HEGEL AND AFRICA
An Evaluation of the Treatment of Africa in The Philosophy of History

RONALD KUYKENDALL
New Orleans, Louisiana

In *The Philosophy of History*, Georg W. F. Hegel (1956) presents an extraordinary interpretation of world history. History is seen as the progression of the *World Spirit* (i.e., Absolute Mind, that which was before the world, God as He is in Himself) as it manifests itself in man and comes to exist in the world. Once in the world Spirit yearns for actualization, to make itself what it can become. And what it becomes is universal freedom embodied in the state, According to Stace's (1955) interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy,

States are related to each other as persons in civil society. . . . Hence states likewise, in their relations to one another, are particular, and each pursues its special interests. . . . And hence each state has its own peculiar colour and features. Each state stands for and embodies an idea, or to be more exact, each state embodies a particular phase of the universal Idea [i.e., the absolute truth as self-determined, infinite, undifferentiated, and which is the definition of God and the universe]. In history the Idea unfolds its various phases in time and the dominant phase at any epoch is embodied in a dominant people. The succession of these phases constitute[s] world-history. . . . The Idea when thus embodied in the history of the world is the world-spirit. (p. 438)

Therefore, by studying the development of states, Hegel is able to discover the different stages in the developing consciousness of Spirit. He does so by distinguishing four historical worlds moving from East to West—Oriental, Greek, Roman, and German. In each
of these worlds, the progressive series of consciousnesses of Spirit has its turn while the rest of civilization looks on.

But why is Africa not among the four cultures or civilizations considered by Hegel? Why is Africa considered by Hegel as the unhistorical, undeveloped Spirit still involved in the conditions of mere nature? Why is Africa, from Hegel's point of view, devoid of morality, religion, and political constitution?

This essay will answer these questions, by getting into Hegel's system and examining the placement within that system of his treatment of Africa, and will challenge the adequacy of his factual knowledge and cultural information. Although Hegel approaches, in the words of Walsh (1971), "world history from a point of view which is distinctively, indeed aggressively, European" (pp. 188-189), this essay will use an Africentric perspective to emphasize the shortcomings and falsities of his historical system.

HEGEL'S TREATMENT OF AFRICA IN WORLD HISTORY

Hegel makes a distinction between Africa and as he says, "Africa proper." He divides Africa into three parts (a) Africa proper, that territory which lies south of the Sahara; (b) European Africa, that territory which lies north of the Sahara; and (c) Egypt, that territory which is connected to Asia (Hegel, 1956).

With regard to Africa proper, Hegel refers to it as "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (Hegel, 1956, p. 91). He goes further to say that "in Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence" (Hegel, 1956, p. 93). Therefore, the African has not reached the level of realizing his own being; he has not yet realized his person. The African is, in Hegel's words, "natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" (Hegel, 1956, p. 93).

To understand Hegel's treatment of Africa, it is necessary to understand his conception of a anthropology. For Hegel the term anthropology means the study of the soul, the lowest conceivable
phase of mind, still trapped in nature, bonded to the body, and barely above the level of animality. Soul is that level at which Spirit sleeps, active only within itself, at one with the environment.

The soul passes through three phases: (a) the natural soul, (b) the feeling soul, and (c) the actual soul. The natural soul is the absolute beginning of Spirit completely influenced by its environment but unconscious of it. The feeling soul is the all-inclusive outcome of the accumulation of sensations, such as, sense experience, passion, and emotion. Finally, the actual soul is the awakening of the “I.” At this level the soul transcends the natural world and regards it as objective and alien to itself. It has become thought and subject-for-itself. Thus a consideration of consciousness cannot be undertaken until the soul has moved through these three phases (see Stace, 1955).

This is why Hegel begins his discussion of history with the Oriental World, which is characterized by substantiality, that which is determined by self, an independent being of its own. And for this reason Hegel does not begin with Africa, which, in his view, has not reached the level of the actual soul. The African, from Hegel’s point of view, is still influenced by nature.

Therefore, because of the forementioned reasons, Africa proper has no role in world history as Hegel sees it. Spirit is undeveloped still within the range of nature. Not yet at the level where it can transcend the influences of the environment, Africa proper is unable to fit within Hegel’s philosophical scheme where history is only significant when it has reached the minimal level of consciousness.

