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AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY IN BRAZIL: ORALITY, AGRAPHIA, ANCESTRY AND THE TIMBUKTU MANUSCRIPTS¹

1. Introduction

The growing inclusion of African philosophy in Brazilian academic production has revealed significant contradictions between the intention to break with Eurocentric paradigms and the persistence of colonial assumptions. They include the idea that African ways of elaborating and transmitting scientific reflections and knowledge about the world are limited exclusively to orality and tradition, in contrast to writing and rationality, which are often conceived as exogenous realities and therefore inauthentic to African cultures. In addition to being anachronistic, this conception ignores the historical and intellectual density of African literate traditions, as evidenced by the thousands of manuscripts preserved in Timbuktu, which express a sophisticated field of written production in the fields of philosophy, theology, science, jurisprudence, and literature.

Jeppie points out that, “attempts to argue for an intellectual history of Africa have often been met with the argument that Africa only has an oral tradition” [Jeppie 2008: 15]. This historical untruth, however, cannot be sustained in the face of the concrete evidence of manuscript collections from the Sahel region, which systematically document the intellectual agency of African literate elites. More than traces of a distant past, the Timbuktu Manuscripts (referred as TM, hereafter) “serve as repositories of important historical data for virtually all aspects of life in the region and beyond” [ibid.: 15], upfront defying the representation of Africa as a space devoid of history, rationality, and writing practices.

The dispute over this representation is even more emphatic in scholars such as Souleymane Bachir Diagne, for whom it is inconceivable to formulate a history of philoso-

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¹ Translation by Vitor Gomes Lopes, French undergraduate at *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte* (UFRN). <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9957725914962108>

phy on the African continent, ignoring the effects of the penetration of Islamic knowledge. Diagne recalls, for example, Cheikh Anta Diop's assertion that, centuries before European colonization, African intellectuals were already dedicated to the study of Aristotelian logic – a fact that radically contradicts the racist “primitive mentality” theses [Diagne 2008: 19]. Moreover, Diagne points out that the Islamization of many regions of sub-Saharan Africa involved not only the adoption of the Islamic religion, but also the incorporation of Arabic's graphic rationality, which led local populations to re-write their own history in their native languages, using the Arabic alphabet: “Wolof, Fulfulde, Hausa and Bambara ceased to be oral languages at the very moment when some people [...] started writing chronicles, myths and praise poetry in these languages” [ibid.: 20-21].

The growing inclusion of African philosophy in Brazilian academic curricula, especially after Law 10.639/2003 and the 2004 Curriculum Guidelines, should not be limited to the valorization of orality as an essentialist trait. On the contrary, it demands recognition of the multiple forms of African philosophical thought, including those expressed through writing. This revaluation of written textuality makes it possible not only to challenge the Western exclusivity of rationality but also to break with the binarism between orality and writing that still informs reductionist approaches.

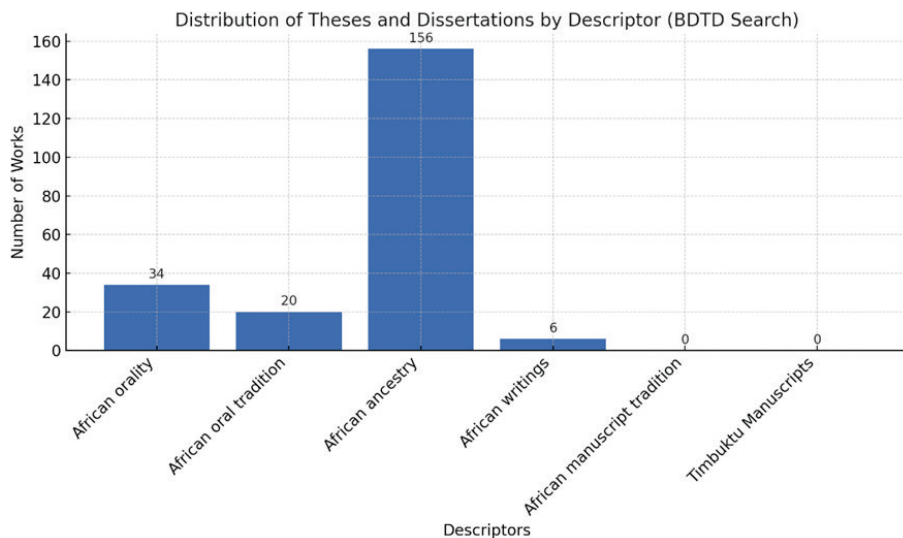
In this context, studying African philosophy becomes part of a broader movement to democratize knowledge and affirm historically subordinate epistemologies. The analysis of dissertations and theses in the Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) database allows us to assess how these guidelines have been incorporated into higher education and how they have influenced recent production, especially in postgraduate education. The investigation reveals progress as much as the persistence of simplistic points of view that restrict African philosophy to orality.

