

Perspectives on Non-racial Philosophical Anthropology and African Philosophy

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Abstract

This article explores the possibility of developing a non-racial philosophical anthropology rooted in African philosophy. In contrast to the critical anti-racial tradition, which holds that race must be confronted directly through exposure, deconstruction, and critique, this study proposes a different approach: dissolving the idea of race by drawing on precolonial African intellectual sources. The article examines the historical and philosophical conditions that produced the racialized humanity of the Euro-modern era, while engaging Egyptian and Ethiopian traditions, especially the figure of Atum-Ra and the thought of Zera Yacob, as alternative foundations for defining a universal, non-racial conception of the human grounded in African traditions of history, community, and thought.

Keywords: Racial/Non-racial Philosophical Anthropology, African Philosophy, Zera Yacob, Atum-Ra, Racism.

Introduction

This article seeks to explore the possibility of developing perspectives on non-racial philosophical anthropology that are meaningful and substantial within the traditions of African philosophy. Before addressing the main argument, it is important to clarify what I mean by non-racial philosophical anthropology and how this approach differs from the more familiar and widely established framework of anti-racial philosophical anthropology.

The latter – anti-racial philosophical anthropology – largely originates from the critical tradition of modern and postcolonial African philosophy, as well as from broader critical theories of race. The logical foundation of this approach is both straightforward and, in many ways, intuitive: although race has no essential or natural basis, it nevertheless functions as a tangible and historically significant social force. Therefore, a thorough historical, sociological, and even psychological analysis is necessary to understand how the idea of race functions. Supporters of this approach emphasize that, because race has a real impact in shaping identities, subjectivities, and structures of domination, it must be addressed directly and dismantled through ongoing critique.

This critical orientation is represented by thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Achille Mbembe. These thinkers view the social, political, and historical realities of race as products of modern and colonial systems of power, and they attempt to deconstruct them from within through philosophical critique, socio-political analysis, and psychological examination.

Fanon's (2008) insights on the lived experience of Blackness under conditions of racism, Mbembe's (2016; 2017) theorization of race as a technology of violence and sovereignty, and Appiah's (1985; 1992) arguments about the fictive yet effective nature of racial categories: all articulate a position in which the struggle against race involves identifying its mechanisms, revealing how it operates, and pursuing its conscious dismantling.

In contrast, non-racial philosophical anthropology begins from a principled refusal to treat race as a meaningful or valid category for understanding human beings or societies. This approach argues that even critical engagement with the concept of race risks reasserting the very Western epistemological frameworks that generated the category in the first place. Thinkers such as John Mbiti, Valentin Mudimbe, and Ifi Amadiume exemplify this stance. Instead of directly confronting racial concepts, they seek to develop an African philosophical anthropology rooted in indigenous conceptions of community, spirituality, temporality, history, and culture. Mbiti's (1969) focus on communal structures and African temporality, Mudimbe's (1988; 1994) critique of the Western 'invention of Africa,' and Amadiume's (1997) work on gender and culture beyond racialized frameworks collectively point toward an alternative vision: a conceptual horizon where race is neither fought nor supported, but simply considered irrelevant. For this view, race is an imposed abstraction without a legitimate role in describing human beings.

Nevertheless, this approach also poses a challenge. While it draws from rich, locally rooted African conceptual frameworks, traditions of community, history, spirituality, and thought, its representatives use these resources only sparingly, sometimes hardly at all. It is precisely in this area that this article aims to intervene. While Glasgow (2009) argues that race can be rejected as an ontological category without abandoning the critique of racism, and Haslanger (2012) proposes redefining race as a social category in the service of political amelioration, neither approach draws on non-Western philosophical traditions as an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the human, which is precisely what this article proposes.

A related but distinct contribution comes from Afolayan (2023), who argues that early contemporary African philosophy has often reproduced the epistemic shortcomings of Western philosophy rather than critically examining them, and who calls for a more reflexive mode of African philosophical inquiry. The present article operates at a different register: rather than reforming African philosophy as an academic discipline, it seeks to recover conceptual resources from precolonial African traditions - resources that predate the epistemic distortions that both Western philosophy and its African disciplinary responses have inherited. Where Afolayan addresses what African philosophy should become, this article attends to what it has, in certain forms, already been.

My aim in this article is not to propose corrections to racial philosophical anthropology through anti-racist strategies. Instead, I intend to engage non-racial perspectives in philosophical anthropology by drawing upon two intellectual sources from the Global South.

1. **Ancient Egypt**, especially textual traditions concerning Atum-Ra, the first human self in divine form, who is depicted as sex, race, and gender neutral, fundamentally indifferent to outward appearance.
2. **Seventeenth-century Ethiopia**, specifically the 1667 philosophical treatise of the Ethiopian thinker and monk Zera Yacob, which offers an extensive examination of human nature while challenging widely accepted classificatory schemes, including racial and gender divisions.