However, the evidence is to the contrary. By using Hegel’s system, it can be demonstrated that Africa is part of the World Spirit on a higher level than Hegel presumes and possesses in Hegelian terms of morality, religion, and political constitution.

But first of all, it makes no geographical, historical, or cultural sense to divide Africa into three parts. European ethnocentrism traps itself in contradictions by racially implying “that the real Africa is south of the Sahara” (Mazrui, 1986, p. 25), while geographically asserting that Africa is a continent. It is a well-established geographical fact that Africa is a continent.
Furthermore, there is no such thing as European Africa. Europe and Africa are two distinct continents. And Black African people have been present in the territory north of the Sahara since prehistoric times (see Diop, 1974).

Last, Egypt is not connected to Asia nor was it influenced by Asia. As pointed out by Diop (1974),

> if a civilization comparable to that of Egypt had flowered there [in Asia] . . . its memory, no matter how vague, would have been transmitted to us by the Ancients, who form one branch of the Indo-Europeans, who furnished so many corroborative testimonials on the Negro-Egyptian culture. (p. 102)

**AFRICAN MORALITY**

*Morality*, just as anthropology, is not used by Hegel in its usual way. It is purely subjective and “excludes all positive duties connected with the family, society, and the state, all of which are objective institutions” (Stace, 1955, p. 395). And just as the soul, morality, too, passes through three phases (a) purpose, (b) intention and well-being, and (c) goodness and wickedness. Purpose is the acceptance of known consequences for the individual’s action and for which the individual assumes responsibility. Intention and well-being compose the special character of the action, that is, the particular end and its value for the individual. But these first two phases do not constitute morality. Only when these two phases coincide with the *universal will* (i.e., a person molding the world through activity, and because every person is universal, their action on the world must also be universal) does morality come into existence. And this constitutes the third phase—goodness and wickedness. Goodness is rational action, universal reason; wickedness is unreasonable action in opposition to universal reason. Because the individual is a rational being, he finds within his own reason universal reason that is the good and that is the attitude of conscience. Therefore, morality is a conscious act of will (see Stace, 1955).
Because Africa proper has not reached the minimal level of consciousness—that is, actual soul—and morality is a conscious act of will, it stands to reason that Hegel says “we must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality . . . if we would rightly comprehend him [the African]” (Hegel, 1956, p. 93). He also says that “among the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent” (Hegel, 1956, p. 96), but can Hegel’s statements be accepted at face value? After all, Hegel bases his conclusions on accounts of missionaries. But the evidence is to the contrary.

For Hegel, morality is born from consciousness, and consciousness is the awakening of the “I.” And because I is universal, morality must also be universal. Furthermore, morality is an act of will that constitutes morality as action. Just as it is for Hegel, so it is for the African.

In African culture, the existence of the individual is the existence of the corporate. And, therefore, “The individual is conscious of himself in terms of I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970, p. 279). Thus the African is conscious of his existence, conscious of the I. And as Mbiti (1970) pointed out, “the essence of African morality is that it is societary” (p. 279) and based on what an individual does “rather than that he does what he does because of what he is” (p. 279). Hence African morality is universal, that is, societary, and is the consequence of action, that is, what a person does. This concept of African morality and consciousness is not just peculiar to an African society but is typical of African culture on a continental scale (see Mbiti, 1970; Diop, 1978). Therefore, Hegel is incorrect in assuming that the African had not reached the necessary level of consciousness and was thus devoid of morality.

AFRICAN RELIGION

Religion like the soul and morality, passes through three phases also: (a) natural religion, (b) the religion of spiritual individuality, and (c) absolute religion—Christianity. For Hegel, “religion is the
manifestation of the Absolute in the form of picture-thought,” (Stace, 1955, p. 488), that is, art. Under natural religion, Spirit is still bonded to nature existing first as a crude form of magic and then passing into objective reality, that is, substance, in which religion is pantheistic, and finally culminating in spiritual individuality where God is recognized as spirit and personal. The third and final phase—Christianity—is where God and humanity are reconciled, or in other words, the unity of God and humanity is established.

