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# PERSON AND COMMUNITY

**Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I**

Edited by  
***KWASI WIREDU***  
***KWAME GYEKYE***

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They wish also to acknowledge the pioneering work of The International Society for Metaphysics and The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy in bringing together representatives of the various philosophical communities in Africa to design the broad project on the philosophical foundations of social life, of which this is the first volume. It is being published along with a volume from Uganda. Other volumes from Zaire and elsewhere will follow in a coordinated effort to identify the philosophical resources of the African cultures and to apply them in new ways for new times in the process of developing an adequate philosophical insight for Africa in the XXIst century.

Finally, the editors would like to express their thanks to Professor George McLean without whose help, encouragement and patience this book would never have come into existence, and to the James A. McLeans for their continued support in the realization of this broad project.



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INTRODUCTION

**THE GHANAIAAN TRADITION  
OF PHILOSOPHY**

KWASI WIREDU

Ghanaian culture is a highly philosophical culture. This is seen in the fact that 'traditional life in our country is guided at many points by conceptions that might broadly be called philosophical.'<sup>1</sup> Thus customs relating to procreation, work, leisure, death and sundry circumstances of life are based on or reflect doctrines about God, mind, goodness, destiny and human personality that most adult Ghanaians will articulate at the slightest prompting. And if one were to come in contact with the genuine philosophers among our traditional folk, one would hear not only articulations but also explanations, elaborations, and critiques of these doctrines and much else besides. Readers of W.E. Abraham's *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) or Kwame Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) will get an idea of the contours of that public philosophy.

Given that Ghanaian life is suffused with speculative thought, it is not surprising that many of our eminent contemporary public leaders have attached the greatest importance to philosophy by both word and work. J.B. Danquah wrote *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Frank Cass & co. Ltd, 1944, second edition with an introduction by Kwesi Dickson 1968) in a busy life of legal practice, public service, political agitation and variegated literary productivity. He was, to the last, given to philosophical meditation and writing and produced, at the close of his life, a voluminous manuscript, *The Akan Philosophy of Man*, which, unfortunately appears to be missing.<sup>2</sup> He prepared himself for his life work with a training in law and history, but most of all, in philosophy in which he took a Ph.D. in 1927 as John Stuart Mill Scholar in the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at London University with a thesis on *The Moral End as Moral Excellence*.

Kwame Nkrumah, the man who led the final phase of Ghana's struggle for independence and became her first president, disagreed with

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<sup>1</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> This information was given to me, in conversation, by Professor Kwesi Dickson, formerly of the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, who edited the re-issue of Danquah's *Akan Doctrine of God*. He said he was personally shown the multi-volume manuscript by Danquah himself not long before his death. But nobody seems to know where it is or whether it still exists.

Danquah on many things, but one thing he did not disagree with him about was the practical importance of philosophy. Nkrumah lived in the United States of America for many years and studied Philosophy, Theology and other subjects in American universities, including Lincoln University and the University of Pennsylvania before moving to England in the mid-forties. But his interest in philosophy was not something he acquired from abroad; his mind was already impregnated with a philosophic curiosity and, to be sure, also with a nationalistic passion before he left our shores. While in the U.S he wrote an M.A. thesis on ethnophilosophy. He, of course, did not use the word 'ethnophilosophy' with the pejorative significance which it now has acquired among many current African philosophers. In Britain he completed a doctoral dissertation on *Knowledge and Logical Positivism* at the London School of Economics under the supervision of A.J. Ayer--an odd combination, since Nkrumah was a convinced Marxist, while Ayer, the leading advocate at that time of sanguine positivism in English speaking-philosophy, was not known for either a sympathy for, or an expertise on, Marxism. Be that as it may, history stood between Nkrumah and the oral defence of his dissertation. In 1947, just before that was scheduled to take place there came the historic call from the United Gold Coast Convention. The nationalist organization in Ghana (then known as The Gold Coast) which had just begun demanding self-government from Britain, called him home to become its General Secretary. Nkrumah immediately obliged--to the doom of colonialism in Ghana and Africa at large.

The interplay, in Nkrumah's mind, between philosophy and practice, more specifically, the practice of radical nationalism, was, in any case, already evident in his *Towards Colonial Freedom*,<sup>3</sup> which he published in London in 1947 before returning to Ghana. In that work he adopted Marxist-Leninist philosophy and adapted it to the purposes of the anti-colonial struggle. There is no reason why a Ghanaian philosopher may not make a creative use of a foreign philosophy in the service of Ghana, whether or not that philosophy has any affinity with Ghanaian traditional philosophy. But later, as President of Ghana, Nkrumah published *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*, in which it was argued that Marxism was, in fact, in harmony with African Traditional thought. Ghanaian traditional thought was not explored in any detail in that work, but that did not necessarily detract from its possible relevance to Ghana or to Africa, in general.

The detailed exploration of Ghanaian traditional thought has, however, been a notable concern among contemporary Ghanaian philosophers, a fact to which the above mentioned books by Danquah, Abraham and Gyekye bear eloquent testimony. This demonstrates that however deeply the Ghanaian mind has gone into Western philosophy or

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<sup>3</sup> The publisher of the second edition, which came out in 1962, was Heinemann Educational Books, London.



the philosophy of any other culture, it has never been in danger of becoming oblivious to its own indigenous tradition of philosophy. The concern with this tradition is also unmistakable in the work of K.A. Busia, Prime Minister of Ghana from 1969 to 1972, who though a sociologist by academic profession, wrote works of considerable significance for Ghanaian philosophy. Busia had a degree in History before he went to Oxford to study Politics, Philosophy and Economics. He afterwards specialized in Sociology in graduate study and earned his doctorate at Oxford with a dissertation on *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*, which was subsequently published by Frank Cass and Company Ltd., in 1951. The book has now become a classic in the descriptive and analytical study of the Ashanti system of government. In virtue also of its treatment of the principles underlying that system of government, it has proved invaluable in the study of traditional political philosophy. Busia's book has a proud place in a time-honored series of studies of traditional politics and jurisprudence by Ghanaian thinkers dating back to J.E. Casely Hayford's *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (London: 1903), John Mensah Sarbah's *Fanti National Constitution* (London, 1906) and J.B. Danquah's *Akan Laws and Customs* (London, 1928). Kwame Gyekye's "Traditional Political Ideas: Their Relevance to Development in Contemporary Africa", which forms the last chapter of this work, is a contemporary continuation of this line of work which is fully conscious of its intellectual antecedents in the tradition.

Of even more extensive philosophical relevance than his work on Ashanti government was Busia's essay on "The Ashanti," which was included in Daryll Forde's anthology, *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954). In this piece Busia provided a perspicuous account of the main features of the world view of the Ashantis and of their conceptions of human personality and social organization. Two other works of Busia deserve special mention, though that does not exhaust philosophically-oriented contributions. *The Challenge of Africa* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1962) and *Africa in Search of Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1967) were mainly political, but Busia was deeply of the persuasion that an appreciation of African traditional philosophy was requisite for a true understanding of Africa's contemporary situation and its *desiderata*. Accordingly, he provided elegant expositions of elements of traditional philosophy in the first two chapters of each book, entitled, in the first case, (compositely) "The Challenge of Culture" and, in the second case, "The Religious Heritage" (Chapter 1) and "The Political Heritage" (chapter 2).

All the essayists in the present work explicitly or implicitly engage the legacy of indigenous philosophical thought available to them through the works of the statesman philosophers noted above and, also, through the oral tradition with which they are acquainted by way of both upbringing and scholarly research. But they also engage, in these essays as in other

parts of their work, the rich accumulation of organized information about their traditional culture preserved in the writings of the first European scholars who made dedicated and prolonged--indeed in some cases life-long--researches into our culture and its intellectual foundations.

Probably, the best known now, certainly the most productive, of these early European students of our traditional culture was the English anthropologist, R.S. Rattray. In a number of goodly-sized volumes, the most important of which were *Ashanti* (Oxford University Press, 1923, second edition 1956), *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford, 1927, second edition 1958) and *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford, 1929) he gave well-researched accounts of various aspects of our culture, including the philosophical. Rattray focussed particularly on the culture of the Ashantis. He learnt their language, socialized with Ashantis of both sexes, and wrote about them with an insight born of both a keenness of observation and a genuine fondness for the people he studied.

In their own day, however, Diedrich Westermann was more famous internationally than Rattray. He also had some substantial insights into our traditional worldview and ethical thinking. Unfortunately, these were often vitiated, in the expression, by a certain attitude of superiority not uncharacteristic of the European anthropology of the period.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even the excellent Rattray was not completely untouched by vestiges of that frame of mind--witness the sub-title of another of his otherwise deservedly

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequent anthropological studies of Ghana, such as those of M. J. Herskovits, Meyer Fortes and Jack Goody have been free of this blemish. Herskovits studied the Ashanti and the Ewe. His *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom* (New York: J. August, 1938) still retains considerable fascination for students of Ewe ideas. Fortes made intensive studies of the Ashantis and the Tallensi. Jack Goody has recently brought together in one volume some of Fortes' most important papers on the Tallensi. (See Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion*, edited with an introduction by Jack Goody (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). These essays are of a definite philosophical interest. For example, I am impressed by Fortes' clear recognition and emphatic exposition of the normative dimension of Tallensi (and other African) conceptions of a person. A little earlier, in 1984, Goody had spearheaded the reissue of Fortes' well-known essay *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* together with a tremendous supplementary essay by Robin Horton on "Social Psychologies: African and Western" (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Fortes and Horton concentrate in these discussions on the social functionality rather than any possible philosophical rationale of the West African ideas with which they are concerned, but philosophers will note various points of a philosophical potential. Jack Goody's own *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1962) will surely become a point of reference in indigenous studies of the traditional philosophies of Northern Ghana much in the way in which Rattray's work has become a point of reference in the study of Akan thought by Akans.

famous works: *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People* (Oxford, 1916, reprinted 1969). In fact, in this book Rattray did a very useful job in translating a selection of Ashanti proverbs into English and providing them with explanatory annotations. The selection was made from a larger set of untranslated Akan proverbs published by the German scholar J. G. Christaller, entitled *A Collection of 3,600 Tshi Proverbs* (Basel: Evangelical Mission Society, 1879). To this German scholar is owed also the first major dictionary of the Akan language viz. *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Chwee, Twi)* (Basel: Evangelical Missionary Society, 1881, second edition 1933.) He wrote also the first major grammar of the language (*A Grammar of the As ante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Chwee, Twi), Based on the Akuapem Dialect with Reference to the other (Akan and Fante) Dialects* (Basel: 1875))

The philosophical importance of these works is hard to overemphasize. The grammar of a language is not, indeed, a blueprint of its logic; but it is, most assuredly, a propaedeutic to it. In the formalization of the natural logic of our vernaculars--a task which still lies ahead of contemporary Ghanaian philosophy although there are some interesting hints in Gyekye's *Essay*<sup>5</sup>--the syntactic and semantical distinctions and classifications established in Christaller's work, along with subsequent efforts, will offer extremely convenient materials for critical evaluation and reconstruction. The dictionary also, which still remains to be supplanted by work from indigenous hands, is a great source of incentives for the study of the conceptual problems that arise in translations of speculative ideas between English and Akan and other Ghanaian vernaculars.

Since, to say the least, it cannot be assumed that the conceptual frameworks embedded in English and the other metropolitan languages in which our traditional thought has been expounded have any close fit with that system of thought, it is not unreasonable to fear that our indigenous thought may have suffered philosophically significant distortions in the process of exposition. Even more alarming is the consideration that the conceptual errors responsible for such distortions cannot always be laid at foreign doors; for, in truth, we and our statesman forerunners of old have been so strongly influenced by foreign conceptual models through religious and other forms of instruction that we have become unwitting foreigners to the conceptual infra-structure of our own indigenous thought, in spite of our unquestionable love for our culture. Thus conceptual dichotomies emanating from foreign philosophical vocabularies, such as the physical and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial, the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the religious, the immanent and the transcendent, and metaphysical notions like dependent and independent existence, creation out of nothing, absolute reality, etc., are often used in the

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<sup>5</sup> See Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, chapter 11: "Philosophy, Logic and the Akan Language"

characterization of our traditional thought without a prior scrutiny of their applicability.

However, such influences upon the mind are never deterministic beyond repair, and we can justifiably hope that the task of conceptual self-exorcism, though difficult and possibly endless, is one in which we can make progress. This consideration is never far from my concerns in my own contributions to this volume, especially in chapter 2: "Problems in Africa's Self-Definition in the Contemporary World."

Perhaps, the one foreign example that we can follow unqualifiedly without danger to our cultural authenticity is that provided by the pioneering scholarly involvement of Christaller and Rattray with the proverbs of our culture. Actually, the example has already been taken to heart by our scholars. And this was inevitable, seeing the overwhelming importance of proverbs in our indigenous rhetoric. There are now quite a few collections of proverbs by Ghanaians. Among these, the volumes of *Ewe* proverbs reproduced in the original language and translated, classified and interpreted by N.K. Dzobo are particularly noteworthy for their ethical interest.<sup>6</sup> These are proverbs that express Ewe moral teachings in dramatic imagery of arresting terseness. But our indigenous proverbs also frequently encapsulate abstract insights of a philosophical character, and Dzobo's discussion of "Symbols and Proverbs as Source Materials for Understanding African Culture" (chapter 4 below) is a particularly apt illustration of this fact.

Indeed, the use of proverbs in the portrayal and highlighting of doctrine in the exposition of traditional thought is a well established practice in the Ghanaian tradition of philosophy. Danquah (*The Akan Doctrine of God*) uses it to good effect. Abraham makes a sparkling use of proverbs in *The Mind of Africa* (chapter 2), and Gyekye not only makes use of proverbs in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (passim) but also vigorously argues their philosophical relevance (chapter 2.1). This proverbial dimension to Ghanaian philosophical discourse is palpably present in almost all the essays in this volume. The day will come when this will not be so prominent a feature of Ghanaian philosophy, but that will not be until the proverbial and other sources of philosophical insight in our traditional culture have been well exploited in providing an accurate and adequate picture of our traditional philosophical thought. That will be a necessary phase of our effort at constructing philosophies that are also

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<sup>6</sup> Two volumes of Dzobo's *African Proverbs: Guide to Conduct* were published by the Department of Education, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana, 1973 and another was published by Waterville Publishing House, Accra, Ghana, 1975. As far as Akan proverbs are concerned a collection that should dwarf all existing ones is that assembled by Mrs. Peggy Appiah. When I spoke with her several years ago it had reached 6,000. I understand that the set is now in the hands of her son Kwame Appiah, the prolific Ghanaian philosophic genius at Harvard, who is working on it.

cognizant of the rich variety of sources of philosophical insight in the modern world.

At present, accounts of traditional thought, having emerged from the work and influence of Western scholars, not infrequently suffer from crass errors of interpretation and even of description. One of the inescapable duties of contemporary Ghanaian (and generally African) philosophy is to correct them. A quite common error is the supposition that because of the well-known communalism of African societies, African traditional thought lacks a non-trivial conception of the value of individuality. Gyekye lays this misapprehension to rest in his "Person and Community in Akan Thought". (See chapter 5 below.)

This work of correction also was started by our statesman forerunners. Danquah, for example, early in *The Akan Doctrine of God* (chapter 2) criticizes Rattray's suggestion in his *Ashanti* that the Ashanti worship their ancestors through fear, 'pure fear'. Nor does he mince words in his critique of Westermann's somewhat contrary claim that Africans are not so much as moved to have fear of the Supreme Being. Westermann had said of West Africans in his *Africa and Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 1937) that they "acknowledge [the Supreme Being] but neither fear nor love nor serve him, the feeling towards him being, at the highest, that of dim awe or reverence". Danquah (op. cit. p. 9) quotes this and quickly picks out the inconsistency in denying fear and attributing awe. He then makes short work of the quotation--justly, in most part.<sup>7</sup> Another controversial remark of Westermann in the same book was that although it is "recognized" by the African "that the principles of good and evil are rooted in God, his will is that man should be good, and he hates evil-doings", yet "this is no more than a Platonic acknowledgement, it is not a sanction which guides him in his actions. Moral obligations are rooted in social bonds, not in God." To Westermann this is evidence of defective thinking. This, again, evokes very spirited criticisms from Danquah (op. cit., p 14 f.)

It is not the case, however, that Danquah approaches the works of Rattray and Westermann in a caviling spirit; in fact, he is generously appreciative of what he takes to be their positive insights. Indeed, shorn of the supercilious spirit in which it was made, the content of Westermann's last quoted remark suggests that, perhaps, he dimly espied an important truth about Ghanaian thinking on the foundations of morals. Careful study will reveal that while it is generally held in Ghanaian traditional thought that God is good in the highest, moral goodness is not taken to be definable in terms of his will but rather of considerations about human well-being. This finding is contrary to widespread accounts of the religious foundations of African ethics.

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<sup>7</sup> The same remark of Westermann draws the ire of another eminent African scholar. See E Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 144 ff.

This issue has received quite some attention among Ghanaian philosophers. Danquah himself seems, on the whole, to come down on the side of an interpretation of traditional ethics which sees its foundations in humanistic, rather than religious, factors. This is the main impression one gets from the article "Obligation in Akan Society"<sup>8</sup> which he published in 1952. In his patiently argued paper, "Does Religion Determine Morality in African Societies?--A Viewpoint" (1976),<sup>9</sup> J.N. Kudadjie maintains that morality in African thought is determined in some cases by religion but in other cases by custom and other social factors of a non-religious nature.<sup>10</sup> In 1981 I gave an analysis of the issue in a paper on "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought."<sup>11</sup> It argued that if morality is taken in a strict sense and the concept of determination is interpreted in a logical or conceptual sense, there is no question but that according to Akan moral thinking, morality is determined, not by religion, but by practical considerations regarding

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<sup>8</sup> *West African Affairs*, No. 8, 1952, published by the Bureau of Current Affairs, London for the then Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University College of the Gold Coast (now University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana)

<sup>9</sup> In J.S. Pobee, ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976). Originally published in the *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. III, No. 5, December 1973.

<sup>10</sup> As a specialist in the Philosophy of Religion in the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Ghana, Kudadjie is a kind of bridge between the philosophers of Ghana and her theologians. Actually, there has been quite some interaction between the two classes of scholars. Bishop Sarpong's *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974) has evoked quite some philosophical discussion among some Ghanaian philosophers, as for example, in Gyekye's *Essay* and in my "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought". There is also Kwesi Dickson's *Aspects of Religion and Life in Africa* (Accra: Ghana, Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1977). Both works contain, among other things, interesting discussions of the traditional doctrine of fate and destiny. Other works of a philosophical interest are: Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (FEP International Private Ltd., 1978), John S. Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1979) and Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984). In a class of its own is the book by the Ghanaian artist, Antubam, entitled *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1963). Antubam was an artist of extraordinary talent and became in his life quite a national artist. In this book he gives, in a philosophically suggestive way, an artist's interpretation of a culture which has engraved much of its speculative ideas and ethical ideology on artistic media.

<sup>11</sup> Paper presented at the 2nd Afro-Asian Philosophy Conference, Nairobi, Kenya, October/November 1981 and subsequently published in H. Odera Oruka & D.A. Masolo, eds., *Philosophy and Culture*, Nairobi, Kenya: Bookwise Ltd., 1983. Reprinted in Norm R. Allen Jr., ed., *African-American Humanism: An Anthology* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991).

human welfare in society. I pointed out that, if on the other hand, the notion of determination, for example, were taken in a psychological sense, different conclusions might be arguable. Gyekye also powerfully argues a basically similar position in his *Essay* (1987, chapter 8: "Foundations of Ethics"). Both our positions are, I believe, by and large--that is, subject to not necessarily simple conceptual disambiguations and interrelations--compatible with Kudadjie's.

In chapter 5 of the present volume ("Moral Foundations of an African Culture") I return to the issue just adumbrated. I attempt to articulate the outlines of an Akan-oriented definition of morality (in the strict sense) and to link it to the communalism of our society, an ethos that is being severely tested by industrialization (even such as it has been) and its social consequences. The problems of moral disorientation resulting from this clash of culture with historic circumstance are (independently) taken up by both Kudadjie (chapter 10: "Towards Moral Development in Contemporary Africa: Insights from Dangme Traditional Moral Experience") and Dzobo (chapter 11: "Values in a Changing Society: Man, Ancestors and God"). In each case there is a reasoned plea for seeking salvation from the moral resources of our traditional ethic, seen in its proper light. These two papers are thus eminently practical in motivation and orientation. This is true also, in varying degrees, of all the contributions in this work, a fact which prompts the following overdue reflection: Ghanaian philosophy, right from its origins in our traditional culture, has always been a speculative-theoretic effort at the understanding of experience and reality for the betterment of the human condition.

The reader will note also, in all the papers in this book, a comparative approach to philosophical discussion. The reason is obvious. The colonial intervention in our history, still a thing of the recent past, manifests itself at one level of our consciousness as a challenge to self-definition. That definition has necessarily to be by contrast to the colonial legacy. In chapter 2: ("Problems in Africa's Self-Definition in the Contemporary World") I confront a variety of aspects of this project of self-definition. Naturally, comparative considerations loom large in my considerations. An even more explicit exercise in comparative philosophy in our situation, though with a somewhat different motivation, was the Ghanaian philosopher B.E. Oguahs's interesting and lucid essay "African and Western Philosophy: A Comparative Study" published in 1977.<sup>12</sup> But whether explicitly or implicitly, our work is going to have to be comparative for a long time to come. This need not--it ought not--overshadow our own direct philosophic contemplation of our culture or of reality. On the evidence of these essays, it has not.

Another imperative of Ghanaian philosophy is that of reconstruction. It would be clear, even on a little a priori reflection, that we

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<sup>12</sup>Included in Richard A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: University Press of America, 1977; third edition 1984).

cannot base our life and thought in the contemporary world on a wholesale retention of our traditional philosophy. That there are elements in the tradition from which we can profit in our present day existence is a conviction that informs all the contributions to this volume. But this presupposes an evaluative analysis, and it can be expected that such analyses will mount as our reconstructive efforts gain momentum. There are, indeed, hints of critical evaluation here and there in this volume; but that, obviously, is not its emphasis. Apart from the axiomatic consideration that not everything can be done at once, one relevant reason is that the strengths of our culture and its philosophy are comparatively more ubiquitous in the areas of ethical and social thinking, which are the main focus of this anthology, than in the area of, say, the philosophical understanding of the world in the light of modern knowledge.

Philosophy is a dialectic, and a dialectic implies the interplay of opposites. Where two or three or more are gathered in a philosophic enterprise, there opposing points of view shall be found. Although there are lots of points of agreement here, this volume fails to be a counterexample to this generalization, for not all our interpretations of Ghanaian traditional thought coincide. One major point of doctrinal disagreement is, actually, between the two editors of this volume, namely, Gyekye and myself. Gyekye, in chapter 5: "Person and Community in Akan Thought" strongly disputes the view, advanced by the Nigerian philosopher, Ifeanyi Menkiti<sup>13</sup> that personhood, as conceived in African thought, is not something that one is born with but rather an ideal that one may or may not attain in life. I happen to have arrived independently at *basically* the same view as Menkiti's, and, although I do not argue it in detail in any of my contributions to this volume--that belongs elsewhere--I do formulate a view of that sort in chapter 9: "Moral Foundations of an African Culture". Another major disagreement between Gyekye and me relates to another aspect of the traditional concept of a person. Gyekye understands the conception to be dualistic, somewhat after the manner of Descartes, while I interpret it to be quasi-monistic, featuring not an ontological duality of the material and the immaterial, but only differences in degrees of materiality between the body and the other elements in human personality. Joyce Engmann discusses this latter disagreement, among other things, in her elaborate piece on "Immortality and the Nature of Man in Ga Thought". (See chapter 8 below.)<sup>14</sup>

I perceive such disagreements as a sign of vitality in African philosophy. Our disagreements suggest that we are each struggling to make sense of our tradition. Short of resting content with pure narratives,

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<sup>13</sup> In Wright, ed., *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> An earlier study of Ga life and ideas frequently cited is the book by psychiatrist Margaret Field called *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition 1961)



supposing--what is open to severe debate--that such things were possible,<sup>15</sup> disparities of interpretations and also of reconstructions are inevitable. Gyekye and I do not see this situation as any manner of threat to our spirit of cooperation and mutual goodwill.

Incidentally, all the contributors to this volume are native-born Ghanaians except Joyce Engmann, who is Ghanaian by marriage. But her treatment of the Ga concept of a person displays not only accurate knowledge but also real empathy. Moreover, her subject is generically of the most central importance to Ghanaian philosophy, to put it no wider. The concept of a person is certainly the most recurrent topic in this whole volume, and her detailed discussion should help the reader to plot the linkages effortlessly.

A volume on Ghanaian philosophy is a volume on African philosophy. Although there are differences of detail and, in some cases, of principle between Ghanaian conceptions and those entertained in other parts of Africa, there are deep affinities of both thought and feeling across the entirety of ethnic Africa.<sup>16</sup> No doubt, in due course, both the commonalities and the disparities will be explored and mastered to the advantage of our continent. But, meanwhile, it is salutary to note that, as W.E. Abraham points out in the prologue to this book, 'It is easy to be unduly impressed by the sheer number of ethnic groups, each endowed with its own ethnic heritage, and overlook the repetitive elements and manifestations which they contain.' Accordingly, the Prologue provides a concrete continental contextualization, in terms of cultural institutions and mind-set, for the concerns articulated in this book. By a complementary contrast, Abraham's

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<sup>15</sup> There are, however, such things as predominantly narrative accounts of African philosophy. Such forms of exposition seem to come easily to foreign scholars. An outstanding essay in this genre is Helaine Mink us' "Causal Theory in Akwapim Akan Philosophy" (in Wright, *op.cit.*). There is no suggestion here that this kind of work does not have its own utility, having regard to its motivation and intended audience; but Africans may fairly be required to transcend the horizons of simple narration or uncommitted interpretation in their treatment of their traditional thought. Her discussions are marked by expository clarity and a narrative accuracy; any interpretations are kept within the bounds of the unsurprising. In striking contrast is the work of Eva L.R. Meyerowitz, an earlier and more famous student of Akan life and ideas. In her *The Sacred State of the Akans* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) and *The Akan of Ghana: Their Ancient Beliefs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958) she gave accounts of Akan thought that were characterized, at the level of narration, by a certain measure of obscurity and, at that of interpretation, by a venturesomeness bordering on idiosyncrasy. See, for example Abraham's reservations about some of Meyerowitz's hypotheses in *The Mind of Africa*, chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> See in this connection chapter 12 of Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* in which he argues the legitimacy, within reasonable limits, of doctrinal attributions of continental scope in African philosophy.

“Sources of African Identity” (chapter 1 below) connects the problem of African identity with an elemental crisis of the human psyche itself.

Finally, it might be well to note that the preoccupation of this volume with Ghanaian traditional thought does not define the limits of the interests of the Ghanaian philosophers represented therein. On the contrary, they all have broad interests and have done work in various other areas of philosophy. They can be expected to apply whatever gains in insight they may derive from that brand of work to the enrichment of the fruits of their traditional preoccupations. That is the surest way of advancing the Ghanaian tradition of philosophy in our day.

**PROLOGUE**

**CRISIS IN AFRICAN CULTURES**

*W. EMMANUEL ABRAHAM*

**ASPIRATIONS AND CONCERNS IN AFRICAN CULTURAL LIFE**

The area discussed in this contribution covers, in its northern reaches, all of the African territories stretching from the Atlantic Ocean through Senegal across the desert of the southern Sahara, as well as the semi-desert of the Sahel, eastward through the highlands of Ethiopia to the Indian Ocean. Southward, it extends to the tip of the continent at the Cape, as well as taking in the island of Madagascar. In terrain, this massive area is highly variegated, comprising forbidding deserts punctured by numerous oases, mountain ranges and their watered valleys, arid steppes, rain Savannah and rain forests. In climate, it spans tropical, temperate, and Mediterranean types.

Its peoples are as diverse as its terrain and climate. They include Black Africans, who are by far the most numerous of its inhabitants, Khoisan (formerly known as Bush men and Hottentots), and Pygmies. These different peoples are also culturally diverse, especially if culture is understood to include the whole distinctive complex of spiritual, material, intellectual, ethical and emotional features which characterize the heritage of a society or social group.

The diversity of cultures indeed attests to the richness of human creativity and invention; it also ensures, however, that there will be variations in the mind-set of human cultures, variations in the specific aspirations and concerns of their peoples, variations in the principles of action and sensibility which they invoke in their attempts to solve culturally rooted problems as well as variations in their efforts to advance reality towards ideals.

Even so, the institutions and customs are, in the end, animated by mankind's common intellectual, emotional and physical dispositions. Indeed, such common human dispositions constitute one reason why the salient problems besetting people all over the specified territories have universalist aspects. A second reason is the general interconnections today among the societies of the world, with the consequent intermingling of their cultures through their mutual acknowledgement and the mutual influences of their politics, economics, religion, literature, art and education. In this way, the aspirations and concerns within local cultures come to take on a hue and a complexion not homegrown. Although this hue and this complexion can become locally present only through local expressions and cultural idioms, the dimensions which problems within societies acquire cannot be explained or resolved completely through the idea of local

cultures, operating in isolation, and without beneficial infusions from other cultures.

How deeply these interconnections affect African cultures depends on several parameters. Among these are the sources and the depth of the individual's feeling of identity within his or her own culture; beliefs and practices which govern the individual's relation to the community; those *morés* of the culture which express the individual's relation to nature; demands of the technological culture on the individual; and concerns about the felt role and destiny of the local cultures in the world comity of cultures.

Perceived as a cultural being, the African today is highly complex, being in fact an accumulation of a variety of cultural fragments. He is endowed with a base of his traditional culture, which is by now irreversibly impregnated at various levels by elements of other cultures, some of which were imposed and others sought and acquired. His base of traditional culture is informed with beliefs about the nature of human beings as members of his society, beliefs about the ethics which should regulate human behavior within the family and its extensions, as well as regulate general behavior towards members of the same society, and even higher beliefs which inspire the ethics. It is informed by beliefs concerning the place of human beings in the environment of nature, and the ethics which should govern human behavior towards that environment.

The populations of African countries are, like those of every other country on earth, ethnically diverse. In Africa, this is because the erstwhile colonial administrations created congeries of numerous culturally diverse ethnic groups within each colonial territory, and almost without exception the colonial boundaries have been retained and maintained by the independent countries. For this reason, every African, as a bearer of one basal traditional culture, is called upon to interact with fellow citizens who are themselves bearers of different basal traditional cultures.

Again, all African countries have experienced urbanization and technological expansion. These are processes which have brought with them influxes of populations from the country into the cities. These movements have disrupted the protective connections and the certitudes which generate the bonds and fellowship of rural life. The material facet of rural life, including property systems, and relations to land and labor; the institutional facet of rural life, including customs, ritual, political and social relations; the value facet of rural life, including ethics, religion, art, and the aspirations and wisdom which they enshrine: everything falls, in different degrees, into abeyance in the face of such mass population movements. In this context, even leisure becomes a problem because its setting is new and now unfamiliar.

There are many ways to explain this great population drain from rural areas, which have in some African countries transferred more than half of the national population to urban areas. In the end, however, lying behind all of the explanations, and making them possible, is the frustration of these traditional cultures. This frustration has been brought about

because the new centers of political authority have not evolved from the traditional cultures, but have either been continued, with modifications, from colonial models which were earlier counterpoised to local institutions, or have been installed through *coups d'etats*. In consequence of their lacking roots in earlier African traditions, visions of the good life, problems involved in its pursuit, and stocks of ideas relating to the problems' solution are no longer generated (even in rural areas where traditional cultures hold the most sway) within the parameters of traditional institutions and their cultures. In hope of a solution, many flock to the cities, which are perceived as today's centers of administration, power, and authority. Indeed, the more centralized the administration, power and authority, the greater the rural drift.

The masses that move to urban areas, being illiterate, also lack the active skills and mental outlook relevant for acquiring the means to a satisfying life in an urban setting. This lack exacerbates problems of urban unemployment, and severely distorts the urban burden of welfare and social security. In this way, it creates, within the urban areas, wildernesses of homelessness and impoverishment.

The rural migrants bring some of the attitudes and domestic practices of rural life to urban areas; for example, they bring a fertility rate which would compensate for high infant mortality in rural settings. But in urban settings, with their reduced rates of infant mortality, such fertility rates lead to high population growths, which existing African urban economic, social, and cultural institutions are unable to accommodate properly.

Modern means of communication and central political authorities have a great reach, indeed, and nowhere are traditional cultures able to insulate their people and hold exclusive sway over them. Still, in rural settings, the largest masses of people continue to conduct their lives against the background of their traditional cultures. There, the able are self-motivated to be productive, and the ability of cultural institutions to guarantee the welfare and protection of those too old, too young or too ill to be productive is never overtaxed. But now, examples of the desirable life held up by modern mass media and the rhetoric of governments have convinced many that they ought to be dissatisfied with their circumstances; and it seems a matter of enlightenment and ambition to succumb to the lure of the city and to abandon their ancestral homes.

The frustration of traditional cultures mentioned earlier has increasingly dislocated the traditional cultures from their aims and weakened their credibility. Everywhere in Africa, this has been a major goad to migration. There have been several other local causes--some natural, others man-made. The periodic devastation of the Sahel region by protracted drought, compounded by the reluctance or inability of the national governments to introduce palliative measures to relieve their own people, has cost millions of lives, and triggered incessant wanderings and cultural collapse among its victims. The scale of the tragedy has been

limited only by the heroic efforts of various nations, agencies, and sundry arms of the United Nations Organization.

Civil war is another man-made calamity and disrupter of cultures in Africa. In some areas, internecine war has been pursued without cessation for thirty years. Sporadic acts of irredentism and attempts at forced religious suppression and domination have wreaked their own havoc. These acts have especially intensified the cultural dislocation experienced inside the rural areas. Farms, grazing lands, livestock and entire villages have been overrun by armies, with bands of brigands following in their wake.

Elsewhere, there has been cultural suppression. The Hottentots of south Africa have been partly assimilated, and partly pushed into the area of the Cape, the Land's End of the continent, as cattle herders. The Bushmen, too, have been decimated, and their remnants pushed into the Kalahari Desert. Like the Pygmies of the Ituri forest, they were originally awesome warriors and exquisite hunters, immensely courageous, skilled trackers, and fantastic experts in their knowledge of poisons, people whose ancestors left records of their own prowess on rock paintings. Exploited by farmers of different races, a people without chiefs and brooking orders from none, Bushmen have been forced to retreat into the desert depths for self-protection. Remnants of them live in Botswana, on the veldt of Namibia and southwest Zambia, as well as in the Republic of South Africa.

The cultural problems of sub-Saharan Africa are by no means confined to its rural populations. Indeed, wherever Western educational, economic, and social practices have been established in Africa, there, too, the greatest dislocation from traditional cultures has occurred. Among administrators, among managers of the national economy and all who work in it, among educators and those they teach, in the armed forces, in religious institutions, in art and literature, and in family relations, problems take shape, and the manner of their resolution becomes determined, without significant consideration of the canons of traditional cultures.

Urban Africans and Africans, trained for urban living, think, learn, work, conceive their hopes and aspirations within a new belief system which comes with its own axioms and postulates, its own norms, and its own ethic. In consequence, problems of the individual psyche, problems of the relations between individuals, problems relating to the responsibilities of individuals to the group, and the individual's attitude to nature, indeed the very idioms of interpersonal discourse, are deprived of the context of traditional cultures, and arise like outcroppings of rock in a bed of sand.

These Western practices and norms have undermined the Westernized Africans' moorings in their traditional cultures. Where before they were driven by a sacred sense of responsibility towards their immediate families, their lineage groups and their societies, now they have a greatly weakened sense of their lineage groups, and almost replace a sense of their cultural society with a still developing national sense.

The purposes and contexts of labor become mutated. Before, work would be possible only in groups, an exception being made solely in the case of the artist. Work would regularly be with other members of one's family or age set; and its purpose would be the sustenance and well-being of the family, lineage group or community. In general, there would be no hiring of labor, each person carrying out family or social obligations as a matter of ethical imperatives. Now, labor is individual, and its competence, just like its rewards, is the individual's. Today, its driving force is economic necessity.

The beneficiary of labor is now the employer; and its products are not chosen within the framework or dictates of traditional cultures. Even agricultural crops are today often cash crops rather than the producers' staples. Hired farmhands who would have enjoyed usufructuary rights in the land, and that only in virtue of their membership in their lineage groups, now work instead for wages, and have neither the inclination nor the power to continue the attitude of solicitude and respect towards the land, which the clan demands and fosters.

In the urban environment, the very idea of a family becomes different. The couple usurps the functions and prerogatives of the old lineage group in the education and upbringing of children. In their upbringing, urban children tend not to pursue the ideals of their cultural patrimony, and, as a result, tend not to be well-acquainted with its traditions. In the past, and today in rural settings, their peer group would supply a framework for their training in social institutions and their initiation as adults. In the new urban settings, street gangs are, as likely as not, to take the place of the peer group. Social control is typically weakened, as the instruments and sanctions of traditional cultures are thwarted without equivalent substitutes. Punishment in its urban practice appears formal and cold, and its very purpose becomes a topic of debate among different theories, whereas in the traditional society its purpose is always agreed.

The new and complex set-up has not shown the same efficiency or success in establishing social coherence and unity, as traditional cultures show where they have authority and dominance. In their hey-day, traditional cultures satisfied the wants which were defined and accepted, and generally achieved the cultivation and coherence of their societies. The new set-ups have been unable to satisfy wants which they themselves defined and accepted, and have almost everywhere fallen into regression. The difficulties and perplexities which people experience today have encouraged the strengthening of ethnic and religious factors in politics, and these do not aid the cultivation and coherence of the multicultural complexes that all African countries today are.

Many Africans do not live in their ancestral lands anymore, and are in Diaspora in technologically advanced countries. Least able to follow the traditions of their original cultures in their new surroundings, in them or in their children the cultural lines from their ancestors will come to an end.

Like urban Africans, their way of life is not bound by the ethical and social norms of their original cultures, and they hold aspirations of individual (as distinct from family) success. They are little inclined to sacrifice their own opportunities in favor of their siblings, or their children's opportunities in favor of their nephews and nieces. Their decisions on important matters of their lives are made without calculation of the interests of their lineage group or kin group.

What makes all of the above problematic and disturbing to the mind-set of today's Africans is the fact that most urban Africans are only the first generation of their lineage to be urbanized. They, in fact, carry within themselves a base of traditional cultures upon which profoundly wrenching demands are made. Indeed, the process of Westernization which began even before colonialism in Africa, and continues under the *aegis* of African governments, has created a cultural transition everywhere in Saharan Africa.

Every country of the region now exhibits different cultural systems which are not complementary fragments of one whole, but are divergent in their structure, in their inspiration and orientation, and in their aims and methods of inculcation. The family, which is the traditional inculcator of the cultural education of the youth, the Western-style school, which is the inculcator of a new education with a different conception of the individual and his responsibility to others, as well as a new attitude to nature, and the street, whose gangs constitute the new peer group--these are the disparate systems by which the development of the youth must now be guided.

Sub-Saharan African governments look to Western schooling to equip the people with the means of transforming their societies into effective and prosperous modern nations. And yet, on the basis of performance, these aspirations and promises appear to have seen fulfilment only with educated individuals, but not with the societies at large. While individuals prosper, the economies of most sub-Saharan African countries have become retrograde, and hopes for recovery and progress have become entrusted to the tutelage of international monetary organizations.

Western schooling, as well as aspirations for the occupations and ways of life which it makes possible, dominate the growing child's life and determine his future. The African family has not constructed a composite of values and norms culled from the traditional culture and the ideals of Western education by means of which inclusive, yet coherent models, could be set before its young people.

## **THE CHARACTER OF THE TRADITIONAL BACKGROUND**

The area discussed above is the home of over a thousand different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, in addition to pragmatic necessity, there is empirical justification for considering African cultural phenomena across wide areas. As a matter of fact, it is easy to be unduly impressed by the sheer number of ethnic groups, each endowed with its own cultural



heritage, and overlook the repetitive elements and manifestations which they contain. Categories of such repetitive elements include belief systems, relations between art, on the one hand, and, on the other, political, economic, religious, and familial institutions and practice, social stratification and political systems, other specific institutions, basic rules for counting descent.

The aim of this section is to discuss some of the characteristics and elements of the traditional cultures, and the history which has brought them to the circumstances described in the previous section. Like any other society, African societies are preexisting networks into which individuals are born. These networks define relations in which its new members are to bear to one another, and relations through which their personal growth is to be nurtured and sustained. Through their cultures, the members are nurtured on common beliefs, ranges of values, attitudes, and actions, which make life in their society orderly. Through the same cultures, the members acquire skills and develop initiatives, by which life in society becomes satisfying. The family is the initial institution through which this formation and nurture are fostered.

The institution of family life is surely a human cultural universal; and the needs which it is primed to serve are among the deepest seething in the human psyche. This institution creates a constant and well-understood social framework for the nurture of the young until maturity; it establishes a hospitable and forgiving ambience in which the young can safely and securely train for eventual social responsibilities and intercourse; it also provides a regulated and protective framework for the responsible advancement of sexual life.

Kinship in Africa is unalterably social in focus, and where social kinship and biological kinship diverge, the social prevails. Thus, in many east and west African societies, and among many Bantu-speaking peoples, a child may call his natural mother's sister's husband "father". In many areas, a woman is permitted to undertake rites of marriage to another woman, and act as, and be, father to the progeny who come about by the action of a chosen sexual partner for the mother. Among many Bantu-speaking peoples, e.g. for the Mukongo, the terms "father" and "mother" are not restricted to the biological parents of a child, but are applicable to every adult member, male or female, of the father's siblings in the one case and the mother's siblings in the other. Hence, some fathers turn out to be female, and some mothers male. The same practice exists among the Kitara, the Ndaw, the Yao and the Huana. It is more usual, however, to call one's father's brother father, and one's mother's sister mother.

The simple point underlying these complex facts is that in African tradition, fatherhood is a social concept, at whose center lie systems of sacral, legal, and economic relations and responsibilities. Children are held to be born into the society via the clan. The elementary family is in this context merely the child's gateway into society. Accordingly, it is whatever group to which the duty of raising the child to the status of a full and

competently functioning member of society is entrusted which constitutes its parents. This group may be a man and his wife, or, may include their own agnate.

Even so, one can still say that two sorts of kinship relations define and knit the members of African families together: descent and sexual. Descent can be uterine or seminal. When it is uterine, the issue are full siblings. When descent is merely seminal, there are co-wives, whose children from their joint husband are linked by descent. The co-wives themselves are related only by virtue of their joint husband, and so merely sexually. Marriage is that institution which forgathers members of both kinship relations.

