

Review of: "Honorific Conception of Philosophy and Exclusionism in Nigeria"

Ruth Irwin¹

¹ RMIT University

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This is an important paper because it brings cutting critique from Africa, to bear on Enlightenment discourse of democracy, inclusion, and the excluded Other. It is long overdue that Africa wrote back to Europe and started to make clear what the impact of racist colonialism has had. Even today, Kant enjoys a great deal of deference and commitment from Continental and Anglo philosophers. His ideas about rationality and the transcendental aesthetic still informs global economic policy, and justifies the alienation of culture from nature. This article is not before time, and highly appreciated.

I feel personally, that it is tremendously sad although completely understandable, that African scholars have had to 'prove themselves to be human' by engaging with the Enlightenment on its own terms. I have no doubt that African scholars, like others from around the planet, have far better ideas than the immature reductive logic of individual rationality.

Unfortunately, that individual rationalism has been incredibly influential, and characterised humanity par excellence, by a handful of prolific European men. Their ideas justified colonial aggression and extractive exploitation in the colonies.

The scope of the paper is handled very well, ranging from Axial cultures that were ignored by the European rediscovery of Aristotle and subsequent deification of Ancient Greek thought. The paper points out that the European Enlightenment tradition remained almost entirely ignorant of other important conceptual traditions in Mesopotamia, India, China, Africa, and 'undiscovered' nations like the Americas, Australia, and small island states.

It then drills down into the racism inherent in important intellectual figures in Germany. As a historian and a philosopher, I would appreciate better historical context of these ideas. When was Kant writing, when was Meiners writing, and how are these discourses similar?

Incidentally, the racism of the Romans – and the British, and quite possibly other Europeans, rests on skin colour only in a superficial way. The Celts for example, mentioned in the article (and my own ethnic and cultural background) are much lighter skinned than the Romans. However, both Romans and upper class British regarded the Celts as animist pagans, and entirely unsuitable to post geocentric, rational individualism. Skin colour is a short hand for a particular ideological colonialism, which advocates (as Kant definitely did) an alienation of culture from nature, subject from object, individual from the socius (Merchant 1980), and nominal universalism from reality. The paper quite correctly identifies these early examples of colonial inferiorisation of indigenous cultures within Europe, as precursors to the colonial objectives globally. The viciousness of colonialism is also evident here; out of a population of 4 million, one million starved to death, and another million were forced into exile (many as indentured labourers, or slaves), as the British landlords extracted food to

sell on global markets from Ireland in the 1840s.

This article has a high level of empathy and good grip of history to appreciate how the racism of Ancient Greece and Rome upon the Barbarian tribes of Europe paved the way for globalised colonial racism.

Recognising how colonial forces were able to leverage 'divide and conquer' along pre-existing ethnic and cultural divides within the community is an important first step in healing Africa from its colonial past. Recognising how alienating the Enlightenment is from ecology, and its role in valorising rational individualism because it enables a consumer based rather than subsistence based economy is also vital.

Simone de Beauvoir did not build on Satre's idea of freedom. Rather the reverse; he read her letters while at the Front about lectures given by Heidegger during the war. Satre wrote *Being and Nothingness* from there. It may be true that *The Second Sex* did not delve into ethnicity and race. But de Beauvoir certainly laid the ground for the cultural basis of identity, including gender identity – which is fundamental to our self conception. She also calmly served the tea, while guests such as Franz Fanon earnestly spoke for hours with Satre, not realising that the real philosopher of the household was being treated like the maid.

Nigeria (and Africa) have interesting issues that bring traditional communities into tension with Enlightenment democracy. The old adage that democracy is an awkward political mode of organisation, albeit better than other alternatives may hold true. As Africa further explores the tensions between tribal affiliation, language barriers, the artificial boundaries drawn by colonial powers, the tension between individualism and community, and so on, I am sure than creative ways of accommodating difference will emerge.

This is a well tailored paper, about a vitally important topic. With such empathic, intelligent, and eco-socially aware authors as these, the future of Africa is in good hands.