

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Welcome back everybody to part two of my recent interview with graduate student, historian, and author, Ibrahim Anoba. This week, we get back to covering more of those brilliant and original, yet horribly and unfortunately obscure thinkers across African history, and Ibrahim tells us why he thinks Africans' ancestors, who prized private property and commercial activity, were wiser than the moderns who have adopted Western ideas of Marxism and morphed it into what Ibrahim calls "African socialism" of several different varieties. So let's get to it then, here on another week of Ideas and Progress.

Anthony Comegna ([00:58](#)):

All right, let's start out this episode here talking about now we've established at least one major story of liberation and the principles of individual free will from Augustine. We have a very major building historical African tradition of liberalism and liberty that eventually will spread across the continent in different forms. And one really key figure, flash forwarding from Augustine, 1,200 years or so, is somebody that I'm fairly sure almost no one in the audience has heard of. And I think that's fantastic, because it's really important that you do this kind of work and revive these figures for our collective memories here. Zera Yacob, an Ethiopian scholar. Tell us about Zera Yacob.

Ibrahim Anoba ([01:51](#)):

Zera Yacob is, ironically, pretty much known to African philosophers. Not philosophers, African philosophers. And, of course, less known to historians generally. Whereas it's very imperative for historians to know about this figure, because not only is that his literature is remarkably philosophical, but the condition that necessitated this literature were rooted in the history of 16th, 17th century East Africa or Africa, particularly the Ethiopian kingdom, the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox church.

Ibrahim Anoba ([02:34](#)):

And Zera was a son of a poor farmer, classic case of a philosopher. So the poor farmer that was pretty much frustrated about the role of religion in Ethiopia at the time was writing in Ge'ez language. This was, of course, the period where Portugal was trying so much to integrate itself into the religious, political fabric of the Ethiopian society, from [inaudible 00:03:07] imperialism.

Ibrahim Anoba ([03:09](#)):

Of course, we know Ethiopia have since time immemorial, have been orthodox. But it was Portugal trying to enforce its own Catholicism on Ethiopians. Of course, the Portuguese and the Roman Catholics consider Orthodox as heretic. And funny enough, but not quite funny, but seriously enough, the Ethiopian Emperor, Susenyos, was very weak when it comes to upholding his people's religious independence. He literally gave in to Portugal. And the local Orthodox followers, like Zera Yacob, were pretty much infuriated. For that reason, Zera Yacob, he started talking against that absurdity and the fact that Ethiopians have to retain their own religious freedom. He really despised the Jesuit prophets. And while he was against this, of course, he came across as a critic, so dissent, and he was being prosecuted.

Ibrahim Anoba ([04:20](#)):

Eventually he had to flee Ethiopia, or his village of Aksum, to the caves outside Aksum, and this was where he developed his philosophical deductions and his meditations. He meditated over the role of religion itself in society. Why do we have to, first of all, force a religion on other people? And second of

all, practice a religion in some way that it disrespects or disregard some people within the same religion? For instance, a key part of Zera Jacob's arguments was that, Islam, for instance, how can Islam say slavery in some cases was tolerable. That in so far you enslave a non-Muslim, then that is tolerable. Well, Zera Jacob was saying, "Well, every man is a man, with his own God-given right." He made a very fascinating line that's extremely comparable to what Locke will later say some decades after. Can you imagine we have an African talking about equality of all men before Locke, before Descartes, before anybody?

Ibrahim Anoba ([05:37](#)):

And he said in his book, called *Hatata* that, "All men are equal in the presence of God. And all are intelligent, since they are his creatures. He did not assign one for life, another for death, one for mercy, another for judgment." And it's quite remarkable that this kind of language is coming from a 17th century, Black African in some village in Ethiopia, in some cave in Ethiopia.

Ibrahim Anoba ([06:02](#)):

But going back to his case against the Muslim for instance, slavery cannot be justified in that sense. He even has issues with Jews. His issue with Jews was that, okay, you say everybody's welcome under Judaism, but still under Judaism, when ladies are going through their menstrual period, you consider them to be impure. Whereas God gave that episode in each woman's life as something necessary for procreation. So if God designed a woman to be that, then who are you, a Rabbi, to consider a woman impure during that process? Are you not going against God's own will?