In African traditions, marriage is procreative in its primary purpose. Accordingly, women who have attained menopause do not in general remarry, and, in some societies, e.g. among the Nargi, their current marriage can be terminated in this circumstance. Men, likewise, are not expected to marry, unless they have a chance of fathering children; and subsequent impotence or sterility in a married man can cause him to lose his wife.

Even so, the procreative purpose has been traditionally regulated, and children of the same mother are by custom separated by three years or more, except in the case of infant death, in order to safeguard the physical and mental health of the nursing mother and her children, as Kikuyu elders, for example, painstakingly explain to young initiates. This spacing was achieved by absolute abstention, reinforced by a series of taboos, forbidding sexual contact during the period of nursing, by husband and wife maintaining separate rooms, often in separate houses, and by the new mother retreating to the home of her own family.

A traditional African marriage is a linking of two families through the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others on the part of both, except in the case of the man in a polygynous marriage. The state of marriage bestows mutual rights on man and wife, and thereby imposes entailed obligations on them, and, indeed, on members of their original families. These rights and obligations are explicit, and are designed to foster conditions of domestic peace and tranquillity for the procreation and upbringing of children. Reliance is placed on common knowledge, as well as on the breeding of the partners. On this dual basis, the partners execute those silent adjustments which tailor practice to ideals.

Apart from these, marriages are maintained by legal connections as well as by prescribed economic responsibilities towards wives, children, and, if need be, other kin; sacral duties, rights, and privileges, social sanction, and the reverence required of children and wives. Stylized behavior is often instituted for the purpose of strengthening positive relations between the families. In some societies, this is sought through the display of exaggerated respect. Thus, among the Ganda, as an exaggerated expression of respect, *tete-a-tete* encounters and conversations between a man and his wife's mother are traditionally proscribed. Among patrilineal

societies, the person to avoid is a man's wife's father. Traditionally, both the Toro and the Lendu scrupulously avoid such contact. In many societies of southern Africa, a woman cannot mention her husband's father by name. In other societies, good relations are sought through the stylized reduction of chances of adversarial encounters between the families, which would force upon a wife a choice between her husband and her own family. For this, a certain amount of bantering is enjoined between members of the two families as a method of conflict prevention, especially between a man and his brothers- and sisters-in-law, none of whom take umbrage at the seeming insults.

The relations created in the marriage rite are involuntary, and inherent in the state of marriage. They may in many cases persist after the death of the husband. For example, among the Nuer, the Zulu, the Margi and others, who recognize levirate obligations, a deceased man's wife, if she so chooses, can continue to bear him children by the action of his surviving brother, as his surrogate regarding his rights as well as his obligations. The complex of relations between husband and wife can only be dissolved, barring an annulment, through divorce and only in societies where provision for this exists. Some of the rights of the husband, apart from reciprocal sexual rights, are rights in rem, such that the man, aggrieved by reason of the adultery of his wife with another man, or of her death at the hand of another, or of her abduction, or of the alienation of her affection, can demand adjudication and the invocation of sanctions. Rights in rem may also be shared or collectively held. The woman's kin however retain the right of protecting her against abuse and ill usage by her husband.

A wife can hold independent wealth, since the duty of support rests with the husband, and the means of one wife cannot be used to support children of a second wife. She enjoys legal rights and discharges sacral and political responsibilities which add up to a high social position. In societies where there is a king, there also is a queen-mother. To wives is entrusted the initial training of children and the transmission of the traditions, religion, morals, manners, tastes of the society. A wife enshrines the moral force of a society; a being more mysterious than a man. She is more sacral, and is the object of many taboos and rites, and is often revealed as the innermost secret of male religious societies.

Wives have the same rights even in a situation of polygyny. In general, a man cannot even take a second wife without the consent of the first, the consent being signified by the acceptance of a pacification fee. In polygamy, steps are taken to foster a spirit of cooperation and friendliness between the wives. To this end, it is important that they do not share kitchens. In the spirit of cooperation and friendliness, they afford one another the companionship and conversation of adults.

Marriage in African traditions is the joining of two families through the union of one man and one woman and their children, always to the exclusion of all other men as regards the woman, and in monogamous societies to the exclusion of all other women as regards the man. The first

step is the selection of a maiden on the basis of her own beauty, known character and good health. Besides, she must not be related to murderers or the insane. The proposal of marriage is made through a deputation from the man's kinfolk to the woman's father and kinfolk. As proof of their good faith, and as an expression of the degree of honor and esteem held for the woman's family, they make a series of presentations consisting of items of wealth, however locally expressed--e.g. livestock, hunting implements, money. Without such presentations, any eventual liaison is only an irregular union and enjoys no protection. In some societies, the presentation is not material, and the man is required to serve the kin of the woman for a period of time, during which he is subject to exhaustive scrutiny. In yet others, they include an exchange of marriageable women into the two families.

The marriage is itself concluded in a public ceremony which proclaims the new status of the partners. Unless it is a remarriage on the woman's part, proof that she was not virginal at the consummation of the marriage can be sufficient cause for its immediate annulment. Her persistent infertility after consummation can be sufficient ground for the termination of the marriage and a demand for the return of the presentations. However, in societies with a sororate tradition, the marriage can be saved by the provision of the wife's sister to bear children for her.

The children of the marriage are in general filiated into the father's kinship group or the mother's, depending on the social determination of descent. In some societies of both east Africa and west Africa, this determination takes into account the size of the presentations. And in a few, filiation is cognatic. The children absorb the traditions, mores, and etiquette of their kinship groups, are instilled with the deepest feelings of affection and esteem for their kinship group and its members, and are cushioned and nurtured by a substantive kinship group whose motivation is sacral, and into which the children are bonded. Grandparents hold a position of special honor and affection, enjoy special friendship with their grandchildren, and act to prevent parental excesses. As elders, they are cherished as the repository of communal wisdom, and their words are regarded as stronger than an amulet.

A man, his wives, their unmarried children, and, sometimes, also their married children with their spouses and children live together in a set of buildings collectively making a household. A household thus constitutes a kinship group descended from common ancestors, but only to a shallow depth, typically spanning three generations. It is strictly exogamous. It is a corporate body, holding land in trust for the exclusive use of its members. A collection of such households, which trace their kinship to a deeper and commonly known level, is an exogamous lineage group. Also a corporate body, it renews and strengthens the inter-household relations by retaining responsibility for the rites of passage of all members of its constituent households. It fixes a man's social status and determines his succession to office. In general, it performs and supervises sacral rites.

A wide net of households which are interconnected through unilineal descent and whose details are known only in the lore of the clan, fuses the households together. As a means of mutual recognition, each clan is associated in a totemic manner with a natural species of plant, bird or other animal. Members of a clan who are otherwise mutual strangers come, through such totemic association, to recognize their mutual kinship, and to invoke the responsibilities and privileges designed into the kinship of the clan. Although, in theory, a clan must ensure the welfare of each member, actual solicitude regarding this, in practice, falls on members of the household. The clan is the vehicle of multilineal social organization. It is the true land-owning body, holds it in perpetuity, and has no power to alienate it in part or in whole. The clan regulates production and constitutes a political and supreme religious body, which apportions social responsibility to lineage groups and determines fields of succession. Differences between the assigned responsibilities cause some lineage groups to take precedence over others in the succession to political and religious offices. Likewise, although each clan is entrusted with special responsibilities of state, the differences between the social and political offices and duties create differences in prestige and status between clans.

Almost all African societies traditionally are unions of clans, and the administration of the union of clans is most often through the instrument of the state. The state is the more or less organized sum of the legislative, judicial, administrative and coercive organs of the society instituted for the order, protection and welfare of its citizens. The highest authority in this scheme of functions in centralized states, as most African traditional states are, is the paramount chief or king. Societies, like the Tiv, are not really stateless, but only diffuse and decentralized in their manner of carrying out functions of state.

A king or paramount chief is to be distinguished strictly from the office which he bears. The office itself is a sacred one, the object of awe and reverence, and the focus of the deepest religious performances. It is defended by a system of taboos and observances. It is the legitimizer of the hierarchy of authority and power by which the functions of the state are carried out. It is only derivatively, and not inherently, that the person of the king is likewise sacred. His accession is on the basis of the consent of electors, and his continuance in office is at the sufferance of his council and his people. Without inherent power to subjugate his people or territory, his own ascendancy is entrenched by the mystique he derives from his office as sacerdotal leader. Accordingly, he is required to be a paragon of the spiritual and moral purity of his people and a repository of their intellectual virtues and wisdom. He is the symbol of the fecundity of society and the fields, and is celebrated at harvest festivals. In line with this, his virility and fruitfulness must be evident, or he could be deposed.

The king is surrounded by a council of chiefs and courts. It is an African saying that there are no bad kings, only bad counsellors. Even so, he can be deposed for a variety of causes. These include contumacy with

respect to his council, oppressiveness, corruption in office, neglect of affairs of state, moral turpitude, and physical or psychological incapacitation.

Although the king's council is subordinate to him, it has inherent rights and competencies, and powers reserved from the king. From the council devolves the authority whereby many functions are carried out by families and village committees, and, in some places, age-sets and religious societies. Typically, there are lower chiefs acting as local governors, who in many societies are kinsmen of the king. They make local rules, raise taxes and tribute, extract labor, sacrifices, and the means of festivals and public celebrations. They must be acceptable not only to the king but also to the people.

The local governors or provincial chiefs were entrusted with judicial functions. They presided over courts which comprised members of principal social groups in the area, like clans, lineage groups and kinship units, and in areas age-sets also. Trials were attended by the principals in the suit, their witnesses, their local supporters, and members of the community at large, who were there to see to it that cases were equitably adjudicated. At the end of all the statements by the principals and their witnesses, opinions were delivered including disquisitions on civic responsibilities in an ascending order of privilege and protocol from the most junior judge to the president of the court who gave the final decision, after weighing all testimony and the opinions of his colleagues. The community saw to it that the decisions of the court were obeyed under threat of social and religious sanctions. Even so, the aim of the court is not purely punitive. Its intent in the arbitration of disputes is the restoration of norms, restitution for injuries inflicted, and, in general, reconciliation. Always, dissatisfied parties retained a right of appeal.

Of course, there are African societies whose traditions do not include a strong centralized authority, like the Logoli, the Tallensi, the Tiv and the Nuer. In such societies, however segmented, procedures, nevertheless, exist for preserving and defending public peace and for establishing and sustaining public harmony. Disputes are thrashed out not in regularly constituted court, but in moots attended by factions from the same or different lineage groups. The aim here is to secure a consensus upon which the restoration of social norms could be based. In centralized and diffused states, alike, in cases where witnesses are unavailable or inappropriate, recourse may be made to oracles and divination to obtain the judgment of interested gods. Steps are often taken to correct the possible bias of one oracle by a demand for the opinion of a second oracle.

The institutions were expressions of comprehensive belief systems, which were organized around mythic creeds. These creeds define a view of the character of the world and the place therein of human beings. Typically, society is conceived as having a sacral unity, which comprises its living members, its dead (who survive in less substantial form) and its as yet unborn children. The living are in constant communion with the dead on grounds of kinship.

Each class of members is credited with distinctive privileges and responsibilities. To the shades of the dead are ascribed a vision made clear by their acquaintance with the past, made wise by their selflessness and their solicitude for living generations, and made prophetic by their diachronic insight into the future. Ever watchful, they admonish and rebuke the living in whom alone dwells the right of decision. On account of the peculiar vision by the shades of the dead and the succor which they are able to give, they are invoked as a group, and the most distinguished among them are celebrated by name.

Powerful as the spirits of the dead are believed to be, they themselves are subordinate to higher powers and, in almost all sub-Saharan cultures, to a supreme being. This supreme being is held to be the original source of order in the world, which he generally administers through the intervention of minor powers. It is these subordinate powers which are associated with various natural objects, such as mountains, groves, trees, rivers and lakes, where they can be summoned through the right invocations.

The supreme being is variously described. In many cultures, he is a sky deity, whose unhappy intervention in human affairs led to the birth of culture, as the Ganda account has it. This is true of the Dinka account, too, in which the birth of human culture comes with the cessation of human dependence on the sky deity for daily sustenance. With the Acholi, the supreme being is more a power with many local presences than a single individual which depends on the services of subordinates. Among the Bantu, generally, there is a vital essence in which lies the unity of all living things, and which is manifested in the highest degree by the supreme being and in lesser degrees by ordinary members of the vegetable and mineral kingdoms.

A human being was thought of as a complex whole of various constituents derived from the mother, the father, the clan, and the supreme being. Some of these constituents outline his personality, his character and his destiny. Others represent an ineducable and unswerveable element in him and are the basis of the fatalist tendencies in sub-Saharan cultures. A few represent an element educable through precepts, example, and sanctions. Still more mark an element connected with the tutelary spirits of the clan, which is molded by the prescription of due practices and the avoidance of others. Above all, there are factors ensuring that a man is amenable to reason. Finally, a person's well-being was based on the harmonious functioning of all these constituents.

The same mythic creeds dominated artistic expression. Saharan African art, whether figurative or not, convex or concave in lines, symbolic or imitative in representation, is mostly functional. The artist, who is almost always a sculptor, accepts a long apprenticeship, during which he perfects his skills, and also studies themes of festivals and ceremonies, the stylizations associated with the themes, the prescribed media and the prayers and incantations required for their rightful use.

When the sculptures are not totemic, they rely on an exaggeration of physical forms and disproportion. Some of these features at first struck mystified observers as frightfully grotesque, and of the same order of degradation as gargoyles. As a result of the subsequent influence which the same features exerted on the minds of non-African artists like Picasso and Braque in Paris, Kirchner and the German Expressionists, Henry M. Moore and Jacob Epstein in England, they gained a different appreciation, and the same vibrant conatus and Immediate power of most African sculptures, which made them so effective in African ritual ceremony, have become more widely experienced.

It is true that in certain African societies, mainly in west Africa, there was a late court art which was decorative in effect, though still functional in intent. It placed symbols and motifs on walls and entrance arches of palaces. These symbols and motifs were supposed to proclaim the power and glory of kings, and the sacred sources of their authority. It also placed symbols on the weapons of hunters and canoes of fishermen. In perhaps every case, except with artistic doodling, the finished work was described, among the Tiv, for example, as the self-expression of the supreme being relying on human instruments.

No account of African art can be complete without mention of the centuries-old highly representational Benin and Ife bronzes. These applied Yoruba discoveries in metallurgy and alloys. They are Iconic and monumental images of the head rather than the full figure, which, when depicted at all, is given a truncated body with a disproportionately large head. Severed heads and stunted torsos would indeed be grotesque if intended to be decorative. Many African cultures, including the Benin, in fact associate the perpetual constituent of a human being with the head. This is the constituent in charge of a person's destiny and the person's intelligence and craftiness. The bronze figures were without doubt connected with such beliefs, and in all probability depicted the heads of the most successful and powerful kings, kings of a manifest and accomplished destiny.

As a whole, sub-Saharan African cultures achieved considerable triumphs. Throughout the west, east, and south of the continent, they constructed a succession of empires and kingdoms from the 5th century A.D., strong monarchies with effective administrations and systems of taxation, as well as a flourishing external trade. The most renowned include the Ghana and Songhai empires in the west, the Azanian empire in the east, and the Monomotapa kingdom of Zimbabwe in the south. The stone ruins of Monomotapa still arouse wonder today. Indeed, one of only nine autochthonous cities in the history of the world was founded by the Yoruba in west Africa; and with its Vai script, Africa is one of only three continents to originate a system of writing.

The traditional cultures described above were penetrated by Islam and Christianity and dominated by colonialism. Colonial administrations in sub-Saharan Africa irreversibly put an end to the political hegemony of



local cultures, not only by their assumption of the powers of coercion and the introduction of new social institutions, new ways of doing things, and new reasons for doing them, but also by their juxtaposition of the local cultures within newly defined geographic boundaries, which did not coincide with any previously existing.

Colonialism brought in new systems of education, an inquisitive and acquisitive attitude towards nature, the promise of mass literacy, scientific approaches to disease, the infrastructure of modern communication and commerce, cultural and religious enrichment, an expanded vision of moral ideas and ideals, the suppression of tribal warfare, party politics, and techniques of management and government unavoidable in the modern state. It brought ideals of constitutional government in contrast with sacred tradition, the ideal of legal egalitarianism and an impartial judiciary intended to pursue it, an efficient though impersonal civil administration, and the promise of a free press.

Colonialism also ushered in unbridled economic exploitation and sapped sub-Saharan cultures of their vitality. They became deprived of direction and internal impetus, and increasingly survived mainly as pageant and ceremonial. New ideas concerning individual accountability and individual reward, the spreading sense of individual vision and the ascendancy of self-interest in contrast with community interest as a basis of action, the growing sense of private power arising from self-action rather than clan direction, all of these atomizing factors, acting in concert, have loosened the internal bonds and efficacy of lineage-based clans.

The penetration of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is extensive, and it, along with Christianity, is a force in different degrees in west, east and south Africa. The nature of its presence and the effect which it has through its presence on traditional cultures is, however, diverse. In some cultures, it is hardly a factor. In others, it is overwhelming. Where it is a factor, some local cultures acknowledge and coexist with it, take advantage of its talents, while insulating the centers of its own traditions from Muslim influence. The Asantes are the clearest example of this. Their king was not permitted to convert to Islam, but his kingdom freely used Muslims as accountants, conductors of its external trade, scribes and, indeed, ambassadors.

The Asantes also sought to graft onto a substratum of their vigorous culture approved elements of Christian doctrine and ethics, selected ideas of Western science and some technological practices.

Some other cultures were more receptive as regards Islamic acculturation. Many in the Yoruba culture, for example, in response to some racial attitudes in colonialism, converted to Islam which preached the equality of believers.

There are cultures, however, which were completely receptive to Islam. Prime examples of this are the Hausa in west Africa and certain Swahili cultures in southeast Africa, where the Islamic experience is vastly longer. Indeed, the Swahili language can be traced back to the ninth

century, and its literature began to be set down in Arabic script only a few centuries later.

It is, however, only since the 19th century and through *force majeure* that Islamic hegemony has been attained. Many Muslims in such areas consider that elements of traditional African religion have been duly purged, and that what survives is but custom as distinct from the prophetic tradition and revealed religion. The continuance of traditional religious practices is, however, evident in all rites of passage. Islamic and traditional African practices run parallel.

Christianity, like Islam, enjoyed its most formative influx into sub-Saharan cultures in the 19th century. However, ancient African kingdoms had contact with it very early. The ambassador of Queen Candace's court mentioned in the Book of Acts hailed in all probability from Meroe, beyond the southern borders of Egypt.

The Nubian kingdoms, whose territory is now part of the Republic of Sudan, had, very early, established the presence of Christianity. It was in the sixth century that Monophysite and Orthodox missions were sent from Constantinople and brought their theological disputes and practices to Nubia. This early Nubian Christianity was, however, to vanish under the pressure of Muslim traders and adventurers, and the strong intervention of the sultans of Egypt in the 12th and 13th centuries. While it lasted, however, it injected African ideas and practices into Christian observance. Its iconography was distinctly African, and its nativity scenes depicted African donkeys and cattle and a black royal wet-nurse, as well as three black kings bearing gifts. Under the leadership of UNESCO and through a vast international effort, many of its relics were rescued before they could be swamped by the flooding arising from the construction of the great Aswan High Dam.

Somewhat eastward, Ethiopia displays both a Judaic and a Christian influence. The Jewish presence in Ethiopia dates by tradition from the days of King Solomon. The Falasha, descendants of the Ethiopian converts to Judaism of that time, combine ancient forms of Judaism with ancient African practices. Presumably, today's Falasha are descendants of those who declined to convert to Christianity in the early centuries.

The history of Christianity in Ethiopia goes back with certainty to the fourth century when it was connected with the archbishopric of Alexandria. Through the centuries, it engaged in a programme of proselytization of non-Muslims and non-Christians, at the same time, like African religions, connecting Christianity with issues of daily existence. Its traditional African features are quite evident, and include more than the religious integration of drumming, singing and dancing. Its achievements include the spectacular architecture of the churches at Lalibela, constructed out of one solid rock, (an eclectic artistic tradition which combines early Christian styles with African motifs and ideas,) illustrated manuscript texts of early Christian works now disclosed to the world, hagiological works and works of critical philosophy.

The changes wrought in sub-Saharan Africa since the 19th century are profound. The main problem posed is one of acculturation. The problem exists because, up until the middle of the 19th century and in many places well into the 20th century, traditional cultures provided a close interconnection between social structure, laws, belief systems, and work and art, and were the cradle of certitudes according to which people led generally harmonious lives. Today, sub-Saharan African countries are transitional agglomerations of ill-assorted cultures, faced at present with the conundrum of generating and supporting coherent and unified nations.

### **TRENDS IN THE CULTURAL TRANSITION**

The culture of a people has many dimensions. They include a pedagogical one, teaching the common wisdom to succeeding generations and yielding the symbols and means for communicating that wisdom; an ethical one, declaring principles of sensibility and action, and sketching out the basis and limits of tolerance and cooperation; a prophetic one, bearing on the norms and future history of its people. All in all, it is a fecund womb of national identity. Acculturation in sub-Saharan Africa will be the means for interweaving the present diversity of cultures into a coherent whole, from which can be derived the ends and the means of the general flourishing of society.

The anticipated result of the acculturation will be the reinvigoration of sub-Saharan African cultures, enriched by the colonial, the Islamic, and the Christian experience in a manner and to an extent which may benefit the peoples of the areas. The goal is the evolution of cultures within which the transformation from disrupted, diseased, untechnical and largely illiterate post-colonial societies into harmonious, literate, technical, industrial, prosperous and thoroughly emancipated ones can be assured.

The social problems in the midst of which the acculturation is taking place are many, forbidding, and unequally distributed among constituent cultures. They include problems of refugees, education, communications, health, food, water, rural development, urban planning, economic progress, and unappeased and recrudescing tribalism.

These problems are already being vigorously tackled. The civil wars, chief source of refugees, are winding down and yielding to negotiations. Medical facilities and delivery have improved dramatically; agricultural production of selected crops has increased tremendously; considerable expansion of the economic infrastructure has been engineered. However, an exclusive concentration on the technical problems of economic development, without attention to cultural development and support, has caused steep declines in gross national products and per capita incomes. Sub-Saharan African reconstruction ought to mean, not simply the creation of a productive economy, but also the fostering and sustaining of culturally coherent, vibrant and tolerant societies.

Indispensable to any such reconstruction will be a literate population. The dynamics of consciousness, the will to progress, the skills and the psychological attitudes necessary for progress can only accrue from widespread education based on soundly designed curricula. Universal, compulsory, and, consequently, free education for all children in urban as well as rural areas will be the means to bring all into the context of the modern state. Millions of children are already in school, with education at all levels locally available.

Sub-Saharan African illiteracy today is not confined to children. Much of it is adult illiteracy, and it cannot be glossed over. After all, education is the means of liberation from some of the limiting factors in our immediate environment--physical, social, and cultural.

### **THE MIND-SET OF AFRICAN CULTURES**

The above sections have discussed characteristic features of the cultural scene in Africa, the aspirations and concerns in that cultural region of the world, the original world-views of its peoples and the historical encounters which have contributed to the formation of their present mind-set, together with its trends.

African societies traditionally were mostly unions of clans. These clans consisted of a wide network of households which were interwoven through lineal descent. The clans were generally responsible for instilling common beliefs, social norms, and living skills in members, in order to bring about loyalty to communal purposes and assurance of security and provision for all.

The traditional societies were irreversibly penetrated by brands of Islam and Christianity, and dominated by colonial powers. These encounters altered the force and direction of the host cultures, altered social relations and the rationale underlying the organization of traditional societies, introduced new ways of doing things and new reasons for doing them, and brought within common territories cultures which before were highly territorial. In a word, these encounters changed, in many different ways at one and the same time, relations between individuals and relations with the environment.

Whereas the host cultures provided a coherent interconnection between social structure, laws, belief system, work, and art, a coherence providing the certitude and trust making for harmonious lives, the historical encounters have produced accumulations of cultural fragments still struggling to promote and support unified nations. Here lies a new challenge.

Since its beginnings in Africa, human culture has responded to great changes in its physical and social environments by creative adaptations and adjustments; but today, the changes and challenges facing African cultures are at their most acute and most pervasive yet. The perplexities thus caused have to some served as the occasion for devising

programmatic social theories and cultural proposals, in whose light certain features of African cultures, which are held to be non-traditional, are to be curbed, because they are thought of as corrupting; at least, they are deplored because they are still thought of as being inauthentic and alien; for others, these same features are, with some caution and conscious purpose, to be integrated and internalized, and welcomed as triggers of beneficent evolution and catalysts of progress.

The stress of the changes is manifest at the seams of society, where individuals are bonded to one another and to groups, and groups are bonded to one another and to the ethnic society. The stress tends to weaken and to dissolve some of these bonds which make a society solidarist and cohesive. In view of the cultural realities of Africa, a few observers have also proposed theories of the traditional and ancient society, and have, besides, suggested hypotheses concerning its origins and the motives of its cultural forms. Relying upon these, they have developed grounds of comment, clarified a basis of acculturation, and synthesized principles meant to govern the crystallization of cultural identity. The cultural facts besetting Africa pose two general needs: i) the need to achieve cultural coherence and cohesion in the modern trans-ethnic nations of Africa, and ii) the need to establish new comprehensive ways of life, which will be grasped as being of value, and to incorporate a more or less common understanding of that value.

This weakening, this dissolution of bonds, is sufficiently widespread to suggest an approach of methodological atomism to the problem of fostering national cultures in today's Africa. It is a similar methodological atomism which underlies universal suffrage with its "one person one vote" principle as a way of ascertaining the will of the group. However, a methodological atomism does not in itself carry any further philosophical implications. In particular, methodological atomism does not imply a social atomism, and is quite consistent with the general African view in which a person is an ethical being, inescapably rooted in social life, and subject to well-defined norms, typically imparted in the framework of the clan.

Today's juxtaposition of diverse cultural strands in Africa, coupled with the general absence of an imperative culture, turns the people of Africa into cultural atoms, each person, it is true, imbued with cultural tendencies and cultural predispositions, but at the same time having open to him or her the attractions the promise to everyone of a rich and variegated landscape of cultures present. In this post-colonial era, when the power and authority of decision making lie with Africans themselves, there exists an embarrassment of riches in the shape of theories and methods upon which political and social decision makers can draw.

There is in Africa today an unabated and constant objective need for a consensus on the nature of the societies which are thought by African themselves, and the encouragement of positive impulses towards fostering such societies. The cultural features and practices which make up Africa

today reflect the degree of diversity whose acceptance is necessary, both for the growth of trans-ethnic national cultures and for regional, inter-regional, and international cultural communions.

The subjective need to form national cultures is keenly felt in Africa. There is clear realization that, without such trans-ethnic cultures, provincial cultural differences are apt to sprout separatist tendencies and actions, which have led to apprehension, oppression, civil war and general unrest. Certainly, the basis for such trans-ethnic cultures exists in the internal similarities among African cultures themselves and in the similarities between the historical experiences of the cultures. If the internal similarities are sufficiently acted upon by elements of cultures from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, which are present in Africa and belong in the historical experience of African cultures, the similarities can be enhanced and can eventually spur the flowering of national cultures.

Elements of cultures from Asia, Europe, and the Americas are already well known to enough millions, among whom they are admired and indulged. The scientific, technological, literary, and artistic content of these cultures, the goods which they have generated, and the high degree of self-expression which this content permits, all find great favor in Africa. These are all goals approved and desired in Africa for Africa; and there exists a brimming eagerness to engage in fruitful dialogue with the respective cultures, not only as the cultures supported by those achievements, but also as the cultures whose fruit they are.

In a way, these elements are making a return to Africa, home of the Adam and Eve of cultures, where all culture first arose in the mists before recorded history. They are elements which resonate in every department of human life in Africa. In political concepts and organization, in economic practice and structure, in educational institutions, methods, and curricula, in employment patterns and labor practices, in agricultural crops, farming methods, and husbandry, in the forms and uses of leisure, in music, dance, literature, and the arts, in family relations and practices, in the rites of birth, marriage, and death, in language, belief, values, dress, and manners, cultures from all continents of the world have found firm footing in Africa.

## **THE OPENNESS OF AFRICAN CULTURES**

On gaining political independence and sovereignty, African nations sought to fortify their independence by an assertion of an African personality or negritude. Attempts were made to characterize what is African and to declare an imperative to preserve and foster it as a way of exploiting political independence for the reclamation and pursuit of an African destiny, a destiny believed to have been interrupted by the colonialist episode. The attempts led to brilliant philosophical essays. Their cultural as well as their programmatic content was, however, quite sparse. They advanced philosophical speculation, rather than a way of life. The concrete African features which they envisaged often consisted in ceremony

and pageantry, in spectacle rather than in conviction. It was more a promulgation for official functions than an expression of the life of the people.

Indeed, as regards the life of the people, such speculations represented a real danger. In terms of a land, a language, a belief system, mores, customs, *savoir faire*, and art, nothing in the heritage covered anything like the entire territory of Africa. Proposals to pursue the African personality were bound, if taken seriously, to promote a divisiveness, dissolving the links forged in the colonial era. The independent African countries were amalgams of such collocations.

Because the certitudes of "negritude" and "the African personality" tended to be discovered by officials of government and the political parties in power, the practical expression was in an area of most interest to government: the very form of government itself. Attempts were made to establish instruments of rule and practices which officials conceived as conforming most closely to their vision of the African personality and negritude. In practice, this meant the introduction of a high degree of centralization, paralyzing to local initiative, and forgetful of the checks and balances conceived in the wisdom of African traditions.

The practices were called African socialism and communalism. In fact, they were by and large species of authoritarianism which were neither African in spirit nor communalistic in manifestation. The proposal to create political institutions which would be African in spirit was, however, not amiss: it is not that the specific nature of the institutions was inscrutable, but that the spirit of Africa, to which the institutions would give manifest expression, has not yet taken secure form. A confident and secure culture is an indispensable condition for workable political institutions, the source of their effective authentication, their defence and their sustainer. National political institutions call for national, and so, trans-ethnic elements of culture. This national culture will be a complementarity of local cultures, cooping their virtues and their psychic strengths and creative power, and the inspiration of its people.

The times are now favorable for such a development. The political and social upheavals which African countries have experienced have now concluded the first stage of their post-colonial era. That stage was marked by a dogmatism, inflexibility, and general combativeness, which, cumulatively, were the assertion of a separate identity, the specification of a cloak and a *persona*, through which thoughtful spokesmen for their African compatriots sought to be grasped, for the departing colonialism had left Africans naked. This is hardly a unique reaction, and is entirely similar to the efforts of various European spokesmen, in particular, certain German thinkers, to describe and thereby constitute the 'Volkgeist' or 'Spirit of the people' in reaction to the 18th century domination of Europe by French culture.

Today, there is a greater intellectual acceptance as something applicable to Africa, too, the fact that all national cultures are now

syncretist, that this is an inescapable existential condition of modern viability. The valorization of African cultures in this post-colonial era requires an impulse forward from an idealized and static conception of traditions to the espousing of a vital syncretist heritage of elements derived from diverse sources, able to constitute for Africans a total resource for living, and offering to non-Africans a familiar feeling.

This should not be an indiscriminate syncretism. The problematique of African cultures was not the cause but the result of the colonial impact; with national sovereignty gained, such consequences of colonialism as remain harmful persist in spite of the withdrawal of their cause. Their acceptance is what is often called the colonial mentality. They have no place in the syncretism.

African countries formerly ruled by France have always showed a greater acceptance of French influences, at least. They had a tradition of participation in the political and cultural institutions of France, which on account of its 'France overseas' conceptions practiced somewhat assimilationist policies. In turn, French personnel participated in notable numbers in the administration and other institutions of the countries. The willing cultural openness in those countries led, in some of them, to a readiness to seek political, military, and other institutional assistance from France, even in matters relating to internal politics. The same openness led to suggestions of an eventual multinational confederation with France.

All in all, however, the new openness in Africa derives to some extent from an appreciation of the realities of the African condition as described in the first section. Some national problems, indeed, need to be tackled internationally. Not only is there an increasing cooperation with reconstructive agencies like the World Bank, there is also a greater sense of trust in regional and pan-African contacts and undertakings. A more thorough inter-penetration among ethnic groups has also made for mutual acceptance and cooperation. In fact, religious difference is a greater cause of mistrust and exclusion in Africa now than is sheer ethnic affiliation, even though the trans-ethnic dimensions of religion in Africa have helped to foster transethnic harmony.

Another harmonizing factor is the relatively low number of high schools and universities. These are often residential and have served as centers of re-acculturation for students drawn from different areas and ethnic groups and even countries. With the effect of uniform curricula added, cultural barriers are broken down and loyalty to more universal cultural norms is advanced.

The role of government in all of this is not the reconciliation of well-developed and self-propelled interests, but the fostering and nurturing of new and more comprehensive societies through initiatives in areas like education, personal liberty, health, agriculture, the facilitation of cultural contacts, support of enlightened rural policies, and the maintenance of public peace. These aims can be advanced through free public discussion and recommendation.



In the past, African governments have proclaimed the public good as the motive of their decisions and actions. In this, they have only proclaimed a democratization of ends. In social and national development, no end, however lofty in idea, can justify every and all means. The democratization of means, of practice, and of institutions that recognize and defend practice is an unexcludable and irreplaceable expression of human dignity in the political life of a nation. In the belief systems of Africa, in which human beings are typically invested with an ultimate and ineradicable dignity, there should be no justification for any kind of authoritarianism, least of all one in which citizens have no inalienable rights in their own country. The pursuit of democratic aims and practices, all the way down to regional and local assemblies, holds the best promise for arousing the faith of people in their destiny, for galvanizing their energies, and for fostering the degrees of self-realization and self-creation needed by each individual for rewarding participation in cultural life.



## **PART I**

### **AFRICAN IDENTITY**



# CHAPTER I

## SOURCES OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

*W. EMMANUEL ABRAHAM*

The most massive segment of African society is traditional, and yet not purely so. By now, it is irretrievably impregnated at a variety of depths by elements of a succession of once alien cultures. It is natural for current accounts of traditional societies to adopt an empirical approach with regard to this most massive segment, just as it is inevitable for them to resort to speculation concerning its past. The union of the two approaches is often made to spawn programmatic social theories. In their light non-traditional features are to be blanced since corrupting, or condemned since inauthentic and alien, or--with much caution--integrated and internalized as triggers of beneficial evolution and catalysts of progress.

I propose two discussions: one, suggesting a theory of the traditional and ancient society, an hypothesis concerning its origins and the motives of its cultural forms; and a second discussion which relies upon the first and from it develops a ground of comment, clarifies a basis for acculturation, and synthesizes principles governing the crystallization of cultural identity.

### SOCIETY AND THE CULTURAL FORMS

#### *The Existential Predicament*

Social stress operates at seams: it creates or dissolves them; it makes society solidarist or fissiparous. Its actual effect evidently depends in part on the extent of its homogeneity. When this is sufficiently extensive, the stress is experienced as an existential predicament; and yet it may become a welding power if tapped, and if, untapped, a disruptive force and breeder of anarchy. Let humanity's first realization that nature is independent of man, of his needs, his desires and his motives be an original existential predicament. In any age before the practical mastery of nature, this perception of nature as intractable is bound to be traumatic. This threatening condition would call for a pragmatic resolution through practice first, and subsequently an intellectual resolution through theory. The theory would initially rationalize the practice and, thereby, subsequently guide it. In the latter stage, it would define the goals and moments of practice, and it would create the ground for its optimism. In turn, with each appearance of success, practice would give an air of confirmation to theory, and thus help entrench it.

At their first appearance, practice would comprise a variety of formulae, incantations, magical rites and ceremonies, all calculated to bind

nature to the ends of man; and theory would take the form of nested myths. There are reasons for these forms. One can imagine that our earliest attempts to overcome the shocking discovery concerning nature were oneiric. This would cause our earliest dreams to have the character of nightmares; for in order to come to terms with our distress, we must first re-enact the shocking discovery in circumstances in which there is certitude of a continued escape from the distress. The re-enactment of the shocking discovery in dream constitutes the nightmare, and in the measure that we are successful in overcoming it, we ourselves may become heroic agents in our dreams, inexplicably equipped with the power to overcome refractory nature. We herewith create the prototype of the wish-fulfilling dream.

Alternatively, and more likely, agents other than ourselves intervene in the dream in our behalf, presenting unguent for the distress, solace for the unhappy consciousness. These agents act not as benevolent aliens, but as subjective surrogates, imbued on the occasion of the dreams with anima and thus enabled to communicate and to act, although in themselves they are known to be inanimate and inert objects.

In this latter kind of dream, we do mythify our experience of nature, for we personify objects, which indeed are recognizably inanimate, and imbue them with a supra-human efficacy. That they are recognizably inanimate may be gathered from the fact that not every instance of objects of the kind in question is held to be thus efficacious. The object which is imbued with the anima is thus untypical of its kind. The personification, likewise, is hardly metaphysical in import, for at that juncture in the history of human culture, the only genre of explanation or account familiar to man is historical, or, rather, biographical. Myth as an account must accordingly rely at this time on the biographical mode. Since this mode calls for a sense of human agency and human causation; objects otherwise known to be inanimate come in myth to be apprehended as willful agents endowed with purposes and motives. The failure of nature (which causes the existential predicament) comes, in turn, to be felt not as a mere sparseness but, under the same biographical mode, as a determination to tantalize our hopes, and to be indifferent to our wishes and welfare. This perception of a personalized and yet insufficiently understood nature now suggests the need for a supra-human efficacy in order to overcome it and coerce it to our ends. Even so, nature is only somewhat personified, for unlike real persons, it cannot be trained or bound through mere cunning or strength.

Indeed, infants, too, seem to experience a similar existential predicament when they discover that their circumambient world is occasionally refractory. Typically, they are thrown into a rage which solicitous mothers may pacify by conformable behavior. If infants, too, were highly conceptual, their rationalization of these facts would be mythic in content. One surmises that their earliest dreams would, likewise and in any case, be nightmarish, re-enacting the refractoriness and devising oneiric means to overcome it. In the adult life of the society, however, mere rage would be impotent, and circumambient nature, disposed more like a

stepmother than a doting mother, would require being tackled by other means, if the threat of the abortion of mankind so posed is to be stalled.

I know that a widely held view is that our first experience of nature is symbolic and mythic. What I am suggesting, on the other hand, is that our first experience is in fact thoroughly literal. The experience of slaking our thirst from rivulets and springs, or of assuaging our hunger from harvests in the wild must, from the very first, have been a matter of course, and completely devoid of symbols. The sure instinct which leads infants to the mother's breast, or man to the abundance of nature, completely lacks metaphysical or speculative motives. Pre-prandial or postprandial grace surely must be a later and non-instinctual development. Rather, it must take the distress of our existential predicament--when rivulets turn brackish or springs dry up, when wild harvests fail a fruit-gathering and improvident society, in a word, when nature is experienced as independent of our will, and a threat of the abortion of man can be smelled--to compel us to resort to mythification and mystery. The resulting imbuing our dreams of otherwise ordinary objects with anima and supra-human efficacy can be accepted also as the prototype of sacralization. And, if sacralization be the paradigm of a symbolic perception of nature, then the present contention is that it only ensues upon the existential predicament, by which it is evoked as a response, and does not precede it at all.

#### *Myth as Existential Response*

The overriding pre-occupation of man in this condition would surely be to overcome and mold nature at all costs. The two levels of components in implementing this purpose are practice and theory; these mark the real and pregnant beginning of human culture, the substitution of plan for instinct. The overriding purpose of both the practice and the theory is to situate man safely in the world. To guide will and plan, mankind devises ritual and myth.

This overriding purpose imposes certain typic features upon both ritual and myth. That myth devised in response to the original existential predicament will be called original myth. Three things evidently need to be addressed by it as *desiderata* which impose typic features upon it. These features will distinguish original myth, irrespective of its actual origins and initial circumstance; they are universal features.

The first of these is that original myth must offer assurance of dependability in nature. This requires that nature be conceived as being subject to rule and as order made manifest. So anxious has myth been to offer that assurance that it has often conceived the order as inexorable, and has expressed it in terms of idioms of necessity or fate and its handmaidens. Because its genre must still be biographical, original myth assumes the form of a genesis account, an account of the beginnings of the world as a whole, and also of society. It is also in the context of society that the course

of nature poses a threat of an abortive humanity, and it is only in the same context that the survival of humanity can be conceived and preserved.

The intended orderliness of nature is not to be grasped as a sheer datum. This much has been apprehended in the felt intractability and the existential distress it begets, and which may occasion unexpected famine through blight, and physical destruction through sudden flood, earthquake, or spontaneous conflagration. In the light of this, the first task of original myth is to create an account which depicts nature as really orderly, and explains the threatening variation as an aberration. The practical interest in this first thrust of myth is eventually to make the orderliness so revealed accessible to human will and purposes. The key to this access is ritual practice.

The second typical feature of original myth is connected with another urgent task; this is to present the threat so posed in the aberration as gratuitous. Were it not gratuitous but merited, there might well be no way to evade it or to prevent it, no way to bend nature to human purposes and will, with the consequence that humanity might yet be aborted. The second feature is, therefore, an account of fault and the causes of the aberration. The third typical feature is connected with a third task, that of securing the means of making these optimistic conceptions fruitful. It rationalizes the rites calculated to thwart the intractability of nature and to render its orderliness once again beneficent.

The characteristic manner in which the original myth introduces the orderliness is through the idea of creation, conceived as an operation upon a pristine chaos or indeterminateness or even nothingness. Creation is thus portrayed as the eduction of a paradisiac state out of this pristine nebulousness. The anthropocentric emphasis of this cosmogony is unmistakable, and as regards man this beneficent orderliness is expressed in terms of the subjection of nature to his dominion. Yet this universal and original existential predicament is connected with the fear that nature might not be antecedently primed to serve the purposes and needs of man. This inspires little confidence in the idea of an initial paradisiac state. A contradiction arises in paradise, for it is in paradise that the aberration is experienced. It is the psychic terror so generated by this contradiction that original myth seeks to relieve through its genetic explanation of the aberration and through its theory of fault.

The right conception is desperately crucial, for if the aberration were to be due to some failing in man, the refractoriness of nature would loom as a recoiling or alienation of a paradisiac nature from man; and this would entail man's expulsion from paradise. Original myth transforms this experience of alienation, and infuses it with optimism. This is its second typical feature. The chaos, the indeterminateness, the nebulousness is external to man and is the ultimate source of the refractoriness of nature. It is the mother of this possibility. The fruition of the possibility is, however, due to some specific event, an event which brings about a disconnection of human



society from the beneficent order of nature. The event initiates a regress into nebulousness. Man himself must be blameless in this event.

