

Anton Wilhelm Amos's Biography

Anton Wilhelm Amo was the first Black student and later professor of philosophy and law at a German-speaking university. He was probably born in 1703 in Nkubeam—now Ghana—near Axim, (Brentjes, 1976, p.28). There is, however, no clear consensus in the literature as to his date of birth or date of death, hence the limited sources do not allow a definitive judgement.

In general, only fragments of Amos' life are known. The exact circumstances under which he came to Europe as an infant are also unclear; it is highly likely that Amo was enslaved, arriving via Amsterdam as a "gift" from the Dutch West India Company to the court of Duke Anton-Ulrich zu Braunschweig und Lüneburg, who had positive relations with the Netherlands (cf. Brentjes, 1976, p.29; Ette, 2014, pp.14-17). It was customary at the time to "give away" people of African origin as servants and "exotics living goods" to European royal courts.

Amos's life and work must always be seen against the backdrop of these historical conditions—the systematic racist exploitation and oppression of black people in the trade and forced labour of enslaved people. In fact, other Black people lived and worked as servants at the court of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (Glötzner, 2002, p.10).

The exact status of Amos and the extent of his independence are still unclear (cf. Brentjes 1976, p.30; Gutema, 2011, p.113; Smith 2015, p.209). In any case, it can be assumed that he had access to formal education at an early age, as is clear from his multilingualism, among other things: Amo mastered Greek, Latin, French, German, Dutch and Hebrew (Ette, 2014, p.31-32).

The education of Amos possibly represented an early Enlightenment "experiment" for Duke Anton Ulrich, which may have been inspired, among other things, by the example of the Black officer and later governor Abraham Petrovich Gannibal (c. 1696-1781) (cf. Brentjes, 1976, pp.31-32; Smith 2015, pp.207-208). Gannibal was taken as a child to the court of Tsar Peter the Great, with whom Anton Ulrich had connections, and had a very successful military career there. Furthermore, Anton Ulrich had close relations with various representatives of the early Enlightenment, who held relatively progressive attitudes towards non-European cultures and populations for the time. Amos' enrolment in philosophy and law at the University of Halle in 1727 should also be seen against this background. Halle represented an important centre of the early Enlightenment in the 18th century and some of the scholars working there were acquainted with Duke Anton Ulrich. In particular, Johann Peter von Ludewig, then director of the University of Halle, was to become an important patron of Amos.

In 1729, two years after beginning his studies, Amo held his disputation (an oral argument that served to establish academic qualifications) on the subject of "*De iure Maurorum in Europa*" ("The Rights of Moors in Europe"), regrettably, it was destroyed. The contents of this writing can only be inferred indirectly from a text of praise by the university chancellor at the time (Brentjes, 1976, p.38). Presumably, Amo dealt with the legal status of African kings in the Roman Empire in comparison to the position of Black people in Europe at that time and stated that the former had extensive autonomy. In contemporary interpretations, this argument of Amo's is seen as a subtle anti-racist critique of the global power relations of the time (cf. Gutema, 2011, p.136; Smith, 2015, pp.210-211).

In 1730, Amo enrolled at the University of Wittenberg to study medicine. Political tensions and the competition between the early Enlightenment and the conservative Pietists at the University of Halle probably played a central role in this decision. His work, at the University of Wittenberg, was mainly influenced by the disputes between the so-called Stahlians, who emphasised the importance of the mind and the soul, and the Mechanists, who in turn emphasised body and matter as central forces (Brentjes, 1976, pp.41-43).

In 1734, Amo completed his doctorate, *On the Impassivity of the Human Mind (De Humanae Mentis Apatheia)* and was awarded a PhD (Brentjes/Thaler, 1968, pp.12-34). In his dissertation, he argues for the fundamental difference between body and mind, referring to the latter, as impassive, in the sense of not being directly receptive to feelings and sensual impressions. Amo was subsequently admitted as Magister Legens (a title that gave the right to give lectures) and was authorised to preside over disputations. From this time onwards, Amo referred to himself as '*Amo Guinea-Afer*'. This is interpreted by some authors as an expression of the self-conscious emphasis on his African origin and identity (cf. Brentjes, 1976, p.47; Firla, 2002, p.64; Smith, 2015, pp.211-212).