Ibrahim Anoba ([06:44](#)):

And he made an argument against Christians too. I mean, he was pretty much against any kind of religious establishment or fact or understanding that cannot be challenged. And this was quite remarkable because, again, his treaty, called *Hatata*, was written during the exact moments where the European Enlightenment was coming out. Of course, his literature came, as I said, many decades before John Locke wrote his treatise, before Descartes, in many way ushered the Enlightenment. So it's quite remarkable to have an African talking about the same thing that Locke, Hobbes and the American Founding Fathers who later on champion, whereas he demands or deserves an equal appreciation, particularly for his historians.

Anthony Comegna ([07:40](#)):

Yeah, I just love that biography. It reminds me a little bit of my favorite figure in history, Benjamin Lay, whose biographer calls, the Quaker Dwarf, who was the first revolutionary abolitionist. And we've heard about him on the show before. I just love the revival of great figures like that. And the other one that I love so much in here is your story about, let me see if I get this very long name, right. Antonius Guilielmus Wilhelm Amo Afer, who you say was the earliest known African professor at a European university. So definitely tell us that, because somehow I had never heard of him before.

Ibrahim Anoba ([08:22](#)):

Right. So Anton Wilhelm Amo is somebody I really, really love. I mean, you cannot help but love him as a historian that is pretty much interested in philosophy. And Wilhelm Amo's story is quite remarkable because, first of all, as I said, he was the first African professor, in any case, in Europe. And he is a professor of law and philosophy. In fact, he had many many PhDs and many many degrees. Law, philosophy, medicine, you name it. And yet, he had been exported, or kidnapped. I shouldn't use the

word exported. He'd been kidnapped from his local village in Axim, Ghana, in the Gold Coast rather, in the very early years of the 18th century. And his episode of journey from Gold Coast to Europe was pretty, pretty horrible, really horrible. But when he got to Europe, particularly to Germany, he was privileged to be in the court of the King of Prussia among the royal families in Germany.

Ibrahim Anoba ([09:43](#)):

And he was opportunity to be sent to school. Some have argued some philosophers of African descent, like Kwasi Wiredu, have argued that Amo was escorted to Holland or to Deutschland on missionary leader circumstances. Others have said, it's because he was enslaved. Whatever. But the case here is, he was educated. And through the process of his education in the University of Wittenberg and the University of Halle, later Helmstedt University in Germany, he developed two interesting dissertations. I think, one for his law degree and one for his philosophy degree. And of particular interest is his dissertation for his philosophy degree. And in that dissertation [inaudible 00:10:40], there is no evidence of devastation anywhere.

Ibrahim Anoba ([10:43](#)):

But from one of the many archive advertisements from University of Halle, from the 17th century, we can get a sense of what Amo was talking about in that dissertation. And that dissertation was entitled, the English translation is, On the Rights of the Moors in Europe. And the Moors of this case are enslaved Africans, or you want to call them not an African Muslims, but enslaved Africans in Europe. I think this was his law degree dissertation, pardon me.

Ibrahim Anoba ([11:17](#)):

And in that dissertation from the abstract, as published by the University of Halle in the 18th century, Amo must have written something along the line of criticizing the inability of Black people to be treated the same way as regular citizens in Europe. And I think a section of that dissertation of that abstract reads "daring not only as he shown a busting in silver, upon law and history, that the Kings of the Africans were at one time vassals to the Roman emperor. And every one of them at an Imperial Pagent, which just teaching Justinian", Justinian was one of the greatest Roman emperor, "Justinian to at granted". But he also especially examined to what extent the freedom of serviceability of Africans in Europe who have been bought by Christians was according to laws, commonly accepted at the time that abstract or that advertisements was definitely written by a German professor.

Ibrahim Anoba ([12:27](#)):

But again, you said capsulation of what Amo was talking about in the dissertation, and this was an African can you imagine in the midst of the enlightenment. Don't forget this was, came to me so they enlightenment in Germany. And some of the greatest enlightenment callers in Germany where the university of Halle, some of them were these mentors, these supervisors, and it was writing for I've been influenced by them, creating an argument about the equality or the rights of Africans in Europe. What is the argument against salvage? To what extent can freedom be probed in the so-called legals to Habitude in Europe at that time. And it just quite unfortunate that dissertation is lost, but that argument alone, gives Amo huge place in African philosophical history. And particularly also, because at some point in his life in Halle, after his completion of his PhD in philosophy, which was then known as the masters of liberal arts, Amo wasn't really given his award immediately.