Man's blamelessness in this event suggests an early conception of fault as a merely external blemish and not an internal failing--something essentially superficial which can be removed or reduced through cleansing means, rites or other benign enactments, possessing a restorative power. In this light it is easy to correct that austere idea which attributes to the barbarousness of ancient society the certainty of affliction for every faulty act. The fault should be conceived after a geological parallel, and not ethical at all: it is simply disconnection from the beneficent order of nature, and such disconnection, howsoever brought about, is an inconvenience to any person or group situated at that point. Notions of desert and vengefulness are not required in the least. This much is confirmed by the antecedent inchoateness from which the paradisiac state itself is coaxed. The inchoateness poses a continual threat of perturbation and regression.

The third typical feature of original myth lies in a prescription of rites and usages able to restore aberrant nature to its beneficence. With these, a new conception of fault emerges, for further lapses of this beneficence or, what is phenomenally the same, the apparent failure of the rites, must now be attributed to acts of omission or commission, whether voluntary or involuntary, on the part of individuals or groups of individuals, in short, to human mistakes. With this arises the ascription of blame and the meted punishment. This new view of fault with its associated vengefulness seems needed for the general credibility of the ritual usages, for now their apparent failures can be promptly explained in terms of such reprehensible mistakes, and so in terms of interference. By now a transition has occurred from impersonal fault to authored offense.

These ideas can, indeed, be illustrated from extant myths. There is clear reference to the prehistoric chaos from which an orderly world is induced and begotten. In the Bakuba, for example, Mbombo ruled when earth was nothing but water shrouded in darkness. Overcome by the pangs of birth, he exurgitated the heavenly bodies. Meteorological processes brought about the formation of the clouds and the emergence of dry hills. By further acts of exurgitation, mankind, animals and other terrestrial life were begotten. Similar antecedents of the created world may be found in the Tao, which Lao-Tzu described as formless, unknowable, and nonsubstantial. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, a primal chaos, a vast immeasurable abyss is described, waste and wild, from which at length earth arose and in the end, mankind. In the *Rig- Veda*, there is a song of an indeterminable state preceding the gods themselves. In the Zuni tale of the Pueblo region of New Mexico, a void and desolate space is described and subsequently filled by Awonawilona by dint of sheer thought and strong will. The Maori account details nine successive states of the universal and cosmic void. Even the *Timaeus* puts forward the formless, indeterminate and recalcitrant bounty upon which order is imposed by the demiurge.

Less obvious embodiments of the same idea are myths relating to creation from the dismembered body of a god or especially a monster or hybrid being or other distorted and not well-formed figure. Attenuated and perhaps parochial, but nonetheless similar, is the idea of the original commixture of earth and sky from whose separation earth and sky are articulated. The fashioning of a living and sentient man from inanimate earth, clay or mud, or his simple emergence from the ground, are but more forgetful variations on the same theme: the emergence of defined forms from the nebulous.

To recapitulate briefly, the leading part of what I have called original myth is cosmogonic in content, and its form is most commonly biological because its idiom must be biographic as earlier explained. The second substantial part relates to the dangerous influence of the pristine chaos on the scheme of things. The manifestation of this influence is seemingly recounted, not only in accounts of a specific fall leading to the loss of paradise, but also in recurrent images of disorderliness and its continual threat and similar themes welling up from the primitive well-springs of human nature and pre-historic experience.

The loss of paradise should, in my opinion, be sought in tales depicting the origin of death, and not in stories of meteorological disasters. Such stories do not relate to the original distress, but rather to potential consequences of ritual, infraction and offense, and accordingly are late. They appear to be connected with widespread maculation and general infractions of commandments designed to safeguard society.

I have mentioned that in order to wrest optimism from the maws of catastrophe, and to explain the survival of man in spite of the introduction of death, original myth has to absolve man from responsibility. The most common device used to convey this in Africa, as elsewhere, is the message that failed. The Creator sends a message of blessing to man, which is corrupted into a curse by the time man receives it; the corruption usually takes place through an eavesdropper delivering the wrong word ahead of the authorized messenger. Sometimes, the authorized messenger himself tarries too long and corrupts the message through faulty recollection. The identity of the messenger varies from region to region, and almost from people to people. It might be the cat, the duck, the frog, the chameleon, the goat, the praying mantis, the tortoise, or the centipede. One way or another the assurance of human immortality is corrupted into a message of death. The *Book of Genesis* conforms to this structure also. Two trees are involved in the story of the Fall: one the tree of life, and the other, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2.9). The former bestows immortality (Gen. 3.21) and the latter, mortality. The prohibition regarded the latter only (Gen. 2.16 ff). What the serpent did was to pervert gratuitously the word which God himself had given to man, and to describe the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and of death as though it were a tree of knowledge and life (Gen. 3.4 ff).

Original myth also relies on other motifs to indicate the blamelessness of man in the appearance of death. In the Ruandan account, Kazi Ramuntu, common ancestor of all mankind, was directly created by Imana. Man did not die initially. One day, however, Imana was in hot pursuit of Death, so that man would never die. An old woman, in ignorance of the reason for the chase, pitied the quarry and offered Death refuge. Imana then decreed that as man had invited and welcomed Death, Death would thenceforth have its abode with man. It was not long before fratricide and other degradations appeared and spread. Man thus became liable to die in consequence of a virtue of supererogation. Whatever the motif, what is common to all such accounts is the repudiation of all human responsibility in the original distress. The early state of innocence which they preach is not an *ad hoc* supposition, but is crucial for the survival and integrity of the human psyche.

#### **SOURCES OF NATIONAL AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY: MYTH, ART AND PHILOSOPHY**

##### *Myth*

The original events which myth records and ritual reenacts are events involved in our discovery of the independence of nature. If memory of them has been preserved, the myth of creation will introduce a power able to create the world, not as a pile of bodies, but as an ordered system. Man would be created in a state of innocence, which would be disrupted by some mythic event occasioning the distress. Even though potentially fatal, the threat is treated as being in the end futile.

These events are, of course, not now datable. They are both primordial and continual: they are also potentially fatal. The sedimented experience of the threat of abortive humanity is recovered in myth; but even now, in periods of great exigency, many are driven to science fiction and the most remote fantasies.

Myth is a universal, and is not bound by the particular time and space of the original events which it represents. Myth reconstrues what is truly historical into that which is historic. The first step is to shear off from that which is historical every element which renders it spatially and temporally determinate. The events and kinds of objects so treated must in the first place have been involved in a profound experience which becomes sedimented and is capable of recovery in diverse ways. The experience, along with being deeply affective, must also be universal. The second step is to reconstruct the experience in a narrative form, thereby replacing the original principals with *personas* conceived as bringing about their substantiation. It is through such substantiation alone that myth is able to present history, indeed universal history. It is thus that myth becomes universally applicable, when events which are originally locked in time and space lose their provincialism and acquire the valency of the historic.

This substantiation encourages a conception of objects and events which invests them with a certain energy that reaches beyond their concrete span. It is when we limit real existence to the palpable and physically continuous that the conception of objects assumed in myth appears symbol-laden, mysterious or superstitious. The principle of comprehensive objecthood should certainly allow historical objects posthumously to acquire properties. Thus, one may say that a deceased person, rather than his estate, can be cheated by his lawyer.

If the motivation of myth is to promote an account which treats potentially fatal threats as being in the end futile, if the primary intent of myth is pragmatic then ritual will be crucial. Its aim will be a retracing of steps to ensure correction, a re-enactment calculated to evade the disruption and ensure control. To be useful for this purpose, ritual enactments will possess an identity transcending their local confines. This enables objects to be involved in a re-enactment, for the re-enactment is not merely mimetic or allegorical; it does not rest upon an analogy with the originals. It is precisely this substantiation which is reflected also in the mythic identification of image with object, and of word with essence.

I am well aware that the foregoing views do not consort well with those accounts which are accorded favor. In fact, it owes something to them. According to one not so current account, myth arises from the bewitchment which language casts upon thought. This view is philosophically interesting if not particularly so to anthropologists today, for Ludwig Wittgenstein, too, once suggested a similar origin for speculative philosophy. The best basis of this view lies in the linguistic phenomenon of paronymy, whereby one etymological root possesses different significations. For example, the root connection between the two Greek words *laoi* (men) and *lâoi* (stones) is pronounced to be the source of the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha, according to which men grew from stones. The general idea in such accounts is that adults used colorful and concrete language in their communications, and children lost the original meanings while retaining the colorful expressions. This forgetfulness brings about a pathology of language, whereby figurative expressions are misconstrued, and a mythopoeic etymology promoted for the vocabulary of morality and nature. Views like this have been held even in our own day by Ernst Cassirer.

A second view advocates a psychological mythology. Here, myth is said to result from the play of the subjective fantasy, and this derives from the sphere of affectivity and will. This is put forward as the origin of art and religion, and myth becomes the daydream of the race, to be explained by plumbing the subconscious and by producing symbols of psychoanalytic exegesis. This is of a piece with the species of accounts which regard myths as allegories of profound meaning.

A third kind of view, endowing myth with cognitive content, treats it as a highly subjective account of objective events. In this view myth is cultural tradition, a repository of ancient history or science. This view of

myth, championed by Andrew Lang, Thomas Carlyle and Tylor, portrays myth as primitive science in which the human self is relied upon as model. The inward life, expressed in dream and imagination, is projected onto a nature which thus becomes peopled by animated and willful plant, animal, and natural phenomenon, creatures to be influenced by imitation and propitiation. A limited form of this position was held in Germany by schools counting among their members stalwarts like Ehrenreich, Siecke, and Winckler, and also Müller, Frobenius and Kuhn.

The other view, held by people like Rivers and Bellamy, is that myth records history, rather than science. Related to this is the class of views which treats myth as ideological and social in purpose. With a little violence, commentators as diverse as Frazer, Malinowski, and Freud can be saddled with such views. Society justifies and enforces tribal customs, especially those relating to economic relations, by putting forward legend as tribal history.

No review of theories of myth, however cursory, could overlook the highly influential ideas of Levi-Strauss, who gives to myth the purpose of devising a logical model to overcome a contradiction, and makes mythical thought work always from an awareness of oppositions onto their progressive mediation. The views of Levi-Strauss, in fact, apply, nicely to those subordinate myths devised to handle parochial *loci* of predicament. If the view I am putting forward is accepted, then Levi-Strauss can also be said to apply to original myth the contradiction lying now in the opposition between the beneficent orderliness of nature and the suppressed chaos in it which causes our original existential predicament. The whole function of original myth would then be to procure a mediation of the two. Levi-Strauss himself, however, applied his views to what I call subordinate myths dealing with specific predicaments and their *loci*. Not only could such predicaments arise from ritual infractions, but subordinate myths would also need to be instituted to regulate and safeguard society. In the end, however, Levi-Strauss' account is purely structural, and is not directed at the question of origin or the typology of content.

There is much which none of the customary accounts will explain. Neither the claim of paronymy nor the psychological account as it commonly occurs will explain the typic and structural similarities among myths of widely scattered peoples, where historical and linguistic connections cannot be assumed. In the view I am advocating, a comparability of mindset in early man, irrespective of locale, and the comparability of his existential predicament and its cause, lead to a mythic similarity in the character of content, type and structure. Indeed, the original causes of the predicament are always parochial, local, and historical; but because their effect and significance are universally the same, they can be freed from the unities of time and space without historic travesty. The dramatic and miraculous transformations noted in psychological accounts, in fact, relate to the existential predicament and its imperative of resolution. Their reference to unceasing frustrations and bold deeds, in fact, merely

imposes upon dream and myth the character of the epic. According to the present account, the frustrations reflect the experienced intractability of nature, and initial myth, in fact, gives a promise that they are not intrinsically unceasing. The bold deeds refer to the actions required to stifle that intractability and promise the same eventual optimism and relief.

In my opinion, the severest weakness of the above accounts lies not in any detailed limitation, but in their perception of myth as cultural tradition; for in this, they lose sight of the inevitability of myth and its salvific aspirations. The experienced intractability of nature and the danger thereby directed at man are what made nature worth knowing and categorizing; they are what shaped the nature of that knowledge and made it pragmatic.

#### *Art*

I have proposed the foregoing ideas because I would like to base upon them a theory of national or communal identity. Such identity has dimensions which are fostered, on the one hand, by social norms and artistic forms and, on the other, by philosophical schemes; dimensions arise by an unbroken ancestry from conceptions such as I have put forward.

Let me first explain the connection with social norms and artistic forms. These create a pre-disposition of deportment and reaction, an axiological framework within which priorities are ranked and goals imposed. In their artistic expression they explain also ceremonial music, dance, and the plastic arts, and literature.

Art is originally functional, and not a free or idiosyncratic expression at all. It is not a testament of personal taste or intimations, nor a creation intended for the museum or gallery for contemplation, study or enjoyment. Art for art's sake can only be a comparatively recent shibboleth. It is only when a people have been freed from the exigencies of functional art that art becomes a personalistic creation, an expression in which the individuality of the artist is paramount. It is certain that a society which dwells under the ever-present threat of the recurrence of an existential predicament of the sort which I have described will need to contrive corrective measures which of necessity can be repeated, a cycle of rites and ceremonies, until such time as it can invent a knowledgeable technology. The society will be organized around mythic creeds, and will embrace a view of the world and its own place in it which is metaphysical.

This given, the rites which are calculated to foster society cannot ignore the mythic theory of nature, and this theory is metaphysical in viewpoint. This viewpoint would imbue the rites not just through a general metaphysical preface, but by actually determining the very form and idiom of their devices. The ritual must rely on visible objects and palpable actions, and when correctly employed these are to re-enact original events. Now these potent objects and actions cannot achieve the substantiation and re-enactment of the past, unless, like the figures or *personas* in the early nightmares which I discussed at the outset, they are imbued with supra-human power and efficaciousness. Indeed, society itself is conceived

correspondingly as being a sacred unity, comprising its living members, its dead which survive in disincarnate form, and its as yet unborn and unincarnate children. Each group by its peculiar attributes possesses its appropriate privileges and responsibilities. The spirits of the dead have a vision which is made clear by their acquaintance with the past, and in its behalf they can rebuke the present. They have a vision made wise by their selflessness of motive and by their single-minded insight into the present, about which they are ever solicitous. They have a vision made prophetic by their intimate appreciation of possibilities of the future, and in its behalf they admonish the living. Privileged in this magnitude, they still have to concede to the living the right of decision. At the same time, on account of the peculiar vision possessed by the dead and the succor which they are able to give, much consideration is due them. Accordingly, they are celebrated at appointed times, and invoked for help in time of need. The imposition of the appropriate form on the objects and events, which are the instruments of ritual, is the very same thing as art.

Art objects are central to such celebration and invocation, and could be so widespread that each family would possess such objects. Their forms may be dictated by the totem of the clan to which the family belongs, or by characteristics conceived as embodying the essential nature of a revered ancestor. The art object is not simply declared to represent such characteristics; it must itself be felt to embody and substantiate them, and this it can be acknowledged to do only if it itself exhibits a compelling form.

The most striking art objects have the society at large for the setting of their use, during public festivals and religious ceremonies in accordance with the calendar. These ceremonies are calculated to restore and strengthen the orderliness of nature and of society, and to evade the tragedy which a disconnection from that orderliness would entail. Again, the art objects were required to embody and substantiate the relevant forces, not by allegation, by description or by stipulation, but by credible and manifest being, something which could not be achieved without imposition of appropriate physical forms on ordinary materials. These art objects were creations of specialists who throbbed with artistic talent, honed and informed through many years of apprenticeship to the master artist. During the long period, the apprentice studied themes of festivals and ceremonies, the stylizations of art associated with these themes, the prescribed medium and the prayers and incantations required for their rightful use. It is true that the creations would often bear the imprint of a particularly gifted author, but never in such a way as to register his individuality. His signature would lie in the entrancing degree to which his work is compellingly affective.

The ceremony itself would include drumming, dancing, chanting, and sacrifice. It might last for days, and its instruments by design encourage the building up of destructive feelings and passions. At the peak of the ritual, there is typically a massive release of tension and passion, and the

mood of the participants becomes relaxed and even jovial. The art objects are then stored away from public view.

It is evident that these objects cannot re-enact dangerous forces, nor the actions substantiate threatening events if they are representational and natural in style. When they are not totemic, they rely on an exaggerated physical form and disproportion, in order that directly and without interpretation they may induce the desired feelings and expected state of mind. These art objects were empathically fearsome, and incautious individuals who came into unauthorized contact with them during the ritual were believed to be in awful danger.

These abstract works of art were early regarded by foreigners as possessing only an ethnological interest, and no artistic value. From this point of view, they were judged to be frightfully grotesque, and of the same order of degradation as gargoyles. Subsequently, as a result of the influence which the same works exercised on others like Picasso and Braque in Paris, like Kirchner and the German Expressionists, like Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein in England, they were differently perceived, and their vibrant conatus and immediate power were more widely disclosed.

It is true indeed that in certain African societies, mainly in the Kwa language group (e.g., Benin, Yoruba, Fon, Ewe, Akan), there was a court art which I surmise to be in every case late. Even this art was still functional, and not decorative in intent. It was applied to the walls and entrance arches of palaces, and was supposed to proclaim the power and glory of kings, and the sacred sources of their authority. It is also true that certain societies, like the Tiv and the Fanti, permitted anyone who so wished to assist with their sculpture and canoe decoration. In neither case, however, was the finished work regarded as the individual or collective expression of the artists. Especially among the Tiv, it was described as the self-expression of the Supreme Being himself relying on human instruments.

The case of the highly representational Benin and Ife bronzes must loom as a notable exception to this view that all art is originally functional. They cease to seem so once it is realized that those pieces tend to be images of the head and not of the full figure, and that when they do depict a full figure, the body tends to be truncated and the head made disproportionately large. Severed heads and stunted torsos would, indeed, be grotesque if intended to be decorative. A clue to their real purpose should instead be sought in the fact that many African societies, and certainly the Kwa-speaking, which include Benin, do associate a spiritual factor with the human head, that factor thought to be responsible for unfolding a person's destiny and expressing itself in brand of intelligence and craftiness. The bronze heads were evidently connected with such beliefs, and in all probability depicted the heads of the most successful and powerful kings, kings of a manifest and accomplished destiny. In a full figure, the stunted torso would now draw dramatic attention to the enlarged head, as if the king



were all head. The import is the same as that of an image that is only head. Head, palace wall, and arch would alike proclaim an accomplished destiny.

The artist who produced the ritual objects was himself regarded as a kind of priest. He was steeped in the metaphysics of his people and possessed the skill to concretize it in his creations. His mode of work has often been described in African novels, for example in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. At the peak of his work, he enters into a trance-like condition and becomes oblivious of the public and its doings. The trance-like condition insulates him from all distraction, and fixes him in tune with the forces which he seeks to concretize. His product is to be functional, and all has to be right, from selected materials, to incantations and propitiations. The artist invokes the very forces which are to animate his creation; by fashioning a work which embodies these forces, he becomes a channel of communication with them, the means of mediation between them and society, he constitutes a priest-like figure. William Fagg, who has long studied the forms of these productions, has found that it is precisely the metaphysical purpose which explains the exponential design of much of African art.

The art objects which I have been discussing are obviously structural. I am prepared to suggest that the same functional intent imbues music and drumming, that in their original and principal setting their complicated rhythm, cadences, and counterpoint are evocative, calculated to induce a state of mind, and indeed to take its public through a pre-set range of emotions. It has often been noted by ethnomusicologists that in those societies which are closest to the traditional society, namely, those of Asia and Africa, indigenous music is connected with the metaphysical and moral conceptions of its people. Where, by reason of a triumphant technology there is little dread of nature, music comes to be appreciated for its form and techniques.

The situation is different, though not to this extent, for African sculptors and composers of today. Those who have tried to work in the style of past masters have failed to project the power of their works. Many factors are no doubt responsible here. Obviously, they have not been apprenticed to the old masters. More important, however, is their indifference to the old metaphysical vision and their inability to commit their work to its service. When a society loses its creedal commitments, and creative individuals do not serve such an outlook, a work of art truly become the expression of the creative talent of the artist, and may possess no function beyond its own aesthetics. It lends itself to exhibition, even to contemplation, and to pure aesthetic enjoyment. In the early centuries of the Christian era, when Councils defined a unitary creed, Christian iconography was functional, and relied on elements of distortion to proclaim its power. As the creedal grip loosened, first under assault of heresy, subsequently through sectarianism, and finally through demythologization, differences in style have become profuse, until we now have the inoffensive, blue-eyed blond Jesus depicted with such overwhelming banality as to make it a

religious farce. When society becomes atomistic and is no longer felt to be sacred, artistic skills lose their original focus and serve individual perceptions and vision. The forms of art are then due solely to individual conceptions, and its products meant for contemplation and enjoyment.

### *Philosophy*

It is not only art and artifacts which are connected with the purposes of original myth. Philosophy, too, has its roots in myths. I do not merely connect philosophy with myth, but propose to root the two in the same original experience, and oppose them, not so much on the basis of their content, as of their style. Plato believed that philosophy was born of wonder, and it was left to Aristotle to add that the wonder was not about esoteric matters, but exoteric ones like space, time, motion, perception. The principle of collection, not suggested by the list itself, is clear on the supposition that myth and philosophy are rooted in the same original experience. The psychically distressing phenomenon which occasions myth is universal; likewise the intellectually distressing features, which occasion philosophic wonder, belong within the common purview. Evidently, the existential distress can be safely intellectualized only if nature has been harnessed to a comfortable degree and its independence sufficiently overcome. Accordingly, Aristotle also noted that a pre-condition for the emergence of philosophy is the availability of leisure to a people or a class of persons whose material welfare was already assured.

Even so, the wonder which begets philosophy is not curiosity for its own sake, but a continuation of the original alienation. Its actual impetus is founded in a memory, in the recovery of a sedimented experience, and it is directed at a still distressing experience of nature. Fortunately, it is still possible to substantiate this in the genesis of Western philosophy, among the ancient Ionians. As is commonly agreed, the early Greek philosophers saw a problem in change and devised philosophical accounts purporting to make it intelligible. Change is a generalized version of the original intractability of nature; it may even be distressing, and to the Ionians it was intellectually puzzling. Wonder now replaces the distress which occasions myth; and for its intellectual alleviation it occasions philosophy. If the effect of myth is to offer reassurance concerning the distressing phenomenon, the effect of philosophy is to offer illumination concerning the puzzling phenomenon.

The philosophical puzzlement was not sudden. The poetic tradition which preceded Greek philosophy also saw a conundrum in change, but it did not present it as an intellectual problem. It was presented as an existential one, responsible for a profound alienation. The poetic tradition was quite obsessed with the phenomenon of change. In fact the Ionians, who produced the first known philosophers among the Greeks, very early began to murmur about the vicissitudes of life. They were already successful enough in harnessing nature to build a surplus of material wealth

and a surplus of nature, but they could have no assurance of continuing life to enjoy either. They soon broke into open accusation of the gods.

Homer, the oracle cited as authority for settling moral disputes, questions of etiquette, irredentist claims, and just about any dispute with respect to which one could find apt quotations, held out little comfort. He had, indeed, compared men to leaves. We only have a seasonal life, new generations arising as old generations cease. Mimnermos of Colophon, writing in the second half of the seventh century B.C., complained that man, without help of the gods, won material abundance, only to be cheated out of its enjoyment by old age and death. Could not the gods have bestowed perpetual youth on man in place of the torments of tantalization? Picking up Homer's image of leaves, he went on to list the ills of elderly life as poverty, disease, sterility, and, indeed, sexual fumbling. In passage after passage, he blurted the same lamentations: man was powerless before the gods, and old age was to be dreaded more than death.

Semonides of Amorgos, enlarging upon the same themes, even thought that Homer's comparison between men and leaves was the best thing he ever said. He himself compared men to cattle in the eyes of Zeus, who brought people to their end as he pleased. He exceeded all others in his melancholy. He proclaimed evil everywhere, "ten thousand dooms, woes and griefs beyond speaking are the lot of mankind." Semonides, too, although more cosmopolitan than most, still shared the dejection over the generations of men that fell like leaves of the forest.

The Ionians found no consolation with the poets, and certainly entertained no sanguine ideas about the after-life. The passage from life to death appeared to them like that from sickness or old age to ghostly existence. The ghost itself was held to be a weak, pale shadow of a real man. Accordingly, Achilles could say to Odysseus that he would "rather be a laborer to a poor man on earth than rule as king among the dead".

This distress which the Greeks felt at the fact of change was assailed in different ways. Initially, they attempted to overcome it through rites and myth. In myth, however, we have a poetic kicking against the goad, and not an unravelling of a puzzling concept. The solution offered by myth is, like its problem, existential in form and not conceptual. It is mythic, not philosophical. Even so, the myths sought to present a unified account of the world, and adumbrate the offices and arts by means of which nature could be controlled. These accounts were historic in content even though presented in historical modes. They relied on large natural masses like the water of the sea, the land of the earth, and so on, and turned them into personages. The vicissitudes which the Greeks resented were perhaps more painful than the original failures of nature, for now man is being cheated out of full possession of the rewards of his own labors. With myth, historical occurrences have been transformed into historic archetypes. The stage is set for the historic to become the philosophical.

Myth replaces the historical content with a historical style. Philosophy eschews both the historical content and the historical style in its

handling of precisely the same experience as myth. Indeed, it is when a people have enough material self-assurance, and philosophy has emerged, that myth begins to acquire overtones of incredibility and figment. Until then it takes the place of philosophy. If we look upon myth and the historic as an abstraction and generalization from that which is historical, we can also look upon philosophy as further abstraction and generalization from myth. Myth has already shed historical facticity, but retains the idiom of personages, events and actions, not simply the use of proper names, but also the ascription of motives and purposes. The style of original myth may not be that of original philosophy; but its content is.

Philosophy, at its first appearance, represents a subsequent echelon to myth and, dropping the historical idiom, it adopts that of analysis and reduction. In place of biography, it substitutes explanation; in place of a human aetiology, it develops a technical vocabulary pressed into the service of a schematic account. Philosophy is neither biography nor aetiology; and yet it mimics biography with its literal ontologies, and mimics aetiology with its inferences. Perhaps the most profound misunderstanding of both myth and philosophy is represented in gnosticism, which treated myth and philosophy as at once history and aetiology; just as myth relied on rites for control, gnosticism relied on the understanding which a philosophy might provide for control. As a result, in gnosticism there is a recapitulation of the cosmic history of man, of an original alienating experience, a deterioration of perfection, which is sedimented. When this history is re-enacted, and the individual remembers who and what he is, he can overcome the original distress and thus work his own salvation. Salvation comes through knowledge, and knowledge is re-collection. It is evident that gnosticism shares with myth the idea of the original distress; it shares with philosophy the idea of the elimination of the distress through knowledge. Between myth and philosophy, the distress passes from being existential to being intellectual. With gnosticism, it is both.

Once philosophy emerges, it is all-embracing: it proposes a general account of the world as a whole. It is only later that it differentiates into branches, giving more detailed accounts of the parts which might make up a unified account. Similarly, myth, too, begins with an historic account of creation of the world as a whole, and subsequently differentiates ancillary myths of facets or factors which bring their own parochial distress.

Philosophy too is concerned with ethos, but now not the ethos of a people as such. It is, therefore, not obliged to make prescriptions. To the extent that it gives a narrative, it may recover embedded values. The rest of its business, analysis and argument is often conducted without prior commitment to the soundness or validity of its original descriptive narrative.

General myth and first philosophy are not contrasted in content but in idiom. One sign of the approach of the one to the other is the switch from a cosmogonical focus to a cosmological. Myth develops specialized forms to cope with more parochial alienations, especially those connected with

institutions; philosophy, too, beginning with an all-embracing metaphysical concern, must and does generate specialized branches, provoked by the analogue of specific distress. The ascent of abstraction in the passage from the historical to the historic and on to the philosophical will be recapitulated in a comparable passage from the metaphysical to the epistemological to the logical, a sequence verified in the history of western philosophy, where first metaphysics, then epistemology, and finally philosophical logic and its variants become in turn the fundamental parts of philosophy. My meaning is as follows. Just as original myth may need to be safeguarded by the devising of additional and more specific myths dealing with the regulation of society and individual comportment, so it comes to be conceived that metaphysics will not be securely formulated until central questions in epistemology are solved, and in turn that epistemology will not be securely formulated until questions in philosophical logic and its variants are solved. This perception has experienced cycles and can be seen in the sequence from the pre-Socratics through Plato to Aristotle, and in the more stupendous ambit of medieval philosophy, seventeenth century rationalism and empiricism, and twentieth century philosophical logic and philosophy of language.

The following incomplete table sufficiently suggests the parallel intended:

<i>Myth</i>	<i>Philosophy</i>
Cosmogonical myth of origin	Cosmological metaphysics
Religion	Philosophical theology
Social institutions	Social and political philosophy
Ritual conduct	Ethics
Ceremonial	Aesthetics

All of the foregoing suggest a principle of appraisal which can be applied fruitfully to the case of Africa, for its original myths approximate in different degrees to that critical point where philosophy erupts.

This eruption counts, among the factors which determine it, the adequate mastery of nature as proved by reliable material wealth and the provision of leisure. At this point, there is a tendency for the hold of myth to weaken. Myth itself is not questioning or self-worrying; it does not isolate and examine. Instead, it reinforces itself by repetition and entrenches itself through sanctions; it protects itself by an immunity from skeptical investigation in the manner in which it is transmitted. Whether exoteric or esoteric in transmission, the cosmogonical myth itself--the most creedal in character--may become with the passage of time and increased material confidence less concrete, sketchier and forgotten in detail.

The cosmogonical character of original myth makes certain weaknesses endemic to it. As a cosmogonical account, it cannot offer a general theory of being or of objects, and must rely on external relations

between types of objects. Its style is historical, and yet gives no indication of historical destiny. If the source of the world of nature is itself rational, the account is liable to generate a vicious infinite regress. If the regress doubles back on itself, and puts the beginning in the end, it will close a vicious circle. And yet should the regress cease, it will only involve special pleading on behalf of some initial term chosen for the particular cosmogony.

Ancient cosmogonies tend to be genealogical. As genealogies, they are closed to discussion. We note that something begat something else, but cannot ask why it begat at all. The sources of such explanations ultimately lie in revelation rather than discovery, and we ourselves cannot deduce the mythic ancestors from our encounter with the world. Insofar as mythic cosmogonies are historical and genealogical, they must rely on personages and events. The first break introduced by philosophy lies precisely here. It was indeed appropriate for myth to adopt its personalist idiom, which made it comparatively brief and easily memorized. Its imitation of vision in relying on personages and action was well-advised. Philosophy, however, in representing further abstraction than myth, must abandon cosmogony for cosmology, personages and events for empirical and transcendental concepts, genealogy for reduction. The unity of the world can consist now not in the unity of its source but in the unity of its substance. Its motive is not to control nature but to understand it.

I have suggested a view of the origin of myth which connects with the origins of dimensions of culture. I have tried to illustrate this connection through the example of art and philosophy. The same connection holds for literature and music and, in general, for ideas concerning the ethos of a people. Precisely because myth embraces society in a common pristine era, it provides an archaeological, sedimented, and memorial basis for social cohesion. Many are its dimensions: pedagogical, teaching people of their common origins and yielding the symbols and instruments for communicating their wisdom; ethical, deriving by subordinate myths principles of action and sensibility which are in general supportive of their general myth; prophetic, bearing on the norms and the future history of its people. A people deepen their understanding of their present by appropriating their past not only through history, but also through myth and philosophy, for there is a larger memory of the past which does not possess the conscious clarity of historical writing, a sedimented cultural memory enfolded in myth. It is a fecund womb of national identity.

**CHAPTER II**

**PROBLEMS IN AFRICA'S  
SELF-DEFINITION  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD**

*KWASI WIREDU*

**INTRODUCTION**

From a logical point of view, it is a tautology to say that everything is identical with itself. In other words, it is a logical truth that everything is what it is and not another thing. Accordingly, any problem Africa may have as to her identity cannot be whether Africa is what she is, but only whether she is what she ought to be. The problem, that is, is normative rather than descriptive.

But why is there a problem of identity in the first place? Individuals, let alone nations and whole continents, do not start wondering whether they are what they ought to be if everything seems to be going well. It is when things go wrong that critical self-analysis tends to begin. However, not everything that goes wrong with a people precipitates a crisis of self-identity; it is only the kind of reverse that injures human dignity and saps self-confidence that causes that type of soul-searching. In Africa colonialism has been such an adversity.

Colonialism is not necessarily racist in the sense in which the concept involves claims of racial superiority on the part of the colonizer; but it frequently goes with some sense of superiority. The Roman colonizers of Britain were not of a different race, but they had a poor opinion of the level of civilization of the Britons. This was, by the way, in marked contrast to the Romans' appreciation for Greek civilization in spite of their conquest of Hellas. But when one race comes to dominate another of a different skin color by virtue of a superiority in science and technology, then a conqueror's racism is fairly inevitable. European colonialism in Africa has been true to this form. The racism associated with it was not just a state of mind, but an active programme which sought to change the African's supposedly inferior way of life to conform to European models in some important areas of human experience, such as education, religion, economics, politics, etc. It was, therefore, natural that the anti-colonial struggle should take the form of both a cultural and a political nationalism.

African political nationalism aimed at regaining national independence and then building viable modern states, while cultural nationalism aimed to restore to Africans their confidence in their own culture. This latter was particularly urgent as colonial racism had succeeded in alienating many Africans from their own culture.

In so far as cultural nationalism implied a rejection of foreign cultural influences, it tended to take the form of a traditionalism. Thus the question of identity was, in effect, posed as, "Are we what we used to be?" The obvious fact was that we were not; consequently the solution proposed was that we should discover what we were previously and take steps to become such again. There is a suppressed premise in this reasoning, since, as we have seen, the question of self-identity is a normative one. The premise in question is: 'What we ought to be is what we used to be.'

There are problems of principle with this mode of self-definition. It is obviously not true in general that what we ought to be is what we used to be. We were children to start with, but that hardly supports a nostalgia for infantilism. The concept of self-improvement implies that we ought to become something other than what we are currently or were in the past. Thus, unless we make the strange assumption that culture is not open to improvement, the premise under discussion must be acknowledged to be faulty.

So, given that we do have a crisis of self-identity, the following question must press itself upon us: 'Why should we be other than we currently are?' The answer of anti-colonial nationalism is: 'Because we became what we are now, not of our own free will, but rather through a colonial imposition'. But suppose what we are now happens to be better than what we used to be? Or suppose that, even though what we are now is no good, still what we were in the past was either no good or, if good in its time, ill-suited to the present time. Then what?

These questions, though not framed in exactly these terms, begin to make themselves felt in post-independence reassessments in Africa. This is connected with the fact, noted early in this discussion, that independence was sought with the aim of building viable *modern* states in Africa. This purpose, of course, is the purpose of modernization. But modernization involves changing old ways of doing things. Thus, a tension develops between cultural nationalism and the quest for modernization in post-independence times. On the one hand, there seems to be a desire to return to the roots, to old ways of life; yet, on the other hand, there seems to be a desire to change the old ways along lines established, in some cases, by foreign peoples. The question is: 'Is there a real incompatibility here?'

## THE EXAMPLE OF JAPAN

Consider the case of Japan. This nation seems to have been able both to achieve modernization and preserve her distinctive culture. This would seem to suggest that modernization and cultural conservatism are not incompatible. There is something in this; but it can be misleading. Cultural conservatism is perhaps too strong a phrase. The striking thing about the Japanese is not their cultural conservatism, but rather their cultural adaptability. They are famous for their capacity to learn things from other peoples and adapt them to their own purposes. Modernization has certainly



modified their culture, and this has come, not by the sheer force of events, but through a deliberate national policy. It was through a deliberate and systematic policy that the Meiji rulers of Japan in the second half of the 19th century worked to abolish Japanese feudalism while retaining (even by law) their traditional values based on the family. The absorption of Western science, technology and learning generally was done with open utilitarian eyes.

The point, then, is not that modernization can go on without changes in a traditional culture, but rather that it need not involve the indiscriminate jettisoning of the elements of such a culture. Not only this. As far as cultural self-identity is concerned there is an important distinction still to be noted. Regarding the idea of indiscriminate changes in a culture, there is a difference between changes of this sort that are of one's own bat, so to speak, and ones that come about semi-consciously through impregnation with foreign cultural models inculcated by way of imposed systems. Indiscriminate conduct is, of course, not commendable in any sphere of life. Nevertheless, it seems better, if one is going to tamper with one's traditional culture indiscriminately, to do it by one's own decision than through foreign pressures. It is better because it displays a greater degree of free will, and free will is a basic human ideal. It is better, moreover, from the point of view of the present discussion because it does not necessarily generate an identity crisis. If you change aspects of your culture and adopt in their place new ones of your own devising, then, even when there is trouble, any malaise would not be owing to a sense of compromised identity. The question then to be asked might still take the form: "Are we what we ought to be?" and the solution to be adopted might consist in returning to tradition. At all events, however, the crisis of identity can pertain only to perceptions of the self in its distinctness from others.

We can distinguish at least three types of cultural change: (1) Change which is deliberate and self-initiated and which substitutes something original for an old cultural element; (2) Change which is deliberate and self-initiated, but which involves foreign substitutes; (3) Change which is neither self-initiated nor original in its replacements. From the point of view of the problem of identity, the first type is the least, and the third the most problematic. Japan's experience approximates the second, while Africa's seems, at some stages, to have been of the third type. It is understandable, then, why Japan, unlike Africa, has not suffered too deeply from a sense of subverted identity.

It is tempting, accordingly, to commend the example of Japan to Africa: 'By all means import and assimilate Western science, technology and other forms of knowledge as the Japanese did, but be sure to decide for yourselves, just as the Japanese did, which elements of your culture to retain and which to dispense with in the process'. In principle, this advice is, of course, sound. But an over-enthusiastic recommendation of the Japanese model could betray an a-historical as well as an unanalytical underestimation of the problems underlying Africa's crisis of identity.

Japan has, indeed, had her own period of nationalistic soul-searching, but she has never had an identity problem to anything like the extent of Africa's. The reason lies in a number of circumstances. Japan, unlike Africa, was never subjected to conquest or colonialism prior to her breakthrough in modernization. Unlike Africa, again, she is a homogeneous nation with a single national language<sup>1</sup> and a national religion which has developed in its own way, assimilating foreign influences at its own pace. Besides, Japan, unlike most of Africa, had a long tradition of writing and literary learning which, coupled with her possession of an indigenous national language, facilitated her appropriation of Western knowledge *in her own conceptual medium*. Added to all this is the fact that, even before the concerted push towards modernization in the second half of the 19th century, Japan had a reasonably sophisticated system of agriculture, which, in fact, proved to be the source of capital accumulation during the intense formative period of industrialization.

Nevertheless, one thing at least can be learnt from the case of Japan; it is that to maintain national self-identity it is not necessary to remain the same as in ancestral times. Some important elements of Japanese culture were consciously borrowed from other peoples. Thus Japanese religion and ethics are an eclectic combination of a native Shintoism, a Chinese version of Indian Buddhism and a transplanted ethic of Confucianism--all these pragmatically hinged to a scientific attitude more recently acquired from the West.

### THE PROBLEM OF COLONIAL MENTALITY

It follows, by analogy, that the answer to Africa's problem of identity in the contemporary world does not lie in a cultural traditionalism but in a critical and reconstructive self-evaluation. This self-evaluation is made extremely difficult, even now, decades after independence, by the colonial mentality induced in our people during colonial times. This is the mentality which makes a formerly colonized person over-value foreign things coming from his erstwhile colonial master. 'Things' here is to be interpreted to include not only material objects but also modes of thought and behavior.

Were the dominance of this colonial mentality absolutely complete, there could not, of course, have been so much as a sense of identity crisis in our people. The obvious fact of this consciousness in Africa shows that indigenous modes of thought and action have not been totally eclipsed by colonialism. One circumstance that has limited the psychological penetration of colonialism is that the colonialists did not trouble themselves much to 'educate' the populations in the rural interior of the African countries they colonized. Consequently, these people still retain large parts of their indigenous world-outlook. This has ensured, thanks to our

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<sup>1</sup>Ghana alone has 46 distinct languages, not just dialects.

'extended family' system, that even the educated class have never been completely cut off from their culture. But the problem is that elements of the colonial mentality have been so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the African people that it is not unheard of for even the fiercest denunciation of colonialism or the most fundamentalistic affirmation of indigenous culture to betray unconscious traces of that mentality. The present writer does not claim exemption from this plight, and this essay can be considered as one personal exercise in the struggle for African mental decolonization.

It is important at the outset to understand why colonialism was able to make such deep inroads in the psychology of our people in most parts of Africa. The basic reason is that, as remarked earlier on, the colonialists came with superior science and technology. In many places they brought literacy where there was none. In these respects the gap was decisive; which, in the particular case of technology, is why the invaders were able to subjugate our ancestors in the first place. It was, of course, no mistake on the part of our ancestors to recognize this superiority. I mean the superiority in science and technology as manifested in the techniques and products of the colonialists. But the question is not so clear-cut when it comes to the religion, law, state-craft, mores, language, etc., which came as part of the colonial package. Having accepted one part, our people were led to transfer their approval to the other parts of the package. How were they 'led' to this? It was principally through the teachings of the missionaries who came along with the colonialists to 'civilize' us and save our souls. Their campaign was only too successful. The result? A formidable distortion of the African identity. Since the days of the anti-colonial struggle we have been witnessing a struggle to restore the sense of authenticity. But the problems have not only been many, but also have frequently been buried beneath the surface of our experience.

### **CHRISTIANITY AND GHANAIAAN CULTURE**

Take the sphere of religion, and consider the case of Christianity. This religion is completely alien to most parts of Africa (In Egypt and Ethiopia its status is, of course, somewhat more complicated). By some estimates, approaching a third of the whole population of Africa is Christian. This large mass of Africans adheres to a Europeanized form of the Judeo-Christian religion, complete with its own world-view and ethics. The question might be asked: Since Africa has her own religions and systems of morality, why should an African forget them in favor of alien ones? There is something misleading about this question, in as much as it might seem to suggest that Christianity has been consciously chosen by its African flock. On the contrary, the modern African is frequently born into a Christian family; he attends a Christian school and becomes a Christian as a matter of course (rather than of conscious reflection) in the very process of his socialization. As for his forebears, they were, as we have seen,

ingratiated into Christianity through importunate evangelism and the dazzle of certain aspects of the colonial package. Nevertheless, some form of the question posed has made itself felt in the consciousness of many an African Christian. He is now asking, 'How can I be both an African and a Christian?'