The Lutheran orthodoxy that dominated Wittenberg began to fight the early Enlightenment scholars more and more intensively, resulting in some progressive teachers leaving the university. Following the death of his patron and friend, Martin Gotthelf Loescher, Amo returned to Halle in 1735. By then, the situation for the early Enlightenment school in Halle had improved again, probably mainly due to the protest of a large number of students and lecturers. In 1736, Amo applied and was granted permission to teach at the University of Halle where his lecture was then listed in a course catalogue for the following year. Again one year later, in 1738, Amo published his main work *Tractatus de arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi* ("Tractatus on the art of sober and accurate philosophising"), in which he presents his epistemological ideas as well as his general concept of the function of philosophy (Brentjes/Thaler, 1968, pp.60-275). However, as the influence of the early Enlightenment philosophers waned again at the University of Halle, Amo left Halle again in 1739, this time for Jena.

Amo's activity in Jena can be traced through an entry in the dean's book as well as through lecture announcements. It is striking that Amo no longer referred to the Dukes of Brunswick and Lüneburg in his application for permission to teach in Jena, as he had done in previous comparable applications (cf. Brentjes, 1976, p.62). In 1735, Duke Ludwig Rudolf, Amo's last supporter, died and his successors were no longer so positively disposed towards Amo. After 1740, the sources on Amo's activities diminish almost completely. It is therefore unclear whether and for how long he remained in Jena, or whether he even changed his place of residence again (cf. Brentjes, 1976, p.66; Firla, 2012, 15-23). Finally, at the end of the 1740s, Amo left Germany and travelled to the region of his birthplace in present-day Ghana.

The reasons for this decision appear to be manifold. Most of Amo's supporters had died—including his friend and patron Johann Peter von Ludewig in 1743. However, the decisive factor was most likely also the racism that Amo must have experienced regularly. One indication of the racism he experienced is a racist mocking poem published by Johann Ernst Philippi, a former fellow student of Amo's in Halle, in 1747 (Brentjes, 1976, pp.69-71; Ette, 2014, pp.125-127). In it, the amorous efforts of an unnamed Black man, who was almost certainly to be Amo, are racially rejected by a young white woman. The extent to which this story is based on actual events or is entirely fictional, cannot be determined.

The only surviving primary source that offers clues about Amo's life after leaving Germany is the account of a Swiss ship's doctor, David Henrij Gallandat, who seems to have met Amo in about 1752 (Brentjes, 1976, p.68). Amo probably lived for some time near Axim but spent the last years of his life in a Dutch West India Company fortress at Chama. It can be assumed that Amo did not go to Chama voluntarily, but rather, because of his high formal education, was perceived as a threat and forced there (cf. Brentjes, 1976, p.69; Ette, 2014, pp.138-142).

After his death, Amo's biography played a significant role in the international abolition movement in the late 18th and during the 19th century (Brentjes, 1976, pp.71-72). After that, Amo fell into "oblivion" for many decades, which can without question be seen in connection with the establishment of scientific racial theories and the expansion of colonialism (cf. Gutema, 2011, pp.142-143). It was only due to the Ghanaian author Attoh Akumah, paying tribute to Amo in his 1905 book *Memoirs of West-African Celebrities*, that Amo was "rediscovered".

In the German-speaking world, Wolfram Suchier, a librarian at the University of Halle, came across Amo's works by chance during archival research in 1916. However, the first systematic research, which had been stimulated by Kwame Nkrumah interest in Amo, only took place in the 1960s in the GDR. Nkrumah, the first president of the independent Republic of Ghana, had been interested in Amo since the 1930s, about whom he had learned through Akumah's work. When diplomatic rapprochement between Ghana and the GDR took place in the early 1960s, archaeology professor Burchard Brentjes, aware of Nkrumah's interest, proposed to create a research project on Amo at the University of Halle. Within the framework and as a result of this project, translations of Amo's theses, as well as several scholarly works on Amo's life and work, have been produced. Today, research on Amo continues in French-, English- and German-speaking countries (cf. among others Appiah, 2018; Dauvois, 2020; Edeh, 2003; Mabe 2007; Smith 2015).

Moreover, Amo's biography and philosophy have already played a central role for several decades, especially in the context of Afro-German activism. Amo stands for the long history of Black people in Germany and Europe: their struggle against racist oppression, early anti-racist positions in academia and equality of all people regardless of their origin and skin colour.

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