Before engaging these sources directly, I will offer (1) a preliminary analysis of nature, culture, and the politics of the ‘natural.’ This short and initial discussion is essential for uncovering the conceptual conditions under which questions such as What is nature? What is human nature? What is the human being? Who is the human being? Who is African, and what is their nature? were shaped by the paradigms of Euro-modernity and the Enlightenment. I will then (2) turn to a more detailed discussion of African philosophy and the crisis of knowledge, highlighting the challenges produced under the Euro-modern paradigm, and how this field attempts to lay the groundwork for a constructive alternative through the idea and perspective of African philosophy. This will lead (3) to an analysis of Black Reason and the evolution of racial consciousness, revealing how the idea of race functioned as a raw material of Euro-modern discourse, and how this material remains relevant for critical self-reflection within Black intellectual traditions. Finally, I will (4) return to the central question of how we might move toward a non-racial philosophical anthropology rooted in African traditions of history, community, and thought.

Nature, Culture, and the Politics of the ‘Natural’¹

Throughout human history, the concept of ‘nature’ or what is considered ‘natural’ has often been invoked as a final justification for regulating and restricting human behavior. Across different cultures and periods, people have faced numerous prohibitions and limitations on a wide range of actions, including sexual orientation, religious choices, freedom of movement, and interethnic marriage, to name a few. Central to these restrictions was the claim that such behaviors

¹ The concepts of human and human nature are far from self-evident. The very term human is rooted in Euro-modern linguistic and historical traditions, leading non-Western critical approaches to argue that “Western Man” has been overrepresented as the universal human, while some Afropessimist thinkers contend that the category itself is structurally tied to whiteness and excludes Black existence. Debates over human nature likewise reveal deep contestation: Marx rejects the concept on materialist grounds; Sartre interrogates it existentially; feminist and post-structuralist thinkers critique its patriarchal and essentialist foundations; and African existentialists such as Lewis Gordon, drawing on Fanon, show that these notions reflect the particularities of Euro-modernity rather than universal human experience. My purpose here is simply to note these conditions of emergence, before turning to how non-Western critical traditions have challenged and redefined such concepts.

transcended the boundaries of what human "nature" or "natural" conduct permits. To lend these prohibitions an air of legitimacy, nature, specifically biology, was often presented as an inherent force, aligning with theological, cultural, and social motivations.

For instance, the human ability to run is considered "natural" because it is an inherent capability, while the inability to fly is viewed as "unnatural," since humans do not possess this ability. Historian Yuval Noah Harari delves into this dilemma when he asks:

How can we distinguish what is biologically determined from what people merely try to justify through biological myths? A good rule of thumb is 'Biology enables, Culture forbids.' Biology is willing to tolerate a very wide spectrum of possibilities. It's culture that obliges people to realise some possibilities while forbidding others. Biology enables women to have children – some cultures oblige women to realise this possibility. Biology enables men to enjoy sex with one another – some cultures forbid them to realise this possibility. (HARARI 2015, 148)

In other words, various cultures and social frameworks within which humans organize their religious and ideological existence have attempted, and largely succeeded, in limiting and defining the "natural" as a specific conception of good. This is even though nature does not exhibit a preference for particular behaviors or traits over others. On the contrary, being natural means existing without contradicting the laws of nature, and nothing more. Unlike cultures and ideologies, the history of human biology is indifferent to purposes. As Ricoeur and Changeux argue in their book, [What Makes Us Think?: A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics, Human Nature, and the Brain]: "The conception of man as a cosmic accident has nothing to do with any sort of culmination, either with respect to human nature or to human productions" (CHANGEUX & RICOEUR 2000, 231).

Put differently, while nature exhibits perfect indifference towards human diversity, cultures and ideologies have weaponized human diversity and variance to create societal layers and social hierarchies, which peaked with the advent of scientific racism in the modern era. Ethnic differences and social hierarchies are not novel inventions of Euro-modernity. The exceptional contribution of the Euro-modern revolution is its establishment of the biological body as a barrier to mobility and equality through the creation of a systematic biological taxonomy that transforms ethnic diversity into racial differentiation. In this regard, "The modern race concept was constructed by practices of naming and ordering, much more than it was by overt expressions of racial realism. It owes much more to the systematic project of Blumenbach than to the juvenile taunts of Voltaire" (SMITH 2015, 264).

A more serious problem, as Eze presents it in [Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of a Post-racial Future], is the Euro-modern claim that racial difference indicates a fixed substance of human nature innate to each race. For Eze, understanding the Euro-modern concept of race requires a long historical

perspective: from its narrow meaning in antiquity or the medieval period (as will be elaborated later), through its eighteenth-century expansion into terms, such as “stock”, “tribe”, and “nation”, (EZE 2001, 26), and finally to the new role it took on within the emerging sciences of history, nature, and humanity. In this process, race became central to the development of the modern ‘science of man’ and to the ways Euro-modern philosophy conceptualized humanity itself. In other words, Eze argues that race is not a marginal or accidental addition to European philosophy, but a fundamental element that evolved alongside Euro-modern ideas of history, nature, culture, and humanity.