The answer that seems to be being canvassed in the most influential circles of African Christians is that Africans can be Christians in good conscience only by Africanizing Christianity. But how can this be done? Well, where there is a will, there apparently is a way, and some Africans have even thought to Africanize Christ himself, witness those artistic representations in which the Son of Man is depicted as a black man; which shows, by the way, that the wisdom of the way that opens to a will cannot always be taken for granted. There have, of course, been more level-headed forms of Africanization; but, as far as one can see, they have been mainly concerned with the externals of the religion: liturgy, forms of apparel, personnel, etc. One should not underestimate the gains that have been made in the Africanization of these aspects of the Christian religion. It is not so very long ago that an African preacher in the Presbyterian church in Ghana was disciplined for mounting the pulpit in his native attire. Now, in the 80's, even the Catholic church permits songs in African rhythms and idiom, actually punctuated with drumming, right in the process of worship, a phenomenon which, a few years ago, would have seemed more inconceivable than that a donkey should transport itself through the hole of a needle. No one who observed the subdued demeanor of Africans during worship in the more rigidly colonized modes can help noticing the contrasting spontaneity and joy with which many of our people participate in Christian worship electrified with African music.

Nevertheless, it may be questioned whether such African admixtures in externals with the foreign doctrinal content intact can amount to any serious Africanization of the Christian religion. The nearest that I know any church to have gone toward doctrinal concessions in recent times is in their more relaxed attitude towards certain African customs. Such a pervasive custom is the practice of pouring libation to our ancestors at ceremonies of any importance. In the past not only was such a ritual out of the question inside chapel walls--it remains so to this day, but it was also forbidden to African Christians even in their cultural activities far outside church environs. Now, however, an African Christian can pour libation to his heart's content without fear of episcopal reprisals.

But, even here, relevant questions remain unpursued. The ritual of libation presupposes a cosmology which is inconsistent with the Christian one. The traditional Ghanaian does not bifurcate the world into a natural and a supernatural world. Life after death is, for him, in a world closely continuous with the present one; and our departed ancestors are conceived still to be participating members of their families, rewarding good conduct and punishing its opposite in their own special way. The pouring of libation is, accordingly, intended as an invitation to them to come and take part in

important undertakings of the living and to grant them their propitious auspices. Very far removed from such conceptions is the Christian doctrine of a supernatural world of heaven and hell existing in metaphysical isolation from this world.<sup>2</sup> The question then arises: Does the mellowing of the Euro-Christian authorities in their attitude to the practice of libation imply the belief that the related cosmology is compatible with the Christian cosmology? There is no evidence that this is their frame of mind. More curiously, there is no evidence that the African Christians in Ghana, who seem glad to be able to pour libation without any anxieties about clerical censure, have considered the cosmological complications.

As far as the question of Africa's self-identity or self-identification is concerned, the crucial issue here is not as to which of the two cosmologies is the more viable intellectually or whether any of them is viable, but rather whether the contemporary African Christian has made a conscious and reflective choice between his own traditional cosmology and that of Christianity or has forged some kind of a selective synthesis of the two. No African Christian can lay much of a claim to authentic African identity if he adheres to an unexamined jumble of Euro-Christian and African cosmological conceptions. On the other hand, if, on due reflection, a modern African concludes that the Euro-Christian cosmology or conceptual framework, more generally, is preferable, this need not compromise his African authenticity, just as the conscious adoption of Buddhism has not made the Japanese any less authentically Japanese. The present position in many parts of Africa is that in spite of much earnest and sincere nationalistic protestations, the African Christian has hardly started to think of a critical reappraisal of Christian doctrine *vis-a-vis* his own native religion. Until he can do so, all claims to African authenticity in this sphere must be suspended.

### CULTURAL IDENTITY IN GENERAL

This is the appropriate place to call attention to a somewhat paradoxical condition for cultural identity. A culture can shed off many of its traits and gather foreign accretions without sacrificing its identity, provided that it does not lose its contingent features. The contingent is normally contrasted with the necessary, but in this case the contingent becomes the necessary. The explanation is as follows. Any culture has procedures, customs and usages that have no essential bearing on questions of either human well-being or truth or falsehood. Style of apparel or of address, for example, is frequently (though not invariably) of this nature.

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<sup>2</sup> By contrast literal concepts of heaven and hell are part of the stock eschatology of our local Christian Churches. Less literalistic understandings of Christianity may construe those concepts figuratively; but still the basic Euro-Christian notion of the super-natural world is deeply alien to Ghanaian traditional thought.

Adopting one style rather than another often makes no objective difference to human well-being or to one's beliefs about the world. Specifically because of this, there cannot be any compelling reason to change such elements of a culture in favor of foreign ones.

It might be useful to mention a few more of such facts of culture here. Language, dance, music, recreation, style of courtship--all these and more are contingent in this sense in some of their aspects. Since it is not rational to give up such components in preference to foreign substitutes, to do so is a sure sign of the loss or diminution of cultural self-identity.

This is not to overlook the fact that cultures do evolve and that no part of a culture is immune to this process. The contingent elements of a culture can change imperceptibly over a long period of time or, on occasion, more abruptly, without prejudice to identity. Such changes may be due to indigenous whims and caprices; and why not? What a people's cultural identity will not survive unscathed is foreign substitutions in this area. It should be noted, furthermore, that it is not being contended that to be authentic a culture ought not to accommodate some contingent elements from abroad along side its own. The conquest of distance through the tremendous developments in communication in the present century will see to it that there is an unceasing process of intercultural exchanges across the globe. But only weak cultures will permit this to eclipse what we might call, with an appearance but only an appearance of contradiction, their contingent essence.

Such components of culture as philosophy and religion, on the other hand, are anchored to truth. Philosophy necessarily involves claims about what things are or should be and about what relations hold between various objects of thought. Basically, the same thing is true of religion. If it should turn out, for example, that it is not true that God exists (given some intelligible and stable conception of God), surely, certain religions would lose their foundation. Now, suppose, only for the purposes of argument, that unbeknown to a certain culture, God does not exist, and that it has been shown in another culture that this can be conclusively proved. Then, for the first culture willfully to ignore the proof in the name of cultural self-identity would demonstrate nothing more glorious than a collective pigheadedness. It is obvious that this can be generalized for all beliefs as to what is or is not the case. Therefore, it can be asserted that religion and philosophy (as also other domains of thought in which truth is sought, such as science) are areas of human experience in which the effects of cultural differences could conceivably be eliminated through the peaceful give-and-take of dialogue among cultures. It is conceivable, consequently, that the time might come when only humanly contingent features will individuate cultures. Should there be any qualms on this point, they can be blamed on the fallacies of relativism.

### CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS IN REALIZING AFRICAN IDENTITY

Any interaction among cultures, however, has to be on the basis of equality; otherwise some cultures are compromised, as ours has been in Africa. It is not only at the levels of our social, economic, political and religious institutions that the unequal cultural relationship with the colonialists has affected our life but also at the deeper levels of our fundamental conceptual frame-work. And this I take to be the most far-reaching explanation for the tardiness of our African Christians in seeing the necessity for a critical reassessment of Christian doctrine. Such concepts as 'God', 'Spirit', 'Soul', 'Salvation', 'the Mystical', 'the Supernatural', 'Creation', 'Omnipotence' have wormed their way deep into our scheme of concepts and are used by us, Western-educated Africans, especially the Christians among us, as if their intelligibility or internal coherence in all human language and thought can be taken for granted. So that the exposition of even our own traditional religious thought is couched in these terms without a thought of possible conceptual incongruities. I happen to think that these concepts have the most imperfect fit, if they have any fit at all, with our indigenous categories of thought. But the issue here is not whether this is true or false, but rather whether the relevant question has been seriously raised and considered. To the extent to which we use cardinal concepts assimilated through a foreign education uncritically, to that extent is our African identity thrown into question.

The conceptual problems in defining our African identity are not restricted to the sphere of our religious thinking; they range, in fact, over the whole gamut of our intellectual life. It is a well-known fact that, intellectually, we think in the metropolitan languages in which we were educated. As far as concepts such as 'Being', 'existence', 'Entity', 'Nothingness', 'Substance', 'Quality', 'Truth', 'Fact', 'Reality', 'Matter', 'Body', 'Mind', 'Person', 'Space', 'Punishment', 'Free Will', etc., are concerned, we might, many of us, just as well be called Europeans. Yet, there are very radical differences between the manner in which the matters involved are conceived in our indigenous languages and thought, on the one hand, and in the metropolitan languages and thought, on the other. This being so, the least that an African of an abstract bent, mindful of his own cultural identity, ought to do is to elicit these conceptual differences through a comparative analysis and try to assess them objectively. That an objective assessment of such things is possible is a substantial thesis. Here I cannot even begin to argue it; I can only throw it up as a plausible presupposition. But it is relevant to note that if an objective treatment of such conceptual disparities were not possible, there would be little point in any attempt at intellectual dialogue between different peoples.

The considerations of the last paragraph bring out clearly, I hope, that, at its most fundamental level, Africa's problem of identity is a philosophical problem, a thought which should strengthen our sense of the importance of the current debate among African philosophers and others

about how best to define African philosophy itself. This question is, in fact, one to be answered, at this historical juncture, not with a definition *per genus et differentia* but rather with a programme for intellectual construction and reconstruction in the service of Africa and ultimately the world. Any such programme will have, at the very minimum, to include the conceptual exorcising of the colonial mentality alluded to at various points in this discussion. It emerges, thus, that in properly defining the African identity of their calling, African philosophers will be *ipso facto* helping to define and establish Africa's identity in the contemporary world.

### POLITICAL IDENTITY

In approaching the close of this discussion, let me touch on an issue in the political field that has an obvious relevance to Africa's quest for identity. It is the question of African socialism. Almost all African countries have now won their independence. But, if anything, they have been faced with problems that are, intellectually, more difficult than any faced in the struggle against colonialism; and our leaders, not necessarily philosophers to start with, have been constrained to do some quite fundamental thinking. Some of the most important of these problems may be formulated as follows: What form of social organization is best suited to Africa, having regard to her history and aspirations and to the requirements of social justice in general? And what political forms are to be adopted for the achievement of these social aims. Many African leaders have declared an adherence to socialism as the best social system. Generally, this choice has been predicated on the contention that socialism is the only system that avoids 'the exploitation of man by man'. But an additional reason of the greatest significance has been the claim that this system is but a natural development of traditional African communalism. This is sometimes exaggerated into the assertion that the latter was in fact already a form of socialism practiced in Africa in precolonial times. Be that as it may, it is clear that the reason why our leaders have linked their socialism with the communalistic past of Africa is that they are anxious to demonstrate to the world that they did not struggle for independence only to imitate the social and political forms of either the East or the West (ideologically speaking). Accordingly, the term 'African socialism' has been used to contrast socialism in Africa with socialism elsewhere.

Unfortunately, serious conceptual problems have arisen in the elaboration of this contrast. The impression is sometimes given that African socialism is different in concept from other socialisms. But there cannot be one definition for socialism in Africa and a different one elsewhere. What may conceivably differ in socialism from place to place is the way in which the basic concept of socialism is developed and implemented. As a minimum, socialism must be a system in which the main means of production and distribution are owned and controlled by society as a whole and in which distribution is conducted on egalitarian principles. A little



reflection on this definition will disclose why attempts to realize this concept in actual practice result in the well-known proliferation of brands of socialism. The point is simply that concepts, such as social ownership and (more notoriously) egalitarianism, invite different interpretations from different thinkers.

The question then is: when one talks of African socialism is one referring to particular African *interpretations* of the concept of socialism or to particular African *routes* to socialism? Considerable confusion has arisen due to the apparent inability of various analysts to distinguish between an interpretation of the concept of socialism as a social form and a route through which some interpretation of the concept might be pursued in practice. Thus it is frequently said that one respect in which African socialism differs from Marxist socialism is that the exponents of the former do not believe in the doctrine of class struggle. [Senghor of Senegal and Nyerere of Tanzania come to mind here. The late Nkrumah of Ghana, was not an enthusiast of the class struggle prior to his overthrow, but became one afterwards.] But the question of the class struggle is really only relevant to the way in which socialism might be achieved. Of course, if, as some have claimed, there is no class struggle in Africa or, more breath-takingly, if there are no classes in Africa, then the quest for socialism will not go through the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Africa. But this would not necessarily disclose a different interpretation of the concept of socialism as a form of society from that of Karl Marx. The difference here would only be between the African and the Marxian routes to socialism.

An even more subtle confusion in the way in which African socialism has been contrasted with Marxist socialism is displayed in the habit of citing the rejection of dialectical materialism by some leading African socialists as a difference between the ideologies of African socialism and Marxist socialism. Lost here is the distinction between an ideology and a theory of reality. Dialectical materialism is a theory of reality, not an ideology. The same is true of even historical 'materialism'. These are theories of what the world is, has been, and will be like, not what it ought to be like. An ideology is a conception of what society ought to be. Of course, if any such conception is to have a chance of being realized in the world, it will have to take full account of what the world is like. But what the world is like does not logically prejudice the issue of what it ought to be. The general relationship between "is" and "ought" is a contentious philosophical issue, but it seems clear from the considerations just adduced that if a given African thinker rejects dialectical materialism as an account of reality, that does not logically preclude his believing in Marx's conception of the classless society of the socialist millennium. For the same reason the play made on the contrast between Marxist atheism and the alleged pervasive piety of the African is not to the point.

The comparison of African socialism with Marxist socialism is sometimes beset by even grosser errors. Thus the suggestion has been made that one distinguishing characteristic of some forms of African socialism is

that they give room for a substantial private component in the economy. But in view of the definition of socialism, an economic system, in Africa or outside Africa, which harbors a substantial permanent, private component can never be called a type of socialism in any full sense.

## CONCLUSION

In all this, what is of paramount relevance to our concerns in this paper is that the faulty comparisons noted above seem, at least in part, to be motivated by what might be called the fallacy of uniqueness. It seems to be supposed that for Africans to have an authentic identity, they need to be unique in their social and political forms and in many other things besides. As suggested earlier on, however, in questions of truth or falsity, as also in questions of what does or does not minister to human welfare, there is no particular virtue in being different. What is required for authentic identity is that belief, decision or choice should be based on one's own conscious reflection. The important issue, then, is not necessarily whether socialism in Africa is of a peculiarly African species but rather whether, if socialism is chosen, this is done on due reflection. The same holds, of course, with respect to any other choice of ideology. To be sure, if Africa had a unique ideology of her own, in no way indebted to either the East or the West, no one could possibly quibble about her identity, politically speaking; but it is of the last consequence to understand that an African nation's identity need not be jeopardized by the choice of a social ideal already known and pursued elsewhere, such as social democracy or liberal democracy or *Juche*, provided that it is based on her own reflective thinking.

But now, how can Africa do her own thinking when, as pointed out already, the minds of very many Africans remain colonized in the deepest reaches of their conceptual framework? This brings us back to our earlier finding that Africa's problem of identity is at bottom a philosophical problem.

## **PART II**

### **KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING**



### CHAPTER III

## KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH: EWE AND AKAN CONCEPTIONS

N.K. DZOBO

This study will be based upon an analysis of the epistemic conceptions found in the everyday speech and oral literature, e.g., the proverbs and wise sayings, of the Ewe and Akan of Ghana. The paper will be concerned mainly with critical remarks, clarifications and definitions of epistemic terms. Some synthesis and interpretation of the analytical findings will be attempted in the concluding sections.

Indigenous African societies consider knowledge and truth as the key factors in living a meaningful and satisfying life; the capacity to comprehend these has been used as the principal criterion for differentiating human beings from the lower animals. A human being is, therefore, indirectly defined by both the Ewe and the Akans as “the being that knows things.” That is to say, only humans have the intellectual faculty for acquiring knowledge and for grasping reality through the medium of ideas.

Because of this understanding of the essential nature of man, one way to say that a person is stupid is to say that “he does not know things” (*Menya nu o--Ewe; Onnin hwee ade--Akan*), or simply to say that “he is an animal” (*Enye la--Ewe; Oye aboa--Akan*). The head is believed to play a very important role in knowing, and so of a person who is not intelligent it is said that “his head is dead.” (*Efe ta ku--Ewe; Ni ti awu--Akan*). In other words “to be human is to have a live head,” that is to say, to be intellectually alert or to grasp things mentally in terms of correct principles.

Thus, to be human is to know and understand things, especially the fundamental ideas and principles of life. For this reason one proverb says, “The child who goes about inquiring *to know* what is happening is never an animal (fool).” (*Vi-bia-nya-ta-se medzoa--la o. Ewe*).

### THE METHOD OF KNOWING

The main questions we shall address our inquiry will be:

1. What does it mean to know, or what is knowledge?
2. How do we know?
3. What are the sources of knowledge?
4. What are the categories of knowledge?
5. How is knowledge validated?

Indigenous African society is never skeptical about man's ability to know; it strongly believes that man can and does know. Therefore, the question is not "Can man know?" but "How do we know"? Indigenous society is, therefore, concerned first and foremost with the manner of knowing.

How do we know? To answer this question we shall examine carefully the different Ewe and Akan synonyms for 'to know.' There are four very important words for this, two in Ewe--*nya* and *dze si*, and two in Akan--*nim* and *nya*.

(i) *To Know as Nya*. The most common Ewe word for 'to know' is *nya*, which has an object *nu* meaning 'a thing.' Thus, the expression *nya nu* implies the certainty of something known; it rules out any room for doubt.

Dietrich Westermann, the celebrated German authority on the Ewe language, translated the verb *nya* into English as 'to know', 'to understand' 'to be able' (Westermann, 1928). These, however, are secondary meanings of the verb *nya*. Its primary meaning can be translated as 'to observe,' 'to take a look at,' 'to note,' and 'to look.' These meanings of the verb appear in such expressions as:

a. *Nya nusi wom viwo le da*--"look at or observe what your child is doing."

b. *Nya asiwo da, efo di*--"Look at your hand, it is dirty!" This expression is similar to another perceptual expression, *See da!*: "Listen to this." The two expressions call for the use of the senses of perception. *Nya nu* then means "to gain knowledge by observation or seeing, by the use of the senses." Here observation is the means by which we come to know; what is known is, therefore, referred to as *nunya*, meaning 'thing observed'; the result of observation then is knowledge (*nunya*).

This basic understanding of the verb *nya* is, supported, by its Akan use. *Nya* is perhaps originally an Akan word or a common inheritance. In Akan it means 'to find', 'to experience', 'to gain', 'to come by' as found in such expressions as *Manya asem*: 'I have got trouble'; *Wanya sika*: "He has found (made) money"; *Wonyaa wo he?*: "Where did you find it?" The uses of *nya* in these sentences always imply that the subject of the sentences is 'doing something,' i.e., 'going through an experience and getting something from it.' Therefore, if the verb *nya* is used epistemically it implies that the subject of the verb *nya* is doing something--observing or experiencing something and then deriving something from it. What is derived from such an experience is *nunya* (knowledge).

According to John Dewey, the process of acquiring knowledge from experience/observation has two phases: active and passive. The active phase of experience consists of trying or experimenting with something; the passive phase is undergoing the consequences of what has been done. The value of the experience lies in connecting the two phases--that of trying and

that of undergoing. Dewey went on to say, "When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by the action is reflected back in a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance."<sup>1</sup> The mere action then has a meaning; and this is knowledge.

Knowledge arises when the doer is able to connect what the first phase of experience means in terms of its second phase or consequences. The ability to deduce the correct lesson from experience is highly valued in the indigenous society. One proverb emphasizes this by saying "It is only a fool who allows his sheep to break loose twice." (*Okwasea na ne guan te mprenu*--Akan.) Another proverb making the same point says: "It is only a fool (animal) who falls down twice on the same mound." (*Ame le ye dzea anyi zi eve le ko deka dzi*--Ewe). Observation and inference then are methods of obtaining knowledge: experience is a source of knowledge.

(ii) *To Know as Dze Si (Ewe); Nim (Twi)*. The infinitive *dze si* means 'to know', 'to note', 'to recognize'. It is used in such expressions as: *Medze sii*: "I have recognized him," or "I have seen him once"; it is equivalent to *Menyae*, meaning 'I have known him'. *Dze si* always implies the use of the sense of sight or observation in knowing; in this sense it is equivalent to one sense of the Akan word *nim* meaning 'to know through observing an external reality'.

To sum up what has been said so far about the indigenous method of knowing: observation and inference have emerged as the relevant methods of knowing. There are two steps involved in the knowing process: first, observing an external phenomenon by the senses and receiving the necessary sense-data from it (the experiencing phase of knowing); second, the process of organizing and interpreting the sense-data into ideas which come to be referred to as knowledge (*nu nya*--Ewe; *ni mdee*--Akan). Knowledge, then, is the end-product of intellectual processes which begin in sensation. Sensations are, therefore, regarded as stimuli to reflection and inference; they are the beginnings of empirical knowledge.

#### *The Passive Way of Knowing*

The method of knowing discussed above was referred to as the active method of knowing. There is, in addition, the passive method of knowing. The two most common terms used to represent it are *le*, meaning 'to seize,' 'to grasp,' 'to encounter,' 'to grip,' and *wu*, meaning 'to kill,' i.e., 'to experience passively.' Examples of their uses appear in the following expressions:

- a. *Do le lem*: "Illness has seized me"--I am sick.
- b. *Do le wu yem*: "Hunger is killing me"--I am hungry.

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<sup>1</sup>John Dewey *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 163.

- c. *Tsiko le wu yem*: "Thirst is killing me"--I am thirsty.
- d. *Tro le asii*: "The god has seized him/her to be his wife; i.e.,  
A god has elected him/her as his priest/priestess. He  
has experienced/known the power and presence of a  
god.

In all these and similar experiences the subject knows something, not by what he does, but by what happens to him; hence this type of knowing can be described as passive and subjective. The subjective nature of such knowledge does not *ipso facto* make it invalid, because such knowledge is best verified by its positive fruits.

In the indigenous society, then, knowing is the result of two different types of experiences, one active and the other passive.

### CATEGORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

There are four main categories of knowledge in Ewe, each traceable to sensory experience as their sources. They are *nyatsiname*, *susununya*, *nusronya*, and *sidzedze*.

1. *Nyatsiname* usually refers to knowledge that is passed down by word of mouth. This may be described as *traditional* knowledge, where traditional is used to mean that which is passed down from one person or from one generation to another. Knowledge that is passed from parents and elders to the next generation and contained in proverbs and other forms of oral literature is a good example of knowledge as *nyatsiname*.

2. *Susununya* is knowledge gained from reflection. Its nature is deductive or contemplative. This does not require an immediate experience as its source, but relies on deduction from premises that have been already established.

3. *Nusronya* is knowledge acquired through the process of learning from formal education. Its popular designation is 'book knowledge' (*agbalemenunya*). *Nusronya* is not highly valued by the traditional society because it tends to be foreign and thus is divorced from the realities of the African experience.

4. *Sidzedze* which is the knowledge that is gained as a result of acquiring a certain level of awareness or gaining a certain understanding of things, relations and situations. This knowledge is gained as a result of understanding things in terms of their fundamental principles. The Ewe term *sidzedze*, refers to insight gained through the grasping of fundamental principles. One proverb says: "Knowledge of self without *sidzedze* makes a person a slave." (*Simadzemadze ame dokui fe ablode de wodoa kluvi ame*). This is a way of saying, "The only self-knowledge that is worth having is that based upon fundamental principles." This type of knowledge makes us free.



## NYANSA AS WISDOM

The word *nyansa* is usually used to translate the English term ‘wisdom’, but sometimes it is translated as knowledge. I will limit its use to wisdom in order to avoid any confusion in a philosophical discourse.

*Nyansa*, as wisdom, is an Akan word, made up of *nya* and *nsa* meaning ‘that which is obtained and is never exhausted’, i.e., a lesson which is learned from experience and is lasting, an important lesson from experience. *Nyansa*, then, is a special type of knowledge: it is drawn from experience and is cherished because of its value for one’s life. The elders are usually credited with the ability to draw appropriate lessons (*nyansa*) from the various experiences of life. For this reason one Akan proverb says: “Wisdom is something we acquire through learning; it is not something we buy” (*Nyansa vesua na vento*). This proverb implies that *nyansa* is based upon a considerable experience of life. Thus, reliable inferences of this sort are usually only associated with the elders, who in Ewe are called *ametsitsiwo* or ‘the mature ones’. One proverb sums it up this way, “You get palm wine only from mature palm trees” (*De tsitsi me aha nona*--Ewe). The *nyansa*, that is, the lessons of wisdom are stored by the elders in the proverbs and other wise sayings of the indigenous culture.

*Nyansa*, as careful and mature lessons derived from experience, cannot be regarded as *sophia*, i.e., a complete vision integrating the various fragmented experiences of life. Some examples of such particularistic but consistent teachings about life are found in the following proverbs:

- a. “Knowledge is like a garden, if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested.”
- b. “You do not keep the dish in which your neighbor has sent you food, (you return it with your own food in it),” that is, reciprocity is one principle that guides successful social behaviour.
- c. “Once you get hold of a snake’s head, what is left is just a piece of rope,” that is, the most effective way to solve a problem is to tackle it at its roots.

Having *Nyansa*, however, is not just being in possession of a series of guides to conduct; it is an attitude or fundamental disposition which shapes the behaviour of the person who has it. The wise men of the indigenous society (*nunyala*--Ewe; *anyansato*--Akan) are, therefore, not just knowledgeable men and women, but persons who have a consistent mode of response to life’s experiences. In this regard they can be said to be people who practice a philosophy of life informed by *nyansa*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For a somewhat different and detailed analysis of *nyansa*, see Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Chapter 4 (Editors).

Both knowledge (*nunya*) and wisdom (*nyansa*), therefore, must have a practical bearing on the conduct of life. This attitude to knowledge and wisdom is made quite clear in two Akan proverbs which say: "Wisdom is not (like) money which may be kept in a safe" (*Nyansa nye sika na woakyekyere asie*); and "One does not collect wisdom in a bag, lock it up in a box and then come to say to a friend 'Teach me something'."

*Nyansa* is a highly valued commodity in the indigenous society. Indeed, it is maintained that the whole world is founded on wisdom. That is, the wisdom of *Mawu*, the creator, organizer and sustainer of the world, who is regarded as the source of all wisdom. An interesting aspect of the "indigenous conception of wisdom is that it is closely associated with calmness or coolness. Thus one of the praise names of God is *Fafato*, which means 'The source of coolness'. This also leads to a connection between wisdom and women. Because of their characteristic cool, calm and pacific nature, women are generally said to give wise judgments in disputes. Owing to this conception of women, traditionally before a judgment is delivered at a chief's court the elders always go into council, as the saying goes, "to consult the *old lady*" (*abriwa*) for a wise judgment. In the past the elders really did consult an old lady.

Chiefs also, because of their role as decision-makers, are expected to acquire the cool nature of women or of the gods to enable them to make wise judgments. The chief's title among the people of Benin is, therefore, *Dada* meaning 'Mother'. Among other Ewe he is addressed as *Togbui* and as *Nana* among the Akan. These titles are associated with maturity, cool-headedness and wisdom.

## ATTITUDES TO KNOWLEDGE

Apart from the general attitude toward knowledge discussed above there are some specific indigenous attitudes to *nunya* and *nyansa*. The first attitude to knowledge is that there is a limit to what any one individual can know, even though there is no limit to what can be known in principle. One proverb expresses this attitude thus: 'Knowledge is like a *balobab* tree (monkey-bread tree); no one person can embrace it with both arms' (*Nunya adidoe, asi metune o*). Since knowledge is limitless, any person who claims to know everything knows nothing: "Knows all, knows nothing" (*Nim, nnim--Akan*).<sup>3</sup> Because of this attitude to knowledge a chief alone is not

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<sup>3</sup>There is a story told of Ananse who collected all the knowledge in the world into a pot and hung the pot around his neck and was climbing a coconut tree with the intention of hanging the pot up the tree so that nobody else could have access to knowledge. Having hung the pot right in front of him he was having some difficulty in climbing the tree. His son Ntikuma was standing by, watching Ananse climb the tree with difficulty. He suggested to his father to put the pot of knowledge at his back in order to facilitate the climbing. Ananse did so and found the climbing easier. But this meant that some knowledge

expected to give judgment in cases at his court, for wise and sound judgment is supposed to come from several heads: "One head does not go into council."

The next attitude toward knowledge is figuratively expressed by the proverb, previously quoted, which says "Knowledge is like a garden, if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested." The main point of this proverb is that the individual has an active part to play in the acquisition of knowledge, or, as another proverb puts it: "Knowledge is not the gift of the gods" (*Nunya mele aklama me o*). Man is not born with knowledge; whatever he knows is acquired through experience and through a deliberate effort on his part to know. One proverb, therefore, says: "The one who keeps asking never loses his way" (*Obisafo nto kwan*--Akan). The other one says: "The child who goes about *asking to know* what is happening will never be a fool." Lack of knowledge, ignorance, on the other hand is said to make a fool of a person (*Numanya-manva de wodoa bometsila ame*--Ewe). This attitude toward knowledge, even though it does not completely rule out *a priori* and revealed knowledge; nevertheless indicates a bias towards *a posteriori* or empirical knowledge.

The third specific attitude toward knowledge is the conception of knowledge as light and as the source of freedom. We see this attitude in two proverbs. One says "The lamp of ignorance misleads in the night" (*Nu manyamanya fe akadi tra ame za*--Ewe). In this proverb ignorance is likened to darkness and so its lamp cannot be expected to provide light, while knowledge is light considered especially as moral enlightenment. As enlightenment, knowledge makes the individual free and in this sense it is said to be creative of a better life. To the indigenous society, therefore, "Knowledge is, in the words of Dewey, "not something separate and self-sufficing, but is involved in the process by which life is sustained and evolved."<sup>4</sup>

## THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH

The examination of the concept of truth is a logical follow-up to the study of knowledge. The main question to be examined is: What makes our knowledge claims true or false? What is the indigenous concept of, and attitude toward, truth? To answer these questions we shall examine some truth terms and expressions in both the Ewe and Akan languages, especially as they are found in everyday utterances and proverbs of the people.

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(intelligence here) had been left in the world and that he had not gathered all the knowledge in his pot. In anger he threw down the knowledge pot and broke it; as a result knowledge flew to all parts of the world. The point of the story: nobody can claim to know everything and so must be open and ready to acquire new knowledge.

<sup>4</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 339.

There are six main terms for truth in Ewe, namely: *nyatefe*, *nyanono*, *nyagbagbe*, *nyagba*, *nyadzodzoe*, and *anukware*. The last term, *anukware*, is borrowed from the Akan language, and the remaining terms which are Ewe in origin have the root word ‘*nya*’ which, as we have seen, plays a very important part in the conception of knowledge and wisdom and can best be translated here as ‘statement’, ‘word’, ‘matter’ and ‘case’. In other words, to the indigenous mind truth is a knowledge-claim with a specific characteristic. We must search out this characteristic.

*Truth as Nyatefe*: The most common Ewe term for truth is *nyatefe*, which has been made popular by its use in Christian communication. Etymologically, it is built upon *nya*. *Tefe* means ‘place’ or ‘spot’; it is a common suffix in Ewe language, as seen in such words as *Ametefe*, *nutefe*, *kutefe*. Thus, *nyatefe* literally means ‘the statement/word that is at its place’, i.e., a correct statement. A statement is said to be correct when it describes accurately the state of affairs as it is. Another way, therefore, to say in Ewe that a statement is true is to say *Nya la le etefe*: “The statement/word is at its place,” as is usually said about the report of an eyewitness. According to the *nyatefe* conception of truth, a statement is true if it describes an object or event as it really is, and such statements are generally known to be made by eyewitnesses. Thus one proverb says: “Nobody doubts the death of the crocodile’s mother if it is reported by the fish.” This is another way of saying that the report of an eyewitness can be trusted to be true because such reports normally give accurate accounts of the state of things. For this reason, when the elders at a court want to question the validity of a report they ask its author either ‘*Eno nya la tefea*,’ which means literally: “Did you sit down (witness) at the place where the event occurred”? Or ‘*Ekpo etefea*?’: “Did you see the place where the event happened”?

*Nyatefe*, then, is an on-the-spot-account of an event reported by a person who witnesses it. The belief is that there is a higher degree of reliability and accuracy in an on-the-spot statement than in hearsay. This, however, does not rule out the fact that there may be errors in the reports of an eyewitness; so the essence of the *nyatefe* concept of truth is to be found in its high degree of accuracy and reliability, not in its being a facsimile of reality. Truth as *nyat efe* then consists in a high degree of correspondence between the truth-claim and the objective state of affairs so stated; its validity also lies in its high degree of accuracy and reliability. The *nyatefe* concept of truth assumes that there are certain kinds of statements that can be made about objects, events and relations which are true because of the intrinsic nature of such realities. The truth-value of such statements is, therefore, determined by the nature of the realities under consideration.

*Truth as Nyanono (Nyano)*: The second truth term is *nyanono* or *nyano* which is made up of *nya* and *no*. As *no* means ‘mother’ or ‘female’, *nyano* means literally ‘mother/female statement or word.’ This is a metaphorical expression in which ‘mother’ or ‘female’ is used as a symbol of life, of that which creates life and promotes growth. *Nyano* as truth, then, means ‘the statement that is alive’ or has a creative power, just as the

woman in the indigenous thought is seen as the principle of life, creativity and growth, while man represents the principle of death and destructiveness. The *Nyano* concept of truth emphasizes truth-value as a living, creative and productive principle. It has the power to create new situations, to promote growth and effect rejuvenation. This is a dynamic understanding of truth. So one way to say 'speak the truth' is '*do nyanono/nyatefe*', which literally means 'plant the truth', the understanding being that if it is the truth it will germinate, grow and bear fruit. Falsehood, which is called *nyakudu* or 'dead word/statement' will not germinate. The *nyano* conception of truth implies its method of verification: truth is known by, and consists in, its power to create new situations and make things better.

*Truth as Nyagbagbe:* *Nyagbagbe* means the word/statement that is alive (*nya* and *gbagbe*--alive). *Gbagbe* is used in such expressions as *nu gbagbe*, meaning 'living thing'. Thus *nyagbagbe* means 'living word or statement' in contrast to falsehood, which is termed *nyakuku*--'dead word/statement'. Again, truth, *nyagbagbe*, is conceived as a female principle, a principle of life, creativity and growth. Thus truth can be described as the statement of life or life-statement. As such, truth is regarded as of the greatest importance.

*Truth as Nyagba:* The other term for truth, which derives from *nyagbagbe*, is *nyagba*, and is made up of *nya* and *gba* which means 'first,' 'distinguished,' 'genuine,' 'important.' *Gba* appears in such expressions as *nu gbae*: 'the real thing,' or *ame gba*: 'an important person.' Truth, then, is an important statement because it contains the word of life.

The last three conceptions of truth may be designated "the Creativity or *Nyano* theory of Truth." This can be said to be unique to the indigenous concept of truth. It is different from the pragmatic theory of truth in that it is not only the workability of an idea that makes it true, but its power to bring about a better human situation and continuously to improve the conditions of life. The defining characteristic of the creativity theory is its emphasis on the ameliorative nature of truth.

*Truth as Nyadzodzoe:* *Nyadzodzoe* is the fifth Ewe term for truth; it is a forensic term which is heard often in the settlement of dispute. Like the others, it is made up of two words--*nya* and *dzodzoe* which means 'straight'. Truth as *nyadzodzoe*, therefore, means literally 'straight statement/word;' falsehood is referred to as *nyagoglo* or *nyamadzomadzo*, meaning 'crooked statement/word.' *Nyadzodzoe* is usually pronounced as a judgment in a dispute to mean 'not guilty' or 'you have behaved correctly,' but this correctness of behavior is judged on the basis of the truth or falsehood of the statements one makes about what has happened.

The straight-statement conception of truth presupposes the existence of normative standards of truth-statement which are used to measure other truth-statements. This understanding of truth as a statement that is judged to be straight by an already accepted 'straight-statement' is brought out in the proverb: "It is only the liar who loses his teeth three

times in his lifetime.” Normally people lose their teeth twice in their life time, once in childhood and lastly in old age. Thus, the statement that corresponds to this fact of life is: “Men lose their teeth twice in their lifetime.” Any person who says he lost his teeth three times is not making a ‘straight-statement’, and no behaviour emanating from such a statement will be considered straight.

The normative truth-statement is, therefore, what is generally known by the society, represented by the elders, to be true in speech as well as in deed. The truth of a statement is therefore in its *identity* with what has been known to be the case in such matters. The knowledge of normative truth-statements is acquired through long years of experience and is passed down from generation to generation. In non-literate societies the memory is the repository of truth as *nyadzodzo*.

*Truth as Anukware:* *Anukware* is an Akan word for truth, where it is spelled *nokware*. This is made up of *ano*, meaning ‘mouth,’ and *koro* meaning ‘one’. Hence, *anokware* (*anukware*) means ‘one mouth’. Truth as *anukware* means a statement that is made with one mouth’, i.e., made with consistency and without contradiction in the description of the same reality. Internal consistency and harmony are, therefore, held as the marks of a true statement. Dr. K.O. Agyakwa of the Faculty of Education at the University of Cape Coast is of the view that ‘speaking with one mouth’ rather means several people saying the same thing about a given state of affairs, so that “truth is the sum-total or consensus of what people are saying about a given state of affairs.” He concludes that consistency “becomes a test for truth” which “resides in the collective mind of the community.”<sup>5</sup>

The consistency that Dr. Agyakwa referred to as the criterion of truth is an ‘external’ one; that is to say, the consistency is between truth-statements made by two or more people about the same reality, and not the consistency among truth-claims made by the same person about one and the same reality. This latter consistency might be called ‘internal’ consistency and is generally required by people in establishing the validity of statements. For this reason, as soon as an individual contradicts himself (which means speaking with two mouths), he is said to be speaking a lie. An individual who corroborates what others have said is confirming and not necessarily ‘speaking’ the truth which is always first established by one person. Moreover, the ubiquity of an opinion cannot be used as a criterion of truth, because the voice of the people (*Vox populi*) is not always the voice of God (truth). It can be concluded then that the *anukware* conception of truth is the ‘internal’ consistency and harmony that exists among statements made by the same person about one and the same reality.

This conclusion is upheld by several indigenous conceptions of falsehood. To say that ‘You are telling a lie’, the Ewe living around Ho in Ghana say ‘*enyi ve*’, which literally means, ‘You are an alligator lizard’

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<sup>5</sup> K.O. Agyakwa, *The Educational Wisdom of Our Fathers* (Dept. of Educational Foundations, Cape Coast, Ghana, 1979), pp. 70-71.

which has a forked (double) tongue. 'You are an alligator' is a metaphorical way of saying 'You have two tongues,' 'You speak with two tongues (mouths).' Another way of saying that 'You are telling a lie' is 'You have two heads.' As the proverb puts it: "One person does not grow two heads" (*Ame deka metoa ta eve o*). This is a way of saying 'Stop contradicting yourself.' Other expressions are: "There are two tongues in the mouth of a liar"; "It is the liar who grows the tongue of an alligator 'His mouth is twin (two-pronged)' (*Nano ye nta--Akan*), i.e., "He is a liar." A local term for falsehood is *venyinyi* (*venyenye*) which means 'the state of being an alligator' which is representative of those who have 'two tongues/mouths.' All these expressions for falsehood indirectly stress consistency and harmony among the statements made by one and the same person as the criteria of truth, conceived as *anukware*.

Four clear concepts of truth have emerged from the preceding examination of the indigenous truth terms. First, truth is the knowledge-claim that, to a high degree, corresponds to reality, as it is. Second, truth is the identity of a new statement with other statements that have been accepted as true. Third, truth is the 'internal' consistency and harmony that exist among statements made by the same person about the same reality. Finally, truth, like knowledge and wisdom, is the statement that has the power to create new and better situations of life. Truth, in this sense, is a dynamic and creative property of statements.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion shows that, even though truth has a formal aspect, it is essentially dynamic and creative. Hence, one proverb says "Truth makes things good" (*Nyatefe nyoa nu--Ewe*). Also "Truth is woman," as woman has the power to bring forth new life. So, truth has creative power, while falsehood is destructive and disintegrative. Therefore, if truth is ignored the result is disaster, for only truth can settle falsehood. Truth is accordingly cherished as the greatest spiritual value. As one proverb puts it, "*Sebe*, if truth lies in your mother's vagina and you use your penis to bring it out you have not had sex with her,"<sup>6</sup> which is a way of saying that truth stands at the very top of our values and all other values can be sacrificed if need be to get truth. Nothing can destroy truth; the person who loves truth will live long while the person who loves falsehood will die young, because truth is life while falsehood is death.

The ability to know, i.e., to grasp reality in terms of fundamental ideas, and the possession of knowledge are critical properties that makes one a *human being* in the conceptions of the indigenous society. One method of gaining knowledge of an object is through the process of

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<sup>6</sup> The word "*sebe*" is used in Akan as polite apology for using rather delicate language. It may be translated by some such phrase as "If you would, excuse my language."

observation and intellectual assimilation through the medium of ideas. The knower must detach him/herself from the reality to be known as much as possible so as to be in the position to have that knowledge of the object which can be described as *n yatefe*. The other method of knowing is that of making appropriate inferences from a passive experience in which one is acted upon by objects encountered.

Knowledge (*nunya*) then may be defined as inferences or ideas derived from experience, be they active or passive, and expressed as statements or propositions. *Nunya* becomes *nyansa* (wisdom) when it can be regarded as a complete principle of comprehension for a fairly large segment of experience. Without knowledge (*nunya*) and wisdom (*nyansa*) human life returns to animality; they are the divine creative Intelligence and Principle at work in the creation, organization and support of the universe and of life.



**CHAPTER IV**

**AFRICAN SYMBOLS AND PROVERBS  
AS SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH**

*N. K. DZOBO*

The purpose of this chapter is not to explore in detail the indigenous symbol system of Africa, but to discuss individual groups of symbols as sources of insight into African orientations to life. Many people regret the fact that, besides Egypt, the rest of Africa has not invented an alphabetic system. They overlook the fact that Africans have been using both visual and oral “picture words” for a considerable time to express, transmit and store their thoughts, emotions and attitudes. All over Africa, visual images and ordinary objects are used *symbolically* to communicate knowledge, feelings and values. As symbols play such an important role in the African conception of reality, a sound understanding of African patterns of thought and feeling requires an appreciation of the nature and function of symbolism as a medium of communication in African culture.

**CONCERNING THE USES OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS**

Because the nature and role of signs and symbols in the process of transmitting information are easily confused, a clear notion of the difference in the way they are used in communication is necessary for appreciating the cognitive value of indigenous symbols.

*Natural Signs*

For our purpose, it is necessary to identify two main types of signs, namely *natural* and *artificial signs*, both of which are used to provide stimuli for fairly determined appropriate responses.