In response, this article proposes an approach centered on the notion of *forms of African philosophical thought* - historically situated ways of elaborating and transmitting knowledge, including through writing. Taking the TM into consideration, it is argued that writing constitutes a legitimate and sophisticated expression of African epistemological agency.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, centered on the documentary analysis of theses and dissertations produced in Brazilian postgraduate programs and available in the BDTD. The selection of the *corpus* was guided by a systematic search carried out until June 8, 2025, with the following descriptors: “African orality”, “African oral tradition”, “African ancestry”, “African writings”, “African manuscript tradition” and “Timbuktu Manuscripts”. These terms were applied in simple searches and also as filters by title, in order to map the presence of the central categories of the investigation.

The initial search identified 216 works: “African orality” (34), “African oral tradition” (20), “African ancestry” (156), “African writings” (6), “African manuscript tradition” (0) and “Timbuktu Manuscripts” (0). Based on this table, here is a column chart that visually represents the data:



The analysis of the descriptors shows a significant concentration of themes around African ancestry (72%) and, to a lesser extent, orality (25%), with a complete absence of records mentioning the “Timbuktu manuscripts” or the “African manuscript tradition”. This distribution reveals three main aspects: (1) the persistence of an essentialist conception of Africa as a predominantly oral and ancestral space; (2) the silencing of African written traditions, which are fundamental to challenging the Eurocentric conception of rationality as an exclusive attribute of the West; and (3) a critical gap that presents itself, simultaneously, as an epistemic opportunity to reconfigure the forms of African philosophical thought in a decolonial key.

The refinement of the *corpus*, reduced from 216 to just 20 works after applying filters by title, reinforces these asymmetries: 15 refer to “African ancestry” and five refer to “African orality” or “African oral tradition”, without any explicit mention of written traditions. This absence is not just due to technical limitations of indexing systems, but reflects a consolidated thematic trend that favors specific images of Africa, aligned with the paradigm of orality, at the expense of approaches that recognize the centrality of writing as a legitimate form of thought.

The shortage of work on written traditions points to a selective epistemological structure that perpetuates the myth of *agraphia*² and relegates African writing – including *ajami* and Arabic records – to invisibility. Although the complementary search in external repositories identified one thesis with some adherence to the theme [Sayão 2023], the gap remains significant.

Based on an inductive reading, three analytical categories were constructed: (1) works that reduce African philosophy to orality; (2) those that recognize writing and orality in a hierarchical relationship; and (3) those that marginally mention the manuscript tradition. This data demonstrates the urgency of a critical review of the categories that support Brazilian academic production on African philosophy.

² The terms *agraphia* and *agraphic* are used in this article as the lack of writing or of the ability to write, not the neurological disorder.

3. Discussing the results

In general, the data analyzed – remembering that the *corpus* consists of 216 documents – reveals an unequal and epistemologically asymmetrical reception of African philosophy in Brazilian postgraduate studies. To avoid counterproductive descriptive overload, we have chosen to present representative examples, drawn from the main trends observed. The results point to the persistence of interpretative models that restrict African forms of thinking to orality and symbolic ancestry, often dissociated from any indigenous written tradition.