Thus, from the moment the biological taxonomy created by Euro-modernity classified humans within a racial categorization system, the implications were profoundly and drastically severe for philosophical anthropology, which sought to provide tools not only for understanding human nature but also for understanding the nature of diversity. "The scientific racism," Smith further notes, "facilitated by evolutionary thought is very obviously in tension with the conception of human racial differences as a static grid, which at least intimates polygenesis, and takes the differences between different groups as fixed and unchanging" (SMITH 2015, 251).

African Philosophy and The Crisis of Knowledge

When the racial philosophical anthropology formulated during the 18th and 19th centuries sought to delineate the boundaries of humanity, the account it presented left most of the human world, particularly black people, outside these boundaries. The predicament was that "There is no other world in which black and African people existed, and perhaps could exist, but the modern one. This leads to the unfortunate circumstance of being homeless in the only world to which they could belong" (GORDON 2012, 104).

In other words, the fundamental struggle of African philosophy has always been, and remains, to critique the assumption that Western modern philosophy rests upon the idea of viewing Africa and its peoples, as Gordon aptly puts it, as "illegitimate in the world to which they are indigenous" (2012, 104). This represented a deep logical contradiction within the concept of universalism inherent in Euro-modern thought, a form of universalism that took the idea of humanity, broke it into parts, and then declared some segments of that human whole as no longer part of it. The foundational idea that made this "cut" possible was, of course, the concept of race.

In this context, Denise Da Silva makes a compelling argument in [Toward a Global Idea of Race], demonstrating that "the 'creation' of various and diverse kinds of human beings [...] deployed the powerful weapon, the concept of the racial, which manufactured both man and his 'others' as subjects that gaze on the horizon of their finite existence" (DA SILVA 2007, xviii). The concept of race, in other words, did not merely describe human difference; it actively produced the hierarchical distinction between those who counted as fully human and those who did not.

The expansion and dilution of the concept of humanity were a direct consequence of the transformation of the human being into an object of philosophical and scientific inquiry between the 17th and 19th centuries. Western modern philosophy sought to free itself from the looming shadow of ontology by defining the human being as a self-determined rational being, yet this effort was twofold: to generate universal characteristics for "man" while simultaneously defending that rational being from what Da Silva identifies as "the constraining powers of universal reason" (DA SILVA 2007, xiii).

Nevertheless, the concept of "humanity" proffered by Euro-Modernity has always been inherently racial, thereby undermining its ostensibly universal claim. As Da Silva astutely observes, the attributes of universality and self-determination conferred upon man by early modern philosophers, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, "explicitly place non-Europeans outside the trajectory of universal reason" (DA SILVA 2007, 14). Charles Mills summarizes the issue effectively: modern Western philosophical inquiry cannot be genuinely critical if it refuses to engage with race, for it will consistently engage only from a white-European interest, one in which "the single most important conceptual division historically being that between 'whites' and 'nonwhites'" (MILLS 1998, xiv).

The notion of universal reason, which was intended to negate an account of human difference, instead operated in precisely the opposite direction, manifesting as a framework "that fuses particular bodily traits, social configurations, and global regions, in which human difference is reproduced as irreducible and unsublatable" (DA SILVA 2007, xix). This facilitated the perpetuation of the racial myth, which enabled the classification of human beings into disparate racial categories, each ascribed with "specific physical and mental properties" (MBEMBE 2017, 57) and culminated in what Mbembe describes as the "social death" of black people (MBEMBE 2017, 78).

Turning to V. Y. Mudimbe's [The Invention of Africa] (1988), his analysis reveals that the European colonial mission did not aim to understand the continent before deepening its grip. From its inception, it sought to impose a distinct European epistemological framework upon Africa through the dual mechanism of anthropological and ethnographic science, simultaneously increasing control over the continent and producing the knowledge needed to justify that control.

Against this backdrop, African philosophy endeavored to effect an epistemological rupture regarding how Euro-modern thought conceives of itself and thereby sustains the mechanisms through which the social order is reproduced – a social order predicated on exclusion, in which modern Western culture, science, and philosophy have been deeply complicit.² The historical origins of this debate can be traced to the philosophical marginalization of Africa since the Enlightenment, when race was deployed as the foundational criterion for such distinctions.

² For further discussion, see Tsenay Serequeberhan, particularly [Contested Memory: The Icons of the Occidental Tradition] (2007), which examines how major canonical thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx contributed to the rationalization of anti-African racism.

Consequently, the concept of African philosophy should be understood as a comprehensive theoretical and historical undertaking, shaped by the responses of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples to the historical-philosophical conditions imposed upon them by Eurocentrism. I advocate for a position that regards African philosophy as an expansive theoretical project: one that carries substantial political implications and constitutes a critique of the theoretical structures of modernity and the Enlightenment. The struggle for liberation from the image of sub-humanity and philosophical incompetence was, and in many ways still is, far more political than philosophical, hardly surprising, given that the entire Enlightenment project was itself a socio-political effort.