In everyday communication, natural objects and events are employed as *natural signs*, thus smoke is taken to indicate the presence of fire, and gives rise to the proverb, “There is no smoke without fire.” Sometimes wet streets are a sign that it has rained; and a student’s yawning in class may be a sign that he is tired, sleepy or that the lesson being given is boring. A scar on the body may indicate an accident.

A natural sign is thus a part of a greater event of a complex condition, and indicates the rest of the situation of which it is a notable feature. Sign, then, is a symptom of a state of affairs.

There are three significant features to be noted in the use of signs in communication: the sign, its object and the subject who relates the sign and the object signified. The sign and its object (for example, smoke and

fire) logically form a pair. In any such combination one of the terms is less important--smoke, in this case--than the other--fire. The less important term, smoke, becomes the *sign* of the more important one, fire. The less important term is normally more easily available than the other term in the pair. For example, a scar as a sign is more easily available than the accident which is inferred from the presence of the scar. The accident, then, is the meaning of the scar as a sign.

### *Artificial Signs*

Sometimes we produce artificial or arbitrary objects and actions and correlate them with important ones that serve as their meanings. These are called artificial signs. Traffic signs are good examples of artificial signs. For example, *red light* has been used arbitrarily to mean "stop" or "prohibition." Colors are also used arbitrarily to mean many different things. Thus, in the indigenous Ghanaian culture, *brown* is used as a color for mourning, and so brown clothes are customarily worn to funerals and memorial services. Placing the arm or arms across the middle of the head or clasping both hands at the back of the head is used as another sign of mourning in Ghanaian society.

Similar artificial signs abound in other African cultures. They do not form parts of conditions which they naturally signify, but are used arbitrarily by the culture to impart specifically agreed-upon information. There is no limit to what such signs may mean, and so a *sound of a bell* may indicate any of the following: to begin church worship or classes, to change lessons, to call attention to what is being said, etc.

A sign can be taken or designed to mean so many things that a misinterpretation of signs is a real possibility. A "stick-up thumb" in Ghana is an insulting and vulgar sign, but in America it is used as a way of asking for a lift. Even within the same Ghanaian culture the left hand is ritually an unclean sign; but because it is not used normally to do evil as the right hand sometimes is, it has also become a sign of peace and is used, especially among the Ewe of Ghana, to prepare the reconciliation libation water called *dzatsi*.

However ambiguous be the use of signs, they furnish information about the environment and about the intentions and feelings of people, and they elicit appropriate reactions. Their major limitation, apart from the ambiguity in their use, is in the fact that they do not point characteristically beyond themselves to hidden meanings and information as to symbols.

### *Symbols in General*

One great difference between the use of signs and symbols is the degree of qualitative information that is conveyed through them. While signs provide simple information, symbols are used to communicate complex knowledge, abstract truths and ideas about life and its meaning.

The simplest example of a sign might be the use of a *personal name*, in introducing someone. For example, if Fidel Castro were present and introduced, everyone present would stand up. In this case, the name is used as a sign and calls forth an appropriate action. But if the name, Castro, were used in a discourse it would make us think of what the person bearing the name represents in consciousness. In other words, the name in this case is used as a *symbol*; it will not call forth actions appropriate to their objects, but will *make us think of its objects in certain ways*. A symbol is, therefore, a vehicle for the conception of an object, enabling us to conceive or form a view of an object; it calls forth mental images. Thus, for example, Fidel Castro in his relationship to the United States of America might give rise to the thought of a modern Old Testament David who stood against a Goliath. The *conception* of a symbol, therefore, consists in what it *means*, and Castro as a symbol may mean the fact of the continued existence of the weak and the powerless in spite of threats from the mighty or it may mean the spirit of defiance. A symbol is therefore a powerful instrument of thought and conceptual abstraction.

Below are some examples of indigenous African symbols and the conceptions they evoke in the mind:

1. *The elephant*: symbol of power and kingship.
2. *The lion*: symbol of ferocity, danger and royalty.
3. *Woman*: symbol of peace, productivity, creativity, life and growth.
4. *Rugged Triangle*: symbol of stability and inner repose; true life is secure, stable and lasting or has safe and stable foundations; life that has a solid basis (see figure 1).
5. *The ram and its horns*: symbol of pacific disposition combined with strength and power (see figure 2).

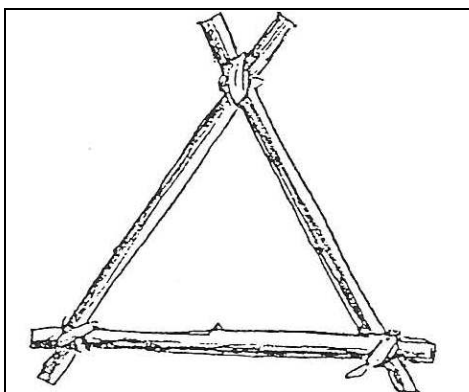


Figure 1. *Eto*

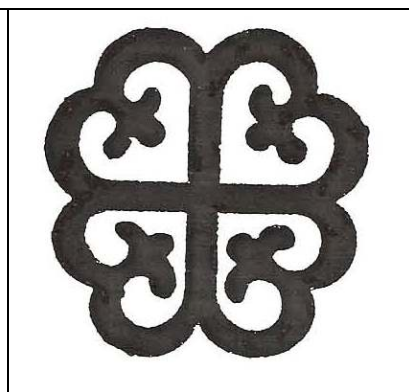


Figure 2. *Dwinnimmen*

In all the examples given, the conception of the objects are derived from certain unique and relatively enduring traits noticeable in the objects used as symbols. Thus, the two traits that are characteristic of the ram are “peaceful nature,” represented by the general nature of sheep, and “strength and power” represented by the horns and their use in fighting.

The meaning of a symbol, like that of a sign, is determined by the subject using it, so sheep can be a symbol of humility in one culture and a symbol of stupidity in another. The serpent can be a symbol of evil in one culture and of life and continuity in another. The subject and his culture, then, are responsible for the meaning given to any particular symbol. This synthetic process of giving meaning to symbols is aptly expressed by the proverb: “The Potter, and not the pot, is responsible for the shape of the pot.” Thus, the egg as a symbol in Ghanaian culture has several symbolic meanings: feminine beauty for those who think that a girl with an egg-shaped head is a beauty; it can be a symbol of easy labour in childbirth, because some people are of the opinion that the hen does not labour much in laying eggs. The egg is also a symbol of new and creative life, of fertility and fecundity. Finally, it is used as a symbol of love and of state power, which are considered very fragile. The top of a linguist staff in Ghana is therefore sometimes made of carved hand with an egg in it, and this is translated as: “Power held in one hand is not safe.”

In positive terms the symbol recommends the virtue of sharing political power and so could be called a “symbol of democracy”.

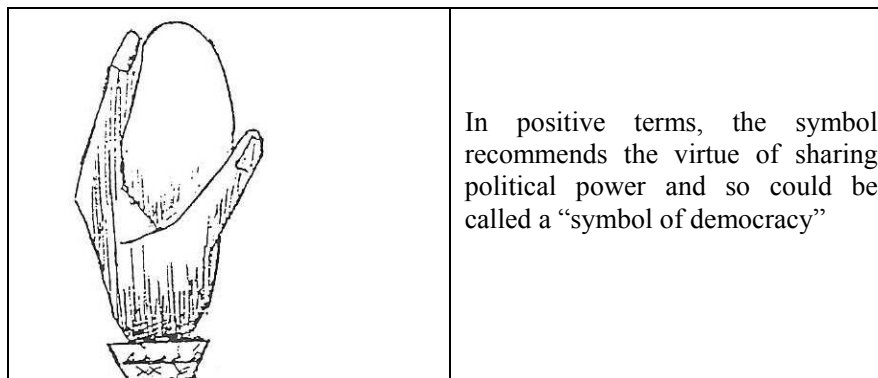


Figure 3. *Asi kple azi*

### *Suitability and Types of Symbols*

The preceding discussion of African symbols leads to the question: What generally makes an object a suitable symbol? Usually objects, plants and animals are found more suitable as symbols because they run true to

type, e.g., the egg is characteristically fragile and so can be effectively used to represent the delicate nature of love and the loving relationships; fire is always warm and so can be used to symbolize the warmth of sincere love. Human nature, even though complex and changeable, is used to represent certain broad traits. Thus, woman in the indigenous culture has come to represent the creative principle of life, and man has become a symbol of strength and destructiveness. Boys and girls among the Ewe and Akan of Ghana, Togo and Benin are, therefore, given names that are *characteristic* of their natures. A boy may be given a name such as: *Oko* (Akan), “War”; *Bekoe* (Akan), “He has come as a fighter”; *Tukpe* (Ewe), “Coolness”; *Nyuiyo* (Ewe), “The good is not a taboo to anyone”; *Blewusi* (Ewe)--“Take it easy”; to reflect what they normally bring to people’s minds.

As observed earlier, human beings, objects, animals and plants are found suitable as symbols on the basis of the enduring traits they may have and in the minds of people represent these enduring traits. Thus, in the indigenous folklore and proverbs the antelope is a symbol of puniness and powerlessness.

## TYPES OF INDIGENOUS SYMBOLS

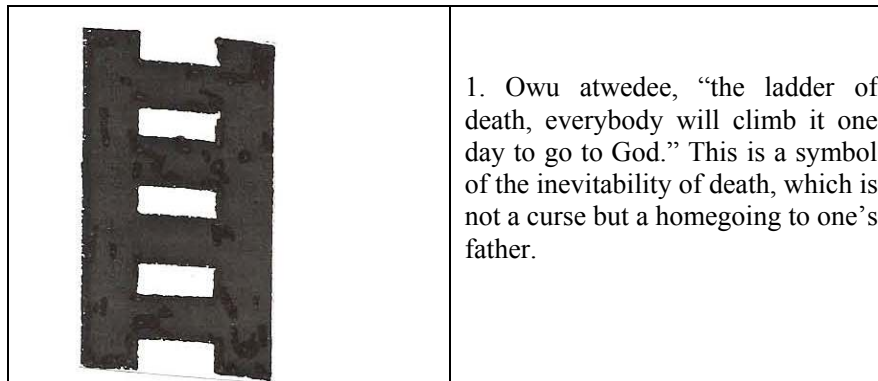
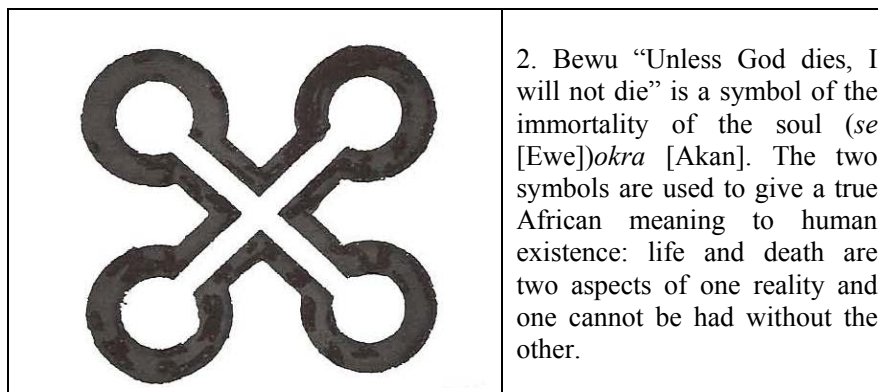
The indigenous cultures of Africa are replete with symbols and symbolic expressions. In the indigenous Ghanaian culture, symbols are used in different life situations, and on the basis of the contexts in which they are used, they may be classified into six major groups with unavoidable overlappings. The six groups are *adinkra* symbols, stool symbols, linguist staff symbols, religious symbols, ritual symbols and oral literary symbols.

*Adinkra Symbols.* The *adinkra* symbols derive their name and popularity from one of the national cloths of Ghana called *adinkra*. The word *adinkra* comes from the Twi words *dinkra*<sup>1</sup> meaning “to say goodbye.” The *adinkra* cloth is traditionally a mourning cloth and is normally worn “to say goodbye” to the dead and to express sympathy for the bereaved family, and so is commonly seen at funerals and memorial services. It is usually adorned with symbols that express various views of life and death.<sup>2</sup> Four *adinkra* symbols are given below.

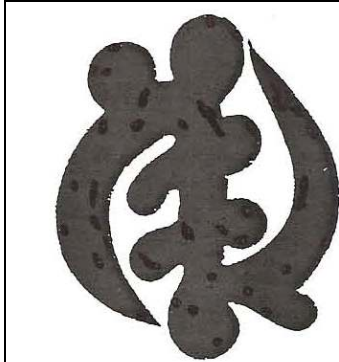
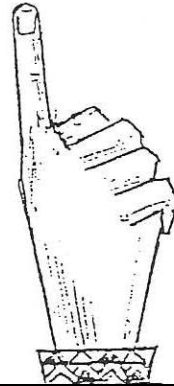
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<sup>1</sup> Some writers give other possible origins and meanings for the word *adinkra*. But it is truer to say that it is the use in this context that provides the name for the cloth.

<sup>2</sup> For a full account of Adinkra symbols, see A.K. Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns* (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Lagon, 1972) and also A. Kayper Meusah, *Sankofa--Adinkra Poems* (Ghana Publishing Corporation, Tema, 1972).

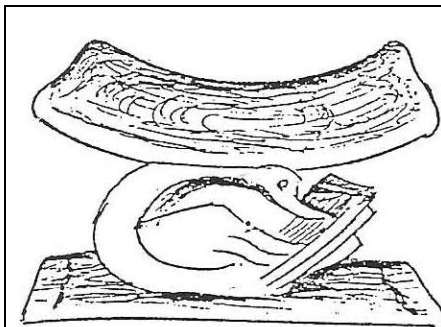
Figure 4. *Owu atwedee*Figure 5 *Myame Bewu ana mawu*

3. *Gye Nyame*, “Only God” is an abstract symbol representing the dependability of God. Its Ewe version called *Mauw ko* is a right hand drawn with a clenched fist and the finger pointing straight up meaning “I lean only on God alone” because he is dependable (see figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6. *Gye Nyame*Figure 7. *Mawu Ko*

The people of the indigenous society use the *adinkra* cloth as an appropriate canvas for displaying traditional symbols which express their unique apprehension of reality.

*Stool Symbols.* The traditional stool of Ghana, like the *adinkra* cloth, is used as a medium for displaying various symbols. The stool itself is a symbol in its own right and is considered as the abode of the soul (*se, okra*) of a nation or an individual. Every individual or state must, therefore, have his or her stool. Formerly a bride was given a stool by her husband so as to *settle* her soul in the husband's house. In some cases, a mother is given a new stool on the birth of a child. This act is to reinforce the continued stay of her soul in her husband's house (see figure 8).

Figure 8. *Sankofa*Figure 9. *Nyansapow*

The stool as a symbol of the individual's soul has become a highly valued personal property. Thus, if the owner is not sitting on it, theoretically nobody else is allowed to sit on it, and so it is generally laid on its side.

The stool is conceived as a female principle and its seat part is shaped like a crescent and represents the warm embrace of a mother welcoming her beloved child home from a journey or from the day's labors. The crescent part of the stool is called *atuu*, which is a word used to embrace a person arriving from a journey.

The middle portion of the stool is carved as a symbolic representation of an object such as an elephant, a sankofa bird, or of an abstract idea such as "*Gye Nyame*". The stool usually derives its name from the symbol that is used in its middle portion, which is called (in Ewe) *titina* (middle) or *nufiala* (teacher), because the particular message of any stool is found in its middle portion. The message of the Nyansapow (Wisdom) Stool (see figure 9) may be used as an illustration. It is rendered as: "The present generation cannot lay aside easily the wisdom of the past; and they can only do this if they have something better to replace it." The stool is, therefore, used as a seat, as well as an aid to teach something important.

*Linguist Staff Symbols.* At the court of any Ghanaian chief, there is an important official called (in Akan) "*okyame*." He is a linguist or spokesman through whom the chief speaks to his elders and the people, and through whom the chief is, in turn, spoken to on both private and public occasions.

The linguist is usually appointed on the basis of his mature experience, expert knowledge of traditional matters, tact and diplomacy. He is a close adviser of the chief and pronounces judgment at the court on behalf of his chief and his elders.

Each linguist has a staff of office, which is carved in wood and topped with a symbolic emblem, usually covered with silver or gold leaf. The emblem depicts a proverb or expresses a highly cherished value in the society. The five popular symbols that are seen on the tops of linguist staffs are given below.



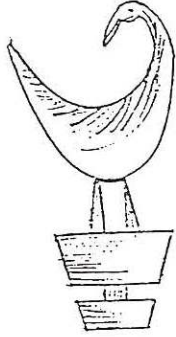
	<p>1. “Three heads joined together” (figure 10). This depicts the value of consultation and discussion in arriving at mature decisions especially at the court of the chief. It is based on a proverb that says: “One head does not go into council.”</p>
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Figure 10. Tikro

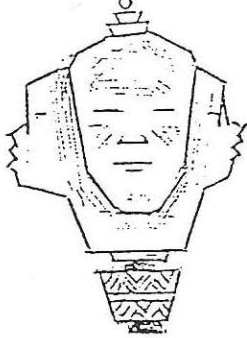
	<p>2. “The crowing rooster (cock)” (figure 11). This is a symbol of good leadership. The belief among the Ewe is that a good leader is a person who wakes up his followers to their responsibilities and privileges. This symbol is used as a guiding principle of administration by the Chiefs of Anyako in the Volta Region of Ghana.</p>
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Figure 11. *Kpodola nyui*

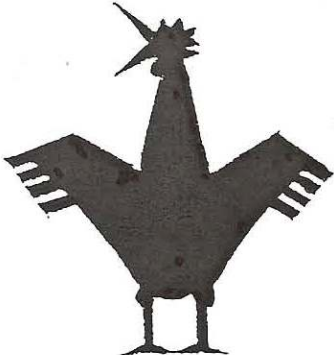
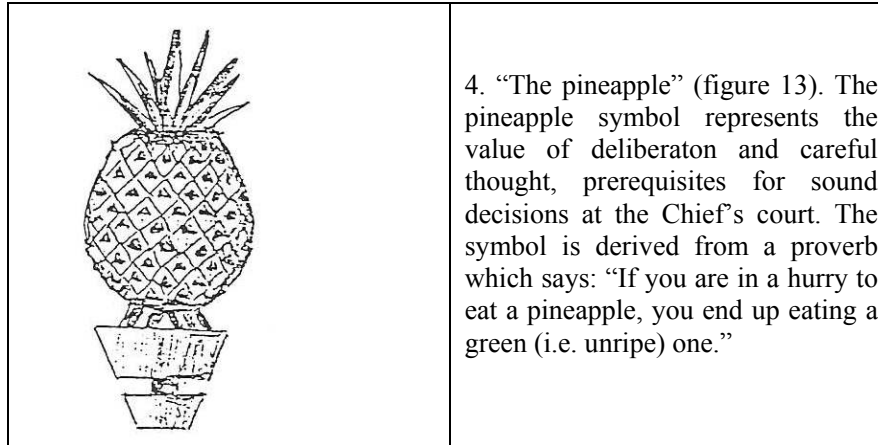
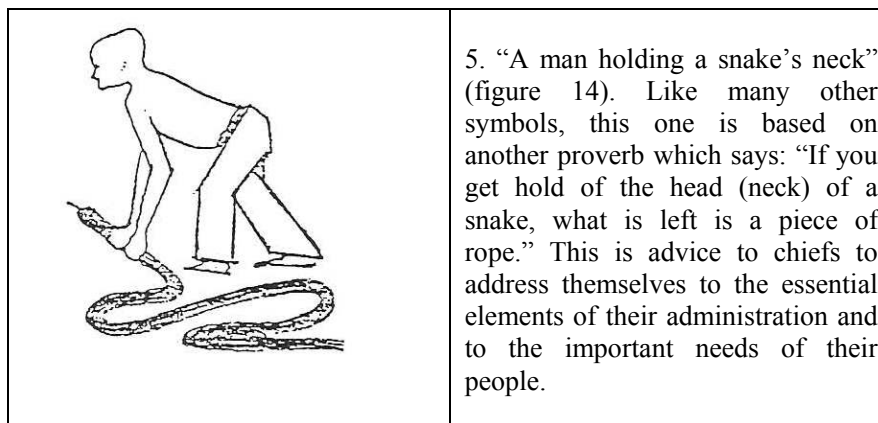
	<p>3. “A hen stepping on her chicks” (figure 12). This is a symbol of parental discipline. It is the duty of parents to correct their children, and parental correction should not be taken as lack of affection for children but a deep concern for their good.</p>
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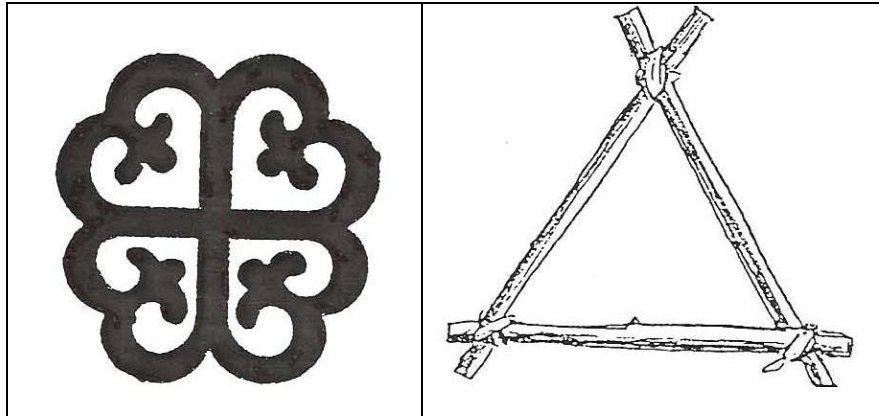
Figure 12. *Akoko nan*

Figure 13. *Aborobe*Figure 14. *Owo ti*

It has become clear from the preceding discussion that in the indigenous Ghanaian society, the clothes that people wear, the stools they sit on and what they use as aids are means of self-expression and a medium for teaching both the young and the old.

*Religious and Ritual Symbols.* All the preceding visual symbols were born of religious or philosophical beliefs. But there are other symbols that express specific beliefs about the High God and reveal the conceptions of his nature. Thus, “*Nyame-dua*” (see figure 15) symbolizes the belief in

the abiding presence and protection of God. [insert figure 16] in the Mawu-cult among the Ewe, the rugged triangle made of sticks is a symbol derived from the opening proverb of a traditional prayer which runs as follows: "Three things make life" (see figure 16).

Figure 15. *Nyame Dua*Figure 16. *Eto*

This is another way of saying: Anything put on a tripod (in this case, of the traditional outdoor stone stove) will not fall down. This is a symbol of stability and inner repose called *Eto*, i.e., three. This state of being is also described as "cool" (*efa* in Ewe) and is one of the defining characteristics of the Ewe High God. *Segbo*, who is, therefore, referred to as *Fafato*, "the Father of Owner of Coolness." Peace has consequently become a necessary condition of a life, of human creativity and of growth. So one proverb says: "The yam thrives well when its mound is cool."

The other very important religious symbol is the woman, who is used as a symbol of the Ewe High God in the capacity of the primordial cosmic unity-totality and the creative principle of life. The unity of the godhead is referred to as *Segbo*, which represents the fullness of the divine being; it is referred to in its totality as *Mawu-Lisa* or Dada Segbo-Lisa. The dual name for the High God comprises the female and the male principles, which are the creating principles of life; one is invalid without the other. But the High God as a creative principle is characteristically symbolized by a woman.

This makes it clear why, among some African ethnic groups, a woman officiates at puberty rites and at weddings. These rituals have their symbolic meanings. The purpose and essence of life to the indigenous African society are to be creative and productive, and the whole of life is seen as a field in which the individual plants the seeds of his life. The personal Ewe name *agbefanu*, meaning "Life is like sowing," and the

proverb, "Woman without man is like a field without seed," sum up the indigenous creative view of life. This is an essential component of Africanity.

### PROVERBS AS ORAL LITERARY SYMBOLS

In speaking and thinking, oral literary forms such as fables, myths, maxims and proverbs are used in the traditional society to express beliefs, values and feelings. Proverbs which are normally short and pithy sayings, are very popular devices used to state metaphorically certain general truths about life. One Yoruba proverb says: "A proverb is a horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas."

#### *Proverbs and Meaning*

This Yoruba proverb defines accurately the symbolic function of a proverb and helps us to understand, the general function of proverbs. Instead of being an old-fashioned way of communication, proverbs lead us to conceive and understand the essence of human relationships, events, life's situations and the behaviour patterns of people. They establish certain value bases to help us comprehend and order our actions, and they enshrine the vital conclusions filtered from life's experiences. Take for example the philosophical question: "What is knowledge?" Several answers are given to this question, not in the form of learned treatises, but in the form of simple proverbs. One says, "Knowledge is like a baobab tree and so no one person can embrace it with both arms."<sup>3</sup> This is another way of saying, "Knowledge grows and grows and so there is no end to what any one individual can know." Another proverb states the same truth thus: "He who knows all, knows nothing." This understanding of knowledge is designed to lead to the development of an attitude of intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness.

A proverb normally has primary and secondary meanings, sometimes referred to as denotative or manifest meaning, on the one hand, and connotative or latent meaning, on the other. In the proverb, "The lion and the antelope live in the same forest yet the antelope has time to grow," the lion and the antelope firstly denote carnivorous and herbivorous quadrupeds, respectively; connotatively, however, the "lion" represents "forces of destruction" while the "antelope" represents man in his puniness and powerlessness. The main point of the proverb is "There is a power in the universe that preserves the life of the weak and helpless in the face of all that threatens it."

It is not always easy to make out the connotative meaning of a proverb, but, if its connotative meaning is grasped, it is found to be a

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<sup>3</sup> *Baobab* is a big fruit-bearing tree with a very huge base stem.

vehicle used by our fathers and mothers to approach, apprehend and recollect reality in their experience.

### *Uses of Proverbs*

Proverbs are a very effective mode of communication, and their correct and persuasive use in speech is always taken as a sign of sound education, maturity, cultural sophistication and wisdom. Among their many uses, we can discern the following:

*To Express Abstract Truths.* Proverbs are generally used to communicate truths that may be abstract and difficult to grasp. Such a proverb usually dramatizes and configures the bare truths in the facts of everyday life and world. In the proverb form the truths become so substantial that they stimulate the imagination and challenge the understanding.

#### *Examples:*

<i>Proverb</i>	<i>Abstract Idea</i>
1) There is no quarrel between the eye and sleep	Learn to tolerate each other—Tolerance
2) The freedom that comes from ignorance enslaves the one who entertains it.	Knowledge is freedom
3) It is only the stupid slave who says that his condition of bondage is good after a heavy meal.	The freedom of self-determination is better than material well-being

*Guide to Conduct.* Many proverbs are used as bases for judging unacceptable modes of behaviour and thus function as general guides to conduct.

#### *Examples:*

<i>Proverb</i>	<i>Principle</i>
1) If you visit the country of frogs and you find them squatting, you must squat too even though you may find it inconvenient.	You need to make some adjustment in a new situation of life.
2) You do not use the left hand to point the way to your father's village.	Learn to appreciate and admire what you have.
3) Once you have made up your mind to cross a river by walking through it, you do not mind getting your stomach wet.	Be firm in carrying out your resolutions.

*As Commentary on Human Behaviour.* Some of the proverbs are careful observations and commentaries on human behaviour and so provide useful insight into human nature.

*Examples:*

<i>Proverb</i>	<i>Principle</i>
1) A person who does not lick his lips cannot blame the harmattan for drying them.	People who are not prepared to help themselves are badly treated by others.
2) It is usually the insect in your cloth that bites you.	It is your relatives or close friends who will ruin or betray you.
3) Ti is the coward who says, "They are insulting us."	It is the coward who leaves the defense of his honor to others.

*To Express Values*

Proverbs display unmissably the main value-orientations of indigenous African society. They express all kinds of values from the moral, spiritual, humanistic, economic and intellectual to the material.

*Examples:*

<i>Proverb</i>	<i>Principle</i>
1) There is no wealth where there are no children.	The importance of children.
2) It is one's deeds that are counted, not one's years.	The meaning of time is in positive deeds. (Creative living).
3) Goodness sells itself; badness walks around.	The value of a thing is in the inherent power that it has to satisfy human needs, and it is this power that attracts people to it.

In the following two extended Ghanaian proverbs, the value of man features in the first one and the value of life in the second:

- a. It is the human being who counts,  
Call on gold, gold does not respond;  
Call on clothes, clothes do not respond;  
It is the human being who counts.
- b. Don't let me die in the day,  
Don't let me die at night,  
Don't let me die at all,  
But let me die.

The point of the first is fairly obvious, but that of the second needs some explaining. In the second one, which is a prayer proverb, the individual expresses his desire to see and appreciate the beauty of life and nature (line one) and to be sexually active (line two) so as to fulfil his creative being and have many children who may perpetuate his name, beliefs and philosophy of life (line three). After he has fulfilled his destiny, he would be happy to join the fathers (line 4). In this proverb we see the indigenous understanding of life and death as polar opposites which complement each other.

From the examination of the various indigenous symbols, it is clear that they constitute valuable source-materials for the understanding of African orientations to life.





## **PART III**

### **ANTHROPOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS**



**CHAPTER V**

**PERSON AND COMMUNITY  
IN AFRICAN THOUGHT**

*KWAME GYEKYE*

**INTRODUCTION**

The existence of a social structure is an outstanding, in fact, a necessary feature of every human society. A social structure is evolved not only to give effect to certain conceptions of human nature, but also to provide a framework for both the realization of the potentials, goals and hopes of the individual members of the society and the continuous existence and survival of the society. The type of social structure or arrangement evolved by a particular society seems to reflect--and be influenced by--the public conceptions of personhood held in the society. These conceptions are articulated in the critical analyses and arguments of its intellectuals.

Questions raised by the intellectuals, especially the moral and political philosophers among them, relate, in this connection, to the metaphysical and moral status of a person (or, self). The metaphysical question is whether a person, even though he lives in a human society, is a self-sufficient atomic individual who does not depend on his relationships with others for the realization of his ends and who has ontological priority over the community, or whether he is by nature a communal (or, communitarian) being, having natural and essential relationships with others. Moral questions, which may, in some sense, be said to be linked to, or engendered by, metaphysical conceptions of the person, relate to: (i) the status of the rights of the individual--whether these are so fundamental that they may not be overridden in any circumstances, (ii) the place of duties--how the individual sees his socio-ethical roles in relation to the interests and welfare of others, and (iii) the existence and appreciation of a sense of common life or common (collective) good. Moral or normative matters may be expressed in sophisticated and elaborate conceptual formulation; but as practical matters they have their best and unambiguous articulation or translation in the actual way of life of a people--in the way individuals are expected or not expected to respond to one another in times of need, to spontaneously care for one another, and so on.

My intention in this paper is to explore the above questions which bear on personhood and community; how the two concepts feature and are understood in African culture will be my point of departure. In an earlier

publication,<sup>1</sup> I discussed the concepts of individuality and communalism as they are understood in Akan philosophy in the traditional setting. In this paper, however, I shall focus my attention mainly on the normative aspects of personhood and community.

### COMMUNITARIANISM IN AFRICAN SOCIO-ETHICAL THOUGHT

The communal or communitarian (I use the two words interchangeably) aspects of African socio-ethical thought are reflected in the communitarian features of the social structures of African societies. As remarked by many scholars or researchers on the cultures of Africa, these features are not only outstanding, but are the defining characteristics of those cultures. The sense of community, that characterizes social relations among individuals is a direct consequence of the communitarian social arrangements. This sense of community, according to Dickson, is a "characteristic of African life to which attention has been drawn again and again by both African and non-African writers on Africa. Indeed, to many this characteristic defines Africans."<sup>2</sup> According to Senghor, "Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society."<sup>3</sup> Kenyatta made the following observation with regard to the traditional life in Kenya: "According to Gikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere he observed that "Individualism and self-seeking were ruled out. . . . The personal pronoun 'I' was used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism was (so) much ingrained in the mind of the people."<sup>5</sup> The communitarian ethos of the African culture is also echoed in the works of some African novelists. Clearly, then, the African social structure with its underlying socio-ethical philosophy, was and very much still is, communitarian.

Now, what would be the conception of personhood held in such a communitarian socio-ethical philosophy? The question is appropriate and would need to be explored, for it is possible for people to assume

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<sup>1</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>Kwesi A. Dickson, *Aspects of Religion and Life in Africa* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Leopold S. Senghor, *On African Socialism*, trans. Mercer Cook (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 93-94.

<sup>4</sup>Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York: Vintage, 1965), p. 297.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 180.

offhandedly that with its emphasis on communal values, collective good and shared ends, communitarianism invariably conceives the person as *wholly* constituted by social relationships; that it tends to whittle down the moral autonomy of the person; that it makes the being and life of the individual person totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, practices and ends of the community; and consequently, that it diminishes his freedom and capability to choose or question or reevaluate the shared values of the community.

The communitarian conception of the person needs to be critically and thoroughly examined before making a final judgment on those assumptions. In making the communitarian self, as variously understood in African culture, my point of departure, I shall set off from the views clearly expressed in an interesting paper published some time ago by Menkiti.

Making Mbiti's understanding or assessment of the status of the person in African culture expressed in the statement, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am"<sup>6</sup> the basis for his analysis, Menkiti maintains that the African view asserts the ontological primacy, and hence the ontological independence, of the community.<sup>7</sup> He says that "as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be."<sup>8</sup> From this assumption, Menkiti infers, (i) that in the African view, in contrast with the Western "it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, wills or memory";<sup>9</sup> (ii) that the African view supports "the notion of personhood as acquired,"<sup>10</sup> that "personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed";<sup>11</sup> and (iii) that "as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail."<sup>12</sup>

He infers the notion of an acquisition of personhood also from the use of the pronoun *it* "in many languages, English included" to refer to "children and new borns."<sup>13</sup> I take issue with the views or conclusions expressed in (i) to (iii), for they do not necessarily follow from the notion of the priority of the community. Menkiti's views on the metaphysical status of the community vis-a-vis that of the person and his account of personhood

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<sup>6</sup>John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup>Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy, An Introduction*, ed. Richard A. Wright (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 171, 180.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 174; also pp. 178-179.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

in African moral, social and political philosophy are, in my opinion, overstated and not entirely correct, and require some amendments or refinements. I will, in the fullness of time, justify my criticisms of his views.

However, I should perhaps point out, that the metaphysical construal of personhood in African thought such as Menkiti's, which gives the community priority over the individual person, has a parallel in the conceptions of the social status of the person held by some scholars, both African and non-African. Their position was grounded in the ideological choice of socialism--"African Socialism"--made by most African political leaders in the early days of political independence. Or, is it the case that the social conception of the individual's status is a logical consequence of the metaphysical? The social conception holds a view of communitarianism which may be either radical and unrestricted or moderate and restricted, with either extreme or moderate socio-political consequences for the individual person. Thus, the advocates of the ideology of African socialism, such as Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere, in their anxiety to find anchorage for their ideological choice in the traditional African ideas about society, argued that socialism was foreshadowed in the African traditional idea and practice of communalism (communitarianism). Thus, Nkrumah observed that "If one seeks the socio-political ancestor of socialism, one must go to communalism . . . in socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances."<sup>14</sup> And Senghor also opined that "Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals."<sup>15</sup>

These statements clearly suggest the conviction of these African leaders or scholars that the African social order, in the traditional setting, was communitarian and would, for that reason, easily translate into modern socialism; hence the euphoric and unrelenting pursuit of socialism by most African political leaders for more than two decades following the attainment of political independence. But in as much as they do not appear to have allowed room for the exercise of individual rights, the view of communitarianism held by them may, most probably, be said to be radical, excessive and unrestricted--a view of communitarianism I find unsupportable.

Communitarianism immediately sees the human person as an inherently (intrinsically) communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated, atomic individual. Consequently, it sees the community not as a mere association of individual persons whose interests and ends are contingently congruent, but as a group

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<sup>14</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism--Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> Leopold S. Senghor, *On African Socialism*, p. 49.

of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or non biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals and values. The notion of common interests and values is crucial to an adequate conception of community; that notion, in fact, defines the community. It is the notion of common interests, goals and values that differentiates a community from a mere association of individual persons. Members of a community share goals and values. They have intellectual and ideological, as well as emotional, attachments to those goals and values; as long as they cherish them, they are ever ready to pursue and defend them.

It is an obvious fact, of course, that an individual human being is born into an existing human society and, therefore, into a human culture, the latter being a product of the former. As an Akan maxim has it, when a person descends from heaven, he descends into a human society (*onipa firi soro besi a, obesi onipa kurom*). The fact that a person is born into an existing community must suggest a conception of the person as a communitarian being by nature, even though some people insist on the individuality of the person. The communitarian conception of the person has some implications: it implies, (i) that the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, that is, that community life is not optional for any individual person; (ii) that the human person is at once a cultural being; (iii) that the human person cannot--perhaps must not--live in isolation from other persons; (iv) that the human person is naturally oriented toward other persons and must have relationships with them; (v) that social relationships are not contingent but necessary; and (vi) that, following from (iv) and (v), the person is constituted, but only partly (see below), by the social relationships in which he necessarily finds himself.

The fundamentally relational character of the person and the interdependence of human individuals arising out of their natural sociality are, thus, clear. It is the necessary relationships which complete the being of the individual person who, prior to entering into those relationships, would not be self-complete for, as we are reminded by an Akan maxim, a person is not a palm tree that he should be self-complete or self-sufficient (*onipa nnye abe na ne ho ahyia ne ho*). It is evidently true that in the social context, in terms of functioning or flourishing in a human community, the individual person is not self-sufficient; his capacities, talents and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of his potential and basic needs. What accrues to his natural sociality--and hence his natural rationality--provides the buttress indispensable to the actualization of his possibilities.

All this presupposes the priority of the cultural community in which the individual person finds himself. Yet it might be supposed that if a community crucially consists of persons sharing interests and values in some sense, wouldn't this fact establish the priority of the individual rather than that of the community, and that, therefore, the community existentially derives from individuals and the relationships that would exist between

them? We may here turn briefly, but critically, to the Akan maxim that says that one tree does not make or constitutes a forest (*duo baako nnye kwae*). This means that for there to be a forest there should be a number of individual trees; the reality of the forest derives from the individual trees. In the context of the relationship between the individual and the community, the analogical meaning of the maxim is that one individual person does not constitute a community. Just as we would not speak of a forest where there is only one tree, so we would not--cannot--speak of a community where there is only one person. Even though existing or ongoing communities are of course of varying sizes, yet not even the smallest one is constituted by one individual person. According to the maxim, a community emerges, that is, comes into existence, with the congregation of individual persons: the priority of the individual vis-a-vis the derivativeness of the community appears implicit in the maxim.

The analogy the maxim seeks to establish between the forest and community, however, is a defective one, even though the notion of the metaphysical priority of the individual person implicit in the explanation of the maxim I have provided may be found attractive by some people. The analogy is defective in that whereas the individual tree can grow in a lonely place, in isolation from other trees and, thus, without any relationship with them or assistance from them, an individual human person cannot develop and achieve the fullness of his potentials without the concrete act of relating to other individual persons. Also, whereas the individual person is born into an existing community, not into a solitary wilderness, and is naturally oriented toward other persons, the individual tree can sprout from, or be planted, in a lonely place. But it would be pointless to strain the analogy of the maxim whose intention is to establish that the whole is a function of its parts, and hence to establish the ontological derivativeness of the community.

The ontological derivativeness of the community, however, cannot be upheld. The reason is that the view of the priority of the individual, logically implied by the notion of the ontological derivativeness of the community, makes relationships between persons merely contingent, voluntary and optional. That conclusion may not yield or lead to the emergence of a community, which, however, is necessary as a basis, not only for defining and articulating the values and goals shareable by individual persons, but also for realizing the nature or possibilities of the individual person. The community alone constitutes the context, the social or cultural space, in which the actualization of the possibilities of the individual person can take place, providing the individual person the opportunity to express his individuality, to acquire and develop his personality and to fully become the kind of person he wants to be, i.e., to attain the status, goals, expectations to be, etc. The system of values which the person inherits as he enters into the cultural community and the range of goals from which he can choose--these are not anterior to a cultural structure but a function of the structure itself: they are, therefore, posterior



to--indeed the products of the culture, i.e. the community. Thus, in so far as the cultural community constitutes the context or medium in which the individual person develops and chooses his goals and life plans, and, through these activities, ultimately becomes what he wants to be--the sort of status he wants to acquire--the cultural community must be held as prior to the individual.

### **COMMUNAL STRUCTURE AND PERSONHOOD**

The articulation of, (i) the ontological primacy of the community, (ii) the natural sociality of the human person, (iii) the organic character of the relations between individual persons, and (iv) the all-importance of the community for the total well-being or complete realization of the nature of the individual person--all this as explicated in the foregoing section certainly can give rise to a hyperbolic and extreme view of the functional and normative status of the community. The characterizations of the nature and status of the community just provided may be true; in fact they are true, to my mind. Yet one could err in at least some of the conclusions one may draw from them by overlooking the logic or relevance of attributes that can be delineated as belonging essentially to the human person *qua* person. A consideration of other aspects of human nature would certainly be appropriate: a person is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but he is by nature *other* things as well (i.e. he possesses other essential attributes). Failure to recognize this may result in pushing the significance and implications of a person's communal nature beyond their limits, an act that would, in turn, result in investing the community with an all-engulfing moral authority to determine all things about the life of the individual person. One might thus easily succumb to the temptation of exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in relation to those of the person, and thus obfuscating our understanding the real nature of the person. It seems to me that Menkiti succumbed to this temptation.

Menkiti, in his interesting paper, deploys arguments to prove that African thought considers personhood as something defined or conferred by the community and as something that must be acquired by the individual. In my critical examination of his paper I shall start with arguments that derive from his understanding of African cultural practices or beliefs and his attribution to African thought of an analysis of a characteristic of English grammar.

Menkiti, as I have already mentioned, infers the notion of acquisition of personhood from the use of the neuter pronoun 'it' in many languages, including English, to refer to children and newborns but not to adults. The point he wants to make is that the use of the neuter pronoun for children and newborns means that they are not yet persons--the community has not yet conferred personhood on them. They are now going through the 'process' of becoming persons. The inference Menkiti draws would most probably be incorrect for a number of African languages. It is surprising

that an inference based on the characteristics of a non-African language is being regarded as having serious implications for African thought!