Thus it can be deduced from Hegel’s conception of religion and his words regarding religion in Africa, that the African exists within the realm of natural religion. Using Herodotus as a source, Hegel accuses Africans of being sorcerers not yet conscious of a Higher Power (Hegel, 1956). He interprets their religious practices as characterized by fetishism; they worship the dead; and “death itself is looked upon by the Negroes as no universal natural law” (Hegel, 1956, p. 95). Therefore for Hegel, “it follows that he [the African] has no respect for himself; for only with the consciousness of a Higher Being does he reach a point of view which inspires him with real reverence” (Hegel, 1956, p. 95).

Before giving an interpretation of African religion a point must be made regarding the terms used in describing African religion, terms such as dynamism, totemism, fetishism, and naturism. These terms display the misunderstanding by Europeans of African religion. African culture and civilization in general have been subjected to flagrant misinterpretation, blatant misrepresentation, and total misunderstanding, but African religions, in particular, as pointed out by Mbiti (1970), “have been despised, mocked, and dismissed as primitive and underdeveloped,” (p. 13) disparaged and “condemned as superstition, satanic, devilish, and hellish” (p. 13) without the least recognition that African “traditional religions have survived, they dominate the background of African peoples, and must be reckoned with even in the middle of modern changes” (p. 13).

For the African, religion is an ontological experience. Expressed ontologically, from the African point view, God—that Higher Power, force, or energy—is the origin and sustenance of all this. He is that
which was before the world, outside and beyond creation. In a study covering over 300 African peoples, the concept of God, without an exception, is conceived as the Supreme Being (Mbiti, 1969). But it does not end here, the conception of a Supreme Being is elevated to an exceptionally philosophical level as rich as that of Hegel. For the African, all phenomena had their origin in a living reality or consciousness that had no beginning and no end, existing from eternity to eternity—infinite. The person evolved from this consciousness and “his destiny was forever to evolve and discover more satisfying dimensions of being” (Ngubane, 1979, p. 77).

As regards fetishism and sorcery, there is much ignorance, prejudice, and falsification. What is referred to as fetishism and sorcery by Hegel is perceived by the African as a universal power or force emanating from God. And just as miracles are inseparable from Christianity, fetishism and sorcery are facets of African religion. However, sorcery stands as antisocial behavior and intolerable within African communities. In addition to this, there are social, psychological, and economic aspects that add to the complexity of discussing and understanding this subject—aspects that Hegel did not understand (see Mbiti, 1970).

The worship of the dead that Hegel refers to is in actuality a symbolic gesture made by the African. It is not really worship but a means by which the departed are remembered just as in Christianity communion is a symbolic gesture. And when those persons who knew the departed also die, then the process of death is complete. No longer remembered by name, the dead are forgotten, except in genealogical remembrances, and the social obligation of food offerings and libations are discontinued. Thus the dead are an integral part of African culture (see Mbiti, 1970; Diop, 1978).

Because Hegel assumes that Africans have no consciousness of a Higher Being, he believes that Africans have no respect for themselves or humanity. He maintains, “The undervaluing of humanity among them [the Africans] reaches an incredible degree of intensity” (Hegel, 1956, p. 95). But what Hegel does not understand is the African’s attitude toward the person, which is deeply interwoven into his religion. Hegel does not understand how the African translates into experience a given evaluation of the person and how
this evaluation shapes the African’s behavior and thought. The African does not begin with the premise that the person has at birth a defect in his or her character that must be overcome. Nor does the African begin with the premise of otherness between God and man, that man is somehow separated from God. The African begins with the premise that the person is a self-defining value. And this self-defining value is a mutual experience present in every person. “The person, however, cannot exist of himself, by himself; he comes from a social cluster, exists in a social cluster” (Ngubane, 1979, p. 78). And just as the person defines himself, so does the social cluster define itself. From this premise, the African “developed a dimension of consanguinity which enabled the person to regard his neighbor as the reverse side of a phenomenon to which he, the person, was the obverse” (Ngubane, 1979, pp. 78-79).

Therefore, this African attitude to the person can be placed within Hegel’s conception of Right, which says, “Be a person and respect others as persons” (Hegel, 1967, p. 37). And for Hegel, “What constitutes a person and gives him rights is not mere consciousness, but self-consciousness” (Stace, 1955, p. 382). Through the mutual respect for others as self-defining persons, the African sees himself in others, his own being; this is self-consciousness. Thus Hegel, once again, is incorrect in his assumption that the African has no consciousness of a Higher Power and no respect for himself or humanity.