This racial exclusion and subjugation introduced a fundamental tension regarding the self-identity of the Black person, and more troublingly, the image that modern Western reason and philosophy perpetuated, rendering the black person's humanity opaque and ambivalent. It is this image that gives rise to the questions Mbembe identifies as foundational to the Western consciousness of blackness: "Who is he? 'How does one recognize him?' 'What differentiates him from us?' 'Can he become like us?' 'How should we govern him and to what end?'" (MBEMBE 2017, 28).

This scholarship on African philosophy, the effort to recover Africa's philosophical heritage and challenge the myth of Greek originality, runs from George G. M. James (1954) and Cheikh Anta Diop (1974) through Théophile Obenga (2004) and Anke Graness (2016), finding its most recent comprehensive expression in Kiros (2019). Underlying this entire trajectory is a single foundational concept: race. In this regard, modern Western philosophy remains complicit in Euro-modernity's pursuit of both material and symbolic domination over the non-European world, serving as a source of justification for how non-European human groups are represented, and significantly "trapped in a lesser form of being," as Mbembe puts it (MBEMBE 2017, 17).

Black Reason and the Evolution of Racial Consciousness ***Western Consciousness of Blackness***

In Western understanding of blackness, the concepts of blackness and the black person are fundamental categories; without them, the colonial narrative remains incomplete and largely irrelevant. Blackness appears in the narrative of 'white reason' as a problem, an explanation, a justification, but most importantly, it will always serve as a myth of racial inferiority – a concept that underpins the entire narrative.

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze captures the stakes of this dynamic when he asserts that the dialectical nature of racial consciousness "echoes the historical achievement of modernity as a global capitalist civilization," revealing the brutalities inflicted upon those it considered obstacles to its progress. Within this normative framework, the racialized projects of modern domination "must have appeared to be a necessary moral task" (EZE 2001, 35). His observation that "questions about reason and human identity, including racial identity, have always clung together in modern thought" (EZE 2001, 41) constitutes a severe and astute criticism of Euro-modern philosophy; one in which race presents itself not as an aberration of reason but as a domain of the rational.

The ranking of races by origin aimed to indicate their level of rationality. Northern Europeans, placed at the highest point on Kant's racial scale,³ were assigned a correspondingly higher level of humanity, while those ranked below were viewed as inferior in rationality and, by extension, in humanity itself. This mental framework shaped Western views of Blackness, consistently refusing to see non-Western groups as part of the human fabric. The legitimacy of philosophical and scientific knowledge under Euro-modernity was inseparable from the legitimacy of its producers, those empowered, by virtue of their position within the rational community, to determine:

All our observations of African man show him as living in a state of savagery and barbarism [...] The negro is an example of animal man in all its savagery and lawlessness [...] nothing consonant with humanity is to be found in his character [...] We cannot properly feel ourselves into his nature, no more than into a dog. (HEGEL 1997, 127–8)

Black Consciousness of Blackness – Self-Liberation

Mbembe links the myth of race to the broader idea of Reason, specifically, Black Reason. He traces how discourses and practices of invention, narration, and ritual repetition worked to construct the Black Man as a racial subject and symbol of savage exteriority, leading to his moral disqualification and instrumentalization. Black consciousness emerges as a response to this construction: a means of self-liberation and identity declaration. "If the Western consciousness of the Black Man is an identity judgment, this second narrative is, in contrast, a declaration of identity" (MBEMBE 2017, 28).

The pursuit of self-liberation primarily involved breaking free from the idea that being black means being something of instrumental value. To this end, many African thinkers sought to align with Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, treating human beings not as means but as ends, by ascribing to the black person an absolute or intrinsic value: a human being endowed with Reason as a universal measure of humanity. As Mbembe observes, "Reason, in particular, confers on the human being a generic identity, a universal essence from which flows a collection of rights and values. It unites all humans" (MBEMBE 2017, 85). What unites the competing visions of Négritude, as Eze

³ At this point, Kant's racial taxonomy warrants direct citation. Classifying humanity into four races connected to their "natural causes of origin", "Whites of brunette color," "High blondes (Northern Europeans)," "Copper-reds (Americans)," and "Blacks (Senegambia)". Kant identifies the white as the "phyletic species" against which all others are measured (KANT 2007, 2:411). As Eze elaborates, the non-white "skin colors" in this schema are cast as "degenerate, ugly variants – reflecting the morally 'fallen' and inferior mental status of their carriers – of the white original" (EZE 2001, 100). This is not peripheral to Kant's philosophy; it is structurally embedded within his account of universal reason.

illustrates, is precisely this need: "to assert African humanity, a humanity whose denial was evident in the institutions of racism in Europe and the United States and in the colonialism in Africa" (EZE 2001, 118).

Mbembe's analysis draws centrally on Fanon, who first identified how the black person is both invented and fixed as an object by whiteness, a process through which, as Fanon demonstrates in [Black Skin, White Masks], Western science and history served simultaneously to construct and erase the non-Western subject (FANON 2008, xv–xvi, 91). For Mbembe, the goal of becoming "human amongst other humans" cannot be pursued through isolation or mythical separatism; whether in the form of Garvey's vision of African redemption or Césaire's Négritude. What unites these thinkers, and what Mbembe draws from both through Fanon, is the conviction that the liberation of the Black individual from racial definition must be oriented toward a co-created world rather than a separate one (MBEMBE 2017, 157).

