengthen nationalism. This aligned with his political experience in Ghana. His call led to the success of what became known as Nkrumaism, an African socialist orientation that bore his name—the Nkrumahist ideology. This attempt stood as an ideological pathway countering its colonial counterpart on the African continent. Nkrumahism thus emerged as a project fundamentally rooted in philosophy as a tool for national liberation.

This marked the beginning of affirming African concepts, experiences, and beliefs as essential traditions of the continent’s philosophy. Philosophical debates followed in service of the liberation project that begins with geography and ends with reason. This becomes especially evident in the work of Frantz Fanon, through his psychological analysis of the relationship between the Black man and the White man in his previously mentioned book. He reinforced this analytical view in the context of double standards applied to Black thought between individuals within the Black community on one hand, and between them and the White community on the other.

This was evident in the dominance of colonial philosophy and thought over the mind and psyche of the Black man in Africa. He elaborated this in his

study “The Alienated Black Self” (1961), highlighting the unique moral contribution of Black thought, which colonialism has long attacked by belittling its principles and implanting an inferiority and primitiveness complex in all products of the Black mind. He further analyzed this in his third study “The Wretched of the Earth” (1971). Fanon’s experience in Algeria, particularly with the Algerian revolution, served as an African model characterized by logical reasoning, organized thought, and a successful revolutionary ideology.

Thus, the project of African philosophy stood between two directions:

- The first called for assimilation into Western civilization as the ideal model of progress;
- The second was a national liberationist path that called for the reassessment and correction of Africa’s intellectual heritage.

Many thinkers and philosophers across Black Africa navigated between these two poles. Marcien Towa rejected linking African philosophy with the ideas of ethnophilosophy and Negritude. He emphasized the importance of internal critique within African philosophy toward its own heritage, as a way to filter out the past and retain only that which passes the test of criticism and classification toward truth<sup>xi</sup>.

Thus, Marcien Towa insisted on the importance of recognizing the presence of philosophical thought in Africa’s cultural traditions, provided there is a precise definition of philosophy, in order to avoid any collusion with racialized philosophy. He advocated, above all, for relying on traditional texts whether written or oral and emphasized the urgent need to focus our efforts not on extracting a philosophy of the past, but on the philosophical elaboration of our current problems, whether theoretical or practical.

## CONCLUSION:

The project of building an African philosophy is still in its early stages, as awareness of its linguistic components and oral traditions, and the necessity of establishing its sources, is still in its infancy. In order to move beyond ethnophilosophy and intellectual ethnicism, this project must be embraced by African institutions and states to solidify and localize the project of the liberated African mind. The journey is

still long between ethnophilosophy and philosophical wisdom this is the journey of freedom according to Marcien Towa. In my view, the time is right, as contemporary global thought is moving toward pluralism, and it affirms individuality and particularity. This is what African minds—both Black and White must strive to uphold.

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2. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl: *The Primitive Mind*; Second Edition; Paris, 1927.
3. Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*; Editions du Seuil, "The Human Condition" Collection, 1952.
4. Cheikh Moustar Bâ: *Diogenes*, No. 235–236, July 2011.
5. Marcien Towa: *The Idea of a Negro-African Philosophy*, 1979; CLE Editions, Yaoundé.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Marcien Towa: *Essay on the Philosophical Problematic in Contemporary Africa*; CLE Editions, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 1971; p. 5.

<sup>ii</sup> Titles: "The Mental Functions in Primitive Societies" (1910), "Primitive Mentality" (1922), "Nature and the Supernatural in Primitive Thought", "Primitive Mythology", "The Primitive Soul" (1927).

<sup>iii</sup> Lucien Lévy-Bruhl: *The Primitive Soul*; Second Edition; Paris, 1927; p. 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Lucien Lévy-Bruhl: *The Primitive Soul*; p. 28

<sup>v</sup> Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*; Éditions du Seuil; "The Human Condition" Collection; 1952; p. 118.

<sup>vi</sup> A language spoken in most coastal regions of Africa.

<sup>vii</sup> Zulu, Igbo, Akan, Yoruba — local African languages.

<sup>viii</sup> French, English, Spanish, Portuguese.

<sup>ix</sup> Marcien Towa: *Essay on the Philosophical Problematic in Contemporary Africa*; CLE Editions, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 1971; p. 27.

<sup>x</sup> Cheikh Moustar Bâ: *Diogenes*, No. (235–236), July 2011; p. 14.

<sup>xi</sup> Marcien Towa: *The Idea of a Negro-African Philosophy*, 1979; CLE Editions, Yaoundé; p. 80.