AFRICAN POLITICAL CONSTITUTION

Last, Hegel makes the claim that African lack a political constitution and are guided by sensuous volition, that universal laws are inoperative and unrecognized, and that the community is ruled by a despot (Hegel, 1956). For Hegel, a political constitution represents the union of universality, where the state is in abstraction from the individual, with particularity, which is the private ends and interests of individuals (see Stace, 1955). What this means is that the individual as a rational entity objectifies his true self in the state. In essence, the state is the reflection of the individual.
Because Hegel lacked factual knowledge and cultural information about Africa, he was completely ignorant of the idea of the state in Africa. Diop (1978) has documented that as a consequence of agricultural sedentarism, the Nile Valley was the very first region where primitive clans soon merged to become no more than administrative divisions (the nomes). The state appeared with its apparatus of government perfected to the smallest details, without our being able to trace except through legend, the anterior existence of a period of nomadic life. And this is valid for Egypt, Ethiopia and the remainder of Black Africa. (p. 144)

Hence the African form of state was a collectivism where the individual was subordinate to the public welfare but also where human individuality and personality were respected (see Diop, 1978). The customs, laws, and traditions were the constitution and structured the society. It was from this that stability and perpetuity were maintained and "in which the person could realise the promise of being human and the glory of being a self-defining value" (Ngubane, 1979, p. 78). This self-definition was incorporated into the political constitution of the community. Recognizing the self-defining value of each individual, the political arrangement allowed each individual the possibility of realizing his human potential. Hence the state was indeed a reflection of the individual.

To fully understand the political constitution of Africa, one must grasp the fact that traditions and customs are interwoven with religious beliefs. Thus religion constitutes the "basis for social processes of teaching respect for political institutions, authoritative government, and social relations" (Onwauachi, 1973, p. 25). The fundamental function of religion in addition to its cosmological function is "political control, social order, and general administration of the community" (Onwauachi, 1973, p. 25).

Furthermore, what must be borne in mind when referring to the political organization of traditional and precolonial African society is its non-European criteria of political cohesion. The political arrangements of African society have nothing to do with sensuous volition and despotism, but, rather, the society is the reflection of
the self-defining value of each individual. Once again, Hegel was incorrect. His comprehension of Africa and her people was insufficient to make the sweeping generalizations that he made.

CONCLUSION

Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is a philosophical treatise that disrespects Africa’s contribution to civilization. Hegel’s interpretation of Africa’s place in world history is a gross misinterpretation. His misinterpretation is evidenced by the ethnocentric division of the African continent, the demeaning of African morality, the debasing of African religion, and the disparagement of African political constitution. It has been demonstrated that Africa, and her people possessed all the qualities and more that make a civilization significant in world history. This misinterpretation is proof of Hegel’s incondite research to overlook the ancient documents that gave proof of the Black African origin of civilization and the pristine development of morality, religion, and political constitution. Had Hegel been intellectually honest and not prejudiced by the ethnocentrism of his era, his philosophical treatise would have given Africa its proper place in world history as the genuine mother of humanity and civilization.

Traditional African culture is very complex, and Hegel’s use of facts is not only questionable but shallow as well. His understanding of African culture is tainted, and his assumption—namely, that the cultural characteristics of African people could only reach a significant level by contact with the outside world, namely, Europe—is a misconception that does not qualify as being historically valid, scientifically adequate, or culturally sound.

Finally, archaeological discoveries have satisfied scientists—with some exception—that the genesis of humanity occurred in Africa, and the first Homo sapiens were of the Black race (see Diop, 1974; Mazrui, 1986). It is also documented that the oldest civilization originated in Africa (see Diop, 1974; Jackson, 1970; Williams, 1974), Hegel deduces the human organism as the final form of nature, and this deduction constitutes the transition to Spirit where
the first category is subjective Spirit in the form of consciousness. Therefore, if Africa is the genesis of humanity, it follows logically—even in Hegelian terms—that Spirit makes its presence first in Africa. As a consequence, Spirit became conscious first in Africa while the rest of the world looked on.

REFERENCES


Ronald Kuykendall is a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin—Madison in the Department of Political Science. He received an M.A. from Purdue University and a B.A. from Southern University at New Orleans both in political science.