This involves, fundamentally, a confrontation with the distortions perpetrated by Euro- modernity philosophical tradition, namely, the moral distortion manifested through capitalism, slavery, and imperialism; the ontological distortion, which sought to ontologize race itself; and the epistemological distortion, namely, epistemic injustice, which posited that Black men and women were epistemically untrustworthy.

It is at this juncture that the distinction between anti-racial and non-racial philosophical anthropology assumes its full philosophical significance. The anti-racial approach, for all its critical power, operates within the conceptual horizon that race itself has established. By engaging race, exposing it, deconstructing it, and resisting it, this approach necessarily presupposes race as a category worthy of engagement. In doing so, it risks perpetuating the very mechanism it seeks to dismantle: the entrapment of the normative conception of human nature within the concept of race.

This observation is not intended as a criticism of the anti-racial tradition. The political urgency of that tradition remains undiminished, and its intellectual achievements are indispensable. However, the argument developed in this article proceeds from a different premise: that the task of non-racial philosophical anthropology is not primarily political but conceptual. Its aim is not to persuade those who benefit from racial privilege to abandon it, a task whose political complexity no honest account of racial privilege can underestimate, but to demonstrate that alternative conceptual frameworks for understanding human beings already exist, embedded within African philosophical traditions that predate the racial categories of Euro-modernity.

This is the philosophical significance of the estrangement from race that the non-racial approach proposes. Estrangement, in this sense, is not withdrawal from political struggle. It is a conceptual move: the deliberate suspension of race as an organizing category for understanding human beings, in order to make visible the frameworks of human self-understanding that racial thinking has obscured. By drawing on precolonial African sources – the Kemetian conception of the primordial self as raceless, and Zera Yacob's philosophical anthropology as one that simply does not operate within a racial horizon – the non-racial approach

does not propose an ideal that must be imposed on a resistant world. It recovers a mode of understanding the human that has always been available, one that race imposed itself upon but could not entirely erase.

Whether this recovery can transform political realities is a question that lies beyond the scope of this article. What this article argues, and what the following analysis is intended to demonstrate, is that non-racial philosophical anthropology is conceptually possible, because it has, in different forms and under different conditions, already been practiced.

Toward Non-Racial Philosophical Anthropology

In her book [Re-Inventing Africa] (1997), Amadiume rightly observes that classical anthropology acted as a platform and a production apparatus for ideas and theories of race, where, in most cases, the Black man and woman were the subjects of those theories (AMADIUME 1997, 2). What Amadiume refers to as classical anthropology is, in fact, racial philosophical anthropology, whose formal foundation as a distinct field of study we associate with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who is prominently identified with the Enlightenment and Euro-modern philosophy. As mentioned in the previous section, Kant developed extensive racial theories about non-Europeans in general and Africans in particular, theories that, in practice, formed the basis for his philosophical anthropology.

In this context, sociologist, historian, and French philosopher Michel Foucault recognizes Kant as the first to formally pose the question of "man": "This had already been formulated by Kant in his *Logic*, when to his traditional trilogy of questions, he added an ultimate one: *Was ist der Mensch?* [What is Man?]" (FOUCAULT 1994, 340).

In this manner, Foucault affirms Kant's position as the foundational figure who formally established the tradition of philosophical anthropology, a discipline ostensibly concerned with understanding the essence, nature, and spirit of humanity. From this viewpoint, Foucault accurately observes that "Anthropology as an analytic of man has certainly played a constituent role in modern thought, since to a large extent we are still not free from it" (1994, 340).

However, if we set aside this intra-Occidental debate and return to our subject, this is the fundamental argument through which we can understand Amadiume's incisive remark that "the subject of anthropology was therefore racist from the start and was not intended to serve an African interest" (1997, 2).

Given the above, one can easily assume that this understanding fueled the growth of the anti-racial philosophical anthropology approach. This approach was motivated by a desire to expose, critique, and resist the dehumanizing tendencies of Western culture and Euro-Modern philosophy towards non-Western thought and philosophy in general, especially African traditions. However, it is also clear that this situation led this approach to be confined primarily to Africa during the colonial and post-colonial eras. As a result, a rich and diverse tradition, history, culture, language, and intellectual heritage that existed long before the Western invasion – both physical and ideological – was pushed to the margins.

I am not suggesting or requesting that we completely reject the critical anti-racial approach. The idea that race can be used as raw material for critical analysis, deconstruction, and understanding social existence is important. However, this approach – which, as Mudimbe (1988) argues, in most cases employs "categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order" (MUDIMBE 1988, 10), has a clear disadvantage compared to the non-racial approach, especially when the latter draws on precolonial texts from Kemet (commonly known as ancient Egypt), Ethiopia, and other intellectual traditions in sub-Saharan Africa.