In the first category, which includes works such as those by Oliveira [2005], Mota [2014], Machado [2016], and Tavares [2019], there is a predominance of an approach that associates orality with the essence of African cultures. Although well-intentioned in its valorization of oral traditions, this reading ends up unintentionally reproducing the colonial logic that opposes orality and rationality. By establishing orality as the only legitimate way of expressing African thought, these studies neglect the conceptual problem of agraphia and reinforce an epistemology of silencing, which makes autochthonous written forms invisible, such as records in Arabic and local African languages.

The second category, represented by authors such as Jesus [2004] and Oliveira [2016], advances, compared to the previous group, by recognizing the coexistence of orality and writing. However, this coexistence is still presented under a hierarchical structure, in which writing is understood as an exogenous element, introduced by Islamic expansion or European colonization. Although they partially break with the exclusivity of orality, these works do not fully incorporate the historical role of written traditions as an autonomous expression of African philosophical thought forms.

The third category – a minority in the analyzed assortment – marks a more significant theoretical shift. Works such as those by Maciel [2011], Ribeiro [2019], Santos [2019], and Silva [2023], have started to recognize that African rationality also manifests itself through writing and textuality, even if this recognition occurs in a lateral, fragmentary, or unsystematic way. In this context, Moisés Sayão's thesis stands out as an important breakthrough in his approach to the *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān*, although without directly addressing the manuscript tradition as an epistemic structure. His contribution, however, points to the need to critically rethink the interpretative milestones that have historically limited the understanding of African philosophical thought in Brazil.

The absence of direct references to the TM in the vast majority of the works examined shows not only ignorance but also an active erasure of these sources as legitimate foundations of African philosophies. What we see is a systematic silencing of ways of thinking that do not fit into the performative and oral model often attributed to Africa. This reveals that, even when focused on honoring African thought, Brazilian academic production still operates with categories inherited from the coloniality of knowledge.

Given this scenario, a change of focus is urgently needed: to understand African forms of philosophical thought in their plurality – oral, written, symbolic, ancestral, scientific – as legitimate expressions of rationality and historicity. This approach helps to deconstruct the myth of an essentially oral and agraphic Africa and to affirm the existence of African philosophical traditions which, although diverse in their expressions, have their critical density, internal coherence, and epistemological validity.

4. The unfolding of the BDTD's three analytical categories and their epistemological and methodological implications

The three analytical categories extracted from the BDTD *corpus* – orality as the center, ancestry as symbolic identity, and writing as absence – reveal not only recurring patterns in Brazilian academic production on African philosophy but also expose the epistemological limits that sustain such readings. A second look, in light of the concept of *forms of African philosophical thought*, at these categories allows to indicate the fields of tension that condition the reception and legitimization of African thought in the academic space.

The centrality of orality, although expressed in discourses aimed at valuing subordinated knowledge, tends to absolutize this dimension, reissuing a colonial epistemology that opposes orality and rationality. Such essentialism, even when articulated with criticism of Eurocentrism, perpetuates the exclusion of writing as a legitimate form of African philosophical production, making a broader understanding of the continent's intellectual diversity impossible.

Ancestry, in turn, is often approached as a symbol of belonging and of cultural matrix, without recognizing its role as an epistemic structure articulated with its own mechanisms for validating knowledge. To ignore its logical-argumentative character, as evidenced by the TM, is to obscure a fundamental dimension of African philosophical traditions, in which ancestry organizes temporalities, legitimizes knowledge, and structures reflective lineages.

Writing, on the other hand, appears marginally, if not completely absent, and is rarely thematized as an autochthonous epistemic regime. The practically non-existent references to the TM, for example, denounce not only bibliographical gaps, but the persistence of an academic imaginary shaped by colonial categories, which relegate African textuality to the condition of exception or anomaly.