It would have been more instructive and appropriate for him to examine how the neuter pronoun 'it' functions in some African languages, and whether it functions in the same way in African languages as it does in English. What he says about the pronoun 'it' does not at all apply to the Akan language, for example: the neuter pronoun 'it' does not exist in this language for animate things. Thus: "*He* is in the room" is translated in Akan as *ōwō dan no mu*; "*she* is in the room" as *ōwō dan no mu*; and "it (referring to a dog) is in the room" also as *ōwō dan no mu*. However, 'it' is used for inanimate things. Thus, the answer to one question 'where is the book?' will be *ōwo dan no mu*, that is, 'it is in the room.' Thus 'e' is used as the neuter pronoun for only inanimate objects. Children and newly borns are of course not inanimate objects. Since the Akan neuter pronoun 'ō' applies to all three genders (strictly only to a part, i.e. the animate part, of the neuter gender, though), it would follow, on Menkiti's showing that not even the adult or oldest person can strictly be referred to as a person! For the answer to the question, "where is the old man?" (if we want to use a pronoun) in Akan will be *ōwō dan no mu*, that is, "he/it is in the room."

In Ga-Dangme languages, also in Ghana, the pronoun 'e' is used to refer to everything-- stones, trees, dogs and human beings (of both the masculine and feminine genders). The pronoun 'e' (= it/he/she) is thus gender-neutral, encompassing all the genders: masculine, feminine and neuter.<sup>16</sup> In this group of languages, there is no pronoun used solely for inanimate objects, as there is in Akan, for the pronoun 'e' is used for both animate and inanimate objects. Clearly, then, neither the neuter pronoun in the Akan language for animate things, nor the gender-neutral pronoun in Ga-Dangme languages, gives an indication as to the real nature of its designatum. The argument that, "it", used of newborns and children (in the English language), implies that they are not yet persons and, therefore, collapses when examined in the context of these languages, for 'it' in Akan and Ga-Dangme languages is, as we have observed, used to refer to adults and older peoples as well, as to children and newborns. Are those older people persons or are they yet to acquire their personhood? The semantics of the neuter pronoun in the African languages I have examined does not in any way lead to a view of nonperson. Thus Menkiti errs.

Menkiti also argues that the relative absence of ritualized grief over the death of a child in African societies in contrast to the elaborate burial ceremony and ritualized grief in the event of the death of an older person, also supports his point about the conferment by the community of personhood status.<sup>17</sup> It is not true that every older person who dies in an African community is given elaborate burial. The type of burial and the

<sup>16</sup>From students in classroom discussion of the topic.

<sup>17</sup>Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", p. 174.

nature and extent of grief expressed over the death of an older person depend on the community's assessment, not of his personhood as such, but of the dead person's achievements in life, his contribution to the welfare of the community, and the respect he commanded in the community. Older persons who may not satisfy such criteria may, in fact, be given simple and poor funerals and attenuated forms of grief expressions. As to the absence of ritualized grief on the death of a child, this has no connection whatsoever with the African view of personhood as such, as alleged by Menkiti. It stems rather from beliefs about the possible consequences, for the mother of the dead child, of showing excessive grief: one belief, among the Akan people, is that excessive demonstration of grief in the event of the death of a child will make the mother infertile, as it will make her reach her menopause prematurely; another belief is that the excessive show of grief over the death of a child will drive the dead child too 'far away' for it to reincarnate, and so be reborn. These beliefs are of course superstitious, but that is beside the point.

Thus no distinctions as to personhood can be made on the basis of the nature and extent of ritualized grief over the death of a child or of an older person. A human person is a person whatever his age or social status. Personhood may reach its full realization in community, but it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society. What a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits: he, *qua* person, thus becomes the *subject* of the acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition process, he cannot be defined by what he acquires. One is a person because of what he is, not because of what he has acquired. Thus, the contrast Menkiti wants to establish between the African and the Western views of the nature of personhood by describing the former as "processual"<sup>18</sup> or "some sort of ontological progression"<sup>19</sup> and the latter as grounded on "some isolated static quality"<sup>20</sup> is, in my opinion, misguided.

However, there are some expressions in the Akan language, and judgments or evaluations made about the life and conduct of people, which give the impression that it is the community that defines and confers personhood. When an individual appears in his conduct to be wicked, bad, ungenerous, cruel, selfish, the Akan would say of that individual, that "he is not a human person" (*onnye' nipa*). Implicit in this judgment is the assumption that there are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behavior of a person, *if* he is a person, ought to conform, and that there are moral virtues that the human person is capable of displaying in his conduct. And because he is thought to be capable of displaying those virtues, it is expected that he would, when the situation arises, display them in his conduct and act in conformity with the accepted moral values and standards. Considering the situations in which that judgement is made about

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

persons, these norms, ideals and moral virtues can be said to include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect and concern for others; in fine, any action or behavior that conduces to the promotion of the welfare of others. And the reason for that judgment made of an individual is that that individual's actions and conduct are considered as falling short of the standards and ideals of personhood.

In Akan cultures, then, much is expected of a person in terms of the display of moral virtue. The pursuit or practice of moral virtue is held as intrinsic to the conception of a person. The position here may thus be schematized as: for any *p*, if *p* is a person, then *p* ought to display in his conduct the norms and ideals of personhood. Thus when a person fails to exhibit the expected moral virtues in his conduct, he is said not to be a person' (*ōnnye 'nipa*). The evaluative judgment opposite to the one we have been considering is, "he is a person" (*ōye 'nipa*). The judgment, here, is not a descriptive one at all, though it can be used descriptively, for instance, to distinguish a human being from a tree. A descriptive use of that judgment would be obvious. It is, however, the normative form of the judgment that I am concerned to point out. The judgement, "he is a person," used normatively, means, 'he has good character', 'he is peaceful--not troublesome', 'he is kind', 'he has respect for others', 'he is humble'.<sup>21</sup> The Akan, fully satisfied with, and profoundly appreciative of, the high standards of the morality of a person's conduct, would say of such a person: he/she is a real (human) person" (*ōye onipa paa*).

Now, the moral significance of 'denying' personhood to a human being on the grounds that his actions are dissonant with certain fundamental norms and ideals of personhood, or that he fails to exhibit certain virtues in his behavior is extremely interesting and is worth nothing. It means that human nature is considered in Akan culture to be essentially good, not depraved or warped by some original sin; that the human person is basically good, can and should do good, and should, in turn, have good done to him/her. It means, further, that the human person is considered to possess an innate capacity for virtue, for performing morally right actions and, therefore, should be treated as a morally responsible agent. I may here refer to the Akan maxim or belief that "God created every man (to be) good" (*Onyame bōō obiara yie*). The meaning of the statement that "God created every man good" is ambiguous. It is ambiguous as between man's actually doing good, that is, actually behaving virtuously and man's being capable of moral choice, that is, having the moral sense to distinguish between good and evil or right and wrong. In other words, it is not clear whether the statement means that man is determined to do good, to pursue virtues, or that he is merely endowed with a sense of right and wrong. How do we interpret the meaning of the statement then? In view of man's evil and unethical actions, the first alternative interpretation cannot be accepted as

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<sup>21</sup> Ahene Affoh, *Twi Kasakoa ne Kasatome Ahorow Bi* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1976), p. 51 (in Akan language).

the correct meaning of the statement: the first alternative is plainly contradicted by man's moral experience. The correct interpretation of the view that man was created a moral being then might be that man is a being endowed with moral sense and capable of making moral judgments. Man can then be held as a moral agent, a moral subject--not that his virtuous character is a settled matter, but that he is capable of virtue.

The foregoing discussion of some morally significant expressions in the Akan language or judgements made about the conduct of persons suggests a conception of moral personhood; a person is defined in terms of moral qualities or capacities: a human person is a being who has a moral sense and is capable of making moral judgments. This conception of a person however, must not be considered as eliminating or writing off children or infants as persons even though they are not (yet) considered as moral agents, as capable of exercising moral sense. The reason is that even though children are not morally capable in actuality, they are morally capable in potentiality. Unlike the colt which will never come to possess a moral sense even if it grew into an adult (horse), children do grow to become *moral* agents on reaching adolescence: at this stage they are capable of exercising their moral sense and thus of making moral judgments. Menkiti, in fact, accepts the characterization or definition of personhood in terms of moral capacities when he says:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's station. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral functions, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense--an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.<sup>22</sup>

This passage surely commits Menkiti to saying that a person is defined in terms of "some isolated static quality"--the quality of moral sense or capacity in the African case--which he thought was a characteristic of Western conceptions of personhood!

Yet to explicate personhood in terms of moral capacities is not to imply by any means that it is the community that fully defines or confers personhood, even though it can be admitted that through such activities as moral instruction, advice, admonition and the imposition of sanctions the community can be said to play some role in a person's moral life. Moral

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<sup>22</sup> Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", p. 176

capacities, as such, cannot be said to be implanted or catered for or conferred by the community

Now, I wish to turn briefly to other forms of judgments made about persons which are not particularly moral in nature. In the communal setting of the African life, an individual's social status is measured in terms of, (i) his sense of responsibility, expressed, in turn, through his responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group; (ii) what he has been able to achieve through his own exertions--physical, intellectual, moral; and (iii) the extent to which he fulfils certain social norms, such as having marital life and bringing up children. Faced with such social demands and requirements, an individual would strive in several ways to demonstrate his sense of personal responsibility, to achieve some measure of success in life, and to have a family (that is, immediate family). All these strivings are aimed at attaining social status. The individual may fail in his strivings and, in the Akan community, for example, may consequently be judged as a "useless person" (*onipa hun*), an opprobrious term. But it must be noted that what the individual would be striving for in all his exertions is some social status, not personhood. The strivings are, in fact, part of the individual's self-expression, an exercise of a capacity he has *as a person*. And even if at the end of the day he failed to attain the expected status, his personhood would not, for that reason, diminish, even though he might lose social respect in the eyes of the members of the community. So that it is social status, not personhood, at which individuals could fail. Mankiti is mistaken in thinking that individuals can fail at personhood.

The foregoing arguments I have deployed are intended to prove that the view, such as held by Menkiti, that personhood is defined or conferred by the communal structure cannot be wholly true. This is so despite the natural sociality of the human person which at once places him in a system of shared values and practices and a range of goals--which, in short, places him in a cultural structure. I have made the observation that, besides being a communitarian being by nature, the human person is, also by nature, other things as well. By 'other things', I have in mind such essential attributes of the person as rationality, having a capacity for virtue and for evaluating and making moral judgments and, hence, being capable of choice. It is not the community that creates these attributes; it discovers and nurtures them. So that if these attributes play any seminal roles in the execution of the individual person's life style and projects, as indeed they do, then it cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is *fully* defined by the communal structure or social relationships.

It is true that the whole gamut of values and practices in which the individual is necessarily embedded is a creation of cultural community and is part of its history. For this reason, it can be said that some of our goals are set by the communal structure. Yet the following questions may be asked: (i) Is it possible for the communal structure to set the whole or a seamless complex of the values, practices, and ends of the individual that will perfectly reflect the complexity of human nature, values and practices--

at least some of which, we know, do change and so cannot be considered monolithic? (ii) Does the communal, and, therefore, cultural, character of the self really imply that the self is ineluctably and permanently held in thrall by that structure? (iii) Does the ethos of the communal structure preemptor permanently nip in the bud a possibly radical perspective on communal values and practices that may be adopted by a self? All of these questions can be answered in the negative.

The reason is that individual persons, as participants in the shared values and practices, and enmeshed in the web of communal relationships, may find that aspects of those cultural givens are inelegant, undignifying or unenlightening and can thoughtfully be questioned and evaluated. The evaluation may result in the individual's affirming or amending or refining existing communal goals, values and practices; but it may or could also result in the individual's total rejection of them. The possibility of re-evaluation means, surely, that the person cannot be absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus, but can, to some extent, wriggle himself out of it, distance himself from it, and thus be in a position to take another look at it; it means, also, that the communal structure cannot foreclose the meaningfulness and reality of the quality of self-assertiveness which the person can demonstrate in his actions. The development of human, i.e., communal culture results from the exercise by individual persons of this capacity for self-assertion; it is this capacity which makes possible the intelligibility of autonomous individual choice of goals and life plans. The fact of the changes that do occur in the existing communal values--for some new values are evolved as some of the pristine ones fall into obsolescence--this fact is undoubtedly the result of the evaluative activities and choices of some autonomous, self-assertive individual persons.

The capacity for self-assertion which the individual can exercise presupposes, and in fact derives from, the autonomous nature of the person. By autonomy, I do not mean self-completeness, but the having of a will, a rational will of one's own, that enables one to determine at least some of one's own goals and to pursue them. (The word 'autonomy' consists of two Greek words 'autos' [self] and 'nomos' [rule]; thus, it means, self-governing self-directing). The actions and choice of goals of the individual person emanate from his rational will. Thus, the self-determining is also self-assertive. The communitarian self, then, cannot be held as a cramped or shackled self acting robotically at the beck and call of the communal structure. That structure is never to be conceived as, or likened to, the Medusa head, the sight of which reduces a person to inactivity and supineness--in this case, cultural or rational or intellectual supineness.

In concluding this section, then, I wish to say again that even though the communitarian self, such as is held in African moral and political philosophy, is not permanently detached from its contingent communal features and the individual is fully embedded or implicated in the life of his community: nevertheless the self, by virtue of--or by exploiting--its other natural attributes (beside the natural attribute of being

communal) essential to its metaphysical constitution, can from time to time take a distanced view of its communal values and practices and reassess or revise them. This possibility implies that the self can set some of its goals and, in this way, participate in the determination or definition of its own identity. The upshot is that personhood can only be partly, never completely, defined by one's membership in the community. The most that can be said, in my view, is that the person is only partly constituted by the community. This view constitutes an amendment to Menkiti's position, put forward without any qualifications, that the community fully defines personhood: "... in the African understanding human community plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of full personhood."<sup>23</sup> Menkiti's view of communitarianism, which appears to have support in the writings of African political leaders (whose view I adumbrated in my introductory remarks), appears to chime in with unrestricted or radical or excessive communitarianism. That view differs from the one I am putting forward which is that of a restricted or moderate communitarianism. It seems to me that restricted communitarianism offers a more appropriate and adequate account of the self than the unrestricted or radical account, in that the former addresses the dual features of the self, as a communal being and as an autonomous, self-determining, self-assertive being with a capacity for evaluation and choice. There are, to be sure, other reasons for preferring restricted or moderate communitarianism over unrestricted or radical communitarianism. These I discuss in the section that follows.

## RIGHTS, DUTIES AND THE COMMUNAL STRUCTURE

It might be supposed that communitarianism with its emphasis on, and concern for communal values will have no truck with the doctrine of rights, for that doctrine is necessarily an individualistic doctrine. Rights belong primarily and irreducibly to individuals; a right is the right of some individual. Yet the supposition that communitarianism will have no place or very little, if at all, for rights will be false both in theory and practice, especially in the case of restricted or moderate communitarianism.

Communitarianism will not necessarily be antithetical to the doctrine of rights for several reasons. In the first place, communitarianism, cannot disallow arguments about rights which may in fact form part of the activity of a self-determining, autonomous individual possessed of the capacity for evaluating or re-evaluating the entire practice of his community. Some of such evaluations may touch on matters of rights, the exercise of which a self-determining individual may see as conducive to the fulfillment of the human potential, and against the denial of which he may raise some objections.

Second, the respect for human dignity, a natural or fundamental attribute of the person, which cannot, as such, be set at nought by the

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 179.



communal structure, generates regard for personal rights. The reason is that the natural membership of the individual person in a community cannot rob him of his dignity or worth, a fundamental and inalienable attribute he possesses as a person. Some conceptions of human dignity are anchored in theism, in the conviction that the dignity of the person is a natural endowment by God, the creator of humankind. One maxim of an African people whose social structure is communal has it that "all persons are children of God; no one is a child of the earth" (*nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma; obiara nnye asase ba*). The insistent claim being made in the maxim that every person is a child of God does seem to have some moral overtones or relevance, grounded, as it must, on the belief that there must be something intrinsically valuable in God. A person, being a child of God, presumably by reason of his having been created by him and regarded as possessing a divine spark called soul (*okra*), must be held as of intrinsic value, an end in himself, worthy of dignity and respect. It is possible to derive a theory of individual rights from theistic conceptions of the intrinsic worth of the person. One conception of rights, famously known to be grounded on an act of God, is in the preamble of the American Declaration of Independence (1776). "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that *they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights . . .*"

However, it is possible to derive a conception of human dignity and, hence, individual rights, not from theism, but from reflecting on human nature, particularly on the qualities that will dispose the human being to function at his best in human society and realize his full potentialities as a person. Thus the eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, on the basis of his rational analysis, grounds the notion of human dignity or intrinsic worth on the capacity of the person for moral autonomy, i.e. rational freedom. Thus conceived, argues Kant, the person ought to be treated as an end in himself: "Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed at the same time as an end"<sup>24</sup> Kant thus formulates his famous Categorical Imperative, considered by him as the supreme principle of morality, also as: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but at the same time as an end."<sup>25</sup> This leads Kant to a notion of moral rights which he refers to as "innate rights" but which belong to everyone by nature and so could be called natural rights, which are our fundamental ethical end. Thus a conception of human dignity and moral or natural (human) rights which concomitantly flow from it can be reached through purely

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<sup>24</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1965), p. 95

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

rational reflection on human nature. But howsoever the conception of human dignity or rights is derived, whether from theistic considerations or from sources independent of God, that conception is linked with, and in fact compels, the recognition of rights, and not only in an individualistic but also in a communitarian situation. In other words, the derivation of individual rights from naturalism (humanism) or supernaturalism cannot be confined to an individualistic framework; the derivation is not an activity or a characteristic or a possibility solely of an individualistic social ambience.

Third, at both the theoretical (conceptual) and practical level, communitarianism cannot set its face against individual rights. For, implicit in communitarianism's recognition of the dual features of the self as an autonomous, self-determining entity capable of evaluation and choice and as a communal being, is a commitment to the acknowledgement of the intrinsic worth of the self and the moral rights which can be said necessarily to be due to it. The recognition by communitarian political morality of individual rights is a conceptual requirement. At the practical level communitarianism must realize that allowing free rein for the exercise of individual rights--which obviously includes the exercise of the unique qualities, talents and dispositions of the individuals--will enhance the cultural development and success of the community. If communitarianism were to shrug off individual rights, it would not only show itself as an inconsistent moral and political theory, but in practical terms would also saw off the branch on which it was going to sit.

However, it can be said that restricted or moderate communitarianism is a consistent and viable theory, one that is not opposed to individual rights, even though it may, for a reason to be stated presently, consciously and purposively give greater attention or care to other communal values of the community. The foregoing discussions then, has, I hope, clearly shown the falsity of the view that communitarianism will have no, or very little place, for individual rights.

Having said all this, however, it must be granted that communitarianism cannot be expected to make a fetish of rights; thus, rights discussion will not be brought to the front burner of its concerns and preoccupations. The reason is not far to seek; it is deriveable from the logic of the communitarian theory itself: it assumes an overwhelming concern for communal values, for the good of the wider society as such. Even so, the absorbing interest in the common good, in the provision for the social conditions which will enable each individual person to function satisfactorily in a human society, does not--should not--result in the gleeful subversion of individual rights. The reason is that even though rights belong primarily to individuals, as we said, nevertheless, in so far as their exercise will often, directly or indirectly, be valuable to the larger society, their status and roles must be recognized by communitarian theory. But the theory will disallow separating rights from the common values of the community and conferring on them a preeminent status. It must be noted that in any scheme of value ranking occurs or is resorted to when situations

require that preferences for some values be made over other values. This is so whether the system of ethics is deontological (i.e. moderately deontological<sup>26</sup>) or teleological. Thus, in the communitarian political morality, priority will not be given to rights if doing so will stand in the way of attaining a more highly ranked value or a more preferable goal of the community. Rights would not, therefore, be held as absolute in the communitarian theory, even though I think they will--in fact they should--have some place in that theory.

However, although it is conceivable, as has already been explained, that the communal structure will allow the exercise of individual rights, yet it can be expected that communitarianism would not suggest to individuals to insist incessantly on their rights. The reason, I suppose, is the assumption that rights, i.e. political, economic, social, are built into the ethos and practices of the cultural community. Thus, the economic, political and social needs of the individual members, which are the subject of most individual rights, would be expected to have been recognized, if not catered to, to some degree of adequacy by the communitarian structure. Individuals would not have a penchant for, an obsession with, insisting on their rights, knowing that insistence on their rights could divert attention to duties they, as members of the communal society, strongly feel towards other members of the community. Rights and duties are not polar concepts, even though they can be: if I insist on my right to all my possessions or to all that has resulted from the exercise of my endowments, I may not be able to show sensitivity to the needs and welfare of others, even as showing sensitivity to the needs of others is an important plank in the ethical platform of communitarianism. The danger or possibility of slipping down the slope of selfishness when one is totally obsessed with the idea of individual rights is, thus, quite real. In a social situation that, as a matter of ethical testaments stresses social relations, concern and compassion for others, and other communal values, insistence on rights (some rights) may not be necessary.

However, while the communitarian structure would not have a fetishistic attitude to individual rights, it would certainly have one toward duties that individual members have or ought to have toward other--perhaps the least advantaged--members of the community. The communitarian theory will expectably give priority to duties rather than rights. Concerned, as it is, with the common good or the communal welfare, the welfare of each and every member of the community, communitarianism will, perhaps undoubtedly, consider duty as the moral tone, as the supreme principle of morality. By 'duty', I mean task, service, conduct or function that a person feels morally obligated to perform in respect of another person or other persons. The duties, which some members of the community feel they owe others by reason of our common humanity and should demonstrate in

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<sup>26</sup>I take it that W.D. Ross's version of deontology which strides between Kant's formalist system and consequentialism (teleology) is a moderate deontology.

practice are such as the duty to help others in distress, the duty not to harm others, and so on. Duties to the community as a whole or to some members of the community would not derive from a social contract between individuals. The contract theory is a contrivance for voluntary, not natural, membership of the community, regarded by some people as a mere association of individuals. In a communitarian framework, however, there would be no place for the contract theory to set forth the duties and rights of individuals who are to inhabit a society that is being contemplated.

Even though such duties as caring for one another, concern for the welfare and needs of others, may not be said to be idiosyncratic to the communitarian system alone and an individualistic system can also evince or practice them, it seems to me that the pursuit of those duties in the latter system will be less spontaneous and less successful because of its obsession with individual rights. And it appears that some of the American philosopher Rawls' notions treated in his monumental work will fit better in a communitarian framework than an individualistic one, which he makes the basis of his arguments. Rawls makes the following statements:

"... the difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a *common asset*..."<sup>27</sup>

"In justice as fairness men agree to *share one* another's fate. In designing institutions they undertake to avail themselves of the accidents of nature and social circumstance only when doing so is for the *common benefit*..."<sup>28</sup>

"The two principles are equivalent... to an undertaking to regard the distribution of natural abilities as a *collective asset* so that the more fortunate are to benefit only in ways that help those who have lost out..."<sup>29</sup>

"... the members of a community *participate in one another's nature*; we appreciate what others do as things we might have done but which they do for *us*..."<sup>30</sup>

Rawls' language unmistakably resonates with communitarian expressions, meanings and content.

The notions of "sharing one another's fate," "common assets," "collective assets," "common benefit," "participating in one another's nature" --these notions and others related to them in Rawls' scheme will surely find a *more* ready embrace in the communitarian home than in the home artificially and instrumentally constructed by individuals in pursuit of their own egoistic advantages or ends. Those notions, it seems to me, are more appropriate, much less idealistic, for a communitarian political

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<sup>27</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 565.

culture, where they will elicit greater significance and understanding and less philosophical controversy or resistance, than in a system, like Rawls', which seeks to give priority to individual rights rather than to duties. The point I am at pains to make, in other words, is that Rawls' essentially individualistic frameworks, determinedly poised to secure and cordon off individual rights, can hardly provide an effective support for those "communitarian notions" he so well articulates, let alone bring them to practical realization.

The question may be raised as to the justification for giving priority to duties over rights in the communitarian political morality. The priority is, I think, based on, and is most probably required by, the demands of the relational character of the person in the wake of his natural sociality. The sociality of the person immediately orients him to the other persons with whom he must live. Living in relation with others directly involves a person in social and moral roles, duties, obligations and commitments which the individual person must fulfill. The natural relationality of the person thus immediately plunges him into a moral universe, making morality an essentially social and trans-individual phenomenon focused on the well-being of *others*. Our natural sociality then prescribes or mandates a morality that, clearly, should be weighted on duty, i.e. on that which one has to do for others.

The success that must accrue to communal or corporative living depends very much on each member of the community demonstrating a high degree of moral responsiveness and sensitivity in relation to the needs and well-being of other members. This should manifest itself in each member's pursuit of his duties. Also, the common good, which is an outstanding goal of the communitarian moral and political philosophy, requires that each individual should work for the good of all. The social and ethical values of social well-being, solidarity, interdependence, cooperation, compassion, and reciprocity, which can be said to characterize the communitarian morality, primarily impose on the individual a duty to the community and its members. It is all these considerations that elevate the notion of duties to a priority status in the whole enterprise of communitarian life.

It is often said that rights are correlated with duties, that if there are rights, then there must be corresponding duties, and vice-versa. This hackneyed statement seems to me not to be wholly true, certainly not true in aspects of moral relationships between individuals, or in cases where individuals feel they owe their community some duty or duties. It is true that if I have a right to education, then, it is the duty of someone, a parent or a local authority or the state, to provide what is necessary for my education; similarly, if I have the right to work, it is the duty of the state to make jobs available for me. In such cases, where rights are asserted against the state or against some persons in specific roles or positions, the correspondence or correlation between rights and duties will clearly be on track. However, it is possible for a person to carry out a duty to someone else without our having

to say that the duty was carried out because of the right of this other person, that is, the person for whose sake the duty was done. (Here I am not thinking of what is called an act of supererogation--an act that a person does not have to do, even though it would be morally commendable if he did it. I am thinking, rather, of an act that a person morally feels he should do, and does it. It seems to me that communitarian ethics will rightly obliterate the distinction between duties and so-called supererogatory acts or acts of charity, and consider all of them as our moral duties. If I carry out a duty to help someone in distress, I would not be doing so because I think that someone has a right against me, a right I should help fulfill. I would be carrying out that duty because I consider that person as worthy of some moral consideration by me, as someone to whose plight I ought to be morally sensitive. (I am here not referring to duties enjoined upon persons by reason of certain specific social roles, positions or status they occupy in society.)

When we want to carry out some duties, especially of the positive kind, such as providing some aid to someone in distress, looking after aged parents, conferring benefits, we do not first ask ourselves whether the persons to whom we owe those duties have any rights against us and whether we should perform those duties because of their rights. People in societies in which the concept of rights has not gained (much) currency in their moral or political vocabulary, would carry out their duties to their fellow human beings, yet without the conviction that the latter have rights against them. Our positive duties toward others, then, are not based on their rights: it is not so much a consciousness of the rights of others as our moral responsiveness to their particular situations that impinges on our decision to carry out our duties toward them. This, I think, is generally true, and would be very much so in a social structure like the communitarian, which does not lay any particular stress on rights. A rider is, however, required here: negative duties, such as not to harm others, to refrain from killing or robbing others, do have corresponding rights. For, one's right not to be harmed imposes a duty on others not to harm one. Even so, it can be concluded that the correlation between rights and positive duties collapses and becomes a one-way, asymmetric relation, for, as I have explained, there are duties without corresponding rights, as far as the individual moral agent is concerned. The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that it is possible for communitarian ethics to hold the moral status of duties in high esteem without this being mandated or induced by a consciousness of rights.

Yet, in stressing duties to the community and its members rather than the rights of the individual members of the community, the communitarian political and moral theory does not imply, by any means, that rights are not important; neither does it deny duties to the self. As pointed out earlier in this section, communitarianism acknowledges the intrinsic value of the person and the moral rights that the acknowledgement can be said to entail. Individual rights, such as the right to equal treatment, to our property, to freely associate with others, to free speech, and others,

would be recognized by communitarianism, especially of the restricted or moderate type. However, in the light of the overwhelming emphasis on duties within the communitarian moral framework, rights would not be given priority over the values of duty, and so would not be considered inviolable or indefensible: it might, on this showing, be appropriate occasionally to override some individual rights for the sake of protecting the good of the community itself. As an autonomous, self-determining being, the individual person must, within limits, care for his well-being or needs, just as he cares for the needs of others. Altruistic duties cannot obliterate duties to oneself. This is so that the pursuit of altruistic duties does not lead to the dissolution of the self. The individual person has a life to live, and so must have plans for his life and must see to the realization of those plans. The attainment of the goal imposes on the self the responsibility or duty to develop his natural abilities. Therefore, the duty one has toward the community and its members does not--should not--enjoin one to give over one's whole life and be oblivious of one's personal well-being.

What the communitarian ethic will enjoin, then, is dual responsibility, a proposal--or better, an imperative--which, on more than one occasion, will be on all fours with the *dual* features of the human being I referred to earlier. The successful pursuit of this dual responsibility requires that, through the development of his capacities and through his own exertions and strivings, and hence through self attention, the individual person should himself attain some appropriate status socially, economically, intellectually, and so on. One is not saying that all the needs or interests of the individual person should be taken care of before he embarks on his duties and commitments to others. Yet it is surely a necessary requirement that the individual be in a position to do so--hence the need to carry out duties to oneself. If the notion of duties to oneself, if self-attention makes sense even in a communitarian context, as I maintain, so does the notion of individual rights, which, as a reflexive notion, must be conceptually linked to that of self-interest or, as I prefer to say, self-attention

## CONCLUSION

Communitarian ethical and political theory, which considers the community as a fundamental human good, advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other--supporting one another--a life which provides a viable framework for the fulfillment of the individual's nature or potentials, a life in which the products of the exercise of an individual's talents or endowments are (nevertheless) regarded as the assets of the community as such, a life free from hostility and confrontation: such a life, according to the theory, is most rewarding and fulfilling.

It is the moderate or restricted version of communitarianism that, to my mind, is defensible and which I support and have argued for in this paper. It is not too clear which of the two versions, if any, is espoused in African cultural traditions. But the position I have taken generally appears to run counter to that of the African political leaders whose writings in the period following the attainment of political independence unmistakably suggest a radical or extreme type of communitarianism traced by them to African cultural traditions.

Moderate or restricted communitarianism gives accommodation, as has been shown, to communal values, as well as to values of individuality, to social commitments, as well as to duties of self-attention. Even though in its basic thrust and concerns it gives prominence to duties toward the community and its members, it does not--cannot--do so to the detriment of individual rights whose existence and value it recognizes, or should recognize, and for a good reason. I believe strongly that an ethical and political theory that combines the appreciation of, as well as commitments to, the community as a fundamental value, *and* the understanding of, as well as commitment to, the idea of individual rights will be a most plausible theory to support. Guided by the assumptions about the dual features of the self with an implied dual responsibility, it should be possible to deflate any serious tension between the self and its community.



## CHAPTER VI

# THE IMAGE OF MAN IN AFRICA

*N.K. Dzobo*

### INTRODUCTION

People usually see the question: “What is the image of man in our indigenous culture?” as connoting any one of the following three sub-questions:

- a) What is man?
- b) What is the nature of man?
- c) Who is man?

The first sub-question--‘What is man?’--is an empirical question which may yield an answer based upon an objective description of man’s observable behaviour. Such answers as ‘Man is a bio-social being’, ‘Man is an aggressive and predacious being’, or ‘Man is a sexual being’ are the consequences of empirical investigations based on such a question.

‘What is the nature of man?’ strictly speaking is a metaphysical question, even though some people take it to mean the same as ‘who is man?’ As a metaphysical question it asks for what constitutes the elements of man’s being. The essence of man’s being is often a matter of speculation, and one may come across such answers as ‘Man is a spiritual being’, ‘Man is a rational being’, ‘Man is nothing but matter’, ‘Man is both matter and spirit’, or ‘body and mind’. Such speculative views of man vary from one school of thought to another, and are based upon one’s metaphysical presuppositions.

‘Who is man?’ on the other hand, refers to man’s understanding of himself. Because one understands oneself in a certain way, one projects a certain image and becomes responsible for *who one is*. The image of man taken as his self-understanding varies from culture to culture. This page limits its examination of one’s self-understanding to that found in the indigenous African culture. The term ‘culture’ as used here refers to the totality of Africa’s basic orientation to life. As the emphasis is upon the foundations of Africa’s culture, we will speak of Africa’s culture, not cultures.

Since the image of man is self-understanding, it helps to shape the very phenomenon it describes, namely, man; it gives meaning to one’s behavior, relationships and history. This understanding of the function of one’s image implies an interaction between one’s understanding of oneself, that is, one’s picture of oneself, and what one actually is, that is, one’s existence at any moment of one’s life. One’s essence emerges as a result of

this interaction. Let me illustrate this point with two African proverbs. The first proverb says: "The chameleon says people respect you as a king if you respect yourself; that is why he walks like a king." In this proverb the chameleon understands himself to be a king and so he behaves like a king; thus royalty becomes his image. The second proverb says: "Disgraceful behaviour is unbecoming of an Akan born." The image of an Akan in this proverb is that of a morally well-behaved person; this is the picture of an Akan that shapes his/her character. Therefore as John Macquarrie said: "Within limits, man is what he thinks he is."<sup>1</sup> The person, then, is responsible for his/her own essence.

It is not enough, however, to form a grandiose and kingly image of oneself; there must be the means to realize the picture conceived of oneself, otherwise one will be building in the air an image of oneself as a king. Man's self-understanding, therefore, must be accompanied by a motive force which is not external to man, but an integral component of man's being. As an Ewe proverb says, "Life is like an anthill, it is built from within out." In other words, what one considers the basic and ultimate moving force of one's behavior is the true and basic image of oneself, one's true and basic self-understanding. We, therefore, tend to think of the image of man in terms of some internally generated, basic prime movers or forces. Thus the question, "Who is man in Africa"? can be reduced finally to "What do Africans consider to be the *basic* and ultimate *force* that motivates human passions and desires"? This basic and ultimate force, if found, will be the image of man in Africa.

To a considerable degree human motivations can be said to be the same for people in all cultures, with varying contextual modifications and emphasis. They can be divided into two major groups, namely: the physiologically determined (sometimes called survival) drives, comprising such master drives as hunger, thirst and sex and their derivatives, such as money and what it can buy; and the trans-survival drives, such as the need for security, peace, safety, love, recognition, status, honor, influence, happiness, solidarity, human creativity and productivity, motherhood, fatherhood, success and prosperity. These drives may be described as secondary or penultimate motivations of behaviour, which means that they are not basic and ultimate. It is usually what people consider to be the basic and ultimate moving force of human behaviour that differentiates one culture from another and also reveals the true common identity of any two cultures. Let us now look briefly at three classical conceptions of this ultimate and basic motive force of human behaviour, as found in the Western and Middle Eastern cultures which have come into direct contact with the African one.

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<sup>1</sup> John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 44.

## THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE

We preface our discussion of the African view of man with the Western and Middle Eastern images for the following reasons. These alien views of man have, to a considerable extent, penetrated our world-view, and, in some cases, have displaced the African view of the person for some Africans. Such Africans have therefore been alienated from their own healthy and well-balanced view of man.

The second reason for a prior examination of the Western views of man is the fact that some contemporary Western view of man, such as those found in the writings of authors such as Erich Fromm and June Singer, are very close to the African view--and, in fact, identical to it in some respects. This provides both a meeting point of the two views, and, at the same time, clarifies their point of divergence. We shall consider two classical theories of man, namely, the conflict theory and the Freudian theory of human nature, and one contemporary theory: Fromm's polar theory.

### *The Conflict Theory of Human Nature*

The conflict theory of human nature,<sup>2</sup> which was scientifically formulated in Darwin's theory of evolution and in the nineteenth century economic liberalism developed by Thomas Robert Malthus, contends that conflict and aggression are locked into the natural order of things, and that by nature man is an aggressor and predator. This theory stresses instinct and animality as the essence of man, and contends that human nature and society develop through conflict, competition and elimination of the weak and the peaceful. In short, the conflict theory portrays man as evil, brutish and destructive; he is moved by the instinct to survive and sees every other member of his species as an enemy. Believers in this theory see co-operation and mutual help as derived or learned motivations of behavior: people learn to co-operate and help each other as they realize that they cannot satisfactorily accomplish difficult tasks alone. Man is, therefore, seen by nature as a solitary being who joins forces with others out of his finitude and only to fight a common enemy.

The view of human behavior as motivated by struggle for survival and competition is deeply entrenched in man's chief self-understanding in the West and the Middle East. Growth and progress are seen as resulting from the friction of competing individual interests. It is believed that each person must stand on his own feet and fight for what he gets; in this way the common welfare throughout the entire culture is achieved. What the individual needs, above all else in order to succeed in this competitive existence, is power, i.e., the ability to realize one's aim in the face of opposition from others. Man is thus portrayed as a being motivated by a single master force: the will to survive through struggle and competition.

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<sup>2</sup>Floyd W. Matson, *The Idea of Man* (a Delta Book, 1976), pp. 19-35.

The basic image of man is that of aggressor and predator. Thus the white man of the colonial days came to Africa to plunder and rob, because he understood himself to be a predator and aggressor. The colonial empire and the present economic empire of the West were established through this picture of man.

### *Freudian Theories of Human Nature*

Before World War I and right after the War, Freud developed two theories to account for the basic motivation of human behavior. He advanced, first, the theory of sexuality (*libido*) and then, in 1920, the theory of the life (*Eros*) and Death (*Thanatos*) instincts.

First, according to Freud, man is driven primarily by a sexual energy called *libido*. This major and basic force of human behavior is instinctual. Man's major concern in life is to satisfy, either directly or indirectly, his sexual needs. The sublimation of this sexual drive results in the development of culture and civilization; its suppression leads to neurosis.

Probably as a result of his experiences during World War I, Freud became dissatisfied with the sexual theory for explaining human behaviour, and so, between 1915 and 1920, he formulated a new theory of man's nature. According to this theory two basic instincts, namely, the Life instinct (*Eros*) and the Death instinct (*Thanatos*), are the moving forces of human behaviour. The Life instinct combines the old concept of *libido* and part of the preservation drive of the conflict theory. The Death instinct is an innate destructiveness and aggression directed primarily against the self. While the Life instinct is creative, the Death instinct is constantly working towards death and ultimately towards a return to the original inorganic state of complete freedom from tension or striving.<sup>3</sup>

Both instincts, however, operate constantly within man and fight with each other. According to Freud, the Death instinct as the principle of destructiveness is the stronger force and, in the end, becomes victorious over the Life instinct and leads eventually to the death of the individual. Man, therefore, cannot help wanting to destroy, for the tendency is rooted in his biological constitution. He either destroys himself or something outside himself, and has no chance to liberate himself from his tragic dilemma.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>J.A.C. Brown, *Freud and Post-Freudians* (Pelican Books, 1967), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup>Freud's view of the tragic dilemma of man's nature is a biological reflection of the Christian view which sees man as unable to save himself from his sinful nature and from its consequences. The Christian doctrine of man, however, does not posit the existence of the two conflicting principles of life and death in one and the same being. The death principle is located in man and the life principle in Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Instead of leaving man in his tragic predicament as did Freud, the Christian doctrine provides salvation for him through the life principle, Jesus Christ, who is said to have overcome the

Freud thus had come round in the end to the same view propounded by the conflict theorists: Man is essentially destructive and an aggressor.

In Freud, however, the Western view of man began to approach the African view in one significant way. By postulating the temporary existence of two conflicting principles--life and death--existing in the same body, Freud saw man, as does the African, as having a dual or polar nature. According to the African view of man, moreover, the two conflicting principles are not only physiological but universal to all creation, applying equally to human nature and other entities and structures. That is, according to the African world view, polarity is the essence of reality. But whereas the death principle is victorious over the life principle in Freud's theory, in the African theory of being it is the life or Creative principle which is the foundation of reality and of the meaning of existence. This does not obliterate the death principle, because the two constitute one reality. More will be said about this later.

#### *The Polar Theory of Human Nature*

There are many reactions to Freud's pessimistic and forlorn view of man. Notable among those is that of Erich Fromm who maintained that "destructiveness is a secondary *potentiality* in man, which becomes manifest only if he fails to realize his primary potentialities."<sup>5</sup> With Fromm, Clara Thompson holds that "the tendency to grow, develop and reproduce seems to be a part of the human organism."<sup>6</sup> She goes on to say that aggression is not a product of the death instinct, but an expression of the organism's will to live. Both writers hold that the life principle or principle of creativity is basic to human nature. This is a radical departure from Social Darwinism and the Freudian views of man, and is in harmony with the African view, according to which the life principle which is the principle of creativity, is not only basic to human nature, but is woven into the very fabric of society and of the universe.<sup>7</sup>

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death principle. The Christian resolution of man's tragic dilemma echoes the Zoroastrian world view in which the god of Light, Life, *Ahura Mazda*, is destined to defeat the god of Darkness, Earth, *Angra Mainyu* or *Ahriman*. In both Zoroastrianism and Christianity the Life Principle wins in the end, while it is the Death Principle which overcomes in Freud. In Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Freud, the two conflicting principles are not considered as one and the same thing; in the African world view they are one and the same thing, but express themselves as two different phenomena. This view of reality was expressed by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus as "The way up and the way down are one and the same" (Fragments).

<sup>5</sup>Floy W. Matson, *op cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup>Daryll Forde, *African Worlds* (London: OUP, 1970), pp. 218-219.

It is Fromm, however, who developed a distinctive theory of human behaviour based upon polarity. Fromm views man as evolving from his critical instinctual (animal) level of existence to that of the rational or human, and hence is unable to live by repeating the instinctual pattern of his species. Therefore, man now experiences his existence as a problem to be solved, a part of which is that he must proceed to develop his reason until he has become master of himself and of nature.<sup>8</sup> Man is, therefore, condemned to find a new home, not in the realm of instincts, but in one which he creates himself by making the world human and becoming truly human himself. This, then, is the goal of human existence: to become truly human and to make society truly human.

For Fromm the condition is, however, characterized by polarity, i.e., by conflicting tendencies: man has fallen out of nature, as it were, but remains in it; he is partly animal and partly human, partly finite and partly infinite.<sup>9</sup> He is torn between progressing to become fully human and regressing to live according to his instinctual nature. Man's essential nature, therefore, is constituted by two opposing tendencies and an inner contradiction is lodged at the heart of human existence. This drives man to seek an ever new pattern for resolving the existential problem of being. Thus man's very nature is to transcend himself through the act of creativity: "In the act of creation man transcends himself as a creature, raises himself beyond the passivity, and accidentalness of his existence into the realm of purposefulness and freedom."<sup>10</sup>

To summarize Fromm's main contributions and to indicate where they harmonize with the African view: Fromm sees man as inheriting two conflicting natures, one rational and the other instinctual, which form the basic structure of his being. An inner contradiction or polarity, therefore, is lodged at the heart of human existence. This has become the basic and ultimate motivation of human behaviour, not towards destructiveness and aggression, but towards creativity and productivity. Man's existential problem then has become the ground of his creativity, which is rooted in the very peculiarity of man's polar nature. Creativity thus becomes the essence of being and of human existence, and the goal of man's existence is to become creative. This is the only way man becomes truly human; in other words, to be human is to be creative and productive.