1. **Ancient Egypt:** Atum-Ra – The First Human Self in Divine Form

The primary textual source for the analysis that follows is [The Book of the Dead] (BUDGE 1979), supplemented by Théophile Obenga's scholarly reconstruction of Kemetian cosmological thought in Ancient Egypt and Black Africa (OBENGA 1992).

In his book [Self-Definition: A Philosophical Inquiry from the Global South and Global North] (2019), Teodros Kiros argues that the meanings assigned to race, as well as other categories such as sex and gender, by Euro-Modern philosophy impose rigid labels that they do not deserve. He further explains that these perspectives sharply contrast with how Atum-Ra, the first human self in the form of a god in ancient Egypt, perceived them. According to Kiros, Atum-Ra and the ancient Egyptians viewed these common human classifications – race, sex, and gender – developed under the Euro-modernity and Enlightenment paradigm as nothing more than an unimportant external appearance, as "the very energy from which Atum-Ra emerged, was sex, race, and gender-neutral" (KIROS 2019, 6). In other words, the primordial self in Kemetian thought is neither confined by boundaries, sex, or race: it represents an infinite consciousness at its earliest stage of emergence; it is formless and just beginning to come into existence.

According to the Kemetian tradition, as depicted in [The Book of the Dead], the emergence of the self also brings forth the deity Atum-Ra. However, prior to the appearance of the deity, there exists a dynamic, boundless substrate beyond the confines of known time and space, referred to in the Kemetian texts as Nun. From this primordial substrate, the "Self" arises: an entity that is sexless (hence genderless), formless, and decidedly raceless, situated at the inception of an existential process. Kiros (2019) dedicates only a few pages to this intriguing phenomenon. Nonetheless, from these densely packed pages, it can be inferred that the emergence of the god Atum-Ra, who is arbitrarily assigned a male form, signifies the onset of conceptual differentiation, such as male or female, man or woman. However, these distinctions, being arbitrary, highlight the influence of mythic imagination rather than any ontological reality. As the texts suggest, these differences are not natural essences but rather garments, temporary appearances that are subject to change and, more significantly, hold no definitive bearing on the true nature of human beings.

The text itself gives voice to this primordial emergence: "I am the god Tmu in my rising; I am the only One. I came into existence in Nu. I am Ra who

rose in the beginning" (BUDGE 1979, 282). What the text describes is a self that precedes all differentiation, prior to form, prior to sex, prior to race. The "only One" that emerges from the Nun is not a gendered, racialized, or otherwise categorized being; it is pure existence at the threshold of becoming. It is this conception of the primordial self, anterior to every attribute that Euro-modernity would later treat as essential, that provides the Kemetian tradition with its philosophical significance for a non-racial anthropology.

This alternative framework finds its fullest elaboration in the rich system of conceptual, metaphysical, and anthropological ideas that shapes the mythological and cosmological texts of the Kemetian tradition. Théophile Obenga, whose writings on ancient Egypt represent a significant breakthrough, writes in his book: [Ancient Egypt & Black Africa] (1992) that:

On the first day, Atoum, out of the Noun, brings forth the twin divinities: God Shou and Goddess Tefnut, the first couple created. [...] Creation continues with that of humanity. Atoum-Ra, the demiurge, emerges from the Noun: creative, luminous intelligence, springs from raw, unorganised, primordial matter.

With this concept of the Noun, the Egyptian philosophers laid down a principle [...] at the source of the very constitution of the Universe as it is now known by human ingenuity. Also, it lays down, quite clearly, the radical unity of all the beings and elements of the universe, issued and created from a unique principle [...] (OBENGA 1992, 33-35).

That is, everything that will henceforth be added as attributes of human beings, such as race, sex, gender, class, social status, and so on, is merely external, meaningless additions that do not touch the core of creation or human essence. To paraphrase Kiro, they are customs, appearances, the garments of race, sex, and gender.

Obenga concludes this point by stating that:

These images, these speculations, born 4000 years before our era, in the consciousness of men and women of Pharaonic Egypt, lasted for nearly thirty centuries, justifying the sacred solar kingship of Egyptian sovereigns, supporting all the rituals, notably those linked to the beyond (solarisation of the deceased). (1992, 36)

In other words, they shaped human and social order without relying on racial fixations. In this respect, a sharp contrast arises between these Kemetian conceptions and the rigid categories of race, gender, and sex that developed in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were granted scientific and philosophical status as immutable.

It is widely acknowledged that, before the advent of Euro-Modernity, individuals and societies were distinguished in numerous means, often characterized by hierarchical structures. At the same time, the concept and notion of race in antiquity carried minimal significance, at times being entirely negligible.