Ibrahim Anoba ([13:38](#)):

And for that reason it can work on and earn money, to teach and earn money. So he wanted to teach and earn money. And he was just frustrated at the department. I think the university now is I think it's still Halle. So he was questioning the school, like why can't they give him my PhD? And at some point he wrote a letter to petition and eventually the university granted his permission. Because the PhD philosophy or the philosophy doctor, he said, it's an extremely, extremely Rivard honor in Europe. At that time, we talk about 1736, strictly a revert order. So to have an African, a black man, you have probing for confirming, for both, that's tied to this really, really extraordinary. And eventually, the departments, consider that an award at the [inaudible 00:14:37] response, official response.

Ibrahim Anoba ([14:39](#)):

They submitted that this, listen here, he said, the submission reads, "Anton Wilhelm Amo masters of philosophy on liberal arts born in Guinea, which is classical name for Africa in a coastal province of Africa, has put forward the petition in which he acts that same rights of delivering public lectures in certain parts of philosophy, they give them to him among us, as used to enjoy in the areas of Wittenberg. When this request added, communicated to each person, it was with great pleasure that this facility was granted. So he's learned that poor man was indeed only resetting loss is most surreal, but in fact, this case was the Duke of [inaudible 00:15:27]".

Ibrahim Anoba ([15:27](#)):

So these two cases of Amo so than a dissertation that was really questioning the rights of blacks in Europe. And of course, going extra miles to ensure his own dissertation was rightfully conferred on him, bringing the whole egg head of the European enlightenment in Germany together to, award him that his citation philosophy doctorate was really remarkable. And that's where I think Amo deserved a very great recommendation in my investigation of literary or philosophical foundation of the African thinking.

Anthony Comegna ([16:08](#)):

Now, I feel like we're kind of going around the continent bit by bit here as well as forward in time. So let's shift over to modern day Nigeria. And I love the comparison that you draw between how, traditional African societies, or historical societies like the Igbo in Nigeria have treated property in land and personal wealth and individual Liberty, as opposed to modern African nations after decolonization. And the change in, in between the, what you call sort of the wisdom of the ancestors saying the ancestors were wiser than the moderns. So tell us a little bit about first of all, what are those relationships to property, land wealth, Liberty in places like Igbo society and other societies in Africa, and how does that compare to the post-colonial experience?

Ibrahim Anoba ([17:12](#)):

Right. But far I'm sorry, that question. I would like to also note that in the part where I was examining these African philosophers of the ancient period, I also of course investigate the writings of historians. Like Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti who wrote about the French occupation of Egypt between 1798 and 1801. I also look at the works of [inaudible 00:17:40] Who wrote about the Autobahn conquest of Egypt in the early 16th century. And of course they're a cool band. Well, that AOL from the Ethiopian side, of course, just to give you a broader picture of our, this ideas of philosophic rise and freedom emanated across Africa, not only in North Africa, but also in Ethiopia and also some parts of Northern Africa. But back to your question about this interesting chapter before I actually wrote the chapter, I was really, really frustrated about how Africa is remarkably of the culture of commerce, the culture of individual freedom,

especially when it relates to property trade as really, really changed for the bad, from the time of our ancestors.

Ibrahim Anoba ([18:41](#)):

Before the colonial is the partitioning of Africa in 1884, our societies kingdoms practice trade, our trade was integral to their survival and how they were pretty much decentralized trade wise. When it comes to wealth ownership in many, many African kingdoms. And of course I will be so wrong to assume that our African kingdoms were unilateral when it comes to their cultural identity, or what are their interpretation of the role of trade or commerce in the life of the society, they were not the same. Even in the Yoruba section of West Africa, kingdom can be markedly different from the other. For instance, they all yours who are in many, many ways different from the taboos, in the Yoruba space, before colonialism, when the concentrate on corners. So that shows you that when African kingdom, even though related to the older language and cultural practices, can be really remarkably different from the other, based on how they arrange the societies in terms of commerce and trade.

Ibrahim Anoba ([19:58](#)):

But my argument in this chapter to chapter five is about our ancestral traditional African societies. As you mentioned, the Igbo societies to teach society and the Amber and the blue Berra in Uganda, some other, neolithic societies in Sudan, place huge premium on the decentralization of wealth. You will find one African society that had a centralization of wealth. And I mean, in this case where the lands, the poetry were owned by the King, you will find one society that such was an existence after finding five societies, which was absolutely about decentralization, where the wealth was controlled by clans, family household or the individual, of course, relation like the grids Zimbabwe at, economic system decks were pretty much centralized around the King or the Supreme ruler, whereas my own society, but my own ancestors society, the Yoruba society coming from [inaudible 00:21:14] had to give the right to families to own land, to own poetry, to own whatever the King cannot dictate what prize a man can, sell his tuber of yam.