## **THE AFRICAN VIEW OF MAN: SYNTHESIS MODEL OF HUMAN NATURE**

### *Unity in Duality*

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<sup>8</sup>Erich Fromm and Ramon Xirau, *The Nature of Man* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 308.

<sup>9</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

The African view of man is derived from the African view of reality which is found in the indigenous religion, creation myths, personal names, symbols and proverbs. This view is expressed simply by a Tanzanian proverb: "In the world all things are two and two." This is a basic ontological statement of the African perception of reality. The two which form the nature of everything in the universe are made up of opposites which become one while remaining two. The Mende of Sierra Leone express the dual origin of all things by saying that the High God, *Ma ngala*, created the twin varieties of eleusine seed conceived as twins of opposite sex in the "egg of God" which is also called the "egg of the world."<sup>11</sup> The Ewe cosmogony expresses this same view of reality in more detail. It says that in the beginning there was only one androgynous High God called *Nana Buluku (Bruku, Briku)* who gave birth to siamese twins called *Ma wu-Lisa*, whose union has become the basis of the organization of the world. In this divine duality *Ma wu*, the female, is envisaged as a Janus-like figure. One side of its body being female, with the eyes forming the moon and bearing the name *Mawu*. The other portion is male, whose eyes are the sun, and whose name is *Lisa*. P. Mercier pointed out that "their dual and conflicting nature expresses, even before the world of men was organized, the complementary forces which were to be active in it."<sup>12</sup> He went on to report from his study of the Fon of Benin (Dahomey) that *Mawu*, the female principle, is fertility, motherhood, life, creativity, gentleness, forgiveness, night, freshness, rest and joy, while *Lisa*, the male principle, is power, warlikeness, death, strength, toughness, destructivity, day, heat, labor, and all hard things.<sup>13</sup>

Those two references express very well not just a fundamental theory of man, but a theory of reality that conceives the basic structure of reality as unity in duality. The primordial unity, referred to either as the Egg of God or the Androgynous High God called *Nana Buluku*, is the one in which all the opposites are contained. But, as June Singer pointed out, one pair is basic, i.e., the female and male pair which serves as the symbolic expression of the power behind all the other polarities and forms the creating principle.<sup>14</sup>

The opposites in any duality and their relationship are, therefore, modelled on the paradigm of the female and male relationship paradigm, i.e., on the principle of creativity, complementarity, tension, balance and otherness. The female-male polarity as seen in the indigenous cultures of the Wolof.

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<sup>11</sup> Elliot P. Skinner, *Peoples and Cultures of Africa* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 637.

<sup>12</sup> Daryll Forde, *op. cit.*, pp. 219, 225.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> June Singer, *Androgyny* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 21.

## SUMMARY OF THE VIEWS OF MAN

Type of Theory	Basic Moving Force of Human Behavior	Image of Man
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	The instinct to survive through struggle, competition and destruction is the main force of human behaviour.	Man is aggressor, a predator by nature. He is not different from the animals.
<i>Freudian Theory</i>	The drive for pleasure and to destroy is the main motive force of man's behaviour. The drive to destroy is stronger and final.	Man is an aggressor and destroyer by nature.
<i>Fromm's Theory</i>	The drive to solve the problem created by the presence of an inner contradiction lodged at the heart of human existence, so as to become truly human by being creative and productive, is the moving force of human behaviour.	Man is a creator by virtue of his polar nature which is basic. Man is evolutive.
<i>Synthesis Model of Human Nature (African)</i>	The drive to realize a synthesis of being through creativity. Since polarity is a basic category of being the drive to realize a synthesis of being is a never ending force of human behaviour.	(1) Man is a creator being with polar elements which are basic to his nature. (2) Man then is a subject and not an object of history. (3) Man is not evolutive, his conflicting tendencies are original to his nature. (4) Man is a communal being.

(Gambia) Mendes (Sierra Leone), Ewe (Ghana, Togo and Benin), Akan and Tallensi (Ghana), Herero (Namibia), Burundi (Central Africa), Lango (Uganda) and in the religion of ancient Egypt, to mention a few, is a primordial image of reality. It is an archetype which the whole human race has inherited, and so is a universal collective image of reality and of man. It appears in us as an innate sense of a primordial cosmic unity, having



existed in oneness or wholeness before any separation was made and still remaining one. W.J. Argyle, commenting on the polar view of reality as found in the religious tradition of the Fon of Benin, said, “*Mawu-Lisa* (the Dual High God) expresses together the unity of the world conceived in terms of duality.”<sup>15</sup> The Akan of Ghana express this by giving siamese personal names to people, one half of the name being female and the other half male. An example is *Dua-Agyeman*, in which dual name *Dua*, meaning ‘tree’, is the female principle and *Agyeman*, meaning ‘warrior’, is the male principle. In the religious tradition of the Akan the Sky God, *Nyame*, and the Earth God, *Asase Yaa*, are paired together: *Nyame* is the male principle and *Asase Yaa* is the female principle in the pair. The Ga of Ghana have such a dual name for their High God called *Ataa-Naa Nyonmo* which literally means ‘Father-Mother Sky God’.

In sum, Africans see reality, including the reality of man and society, structured as unity in duality comprising two conflicting elements. Polarity and unity are, therefore, basic categories of being. Since the female and male pair is basic to all polarities, creativity becomes the essence of polarity as is the case in the union of woman and man. Leopold S. Senghor was right therefore when he observed that, while Western and Middle Eastern view of reality is founded on separation and opposition, on analysis and conflict, the African conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis.<sup>16</sup>

Creativity is thus the goal of human striving, and the polar elements find their unity in creativity. Paul Tillich stated a similar idea thus: “A polar relation is a relation of interdependent elements, each of which is necessary for the other one and for the whole, although it is in tension with the opposite element. The tension drives both to conflicts and beyond the conflicts to possible unions of polar elements.”<sup>17</sup>

### *Man as Possibility*

The whole of life, therefore, is perceived in Africa as oriented toward creativity and is symbolized by woman; Man, used generically, is seen as an integral part of this creative process of life. Thus, the drive to create is the basic and ultimate force behind all human behaviour; the goal of human creation is to realize a synthesis of being.

The creative principle in man is given different names by the different ethnic groups, but its essential oneness with the High God is always maintained. The following are some of its names: *se* or *kra* (Ewe),

<sup>15</sup> W.J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> W. Cartey and M. Kilson, *Independent Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 55.

*okra* (Akan), *kla* (Ga), *ori* (Yoruba), *Chi* (Igbo) *dya* (Mende) and *we* (Kassem of Ghana). Some of these names for the creative principle, which is the principle of life in man, are fragments of the names for the High Gods. Thus *se* comes from *Segbo*, meaning "The Source of the Creative Principle of Life," *Ori* from *Orise* meaning, "The Source from which Beings Spring," and *Chi* from *Chukwu* meaning "The Great, Immense, Undimensional Source of Being."

Man's ultimate goal as an individual and as a member of his clan, therefore, is to multiply and increase because he is the repository of the creative power, the right use of which is his chief responsibility. Likewise, when a woman marries, the most important thing that she takes to her husband's house is her productive powers because this is the essential part of her nature.

The creative process is not limited to bringing forth children, but is seen as embracing the whole of man's life and his relationships. The individual, therefore, is to grow in the development of a creative personality and to develop the capacity to maintain creative relationship. He is to see his individual life and that of his society as fields that are sown with life's experiences and which should yield fruit. This understanding of life is expressed in such personal names as *Agbefanu* (Ewe) "Life sows seeds," *Agbe fovi* (Ewe) "Life hatches things." The person who has achieved a creative personality and productive life and is able to maintain a productive relationship with others is said "to have become a person." (*Ezu ame*-Ewe; *Oye onipa pa*-Akan). The persons who are considered models of creative life are the chief, the elders and the ancestors. Such a life is counted as the greatest value in the indigenous culture.

#### *Man as an Agent*

The conception that creativity is the essence of true human personality implies that man is not just a being who thinks but also a being who acts to change his world. This implies that man is free and self-determining and has a say in shaping his own history and destiny. Through his free action he releases forces which shape the world and society, and because of his dual nature he also can release forces which will destroy society and the world. These two forces are basic to his nature, and he does not evolve from one into the other. Since this capacity for action is essential to being a man it follows that, where freedom to act is denied there is a diminution in the fullest sense of humanity; one's dignity is taken away and one's capacity for creativity is destroyed.

The most devastating effect of Western colonization and missionary proselytization on Africa is the removal of a genuine capacity for free action from Africans who have been made into objects of history instead of being its subjects. To a considerable extent Africans have lost their capacity for creativity; instead of assuming the active role of self-creators and makers of culture they have adopted the passive role of

acquiescence before alleged immutable cosmic laws imposed on them by foreign religion and education.

*Man as a Communal Being*

One important deduction from the fact that polarity has been woven into the fabric of the universe and of society is that community belongs to the very being of man. The origin of all being is existence in a polar relation. The individual's being emerges from a prior social whole which is truly other; it comes into being for the sake of him and exists for his development and growth. Hence, an individual who is cut off from the communal organism is nothing. In Africa it is true, then, to say: "As the glow of a coal depends upon its remaining in the fire, so the vitality, the psychic security, the very humanity of man, depends on his integration into the family."<sup>18</sup>

By living creatively the individual is also contributing to the life and quality of his community and so can say, 'We are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are'.<sup>19</sup>

**DEATH AND LIFE**

*The End of Death is Life*

Contrary to the popular view that the end of life is death, the Ewe of West Africa believe and affirm that the end of death is life. This same view of the relationship between death and life is stated by the father of the lost son when in the Bible he said, "For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive, he was lost, but now he has been found" (Luke 15:24). Jesus was referring to this understanding of the relationship between death and life when he said, "I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains." (John 12:24, also see chapter 11:25).

The new idea in the passage quoted above, which can be added to the conception of life as an offspring of death, is that the absolute beginning of life is power which may be compared to the power in a seed. Life begins as possibility or potentiality which has the power to realize its inherent capability. The seed concept of the origin of life implies that life is a sleeping power that has to be released and harnessed for creative and productive living. This sleeping power which forms the absolute beginning

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<sup>18</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> With apologies to John S. Mbiti, who, in his *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969, p. 108) represents the point of view of the individual person in African society by the maxim "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."

of human reality is referred to as *Se* by the Ewe and as *Okra* by the Akans of Ghana. *Se* is the seed of life, expressing itself as the beginning creative power or energy.

This Ewe conception of the absolute origin of life in death is not influenced by any Christian or extraneous teachings. It is an original and indigenous concept which, so far, has not been explored: it is one of the fundamental points of convergence of the indigenous African and the Christian religious awareness.

### *God as the Seed of Life*

The Ewe conception of death as the seed of life comes out clearly in the Ewe word for both *death* and *seed* which is *ku*. This means that as seed is the beginning possibility and enabling power of a plant, so death (*ku*) becomes the seed of life, i.e., the enabling beginning power of life. To illustrate the point further, as a mango tree is “dead” or “asleep” in the mango seed (*ku*) so the human life is “dead” or “asleep” in its beginning life, which the Ewe call *ku*--i.e., death, and has to be awakened. In other words, life always begins as “dead potens” i.e., as sleeping and potential power which has to be released to become a realized capacity.

As indicated above, the Ewe call this enabling, beginning power which is “asleep,” *Se*. This is the basic Ewe name for God, that is to say, God as *Se* is the enabling power of life with which every individual is endowed. *Se*, as an enabling power, is referred to as *ku*, i.e., death, when it is unreleased and uncultivated; it becomes *agbe*, i.e., life, when it is released and cultivated. The Ewe, therefore, primarily conceive of God as Principle where principle is used as the Origin or Primary Source of all life. The terms “Father” (*Fofu*--Ewe) and “Mother” (*Dada* or *No*--Ewe) are used metaphorically to represent God as Principle or Origin. God is, therefore, both Father and Mother called, *Mawu-Lisa*, where *Mawu* is the female principle and *Lisa* is the male principle.

These two principles are united in *Se* as the seed power of life. Life and death then are not antithetical, but rather two complementary forces which are joined together as *Se*, but remain two. To the Ewe mind, then, there is no question of life confronting and overcoming death. So far as the Ewe are concerned you cannot have life without death. Anytime you pray for life you are also praying for death, because, as one Ewe name puts it, “*Agbezideku*” meaning “Life and death are insolubly coupled together.” Conflict is then eliminated in the Ewe conception of the relationship between life and death; complementarity, balance and reciprocity are the principles that unite them.

### *The Meaning of Life*

Let us return again to the seed concept of the origin of life. As seeds sprout into living plants by breaking the bonds of their beginning seed

life, so also human life springs up and out by breaking the bonds of death. Life has to be freed from its own sleeping, enabling power to realize the fullness of its splendor through the cultivation of its potential.

Life, then, has no *a priori* meaning. It starts as a sleeping, enabling power and acquires meaning through existence, where existence is used in its original Latin sense of *ex-sistere*: going forth or coming into being through a process. The Ewe refer to human existence, conceived as a process of releasing and developing the imprisoned enabling power of life, as *amenyenye*, which means 'to realize being in space and time through the process of struggle'. As a pregnant woman has to labor to bring out her new baby, so human life has to struggle to *acquire* meaning. To the Ewe then to be is to be engaged in the process of becoming. One Ewe proverb puts it this way, "There is no resting place on the journey of life" (*Dzudzo mele alifo o*).

Meaning, then, is given to life in the process of living, which is characterized by making choices. Life's decisions, however, are made in the light of life's master purpose, called in Ewe *du*. This is given to both individuals and nations in a dispensation from God, called *Fa* (Daryll Forde, *African Worlds*, p. 225. 1970). The main content of the individual's *du* may be summarized as the realization of creative humanity. Where life is seen as possibility, it always has unlimited meaning, and its success depends upon the individual's ability to see "the sign" of life that is coiled in the heart of death.

Finally, to the Ewe physical death is neither a threat nor an annihilation, but a transformation and communion of the individualized and personalized *se* with what the Ewe call *Segbo*, i.e., the Big and Supreme *Se*, for the sake of rejuvenation and rebirth of a new being. This cycle continues *ad infinitum*.



CHAPTER VII

**DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE  
IN AFRICAN CULTURE**

KWASI WIREDU

**THE THIS-WORLDLY CHARACTER OF THE AFTERLIFE IN  
AFRICAN THOUGHT**

There is a mildly paradoxical unanimity in African studies about the African belief in, and attitude toward, the afterlife. It is universally noted, on the one hand, that Africans generally believe that bodily death is not the end of life, but only the inauguration of life in another form. But, on the other hand, it is equally universally remarked that the African attitude to life is a this-worldly one. The paradox is, in fact, apparent; but quite some conceptual clarifications are needed to see why.

The crucial conceptual issue concerns the nature of the after-world. In what sense is it an *other* world? Not all African peoples are given to talking about death and the afterlife,<sup>1</sup> but wherever there are any intimations at all of what life in the *land* of the dead is like, the similarities between that form of life and *the earthly* one are striking. The similarities are, indeed, so striking that the characterization of this life as 'earthly' in contrast to the afterlife is already metaphysically inappropriate. In West Africa, for example, where people are not excessively reticent about eschatology, descriptions of the afterlife generally include explicit indications that the transition from this life to the next is by land travel; and, of course, if you travel from one part of the earth by land, you can only arrive at another part of the earth. In traditional Africa, boundaries are often marked by rivers. Not surprisingly, the high point of the post-mortem journey is the crossing of a river. Once having crossed the river, one enters the land of the departed and joins the society of the ancestors, a society which replicates the political order of pre-mortem society to the extent that rulers in the one retain their status in the other.

It would be interesting and relevant to speculate who or what this 'one' is who is supposed to do the afterlife travelling, but it might be appropriate to call attention immediately to the this-worldly orientation of the conception itself of the afterlife. Remaining in West Africa for the time being, it is important to note that the whole point of going on the last

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Nuer of the Sudan: witness E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), p. 144: "Death is a subject the Nuer do not care to speak about." See also, as regards the Dinka, R. Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), p. 289.

journey is to become one of the ancestors. Now, the significance of the ancestors consists simply in this, that they watch over the affairs of the living members of their families, helping deserving ones and punishing the delinquent. If an ancestor is a ruler, the scope of his activities goes beyond his own family to the whole of his town or kingdom. In either case, ancestors are there to see to the good of the living. There is, of course, a reciprocal side to this. Reciprocity is a strong feature of African society; it is, in fact, a feature of any moral community. Accordingly, the living feel not only beholden to the ancestors for their help and protection, but also positively obliged to do honor to them.

How is honor done to the ancestors? In two connected ways, one general, the other particular. The first way is simply to live uprightly. Just to live uprightly is to be a source of honor to one's family, and one's ancestors constitute an integral part of one's family. Bad conduct, on the other hand, brings disgrace to the living family and displeasure to the ancestors. The ancestors, in their post-mortem condition, are credited with veritable moral perfection and are, therefore, not accessible to disgrace, but just because of their elevated moral status they are thought to be even more scandalized by wrong doing than the living elders of the family. Wrong doing may take three basic forms, namely, trifling with the moral law, falling foul of civil regulations or of the customs and taboos of the community, and failing to take good care of family affairs.

The last heading may involve quite particularized imperatives or even injunctions. Perhaps a departed member of the family has left his successor a half-completed project, together with adequate resources for its completion. To go ahead and complete it is to do honor to the dead. Or if he has left some debts to be paid, then that is an opportunity to uphold his honor. There may be dependents to be taken care of, or specific instructions may have been left before death for certain things to be done. These, and such like, form the second, more particular, way in which the living can do honor to the dead, or perhaps we ought to say the dead-but-living.<sup>2</sup>

Since these matters imply definite duties, non-performance may elicit punishment from an ancestor, which usually takes the form of unaccountable illnesses.<sup>3</sup> These are, incidentally, the form of lapses from right conduct that the ancestors are most apt to punish. This restriction does not, however, indicate an abridged interest, on their part, in the general morality of their relatives; it just means that in the ethical division of labor

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<sup>2</sup> Mbiti has made the phrase 'the living dead' famous. By this phrase, he means what he calls 'the spirits of those who have recently died.' But all the ancestors, irrespective of how long ago they departed from this life, are believed to be dead but living. See his *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> K.A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Cass, 1951), p. 24 quotes some Ashantis who (believed they) had been punished by their dead relatives for some such errors.



there are other sources of sanctions. Nor does the restriction diminish the conviction of the living that right conduct redounds to the credit of their departed relations and, besides, warms their hearts.

In the way of direct services to themselves, the ancestors are remarkably undemanding. Occasional dedicatory drops of ceremonial schnapps or modest servings of food in the right place overnight, from time to time, seem to be all that is required. Nevertheless, such acts, especially those of libation, are of the last consequence, for it is through them that the living communicate their assurances of respect to the ancestors and solicit their timely assistance in connection with specific enterprises. In this way there is maintained an on-going relationship with the departed.

What then, to reopen a question previously raised but not explored, must the inhabitants of the land of the dead be like to sustain this social relationship with their mortal brethren? If we recall the land travel and river crossing, not to talk of the schnapps sipping and more solidified pickings, it must occur to us that they must be conceived as of a somewhat psycho-physical constitution.<sup>4</sup> That they must have some analogue of a body is an inescapable inference from the physicalistic setting of their activities and, in any case, from embodied descriptions of sightings of dead individuals which, though rare, are culturally typical. It is no less apparent that they must have minds, since they are supposed to exercise the function of *assessing* the conduct of their relatives and apportioning blight or blessing as the case may require. After all, for at least some African peoples, such as the Akans of Ghana, mind is not an extensionless substance *a la* Descartes, but simply the capacity to do just such things.<sup>5</sup> From all of this, it emerges not only that the land of the dead is, geographically, not altogether dissimilar to our own, but also that its population are rather like ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Little, "The Mende in Sierra Leone," in Daryll Forde, ed., *African Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), p. 115-16, remarks that for them 'the conditions of this world are apparently continued in the hereafter, and the life led by ancestral spirits seems to be similar in many respects to that of the people of the earth. Some informants described them as cultivating rice-farms, building towns, etc. It also seems that the spirits retain an anthropomorphic character and much of their earthly temperament and disposition.' Similar accounts of African conceptions of the afterlife abound in the literature.

<sup>5</sup> See K. Wiredu, "The Akan Concept of Mind," *The Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* (1983); also in Guttorm Floistad, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol. 5, *African Philosophy* (Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> The late Okot p'Bitek, one of the most conceptually alert of contemporary African thinkers, wrote, "For the Central Luo the entities which they believed they encountered at the lineage shrine were not spirits but the ancestors as they were known before death; their voices could be 'recognized' as they spoke through the diviner; they 'felt' hungry and cold, and 'understood' and 'enjoyed' jokes and being teased, etc. They were thought of as whole

Actually, this is not a surprising idea, for it is a natural outgrowth of a conception of personhood which is entertained among the peoples of West Africa (with only variations of detail) and, indeed, among most African peoples with only slightly more substantial differences. According to this conception, a human being has two constituents. The first is the material body as commonly perceived; this presents no immediate conceptual problems. The second, on the other hand, is not easy to characterize; it is not of identically the same type as the material body, and yet it is not of a diametrically opposed category; it is, as the phrase goes, a cross between the two. This second factor of human personality is taken to be what accounts for our being alive or for our having a particular destiny; it is that whose presence means life and whose departure means death.<sup>7</sup> But it is itself conceived on the model of the living body or, better still, of the living person; so much so, that it is frequently spoken of as a replica of a person and credited with the office of a 'guardian angel'.

The ontologically interesting thing about this kind of being is that although it is conceived in the *image* of a person, it is exempted from the grosser characteristics of the material body. Thus, it can appear at, or disappear from, places without regard to speed limits for matter in motion or to the laws of impenetrability. Moreover, it is capable of action at a distance in which a living person may be severely affected without perceptible contact. The question of perceivability brings us to an important property of the entities in question. They cannot be seen with the naked eye nor heard with the unaided ear, except on rare occasions when they

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beings, not dismembered parts of man, i.e., spirits divorced from bodies." (*Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), p. 104. At least one contemporary Luo scholar *claims* personally to have heard voices from the dead. Gilbert E.M. Ogotu, Lecturer in Religious Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya, discussing Luo beliefs about death and immortality, asserts, 'I have heard the voices of people who died a long time ago as they spoke through the living, stating what they wanted the living to do.' Gilbert Ogotu, "The African Perception," in Geddes MacGregor, ed., *Immortality and Human Destiny: A Variety of Views* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), p. 106. The Luo are a large ethnic group spread over territories falling under quite a few present-day African States. They "live in the geographical area that covers southern Sudan, southwestern Ethiopia, northeastern Zaire, northwestern, northern and eastern Uganda, western Kenya, and northern Tanzania . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> For the Yorubas, the life-giving entity is different from the destiny entity; for the Akans of Ghana, both are one, though a distinct apparent entity is postulated by them to account for the unique personal presence of each individual. The ontology of all these entities is, however, basically the same. On the Yoruba, see, for example, E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman's, Green, 1962), Chap. 13. On the Akans and West Africans generally see, e.g., Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (London: F.E.P. International Publishers, 1978), Chap. 5.

themselves elect to make themselves sensibly accessible to particular persons; otherwise, they can be seen or heard only by people with medicinally heightened powers of sight and hearing.

Even so sketchy a characterization of the second basic constituent of a person in the West African conception should make it clear that it would be a substantial oversimplification to describe it as *spiritual* in the sense of this word which implies total immateriality. There is in the conception under discussion only a reduced materiality, and the reduction affects not its imagery, but its dynamics. Since, at death, it is this quasi-material entity which departs to the world of the dead, it is natural that talk of the after life should be replete with a this-worldly imagery. This remark is applicable to the thought not only of the peoples of West Africa but also of many other African peoples, perhaps of most or all African peoples. It certainly explains Okotp'Bitek's insistence, in the specific case of the Central Luo, that the 'entities which they believed they encountered at the lineage shrines were not *spirits* but the ancestors *as they were known before death*' (my italics; recall the quotation from Bitek in footnote 6 above).

If, mindful of all the foregoing, we now return to the question: in what sense is the African world of the dead an other world? the answer must be that it is in no sense another world, but rather a part of this world, albeit a conceptually problematic part. The problem is that the attenuations of the materiality of the place of the dead and its residents seem to leave us with a material imagery, without a solid anchorage. Nevertheless, this imagery has been marvelously efficacious in motivating conceptions of the cultural unity of the living with the dead in the thought of many African peoples. Given this conceptual framework, it becomes intelligible how this life can be seen as a preparation for an afterlife whose whole significance, nevertheless, consists in securing the welfare of the living. It follows, by an obvious transitivity, that in this way of thinking whatever the meaning of life is, it is to be defined in terms of the circumstances of this life.

#### AFRICAN AND WESTERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE COMPARED

I shall return to this last point below, but it might be helpful to cast a brief comparative glance at some other conceptions of life after death. Proceeding in the order of descending immateriality, we may note Plato's theory of survival after death. What survives physical death is the soul, which, for Plato, is an absolutely immaterial entity.<sup>8</sup> During the life of a mortal, this entity is 'imprisoned' in the body, so that death is actually

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Plato's *Phaedo*. An equally 'abstract' conception of post-mortem existence is found in the mystically oriented doctrine according to which a human being consists of a body and an immaterial soul which at death is absorbed back into the 'universal mind.' But this can hardly be called a doctrine of immortality, certainly not one of personal immortality.

something in the nature of a liberation. When this occurs the soul reverts to a totally rarefied realm of being, containing the immaterial and changeless originals of which the things in this world are imperfect copies. There it becomes again directly conversant with the true realities which in mortal life it was at best only capable of remembering. This soul is, of course, indestructible, and enjoys both a pre-natal and post-mortem existence. However beautiful this conception may be, it offers no possibility of a social interaction between the dead and the living and is as far removed from African conceptions as anything can be. Indeed, I doubt that it can be translated into the African language of which I have an inside knowledge, namely, the Akan language (spoken in parts of Ghana and the Ivory Coast).

Within the Western intellectual tradition, however, there is a conception of immortality in which immaterial and quasimaterial factors are intermixed. This is the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body at Judgment Day. On this fateful day, mortal remains of dead people, the largest proportion of them long transformed into earth, will be reassembled and reanimated with their corresponding souls. One way or another, dead individuals will be reconstituted by body and soul being put together again in such a way as to recover their pre-mortem personal identities, with the one pleasant exception that the new editions of their bodies will be so vastly improved as not to be susceptible to any physical disabilities or carnal cravings. In this purified form they will live in eternal bliss, that is, if they are accorded salvation through the undeserved grace of God. In the alternative they shall be consigned, presumably in not so perfect bodies, to some extremely inconvenient mode of existence forever. St. Augustine, for one, was adamant on the justice of such eternal punishment. If it seems harsh, it is only because "in the weakness of our mortal condition there is wanting that highest and purest wisdom by which it can be perceived how great a wickedness was committed in the first transgression".<sup>9</sup>

Three points arise, one of near similarity, two of outright contrast. If we view the resurrected people as whole individuals, they are quite similar to the inhabitants of African lands of the dead. The resurrected and saved are like mortal persons in imagery, but unlike them in their mode of action. St. Augustine (*op. cit.*, Bk. xxii: 29-30) actually speaks of them as being "clothed in immortal and spiritual bodies" which "shall live no longer in a fleshy but a spiritual fashion." The Saint remarks furthermore, "What power of movement such bodies shall possess, I have not the audacity to conceive. . . . One thing is certain, the body shall forthwith be wherever the spirit wills, and the spirit shall will nothing which is unbecoming either to the spirit or to the body." The bodies in question are obviously neither purely material nor purely immaterial (which in any case would be self-contradictory) but, in truth, quasi-material. There is, then, some similarity here between the African and the traditional Christian images of the dead - but-living. The similarity, however, is only *skin* deep, for the "risen"

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<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. xxi: 15.

Christian is a combination of an immaterial soul and a quasi-material body whereas the “departed” African is, by original constitution, a quasi-material being. Nor does the latter have to wait as a split person in some transitional realm till ‘the Day of Judgment’ to attain the wholeness of post-mortem personality.

The absence in the eschatology of many African peoples of a day of judgment together with its inexorable sequel, positive or negative, marks a very significant difference with the Christian variety.<sup>10</sup> The Day of Judgment by definition is an apocalyptic watershed, bringing the end of the temporal phase of cosmic history. Thenceforward, this world is no more. Hence the question of the relationship of the inhabitants of this world with those of the next does not arise. This life is a preparation for the next, but not only that; it is a waiting for the next. That still is not all; the very meaning of this life consists in the fact that there is a next one. Historically, this point of view has been held quite widely in the Western world, though of course, not universally or always within the confines of orthodox Christianity. Jacques Choron in his interesting book, *Death and Modern Man*,<sup>11</sup> has collected a number of striking expressions of that view from some remarkable men. Here are a few: “If immortality be untrue, it matters little whether anything else be true or not” (Henry Thomas Buckle, nineteenth century historian); “If there is no immortality, I shall hurl myself into the sea” (Lord Tennyson); “Without the hope of an afterlife this life is not even worth the effort of getting dressed in the morning” (Prince Bismark); “without immortality . . . all the generations of mankind are fighting a forlorn hope . . . our life is blind and our death is fruitless (A.E. Taylor, a generation ago, one of the leaders in Platonic studies in Britain); “without the belief in the existence of the soul and its immortality human existence is ‘unnatural’ and unbearable” (Dostoevsky).

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<sup>10</sup> Some African people appear to envisage some kind of ‘judgment’ after death. However, this does not have the cataclysmic cosmic connotation of the Christian day of judgment. Each person or group of persons undergoes ‘judgment’ as they come along and they then go to hard or comfortable places according as they have been bad or good. Suffering in the former case, though, is not always irreversible. See J. Omosae Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (Essex: Longman, 1979), pp. 58-59, on post-mortem judgment among the Yoruba. On somewhat similar beliefs among the Dogon of Mali and the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana, see the summary accounts in B. Ray, *African Religions, Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1976, pp. 141-46. On the LoDagaa the most detailed study is that of Jack Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> *Modern Man and Mortality* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

## AFRICAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

From a logical point of view it is difficult to see how the meaning of life can consist in even more life, but the interesting thing for our discussion is that most traditional Africans are likely to find such sentiments extremely surprising. A Nuer or Dinka elder, for example, though he takes the existence of life after death for granted, does not set much store by it. Their's, according to Evans-Prichard<sup>12</sup> (talking of the Nuer) 'is a this-worldly religion, a religion of abundant life and the fullness of days, and they neither pretend to know, nor . . . do they care what happens to them after death'. In the society of the Nuer, either by nature or by convention, 'every man has at least one son and through this son his name is forever a link in a line of descent. This is the only form of immortality in which the Nuer are interested. They are not interested in the survival of the individual as a ghost, but in the social personality in the name' (*ibid.*, p. 163). Godfrey Lienhardt<sup>13</sup> duplicates the same observation in connection with the Dinka. "Children and cattle multiplying and prospering from generation to generation are the ultimate value of Dinka life". Or, as he says earlier on, 'Dinka greatly fear to die without issue in whom the survival of their names--the only kind of immortality they know--will be assured'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, to the traditional Dinka, 'notions of individual personal immortality mean little'.<sup>15</sup> Lienhardt's wording in these quotations might suggest that the Dinka do not believe in the existence of personal survival after death, but that cannot very well be his intent, for he himself gives accounts of how they try through various procedures to establish satisfactory relations with their departed ancestors. The point is simply that even though they do entertain that belief, that is not where they derive their sense of the worthwhileness of life. It is in this that the Nuer and Dinka are typical of Africans generally.

In not being specially thrilled at the possibility of eventually becoming ancestors in the country of the dead, the Dinka and Nuer are very much unlike, say, the Akans of Ghana and the Ivory Coast, the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin or the Mende of Sierra Leone. In these regions the ancestors are highly prized and respected, and the notion of one day becoming an ancestor is, indeed, music to their ears. Yet, becoming an ancestor, as already pointed out, only enables one to help the living to realize human purposes. To a typical Akan, for example, a life that has meaning is one that makes reasonable achievements<sup>16</sup> in the direction of

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<sup>12</sup> *Nuer Religion*, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> *Divinity and Experience*, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> The idea of reasonable achievements is intended to be contrasted with the kind of exaggerated notions of achievement that might encourage megalomania--a type of mentality which the Akans sought to forestall with the

personal, family, and communal welfare. A life of that sort would be a meaningful one even if there were no belief in an afterlife. In point of fact, one's life after death does not figure in one's destiny. Human destiny begins and ends in this world. To hurl oneself into the sea simply because there is no life after death would strike a traditional Akan as equivalent to madness.

In West Africa, indeed, living a full and meaningful life is a condition for becoming an ancestor.<sup>17</sup> This is probably not universally the case in Africa, but in the view of some peoples, such as the Akans of Ghana, a person whose life is cut short by an accident or an 'unclean' disease or any other untoward circumstance does not gain immediate access to the country of the dead; he becomes a neighborhood ghost, an occasional source of frightening apparitions, until he can come back to be born again to try to work out a complete life. This, by the way, is the nearest approximation to purgatory in the Akan system. It is also one of the two forms of limited reincarnation postulated in that system. The second form is supposed to occur when a mother loses a baby and has another soon afterwards, and there is a recurrence of the same sequence. In such circumstances, it is assumed that it is the same person that goes back and forth. Aside from those two types of cases, any talk of reincarnation is largely metaphorical. An Akan or Yoruba will speak of the second coming of an ancestor--to be sure there can be multiple comings of the same ancestor--and mean by this mainly that the new addition to the family bears striking physical or psychological resemblance to the ancestor in question. The literal component of meaning here would be that the influence of the ancestor himself is at work in the phenomenon.

It is not accidental that in such thought-systems belief in reincarnation is so definitively circumscribed. The ancestors being so important in the affairs of the living and status being enhanced by longevity, it is useful to have permanent ancestors. Any generalized and continuous turnover of ancestors would obviously detract from that scheme. Note again that this concept of immortality is a pragmatic one; it is immortality for the service of humankind. In this way of thinking, a paradisaical type of immortality in which people endlessly just enjoy themselves (in however 'spiritual' a fashion) without any responsibilities would be viewed as glorified idleness.

The African land of the dead, then, is not heaven in the Christian sense. The life of the ancestors is pictured as one of dignity and serenity, rather than of bliss. There are, of course, no temptations or tribulations in that life, but neither are there any excitements. The one preoccupation of

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maxim, "It was given to mortals to achieve something, not everything."  
(*'Onipa be yee bi na wameye nenyinaa'*.)

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corp., 1974), pp. 34-36; see also J. Awolalu, p. 54.

that existence is with the good of the living wing of the family and clan. It is upon their ability to achieve this aim that the importance of the ancestors is predicated. Beneficial interaction with the community of the living, thus, is the first law of their being.

If we look for a substantially analogous concept of survival after death in Western thought, obviously it is not in orthodox Christianity that we will find it. The likeliest place would be in the theory of the astral body found in the literature of spiritualism. Death here is regarded as the departure of the soul, itself a kind of body, from the physical plane to another plane of existence, namely, the astral. The soul, in contradistinction from the physical body, is of a highly subtle constitution; but it is still basically corporeal. It is, moreover, of the form of the body, and although it is generally not visible to the ordinary eye, 'those who have eyes' can see it and even hold converse with it. This gives the departed soul a certain sociability and helpfulness. Thus, it is not unknown for the dead to reveal the whereabouts of lost valuables or to help crime detection with crucial information, according to spiritualist claims. It may be said, accordingly, that in terms of ontological status and social relevance the astral survivor is akin to the inhabitant of the land of the dead, as spoken of in African eschatology.

### MORALITY AND THE ANCESTORS

In the Western tradition one can trace the notion of the soul as an astral body to Tertullian, the idiosyncratic early church father (160-220 A.D.). He argued that the conclusion that the soul is corporeal (though ethereal) can be inferred from the Christian doctrine of purgatory.<sup>18</sup> What contemporary spiritualism adds to Tertullian's conception is the social dimension. This social dimension is, however, unsystematic and desultory in comparison with that of the African idea of ancestors. The African ancestors rule their kin from the grave, so to speak; the same cannot be said of their astral counterparts. Because of their minimal social interactions with the living, the cultural significance of the latter (even among the persuaded) is not as great as that of the former.

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<sup>18</sup> 'But what is that which is removed to Hades after the separation of the body; which is there detained; which is reserved until the day of judgment? . . . [For] whatever is incorporeal is incapable of being kept and guarded in any way; it is also exempt from either punishment or refreshment. That must be a body by which punishment and refreshment can be experienced.' (From Tertullian's *De Anima* as excerpted in Anthony Flew, *Body, Mind and Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1964, p. 92. Tertullian was a North African, but it is not clear that his origins had anything to do with his corporealism, if we may coin a word. Saint Augustine also invites mention here. It would be surprising if his North African origins had anything to do with his eschatology.



What is the cultural significance of this? We have already mentioned the role of the ancestors in the enforcement of morals.<sup>19</sup> Morals, broadly construed, cover ethical rules proper as well as customs and taboos. It is with respect to their relevance to the last two kinds of rules of conduct, rather than to the first, that the ancestors have their greatest cultural significance. This is not because their status as guardians of the morality of their living relatives--morality being taken in the narrow sense--is not important, even though often restricted. The reason is twofold. First, in the case of morality, narrowly conceived, the ancestors can only enforce rules whose basis or validity is independent of their own wishes or decisions, whereas customs and taboos are frequently of their own making; and secondly, customs and taboos are more essential to the individuality of a culture than morality. These two considerations each require some elaboration, however brief they must be in the present context.

To take the question of morality (in the narrow sense), first: It is often supposed that in Africa morality is determined by the injunctions of the ancestors and other extra-human powers. This is usually inferred from the very evident influence that beliefs about these beings have upon African conduct. If 'determine' is interpreted in a causal, psychological sense, the conclusion follows tautologically from the premise, for the claim then amounts simply to the observation that the thought of the ancestors, as a matter of psychological fact, does actually cause traditional Africans to behave in certain ways. If, however, the alleged determination of morality by the ancestors is taken in a logical sense, the claim is false or, at any rate, not true of all African thought, for at least in the case of the Akans, the justification of moral rules consists solely in considerations concerning the harmonious adjustment of the interests of individuals with that of the community. The will of an ancestor, or a 'god' or, indeed, of God, may function as an incentive for an action, but never as its justification.<sup>20</sup>

Customs, on the other hand, are frequently held to be justified simply on account of having been laid down by our ancestors long ago. Even here it is pertinent to note that the rules concerned are supposed to have been laid down by the ancestors while they lived, so that their interest in them after death is only a continuation of pre-mortem concerns. Furthermore, although the average mind does not look beyond precedence

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<sup>19</sup> This role may be observed in perhaps most African societies, but it is apparently not universal in Africa. For example, J.D. Krige and E.J. Krige, "The Lovendu of the Transvaal," in Daryll Forde, ed., *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford, 1954), p. 80, say that "Ancestor worship of the Lovendu plays hardly any part . . . in upholding tribal morality". They even assert, 'Ancestors are capricious' *Ibid.* p. 63).

<sup>20</sup> See further, K. Wiredu, "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought," in H. Odera Oruka and D.A. Masolo, eds., *Philosophy and Culture* (Nairobi: Bookwise Limited, 1983).

for the justification of customs, the really wise men of the group can point out their rationale. This is probably also true of taboos. On the face of it, a taboo is an arbitrary prohibition based on the will of some non-human power and backed by threats of unusual consequences. In fact, on deeper scrutiny, such rules may be found not to be without some rhyme or even reason. For the purpose of our present discussion, the important point here is that the reason for a custom or taboo is always pragmatic. A pragmatic reason is one which may justify a practice without making it universally obligatory. Moral reasons, by contrast, are universal. It is because of this universality that moral rules cannot figure in the differentia of a culture, for morality is too essential to human culture to vary from culture to culture. But some things do vary from culture to culture, and custom is certainly one such thing. Since the ancestors--however one looks at the matter--are crucial for the existence in African societies of customs and taboos, their importance in the individuation of African cultures is obvious.

Besides the general relevance of the ancestors to custom and taboo, there are in many African societies elaborate and protracted customs relating to the process by which a person becomes an ancestor. Death, unfortunately, is the first necessary condition for ancestorhood. When that event happens, people feel an obligation to give the deceased a fitting send-off to the land of the ancestors. This involves both spontaneous and formalized mourning and various funeral ceremonies. The scale of a funeral process, judged in terms of the intensity of the mourning, the largeness of attendance and the meticulousness of the formalities, is taken to reflect the respect in which the deceased is held. On this account, people will go to no end of trouble to ensure grand funeral rites for their deceased relatives. There is much less ado about dead bodies, however, among some ethnic groups in Africa. Among such people the mortal remains of the departed are disposed of with very businesslike dispatch. The population of Ghana, for example, includes groups practicing both extremes, as well as groups with intermediate funeral habits. The peoples of the Northern part of Ghana are extremely brisk in their manner of sending off the dead to their new home, while the Akans, among others, devote major effort and time to that procedure. The Yorubas of Nigeria are even more famous for their lavishness of attention and expense in this respect, and I have heard it said that the Luo of Kenya are not far behind. Among peoples of such an orientation, funerals are among the most important and visible observances in cultural life. Since, sadly, people keep on dying, they are, perhaps, the most continual.

### **THE SOCIAL AFTERMATH OF DEATH**

Two aspects of the great preoccupation with the mourning of the dead and associated rites among many African peoples are worth noting. On the one hand, the outpourings of feeling on such occasions have resulted

in some of the most beautiful traditional poetry in Africa.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the frequent funeral gatherings offer constant opportunities for the exchange of assurances of sympathy and solidarity, and for concrete acts of mutual aid. On the other hand, in recent times the emphasis upon funerals has shown a tendency to degenerate into expensive exhibitionism, which, in view of the strong pressures for conformity in African societies, can drive even the reluctant to ruinous funeral expenses. In my opinion, we see here one of the most negative features of contemporary culture in some African countries.