The fact that the idea of race became a rigid and dominant, sometimes even exclusive criterion, for describing, characterizing, and anthropologically examining humans, peoples, and societies under the framework of Euro-modernity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gains further support when we look at Bernard Lewis's book [Race and Slavery in the Middle East – An Historical Inquiry]. Lewis's analysis of pre-modern societies in the Middle East lends further weight to this point. Examining the major civilizations of the ancient world, among them the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Israelites, the Hittites, and the Persians, he finds that where what we now call racial tension existed, it was understood in terms of ethnic, linguistic, or religious difference rather than biological type. In anthropological terms, these peoples exhibited no significant contrasts of racial type (LEWIS 1990). The rigid biological taxonomy that would later define Euro-modern racial thinking was, in this sense, historically unprecedented.

In this context, I think it is useful to highlight Victoria Turner's insightful book (2019), which examines historical sources and medieval theories of race, including its function and performance. Turner's book challenges trends in mediaeval studies that have focused on grounding the idea of race solely in physical features by offering a detailed analysis of medieval French texts. She shows that "race is not simply a physical state of being or embodiment but a multifaceted process of becoming, of acting, and being acted upon" (TURNER 2019, 9). This statement encapsulates her main argument: mediaeval French literature associates race more with cultural and ethnic origins than with physical attributes like body or skin color. Additionally, she notes that "this emphasis on the body [...] as the locus of identity seems to have led to a narrower view of what medieval race more broadly may encompass" (TURNER 2019, 10).

This perspective diverges from the traditional approach to research concerning race, particularly since the Enlightenment. Typically, studies on this subject, such as those documented in the historical evolution of various anthropological discourses, demonstrate that logic is regarded as the fundamental norm for human thought. In this context, logic served as a defining criterion that classified women, infants, slaves, primitive peoples, savages, and pygmies into an inferior species or a less developed form of humanity, to whom extreme logical incapacity was attributed. This type of social history was foreign to Zera Yacob.

2. Seventeenth-Century Ethiopia: Ḥatāta Zer'a Ya'eqob and Wäldä Həywät

As with the Kemetian sources above, the citations that follow are drawn from the primary text of Zera Yacob's *Hatata* (1667), as translated and critically edited by Claude Sumner in [Ethiopian Philosophy, Vol. 2] (SUMNER 1976).

When we place Zera Yacob and his work within the historical context in which they were created, we see that Zera Yacob was an Ethiopian monk and thinker who, in 1667, wrote a short text called *Hatata*. The word *Hatata* in the Ge'ez, an ancient Ethiopian language, has multiple layers of meaning. It signifies, at once, asking questions, inquiring gradually, searching for a way, and searching

piece by piece; it also means to investigate and examine. Through the *Hatata*, Zera Yacob aimed to explore the reality around him, carefully consider the truth as it was passed down to him, even by his parents, and above all, he questioned the foundations of morality and the socio-religious behaviors of the people he lived with, whether they shared his religion or belonged to a different one. Today, these texts are known as the *Treatise of Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat*.

This is a short, dense text of exceptional depth, written with great wisdom, and it conveys a regional and local inspiration in language, culture, history, social thought, political tradition, theology, and morality.

During the 17th century, a pivotal period in his life (1600–1693), Ethiopia, an empire of the Christian faith, was afflicted by religious, moral, social, and political upheaval stemming from the ferocious competition among different religious doctrines. On one side was the indigenous Ethiopian Christian tradition; on the other, European missionaries aimed to convert and absorbing Ethiopian Christianity, distinct and indigenous, into European forms of Christianity, mainly Catholicism.

Zera Yacob was determined to protect Ethiopia from foreign theological and religious intrusion, but equally important, from the socio-political and ideological invasion that threatened the country's local intellectual independence. This text, with its autobiographical nature, begins with a description of his personal experiences but primarily presents an impressive discussion of existential moral philosophy, with truth, reason, discernment, and human nature at its center. Through his observations of society, he sought to understand and describe the roots of the social injustices he witnessed everywhere, especially the inequality among people.

There is a further great inquiry, [namely:] all men are equal in the presence of God, and all are intelligent, since they are his creatures; he did not assign one people for life, another for death, one for mercy, another for judgement. Our reason teaches us that this sort of discrimination cannot exist in the sight of God, who is perfect in all his works. (SUMNER 1976, 12)

Zera Yacob's observations and criticisms cut across social groups, cultures, and religions. Neither Christianity nor Islam, nor the sects within these religions, nor the religious figures in them, escapes his examining gaze. Thus, he writes, for example, against the polygamous tradition of Islam that had effectively become a natural law.

Those who will be born both male and female are equal in number: if we count men and women living in an area, we find as many women as men; we do not find eight or ten women for every man; for the law of creation orders one man to marry one woman. If one man marries ten women, then nine men will be without wives. This violates the order of creation and the laws of nature [...]. (SUMNER 1976, 9-10)

He continues to deepen his social, religious, and moral critique, and writes:

Likewise, the Mohammedans said that it is right to go and buy a man as if he were an animal. But with our intelligence, we understand that this Mohammedan law cannot come from the creator of man, who made us equal, like brothers, so that we call our creator our father. But Mohammed made the weaker man the possession of the stronger and equated a rational creature with irrational animals; can this depravity be attributed to God? (SUMNER 1976, 12)

One of the most compelling critiques of the distortion of nature and what is deemed natural, as understood by Zera Yacob from creation, is evident in his critique of the laws Moses commands the believers of the Old Testament and, consequently, those who adhere to the New Testament.