In summary, *the centrality attributed to orality and the persistent unconscious reproduction of a colonial epistemology* – as evidenced in the analytical categories outlined here – transcend the status of mere thematic descriptions and reveal a structural contradiction: the coexistence between a declared critical intention and the maintenance of colonial reading *dispositifs* that continue to guide the reception of African philosophy. Overcoming this stalemate requires more than the representational expansion of African content; it requires a profound epistemological shift that questions the very methodological and interpretative foundations from which the field of knowledge is organized. It is a question of reconfiguring the place of African philosophy not as a peripheral object of analysis, but as a full epistemic subject, with its own logics, unique historicities, and autochthonous regimes of knowledge validation. It is in this movement – from the recognizing to the listening, from the thematizing to the transforming of the intelligibility milestones – that resides the true decolonizing potential of African philosophical thought: its ability to question, destabilize, and broaden the horizons of Western academic knowledge.

5. Final considerations

The analysis of Brazilian academic production on African philosophy, based on the BDTD *corpus*, shows significant advances in the recognition of African epistemic diversity, but also the persistence of paradigms that limit the understanding of this philosophy to specific identity markers, especially orality and symbolic ancestry. This reception, although committed to a critique of Eurocentrism, often reproduces – implicitly – colonial categories of reading, such as the binarism between orality and writing or the opposition between ancestry and criticism.

The notion of *forms of African thought*, adopted in this article as an interpretative key, has made it possible to problematize these categories not as static data, but as historical regimes of production and circulation of knowledge. Orality, ancestry, and writing – especially in the context of the writings of Africa and particularly in the TM – were approached not as isolated traits, but as interdependent expressions of African rationality, endowed with their own logic, argumentative structure, and philosophical intentionality.

By using the TM as an analytical turning point, the article proposed an important shift: from orality seen as the absence of writing to writing as a marginalized historical presence. This is a political and epistemic gesture that aims to break with the myth of African agraphia and reintegrate the continent's writing traditions as a constitutive part of its ways of thinking, teaching, and questioning the world.

Overcoming the essentialism of orality does not mean denying the richness of oral traditions, but understanding it in dialogue with other forms of philosophical enunciation that have been historically silenced. Likewise, honoring ancestry implies recognizing it not only as an identity reference, but as an epistemic structure that articulates memory, authority, and criticism.

Thus, the task of the Brazilian reception of African philosophy is not to adapt African content to Western categories, but to listen to – and learn from – the multiplicity of African voices: oral, written, scientific, philosophical, that were put into African writing systems or preserved in manuscripts. Ultimately, it is about building a decolonized field of interlocution, in which African ways of philosophizing are not the object of external study, but subjects with whole thought.

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African Philosophy in Brazil: Orality, Agraphia, Ancestry and the Timbuktu Manuscripts

This article analyzes the reception of African philosophy in Brazilian postgraduate studies over the last two decades. The Timbuktu Manuscripts stand out as an epistemic turning point, as they highlight autonomous forms of African philosophical thought with repercussions in the Brazilian context. The persistence of the agraphia myth demands a decolonized approach that integrates oralities, textualities and written ancestries as legitimate and plural expressions of African philosophical knowledge. The results of the analysis point to the urgency of a critique of the categories of agraphia, orality and ancestry, as traditionally conceived, and to the importance of rediscovering and appreciating the Timbuktu Manuscripts.

Тарсізіо Афонсо Чіволє

Африканська філософія в Бразилії: усна мова, аграфія, походження та рукописи з Тімбукту

У статті проаналізовано рецепцію африканської філософії на матеріалі наукових робіт останніх двох десятиліть, виконаних у рамках бразильської післядипломної освіти. Рукописи з Тімбукту особливо помітні як епістемічний поворотний пункт, адже вони демонструють автономні форми африканської філософської думки, що мали вплив на бразильський контекст. Стійкість міфу про аграфію вимагає деколонізаційного підходу, який інтегрував би усну, текстову та письмову спадщину як правомірні та множинні прояви африканського філософського знання. Результати аналізу вказують на нагальність критики категорій аграфії, усності та походження в їхньому традиційному розумінні, а також на важливість перевідкриття та гідного визнання рукописів з Тімбукту.

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