Ibrahim Anoba ([21:27](#)):

The King cannot dictate who owns what land. In fact, the King of course is the many, many West African tradition is the appointees not it's an appointee of the gods and representative of the gods on earth and all lands belongs to the gods or lands or poultry, cattle, sheep, goats belongs to the gods. The King is only a custodian. But even though the King is a custodian in many of these cultures, they can do really did not control who can own what land. A majority of this African civilization of cultures were owned by the families and clans. For example, I looked at the Igbo on chief societies. For instance the Igbo society was extremely sad for those the teas. This was pretty more decentralized. There was not even in many, many cases that the Igbo societies, you would add the find in society or you a community where there was a King.

Ibrahim Anoba ([22:26](#)):

They pretty much organize a societies board, the line of councils, where there will be a representative from each house that made up the village to form the Supreme council. Where issues of trade issues of politics and law, were discussed in forums from the eighth grade forums to the social groups forums. At the same time was with the societies where pretty much everything was about the clan and the Amba and the Lucara societies Uganda and the Congo, and many, many other annuities society like the Dinka. The Dinka ignore the law, the Mandarin of South Sudan when, after apologists is half ago at the time

that they came to Sudan and they were extremely fascinated by the fact that the now looking tribes, the Dinka Nuer and others were still living pretty much the same way they've lived for centuries about just nomadic, not having a settlement, not having fixed political system, but there's to survive throughout these generations of generations.

Ibrahim Anoba ([23:37](#)):

And you can't go to a Dinka settlement and say, where's the King, who is the leader, or who is the household head. They really don't have whole this institutions, but still they do survive, decentralized and very good economic commercial system. They are very rich people, lot of their pain or their concern. And these were the way our ancestors have lived over years, of colonialism came and disrupted a lot of things, but after colonialism many African leaders, as they argued in my chapter Wells for that, what I was talking about, African socialism, misconstrued African communalism or African togetherness or philosophy of Ubuntu, which means I am because you are, kind of solidarity for something. I love the line that Africans, I have to put that dependent on one another, a centralized system.

Ibrahim Anoba ([24:39](#)):

So they used to the socialist communist reforms that are still in many African countries today because centralization of the main commodities of, well, the main means of production, of course, back then it was cattle, farm land, there are controlled by the family, the clan, but now the sources of wealth like crude oil, coal and other cash crops are controlled by the state. So that's a remarkable sheet from the African life that we used to know to what we have for them. And my argument in that chapter was that this is the basis of Africa's inability to economical prosperity. You imagine because they can abuse the centralization of the means of production so much that it has led to corruption and impunity and blatant disregard for human lives and human independence. So much as we've done on economic space in Africa, that you will expect society to flourish.

Ibrahim Anoba ([25:45](#)):

Our ancestors were wise. They knew that, you can't really concentrate wealth in the hands of the King. I'd expect the subject to prosper economically wise. The wants of the King can demand what tributes in this case taxes, tribute from our schools or tributes from the lesser kingdoms. Not telling the lesser kingdoms or the ballets or the chiefs that I will tell you what portion of your land you should get. I will tell you what portion of your harvest you should get. And pretty much what is happening in Africa. I argued in Nigeria, the South Eastern part of the country produce the oil, but the federal government, the central government in Abuja have to tell the South town States producing the oil, what amounts or portion of that wealth come from their backyard.

Ibrahim Anoba ([26:30](#)):

They will have to get, whereas the nations, Africa, or Nigeria and nations King doesn't tell you how much of your own wealth you can't take. But again, there are some very, very logical, much more economical arguments I made in that chapter, which is perhaps the most radical or the most remarkably different that goes away from history and anthropology to much more of economics out of the old book. But I, again, that's an affirmation of who I think we need to have much more interdisciplinary approach to understanding many of Africa as a historical subjects.

Anthony Comegna ([27:13](#)):

I really cannot express how proud I am of the work Ibrahim has done here and will most certainly continue to do. I can't wait to see how this book turns out and what impact it has on classical liberalism and our understanding of how Africa fits into our own niche bit of world history. The ideas we're working with here are essentially timeless and global and work like Abraham's shows that in rich abundance. So to all of you out there looking for graduate projects, or simply your next book topic, look to this as a model and the results will surely help us all keep the progress coming.