The creator, in his kind wisdom, has made blood to flow monthly from the womb of women. And the life of a woman requires this flow of blood in order to generate children; a woman who has no menstruation is barren and cannot have children, because she is impotent by nature. But Moses and Christians have defiled the wisdom of the creator; Moses even considers impure all the things that such a woman touches; this law of Moses impedes marriage and the entire life of a woman, and it spoils the law of mutual help, prevents the bringing up of children and destroys love. Therefore, this law of Moses cannot spring from him who created woman. (SUMNER 1976, 10)

Equally noteworthy is Zera Yacob's pioneering stance on women's status. In opposition to the social norms prevalent during his era, he championed complete equality between women and men. He adhered to the moral standards he advocated and notably married a woman regarded as a maidservant—an act perceived at the time as a deliberate defiance of feudal conventions.

Zera Yacob's commitment to these principles extended to his own conduct. He chose to marry Hirut, a woman of low social standing in his master's household, explicitly refusing to treat her as a servant but insisting on full marital equality; "husband and wife are equal in marriage," as he put it, "we should not call them master and maidservant; for they are one flesh and one life" (SUMNER 1976, 20–21).

Zera Yacob's response to why he chose to marry a woman of lower social status is perhaps the most fascinating. He explained that he married her because of her character and moral virtues. In doing so, he presents a unique idea that a woman, and all humans, should be valued for their moral qualities rather than external traits like physical appearance, skin color, race, or social status.

A profound conceptual split separates Zera Yacob's understanding of humanity from that of anthropology as it emerged in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, where it crystallized into a closed scientific-philosophical framework structured around rigid racial categories.

Zera Yacob provides a markedly distinct interpretation of humanity: not as a fixed and perfected essence, but as a continuously evolving entity, an open-ended project that remains incomplete. In this context, the boundaries of what

constitutes the human are not pre-established, as suggested by anthropology and the concept of race, but are continually redefined through every endeavor to comprehend the origins of consciousness and existence.

It is reasonable to assume that he was familiar with the concept of race, as shown by his harsh critique of the slave trade in Muslim societies of his time. However, as the text indicates, he neither discusses, confronts, nor even mentions, not even in passing, the idea of race as a way to describe or critique social injustices.

His observations, inquiries, and insights all originate from frameworks of knowledge and the traditions of local human history. Zera Yacob develops and documents an Afro-Ethiopian social history rooted in community, tradition, history, theology, and thought, entirely free of racial classifications. Race is not part of his conceptual horizon.

Conclusion

The argument developed in this article has proceeded along two distinct but related lines of inquiry. The first concerns the philosophical conditions under which the concept of race was generated and sustained within the Euro-modern tradition, conditions that, as the foregoing analysis has attempted to show, were neither incidental nor peripheral to that tradition, but constitutive of it. The second concerns the possibility of recovering conceptual frameworks for understanding the human that predate those conditions and that were never organized around the category of race in the first place.

These two lines of inquiry converge in the central distinction this article has sought to establish: the distinction between anti-racial and non-racial philosophical anthropology. The anti-racial tradition, whose critical power and political urgency this article has consistently acknowledged, addresses the damage race has done and continues to do. It is indispensable. But it remains, by the logic of its own engagement, within the conceptual horizon that race has established. Non-racial philosophical anthropology, as this article has argued, does not operate within that horizon at all. It does not resist race, deconstruct race, or seek to overcome race. It simply proceeds from a different point of departure: one in which race was never a foundational category of human self-understanding.

What the analysis of Atum-Ra and Zera Yacob has sought to demonstrate is not that these traditions are equivalent, or that they can be straightforwardly mapped onto one another. The Kemetian cosmological tradition and the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosophical tradition are historically and conceptually distinct. What they share, and what renders them philosophically significant for the argument of this article, is precisely what they do not share with Euro-modernity: neither operates within a framework in which racial differentiation is treated as a meaningful criterion for understanding human beings. In the Kemetian conception of the primordial self, the categories of race, sex, and gender appear as arbitrary external attributes; garments, as Kiros aptly describes them, rather than as essential properties of the human. In Zera Yacob's *Hatata*, the criteria by which human beings are evaluated and related to one another are drawn from reason, moral discernment, and the requirements of a shared creation, not

from the physical and biological classifications that Euro-modernity would later transform into a taxonomy of humanity.

This is not a recovery of an idealized past, nor a proposal to replace one philosophical tradition with another. It is, rather, a demonstration that the conceptual resources for a non-racial philosophical anthropology already exist, embedded within African philosophical traditions that Euro-modernity marginalized but could not erase. The question of whether these resources can be developed into a fully articulated philosophical anthropology adequate to the present remains open. What this article has argued, and what the preceding analysis has sought to establish, is that the project is not merely desirable but philosophically grounded, because, in different forms and under different conditions, it has already been practiced.

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