The sense of tragedy in the face of death is, of course, not necessarily any less in communities with brief funeral rites than in those with extensive ones. The fact of death itself strikes many African peoples as something needing explanation beyond physical causes and effects: hence the many myths on the origin of death to be found in the folklore of many African peoples. The basic message of these myths is that the human species brought death upon themselves through their own disobedience of God. It should be observed, however, that, by and large, what particularly exercises the African mind is not the death of just anybody, but only the death of those who have attained adulthood but not ripe age. Thus, the death in old age of a person who has led a full and productive life is not strictly an occasion for mourning. The Akans would attend the funeral of such a person in white, instead of the customary black, brown, or red. This is taken as a mark of the recognition that the person was blessed by God with a full and completed term of life. In similar circumstances, the Yorubas actually speak of celebration rather than lamentation. The thought seems to be that when one has had ample time to work out one's destiny, it remains only to go and take one's place among the ancestors. On the other hand, for an individual who dies a minor, the question of joining the ancestors does not arise, and in many places there is not even the pretense of a funeral. Although a minor is recognized to be a human being, entitled, in an even greater degree than an adult, to help, affection, and all due consideration, still such an individual is not regarded as a full *person* and, therefore, cannot be a candidate for ancestorhood. Not even death is credited with the power to transform the immaturity of a child into the necessary maturity of an ancestor.

But death in immaturity, or, for that matter, at any stage short of ripe age, requires a special explanation. In the *normal* run of things a person

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<sup>21</sup> As regards the Akans, J.H. Nketia, in his *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (Achimota, 1955) has collected a great deal of such poetry. These verses sometimes take a metaphysical turn. A famous example and, perhaps, one of the profoundest is this (in part):

We have, since we arose from ancient times, been exposed to incessant suffering. The *Ogyapam* tree and its ants are from antiquity. The Creator created death and death killed him. Thou Deceased, Condolences, Condolences, Condolences (p. 125).

should grow up, raise a family and also help his community in all desirable ways before giving up the ghost, or to speak in Akan terms, before giving up the 'okra' (which is the Akan name for the life-principle). A life cut short, then, is an indication of an interruption of the normal sequence of events. Non-intelligent matter operates according to regular laws, which, of themselves, cannot account for such departures from normality. Only an intelligent agent or agency can cause such an estop of the normal flow of affairs as the nipping of a whole life's potential in the bud. This is, in effect, the train of thought which leads the traditional African mind, when there has been a premature death, to inquire not whether some intelligent agency is involved, but which.

Suppose a child playing with a loaded gun pulls the trigger accidentally and kills a promising young man. The gross mechanics of the situation does not elude the African mind, but why this particular young man and at this particular juncture of his life? If this question is answerable, it will be only in terms of reasons, purposes, intentions, etc. Our traditional African assumes that it can be answered,<sup>22</sup> since he considers that everything has a sufficient reason,<sup>23</sup> either by way of mechanical causation or by intelligent (or quasi-intelligent) design. This can be questioned, but that does not belong to our present purpose, which is to give some idea of the reverberations in African culture of the resultant mode of explaining what is taken to be anomalous death.

African ontologies almost always include a Supreme being and a whole hierarchy of extra-human beings and forces, many of whom (or which) are capable of abridging life in certain circumstances. There is, accordingly, a choice of explanations. Perhaps the young man has fallen victim to the envious machinations of a witch. Such a hypothesis, when seriously explored, can have the profoundest social consequences; for the

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<sup>22</sup> A number of scholars and philosophers have noted essentially this point though with their different slants. See Daryll Forde's general introduction to his *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), p. xi. Also, K.A. Busia, *The Challenge of Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 20f; Heleine K. Minkus, "Causal Theory in Akwapim Akan Philosophy," in Richard A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Washington: University Press of America, 1984), or, most philosophically ratiocinative of all, J.O. Sodipo, "Notes on the Concepts of Cause and Chance in Yoruba Traditional Thought," *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, no. 2, July, 1973.

<sup>23</sup> The principle of sufficient reason was one of the cornerstones of Leibniz's philosophy. In his system, every contingent fact is referred to the will of God, but in the African system it appears that the wills of much lesser beings also can constitute sufficient reasons for some occurrences. At all events, the principle itself is undoubtedly a cornerstone in the traditional philosophies of many African societies. Among the Akans it is formulated as follows: "Biribiara wo ne nkyera se." Literally, this says 'Everything has its explanation.'

suspicion would be bound to fall on some individual close by who, henceforward, becomes a spoken or unspoken enemy. The consequent tensions and dissensions constitute some of the most unhappy aspects of African communal life. Or perhaps the young man may have died as punishment from the ancestors for a grievous sin committed by him. He may, for example, have committed adultery with his uncle's wife, than which few greater enormities can be imagined in the family life of a people like, say, the Akans. The wages of sin, here too, sometimes is death.

There are still other possibilities of explanation, as one can easily surmise, but since all such explanations, beyond tentative suspicion, require extra-normal verification, the interesting thing to note here is that such modes of explanation inevitably call forth into existence the institution of divination, which is an extremely important component of many African cultures. Premature death, of course, is not the only problem requiring the expertise of diviners--there is no lack of others: sickness, personal adversities, or even communal reverses--but death is the most worrying of them. Divination occurs on varying scales and in varying degrees of development in probably all African societies; among the Yorubas it appears to have advanced almost to the level of a science complete with a sophisticated mathematical apparatus. It may be observed parenthetically that divination seems to take the place of revelation in many African cultures, a fact which accounts for the absence of prophets of God in the corresponding traditional religions. Our ancestors along with other types of beings are thought to vouchsafe adequate hints and advice to their people. The proliferation of prophets of God in the charismatic churches--a movement which has been sweeping across Africa in recent times like wild fire, if we may be excused a rather mundane simile in connection with such a 'spiritual' phenomenon--is another contemporary twist to a traditional African cultural trait. African divination seems to have domesticated Christian revelation!

## **CONCLUSION**

It is apparent from all the above that, in one way or another, the idea of immortal ancestors dominates African thought about death and the afterlife. Will this belief in the ancestors survive rational investigation in the modern world? The question, perhaps, betrays a rationalistic over-optimism, for whole races do not indulge in intellectual self-examination. Unfortunately, however, they can be overtaken by intellectual events emanating from abroad. This is exactly what has happened in Africa. Her peoples--or a great proportion of them--have been overtaken by the intellectual packages embedded in Islam and Christianity. The question therefore should, perhaps, rather be: 'Can the African belief in the ancestors and the associated cultural practices survive the impact of foreign cosmologies?' If such phenomena as religious conversion proceeded in a strictly logical fashion, it might be expected that the belief in question

would, for large masses of contemporary Africans, be a thing of the past and that, in consequence, there would be quite radical alterations in their culture. In fact, however, what has often happened has been not alterations but accretions. Christian<sup>24</sup> practices regarding the mourning of the dead, for example, in spite of presupposing a different system of eschatology, have simply been added to traditional ones, thus compounding the extravagance of the funeral process where that tendency exists. This is typical of the general confusion in contemporary African life deriving from the uncritical acceptance of foreign ideas.

I might add that there is not necessarily anything wrong with accepting foreign ideas; what is regrettable is to take them without critical scrutiny. If the unexamined life is not worth living, then it can be easily appreciated that such an unexamining approach is unlikely to do anybody any good. In Africa today many of the living are dying through the chaos resulting, in practical life, from this intellectual situation. It would be comforting if there was an afterlife of peace and serenity. But unless we are to give in to wishful thinking, we must acknowledge that the question of the existence of an afterlife is one requiring both rigorous conceptual analysis and careful evaluation of evidence.

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<sup>24</sup>This is less true in the case of Moslem converts for whom conversion appears to be a relatively total condition of mind. Even here, however, coherence has not been achieved between Islamic and indigenous life and thought.

CHAPTER VIII

**IMMORTALITY AND THE NATURE  
OF MAN IN GA THOUGHT**

JOYCE ENGMANN

**INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

The Ga<sup>2</sup> theory of the nature of man has received little or no attention from philosophers. This may be because it has been assumed to be virtually identical with the often-discussed theory of the neighboring Akan. Thus Debrunner refers to “the Ga, whose psychological concepts are almost identical with the Twi terms,” and adds in parenthesis: “It is remarkable that the Twi, Ga and even the Ewe use the same word *kra*, *kla*, *klama*--there is a great temptation to link this with the Egyptian concept of the *ka*.”<sup>3</sup> Nor have the Ga beliefs about immortality received any philosophical discussion.

These two topics are obviously closely related. In this paper I shall explore them and attempt to elucidate the nature of the relationship: that is, in what way, and how successfully, the theory of man’s nature provides a

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<sup>1</sup>I should like to express my gratitude to Nii Tei Adumuah II for the generosity and patience with which he gave me access to his rich store of insight and traditional knowledge; to Prof. Kwame Gyekye, for inviting me to contribute to this volume, and for his advice and suggestions; to my husband, for information and encouragement; to Dr. Helen Lauer, for several helpful discussions; and to Mr. Robert Akrong, for valuable assistance in my inquiries. I am very grateful to Mr. Joshua Kudadjie for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>The Ga occupy the forty-mile long section of the southeastern seaboard of Ghana which extends from the River Densu in the west to the Laloi Lagoon in the east and is bordered by the Akwapim Ridge on the north. Their traditional political organization comprises seven autonomous seaside towns, each with offshoots in the form of agricultural villages northwards up to the Ridge. Five of these towns (Accra, Osu, Labadi, Teshi and Nungua) form the modern city of Accra and its suburbs, while the sixth, Tema, is the major port and industrial center of Ghana. The principle occupations of the Ga are fishing, farming, trading and technical and white-collar jobs. Of the other ethnic groups in the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family they are most closely related to the Dangme, with whom they form an interface in the seventh town, Kpone. It is possible, indeed likely, that some of what is said in this paper applies to Dangme as well as to Ga thought.

<sup>3</sup>H. Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana* (Presbyterian Book Depot, Accra, 1959), p. 15.

framework in terms of which his survival of death may be described and explained.

The major study of these matters from an anthropological point of view are the two chapters "The Dogma of Human Personality" and "The Cult of the Dead" in Margaret Field's classic *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this study I have supplemented the data in Field with some original field-work. In the enterprise of deriving generalizations about Ga thought from beliefs stated by informants and recorded in Field, two constraints presented themselves.

Firstly, the influence of Christianity in the area has been deep and widespread. When a statement is made which seems Biblical in content or expression, it is occasionally difficult to know whether this is a case of independent concurrence between Ga traditional thought and Christianity, or of the influence of the latter on the former. Instances of this will be indicated in footnotes.

Secondly, on some subjects informants differed from each other, or from the views recorded in Field. In this situation there are two possible stances on the part of the investigator. If he accepts the characterization (by Horton, etc.) of a traditional culture as one in which a single world-view has a monopoly on the intellectual assent of its members, then he will assume that one or another of the views in question is more representative of the traditional point of view and hence to be regarded as more authoritative. This approach, however, has often been contested, most recently by Gyekye, who stresses that traditional thought must have been formed by individual thinkers, and that therefore a monolithic orthodoxy is not to be expected. The members of a traditional culture, operating with concepts suggested by their common language, may arrive at and promulgate differing views, which in turn are accepted or rejected by others in accordance with the results of their individual reflection. In this way, competing views come to be at large in the community, and though one or another of them may predominate, all of them have a title to be regarded by the investigator as representative of the philosophy of the culture.<sup>5</sup>

For practical purposes, I shall adopt a modified version of the second stance. Where competing views exist, they will be indicated, and it will not necessarily be assumed that one of them is the Ga view. But this is without prejudice to the possibility that further consultation of custodians of traditional culture might yield grounds for regarding one view as more authentic than the other. Further, where external influence would seem to be

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<sup>4</sup>Oxford University Press, 1937. See too Ako Adjei, "Mortuary Usages of the Ga Peoples of the Gold Coast", *American Anthropologist*, 45 (1943), 84-98, and Marion Kilson, *Kpele Lala: Ga Religious Songs and Symbols* (Harvard University Press, 1971), esp. pp. 62-63.

<sup>5</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 44-51.



a potentially viable explanation of a discrepancy among views, as is the case with concepts of the *kla*, I shall indicate as much.

The Ga have a tripartite theory of man. (The expression “tripartite” will later be found to be misleading, but it will serve for the moment.) Within, or otherwise associated with, the body are two unseen entities, the *susuma* and the *kla*. There is no consensus on the proper translation of these terms. In my view “spirit” is a reasonably apt translation of *susuma*, but “soul” does not correspond to *kla*.<sup>6</sup> Further, “spirit” is required also for the translation of *mumō*.<sup>7</sup> In order, therefore, to avoid erroneous associations and to preserve necessary distinctions, it seems best to transliterate both terms.

The three “parts” of man will respectively form the principal subject-matter of the three sections of this paper. Among the questions to be

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<sup>6</sup>In the Ga translation of the Bible, *susuma* is normally used for “soul”, and *mumō* for “spirit”. The rationale of this is that, since the *kla* is a “higher” kind of entity than the *susuma* (cf. Sections II (b) and III), and God is said in the Bible to be a spirit, *kla* is to be seen as corresponding to spirit and *susuma* to the lesser entity, soul. But the word *mumō* is preferred to *kla* because the latter carries unsuitable associations with traditional religious practices concerning the *kla*. (For why *mumō* can replace *kla* in all the contexts in question, see Section II (b).)

The problem with using “soul” as a translation of *susuma* is that it cannot be used in ghost contexts; “spirit”, however, is quite at home there (“His spirit walks tonight”). The reason why “soul” is not a good translation of *kla* will become clear after the discussion of the *kla*. Basically, it is that the *kla* (on one view of it at least) can be seen as something external to the person; whereas “soul” in ordinary language connotes almost the essence of a person, or at least of his affective aspects (“heart and soul”, he gazed at her soulfully”).

<sup>7</sup>*Mumō*, which is a noun derived from the verb *mu*, “to breathe”, literally means “breath”. It is thus an etymological equivalent of “spirit” (Latin *spiritus* = “breath”).

*Mumō*’s range of uses overlaps with that of “spirit”. The following examples will serve both to illustrate this comparison and indicate its limits. *Mumō fōōng* means “evil spirit”. *Mumō Krōnlgrōng* means “the Holy Spirit”. *Nmumō noo eba shi* means “His [wonder-working] power has declined”. *Mumō ko yō emli*, “There is a certain spirit in him”, means “There is something in him which you cannot put your finger on, but . . .” *Eyō mumō ko* and *Ehiō mumō ko*, “He has a certain spirit”, are both used in the same sense. *Omumō ni yōō omli ehiii*, “The spirit within you is not good”, may be said to someone who easily falls into a rage. *Mumō mli nii ni*, “These are spiritual things” explains why, for example, a witch’s “eating” is not felt physically by the victim.

Thus, like “spirit”, *mumō* is used in contradiction to gross matter; of non-human but personal beings; of an immaterial element in human beings which is conceived of as a substance; and of a temper of mind or character-trait, with no connotations of substantial status. But it also (unlike “spirit”) means “power”, and (not illustrated here) “smell”.

discussed will be the nature of the *kla* and the *susuma*, the grounds for postulating their existence, and their relation to the body and to each other. The Ga conceive personal immortality to take two main forms: survival of death in a disembodied state, and renewed life in a different material body. For reasons of space, however, the topic of reincarnation will have to be omitted in this paper. Since disembodied existence is precisely the independent existence of the *susuma*, it will be discussed in the course of the section on the *susuma*.

### THE BODY

The Ga call the body of a man *gbōmōtso*, the same word being used for the body of animals. This is a compound word consisting of two elements, *gbōmō* and *tso*. *Gbōmō*, pl. *gbōmōi*, is the word for man or woman, person; *mō*, pl. *mōi*, also have this sense. (The latter may be applied to animals, but when it is, there seems to be always a degree of personification.) “Human being” is *adesa*, pl. *adesai*, or *gbōmō adesa*. *Tso*, pl. *tsei*, is used of plants with an upright and particularly a woody stem, as distinct from creepers and soft-stemmed plants, which are *bai*. Thus all trees are *tsei*. *Tso* may also be used of a piece of wood, a plank, stick, pole or staff, both in isolation and in compounds:

<i>obonu kō tso</i>	-	drum and stick
<i>nyiōmōtso</i>	-	walking-stick
<i>denghiōmōtso</i>	-	lit. “a stick for holding in the hand”, such as an officer’s staff

*Tso* also means the material, “wood”. When it is used in this sense in compounds, the name of the object made out of wood normally follows the *tso* element:

<i>tsotsu</i>	-	wooden house
<i>tsoshinaa</i>	-	wooden door
<i>tsosamflō</i>	-	wooden window
<i>tsogbōmō</i>	-	wooden (statue of a ) human being

but:

<i>saatso</i>	-	bedstead ( <i>saa</i> = bed)
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In the last compound, *tso* occupies the same position as in *gbōmōtso*. The relationship between the two elements, *saa* and *tso*, is, as in the first list, *tso*-for-*X*, or, possibly, *tso*-of-*X*, and not, as in the second, *S*-from-*tso*. We may, therefore, conclude that *gbōmōtso* is “*tso* for, or of, *gbōmō*”.

Given the meanings of each element of the compound in isolation and in other contexts, and given the suggestions carried by the structure of

the compound, what conception of the body is conveyed by the word *gbōmōtso*? Two possibilities come to mind.

Firstly, is *tso* perhaps being used in an extended sense to mean material in general, and not just wood, so that *gbōmōtso* means “stuff of man”? Anyone acquainted with the ancient philosophy of the West is irresistibly reminded of Aristotle’s choice of the Greek word *hyle*, meaning “timber”, as the technical term for his new concept of matter. But the fact that *tso* seems not to be used in other contexts to mean ‘stuff’ makes this impossible.

Secondly, does the word have reference rather to the shape of the human body, with a central bigger part (the “trunk”) and smaller parts going off it? This seems altogether more natural and likely. Three other considerations work in its favor. Firstly, the phrase *tso kōng*, whose literal meaning is “shoulder of tree”, is used to mean the crook of a brand or the branch itself. The analogy between the shape of a human body and a tree is thus registered elsewhere in the language. Secondly, *tso* is used in three other compounds referring to parts of the body: *vitso* (“head”), *nōkutso* (“elbow”) and *nakutso* (“knee”). In at least the two latter instances, the jointed form of a tree probably prompted the expression. Thirdly, the semantically equivalent Akan word *onipadua* (Twi) or *nyimpaua* (Fante), where *onipa/nyimpa* = “man” and *dua* = “tree”, is normally taken by Akan scholars to carry a reference to the shape of the body. Christaller, for example, gives its basic meaning as “the figure, form, shape of the body”.<sup>8</sup>

It is relevant to recall at this point that, as in most West African traditional thought systems, trees, and plants generally, are not regarded as inanimate objects. The Ga make the generalization that *tsōi fōō lō, wōji ji amō*: “all the plants are *wōji*”. *Wōng* (pl. *wōji*) may be translated according to context as “(minor) god”, “spirit”, “power”, “*juju*”: the central idea is that of an invisible thing which has real, though limited, power. The seriousness of the belief that plants are endowed with some kind of sentient spirit is shown in the practice of offering prayer before roots are gathered. Certain trees, notably the silk-cotton tree and the baobab tree, are regarded with especial awe, and rarely cut down.

The body then is conceived as tree-like in shape; and the word *gbōmōtso* may carry associations of power, dignity, even sacrosanctity. But the Ga conception of the body is as of a combination of the sublime with the ridiculous. For there is a saying that the body is a mask; and the word used for “mask” in the saying, *kakamotobi*, denotes a comic or grotesque mask, usually homemade, which is donned by young men who go round in groups especially at Christmas-time to amuse the adults and frighten the children. It is said that when we enter life, we choose the mask which we will wear. The implication of describing the body as a mask is that what you see when you look at a human being does not give you his real nature.

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<sup>8</sup>J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language* (Basel, 1933), s.v. *onipadua*.

Man is something other than his body, something more enduring. The next two sections will deal with what the Ga believe goes to make up a human being, apart from his body.

### THE *SUSUMA*

#### *Akan Controversies*

With regard to the possibly parallel Akan theory of mind, Gyekye has maintained that the tripartite superficialities conceals a dualistic kernel. The *sunsum* is a part of the *okra*:

Insofar as things asserted of the *okra* are not assertable of the *sunsum*, the two cannot logically be identified. However, although they are logically distinct, they are not ontologically distinct. That is to say, they are not independent existents held together in an accidental way by an external bond. . . . The *sunsum* may, more accurately, be characterized as a part--the active part--of the *okra* (soul).<sup>9</sup>

All earlier interpreters had held the view that the *okra* and the *sunsum* were logically distinct. But there were radically differing views to their respective natures. Danquah speaks of the *sunsum* as the "material mechanism" and says that "*sunsum* . . . is, in fact, the matter or the physical basis of the ultimate ideal of which Okara is the form and the spiritual or mental basis".<sup>10</sup> Wiredu, on the other hand, holds that the *okra*, while not a straightforwardly physical object, has some quasi-physical properties. For example, it can be seen by medicine-men or those whose normal powers of perception have been extended by medicinal means or those gifted with extra-sensory perception.<sup>11</sup> Thus Danquah and Wiredu each hold that one of the two non-bodily "parts" of man in Akan thought is physical or quasi-physical, but they differ as to which of the two is such. Gyekye, on the other hand, does not accept the attribution of physical properties to either the *sunsum* or the *okra*. He holds that the Akan position is basically a Cartesian one: the *okra*, an immaterial entity, inhabits the body during life, and leaves it at death. The *okra* and the *sunsum* survive death as a "spiritual unity", and it is on this basis that the Akan hold man to be immortal.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Gyekye, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup>J.B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*<sup>2</sup> (London: Frank Gass, 1969), pp. 115 and 116.

<sup>11</sup>J.E. Wiredu, "The Akan Concept of Mind", *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 1987.

<sup>12</sup>Gyekye, p. 98.

I believe it will provide a useful orientation for the ensuing discussion of the Ga beliefs if I list in advance the positions which I shall take up vis-a-vis these points of controversy which have emerged with reference to the Akan beliefs. (This is not, however, to imply anything as to the validity of the parallel.)

- (1) The *susuma* and the *kla* are ontologically distinct
- (2) The *kla* is non-physical.
- (3) The *susuma* has some physical properties.
- (4) *Kla* and *susuma* do not survive death as a unity.
- (5) Personal immortality in a disembodied form consists in the continued existence of the *susuma*.

It will thus be apparent that the position to be advocated in this paper bears more resemblance to Danquah's than to either Wiredu's or Gyekye's. Although these scholars were not dealing directly with the beliefs of the Ga, I shall at various points have to deal with arguments in their writings which are relevant to this subject-matter.

#### *Towards Defining Susuma*

The Ga say that when God created man, he breathed into clay, and activated it. That breath of God which gives life to the clay is man's *susuma*.<sup>13</sup> As already indicated, the word for breath is *mumō*. The *susuma*, therefore, is *mumō*. The *kla* is also regarded as *mumō*. The inter-relations between these concepts are at first glance puzzling. But I now believe they are explicable in terms of the following two theses.

Firstly, *mumō* is a generic term applicable to anything that is conceived (a) as immaterial, i.e., not composed of gross matter like the body, and (b) as personal or quasi-personal. *Susuma* and *kla* are thus both species of *mumō*. Other species of *mumō* are *wōng* (referred to in Section I) and *gbeshi*. Both of these are entities which do not form part of the normal constitution of a human being but which (because they are not material as the body is material) can superimpose themselves upon a human being and occupy the same space as his body or part of his body, and (because they are personal) can utilize that body to produce expressions, either vocal or motor, in which pattern or purpose is discernible. In the case of a *wōng*, such expressions often involve displays of supernatural strength or stamina, such as frenzied dancing or running. They are, therefore, both limited in duration (not usually more than five or six hours) and easy to recognize. Possession by a *gbeshi*, on the other hand, does not give rise to such conspicuous manifestations (cf. Section III), and because its manifestations do not involve supernormal capacities, they may be of much longer

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<sup>13</sup> This is one of the cases where the possibility of influence from Christianity obviously needs to be borne in mind.

duration than those characteristic of possession by a *wōng*. Both *wōng* and *gbeshi*, then, are thought capable of possessing a human being; and both are species of *mumō* alongside *susuma* and *kla*.

Secondly, apart from being the genus comprising these four species, *mumō* also has a narrower use: for as soon as any question of distinction or degree among the various spiritual entities enters in, there is a tendency for *mumō* to slide up the scale in the direction of those seen as “higher”, more divine, or less akin to matter. *Mumō* is normally used in the Ga Bible, for example, to translate *pneuma* (“spirit”), which is seen as being higher than *psyche* (“soul”), on the grounds that God is *pneuma*.<sup>14</sup> Again, there is, as we shall see, a traditional doctrine to the effect that when a man dies his *susuma* goes to the World of the Dead, but his *kla* goes to God; and an alternative way of expressing this is to say that while his *susuma* goes to the World of the Dead, his *mumō* goes to God.

These two and any other similar usages might lead to an objection that *mumō* is not, as I have maintained above, the genus to which *susuma* belongs, for it is sometimes contradistinguished from it. To this I would answer that *mumō* is used in two senses; that *mumō* in its wider sense is the genus of *susuma*; and that it is when *mumō* is being used in its narrower sense that it is contradistinguished from *susuma*.<sup>15</sup>

Within the class of immaterial personal entities, what distinguishes *susuma* from the others? Like *kla*, but unlike *gbeshi* and *wōng*, it is an integral and not an adventitious “part” of a human being. How does it differ from *kla*? One difference is that it can leave the body without causing death; whereas the *kla* is associated with the body right up to death. The detachability of the *susuma* from the body will be very prominent as we consider the *susuma* in relation to consciousness.

#### *Susuma, Mind and Consciousness*

If one enquires of an exponent of Ga traditional thought about the nature of man, one will invariably be taught about the body, the *susuma* and the *kla*; the mind will not be mentioned. Yet the word for mind, *jwengmō*, exists; it is used for example in the phrase *ebō jwengmō*, literally “he has

<sup>14</sup>Thus in I Thess. 5. 23, the phrase *to pneuma kai hō psuche kai to soma*, “your spirit and soul and body”, is translated as *nyemumō kō nyesusuma kō nyegbōmōtso*.

<sup>15</sup>The best-known parallel to the pattern formed by the range of meanings of *mumō* is that which Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* V) saw in the Greek word *dikaiosune*, “justice” or “righteousness”, which has both a wider use (in which it means respect for the rights of others) and a narrower use (in which it means the observance of proportion in accordance with merit in the distribution of money, honor or safety). Justice in the second sense is a species of justice in the first sense, and may be distinguished from other virtues which form part of justice in the first sense.

not got a mind", i.e., "he has no brains". This situation prompts two questions. Why is mind scarcely mentioned in the account of human nature? And what is the relation between this Cindarella and the more important and interesting components?

It would be wrong to say that the mind, for the Ga, is part of the body. For a distinction is certainly drawn between the mind and the brain (*ansō*). Nevertheless it would seem that the mind is regarded as a function of the brain. It is difficult to get definite statements on this issue; and the reason for this seems to be that thought was not traditionally regarded as posing philosophical problems or standing in need of explanation in terms of occult entities, as are some other phenomena associated with man. Wiredu has made a comparable comment in connection with the Akan *okra*:

The *ōkra* is postulated in Akan thought to account for the fact of life and destiny but not of thought. The soul, on the other hand, seems in much Western philosophy to be intended to account, not just for life but also for thought. Indeed, in Cartesian philosophy, the sole purpose of introducing the soul is to account for the phenomenon of thinking.<sup>16</sup>

Gyekye has taken up the reference to Descartes to cast doubt on the suggested contrast between Akan and Western philosophy. He points out that the Cartesian *cogitatio* is wider than thought in the sense of conscious ratiocination, which he believes (although it is not quite clear why) is the sense in which Wiredu is using the word; and

Any living being must have consciousness. This being the case, consciousness, which is equivalent to the soul or mind in Descartes, can be a translation of *ōkra*.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that the contrast can be defended against this criticism in the following way. The fact that a living being is a conscious being does not go to show that the *okra* is postulated to account for consciousness rather than to account for life itself. If, on the other hand, we do take thought in the narrow sense of ratiocination, it is possible to make the contrast quite sharply: Descartes certainly held that thought in that sense was a function of the soul; but the Akan do not connect it particularly with the *ōkra*, of which Gyekye's own preferred summary characterization is "the principle of life of a person and the embodiment and transmitter of his or her destiny (*nkra*)".<sup>18</sup> The fact that Descartes also attributed other conscious states or activities (e.g., perception and volition) to the soul does

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<sup>16</sup>Wiredu, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup>Gyekye, p. 87.

<sup>18</sup>Gyekye, p. 97.

not affect the point that the Akan do not specifically attribute ratiocination to the *ōkra*.

We return, therefore, to the Ga concept of mind strengthened in the belief that conscious thought (ratiocination, daydreaming, etc.) was not considered to constitute a problem, and that this is probably the reason why so little appears to be said about the mind in their theory of human nature. The relative dearth of evidence constitutes an obstacle in ascertaining what the theory does maintain about the nature of the mind. But the impression I have formed is that the mind is regarded as a faculty of the brain, just as hearing is the faculty of the ears, seeing of the eyes, etc. If this is correct, and the mind is a function of part of the body, then it is not surprising if the mind is not mentioned along with the body, the *susuma* and the *kla* in the theory of human nature. It is considered to be subsumed under the first of these components. We have thus a ready, though perhaps disappointingly simple answer to the first of the two questions with which we began, and to the first third of the second question, that is, the relation of the mind to the body.

We have now to consider the relation between the mind and the *kla* and *susuma* respectively. But the relationship between the mind and the *kla* forms an aspect of the relationship between *kla* and *susuma*-plus-body, and can usefully be considered in Section III, where the nature of the *kla* is discussed. The relationship between mind and *susuma* is a complex and interesting problem. Here we encounter a further sharp difference between this and Western theories of mind. For those of the latter which postulate, behind the succession of thoughts, perceptions and volitions, a self whose thoughts, perceptions and volitions these are, have usually made this single entity the subject of both conscious and unconscious thoughts. But on the Ga view conscious thoughts alone are attributable to the mind; unconscious thoughts are experiences of the *susuma*. This is not said in so many words, but I believe it is a generalization which may validly be made on the basis of scrutiny of the types of activities which are attributed to the *susuma*. These include the following activities, with reference to all of which the chief point stressed is that the *susuma* is separated from the body: (i) witchcraft activities; (ii) out-of-the-body experiences in terminal illness; (iii) dreaming/sleeping. Beliefs about the part played by the *susuma* in these activities will now be described.

With regard to witchcraft activities, I shall not have very much to say. The term is intended to cover diverse activities which witches are believed to perform out of the body by night, such as travelling to a meeting-place, taking part in a discussion or feast, and procuring food by a spiritual attack on a victim.<sup>19</sup> These activities, the reality of which is very widely believed in, are said to be performed by the *susumai* of witches which leave their bodies by night. This is the only instance among the

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. Debrunner, *passim*.



activities we are reviewing where the separation of the *susuma* from the body is subject to volition.

It sometimes happens in a terminal illness that a patient who has appeared to be asleep reports, on awakening, that he has left his bed and travelled either to a familiar or to an unknown place, mixing sometimes with the living and sometimes only with the dead. This intermittent “travelling” may go on for days or weeks (rarely, months) before death. Here again it is believed that the *susuma* has actually left the body, and that the reported experiences are genuine experiences of the *susuma* in this independent state. When a person lies unconscious in a coma, it is supposed that his *susuma* has gone to Azizanya, the transition point into the World of the Dead, where he is being judged; if he were guilty, he would not come back.

In a very similar way, dreams are held to be veridical experiences of the *susuma*. It is believed that when we sleep, the *susuma* leaves the body,<sup>20</sup> visits other places, and interacts with the *susumai* of other people. This explanation of dreaming (common to many African peoples<sup>21</sup>), which is liable to seem very implausible to the outsider, Ga sometimes defend by two arguments.

Before stating the first argument, it must be mentioned that the *susuma* is believed to be capable of travel in time as well as in space. So when we dream about a past experience, our *susuma* is said to leave the present and go back to the time at which the experience occurred. The fact that we sometimes dream about genuine past experiences is not thought to constitute any evidence for the veridical nature of dreams, or for the departure of the *susuma* to an earlier time-segment than that in which the body exists when the dream takes place. For in waking life we may *remember* the experience, so that a re-awareness of the experience is patently compatible with the temporal copresence of the *susuma* with the body.<sup>22</sup> The occurrence of premonitory dreams, however, is thought to constitute such evidence. The argument may be formulated as follows. Since some dreams “come true”, the content of the dream must have been a real existent or occurrent, which, since it was not in the same time-segment as the existence of the body of the dreamer, the *susuma* must have travelled in time in order to be acquainted with it.

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<sup>20</sup>Some Ga hold, however, not that the *susuma* can leave the body during sleep, but that its absence is the cause of sleep. According to this view, the process of falling asleep is the *susuma*’s detaching itself from the body.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Gyekye, pp. 91-92, and the reference cited in no. 30 *ad loc.*

<sup>22</sup>It follows from this that, if precognition in a conscious state be regarded by the proponents of this argument as no less genuine a phenomenon than premonitory dreams, then premonitory dreams could not really constitute better grounds for the desired conclusion than dreams which have reference to a past event.

The second argument used is as follows: It sometimes happens that X expresses a belief that Y was dreaming about him on a particular night, when it is in fact true that Y was dreaming about X on that night. What could underlie X's possession of this true belief except some actual mutual encounter? And since the encounter did not involve the bodies of X and Y, it must have involved their *susumai*.

One is not obliged to accept these two arguments, but they are interesting as showing that empirical evidence is deemed relevant to establishing the existence and determining the nature of the *susuma*. The two arguments are each based on a fact: the first, that some dreams "come true", and the second, that two people sometimes dream about each other on the same night. One may think that the hypothesis of the existence and capacity for "travel" of the *susuma* is not the most economical way of explaining these two facts. But, at the least, the arguments show a willingness to relate facts to theories. Such an attitude does not fall under the heading of "superstition" as defined by Wiredu:

By "superstition" I mean a rationally unsupported belief in entities of any sort. The attribute of being superstitious attached not to the content of a belief but to its mode of entertainment. . . . When, however, we come to the traditional African belief in ancestor spirits--and this, I would contend, applies to spiritualistic beliefs everywhere--the position is different. That our departed ancestors continue to hover around in some rarefied form, ready now and then to take a sip of the ceremonial schnapps, is a proposition that I have never known to be rationally defended.<sup>23</sup>

The brief compass of our discussion of the *susuma* so far indicates that this judgment may be too severe. For we have already noted two other cases apart from dreaming where empirical evidence is brought to bear on establishing the existence and functions of the *susuma*: the alleged "travelling" of the *susuma* of a sick person as death approaches, and the alleged "travelling" of the *susuma* of a witch in pursuance of witchly purposes. Both of these rest on testimonial evidence: the patient's report and the witch's confession, respectively.

One may feel that adequately stringent criteria for assessing such testimonies are not always applied; but to stigmatize the "spiritualistic belief" based on them as "superstitious" must amount to either (a) discounting the relevance of human experiences or alleged experiences to the theory of human nature, which would be a remarkable and certainly

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<sup>23</sup>J.E. Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought", in R.A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Washington: University Press of America, 1977), pp. 170-71.

untenable approach; or (b) a judgment that none of the particular experiences in question could be authentic, i.e., that all out-of-body experiences claimed by terminal patients or witches are either sincerely or mistakenly claimed--a judgment which could, it would seem, only stem from the perception of an incompatibility between the critic's theory of human nature and that to which the alleged experiences seem to point. If this were the case, the blanket repudiation of the evidence would be a kind of *petitio principii*, as dogmatic in its own way as the "superstition" on which it is a comment.

The approaches requisite in the context would seem to be rather (c) a careful assessment of the testimonies in question in terms of the generally accepted criteria for judging the worth of testimonial evidence; (d) consideration of whether the facts as claimed warrant the theory as propounded. If (d) yielded a negative result, then, as far as the evaluation of this theory was concerned (though not perhaps that of some alternative possible theory), (c) would be necessary. The adoption of approach (b) above would suggest that the critic's conduct of task (d) has yielded a positive result. Paradoxically, therefore, the blanket repudiation of the testimonial evidence could constitute an indication of approval, however reluctant, of the theory in another respect: the validity of its derivation from those particular alleged facts.

After this excursus into the grounds for belief in the *susuma*, I return to the topic of the relation of the mind to the *susuma*. I hope enough has been said to justify the statement that activities which in the West are attributed to the unconscious or subconscious mind, in Ga thought are attributed not to the mind, but to the *susuma*. Of this, indeed, the chief and perhaps the only example we have had is dreaming; for Western philosophy has scarcely thought it worth taking account of alleged out-of-body experiences such as the other two types of case consist in, nor, as far as I know, do parapsychologists or popular thought ascribe them to the unconscious. At this point may be mentioned the idiom *Esusuma ke le wie*, "His *susuma* spoke to him". This is a comment made when someone stops short of taking a disastrous step. Since it implies that one's *susuma* does not speak to one all or most of the time, it perhaps supports the view that the *susuma* is an unconscious or subconscious element of a person.

We cannot, however, say that the *susuma* is in effect the unconscious mind, and that the theory could be amended so that the *susuma* is past or unrecognized thoughts, wishes, fears, etc. of which the proper subject is the *jwōngmō*. We can see this from the way the theory interprets the experiences of the terminally ill patient. The patient characteristically expresses a desire for death during the period in question. This fact might be used to connect the supposed "travelling" of the *susuma* with Western concepts of the unconscious as a repository of wishes and fears--a connection which could probably be made unobjectionably in the case of dreams. But in the case of the patient, the desire for death is a fully conscious one; and the role of the *susuma* is as a would-be implementer of

wishes to which the conscious mind cannot, by mere volition, give effect. The *susuma* has, as it were, a mind and a will of its own.

Three observations concerning the relation between the mind and the *susuma* now suggest themselves. Firstly, if there were a complete separation between the mind and the *susuma* during dreaming, we should suddenly receive a pack of dreams each time the *susuma* returns to us. But dreaming is a progressive experience, as can be seen from physical reactions on the part of the dreamer. Presumably, therefore, the mind is residually active during sleep, and is able to register the impression of the absent *susuma* in such a way as to produce the physical reactions appropriate to the dream. What, then, is the nature of the link between them, and how does it differ from that which obtains during waking life? This is left mysterious. There is supposed to be an “invisible thread” between the dreamer and his *susuma*, but as far as I know it is not further described.

Secondly, the out-of-body experiences of the sick person near to death seem to be accompanied by a clarity and sense of reality superior to that which characterizes dreams. How is this difference to be explained if they are, both alike, experiences of the separated *susuma*? The theory appears to be silent on this point.

Thirdly, there is a difference between the sleeper’s dream and the patient’s “journey” when each is looked at in the manner broached earlier, as an exercise in wish-fulfillment. For the desires which the *susuma* is supposed to execute in dreams are sometimes not desires which are given countenance to by its owner; indeed they may have been censored from admission to consciousness. This is not so however, of the desire for death in the other case. Moreover, that desire has the peculiarity that it is precisely a desire for a condition of the *susuma* (according to the Ga view whereby after death the *susuma* exists in separation from the body). But the desires which the *susuma* is supposed to execute in dreams are desires for a condition of the whole person. (It is conceivable that someone might hold, within the framework of the theory, that such desires are desires of the *susuma* for a condition of itself in relation to other *susumai* and not, after all, desires of the person in relation to other persons. But that would be to posit a much greater degree of independence between the mind and the *susuma*.)

From the second and third observations, we can see that there are differences between dreaming and the alleged “travelling” before death in regard to both their felt quality and the character of the purposiveness which they exhibit; and in view of these differences, the verdict seems inescapable that the identical explanation of them is too bare. Either dreaming should be eliminated here, or further details should be supplied which make the differences between the two types of cases comprehensible. Without such elaboration, and an account of the link between *susuma* and body, such as was desiderated in the first observation, the complex question of the relation between the mind and the *susuma* cannot be fully resolved.

Perhaps it can be said that the account of dreaming does not sit very comfortably with the rest of the theory.

### *The Susuma after Death*

The *susuma* leaves the body at death. *Esusuma eshi lō--* "His *susuma* has left him"--means "He is dead". The departure of the *susuma* alone, however, is not sufficient to cause death. It is when the *susuma* and the *kla* both leave the body that death occurs.

The question whether animals have a *susuma*, and whether, accordingly, the death of an animal either consists in, or is accompanied by, the departure of its *susuma*, typically does not meet with a very ready or assured answer. But some Ga at least hold that animals do not have a *susuma*, and that that is why (except for those traditionally regarded as gods, such as the hyena, the python, etc.) they are permitted to be killed. This position however, would seem inconsistent with the role ascribed to the *susuma* in human dreaming, in view of the fact that animals obviously do dream. Furthermore, how is the death of animals to be explained if they do not have a *susuma*? For animals apparently do not have a *kla* (at least in one sense of *kla*), and one presumably wants to explain their death in a manner parallel to that of human beings. Thus a positive answer to the question whether animals have a *susuma* would be more consistent with beliefs about the *susuma* of humans in relation to both dreams and death. The unwillingness of discussants to commit themselves to answer this question is, perhaps, due (if my earlier suggestion concerning the empirical basis of the theory is correct) to the fact that, in the case of animals, no reported experiences are available.

In the remainder of this subsection I shall give a mainly descriptive account of those Ga beliefs concerning the fate of man after death which seem relevant to determining the nature of the *susuma*.

When the *susuma* leaves the body at death it travels very quickly<sup>24</sup> and reaches a river which it must cross. Before that, if very rapid action is taken, the *susuma* may sometimes be brought back. If the person's name is shouted three times at the nearest crossroads, and the person responds, then the fleeing *susuma* is said to have been recalled. Alternatively, the body may be besmeared with pepper or pepper may be burnt in the room. The *susuma*, which is believed not to like the smell of pepper, may sneeze, and all is well.

The *susuma* of a person who has died in an accident or by violence (*otōfo*) does not travel from the place of death until after pacification has

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<sup>24</sup>The *susuma* is said to travel faster than light. The authenticity of this as an item in the corpus of traditional, prescientific belief should not necessarily be discounted. For in the fifth century B.C. Empedocles held that light moves so fast that we are not conscious of its movement (Philosonus, *de Anima* 344, 34).

been performed. An *otōfo* is angry and may haunt passers-by in a rough and frightening manner until it is pacified and its spirit transferred.

The river which must be crossed is not identified with any geographical river (Christians tend to call it *Yordon Faa*, “the River Jordan”), but the arrival-place of the newly-dead is known by the name of a geographical town, *Azizanya*, which is sited where the River Volta flows into the sea. This is a picturesque expression of the belief that we are all one with eternity which we are eventually going to join. Money is put into the coffin as the fare to the further bank of the river. At *Azizanya* the nose is said to be broken, for ghosts are reputed to speak nasally. The dead person thus irrevocably enters *gbohiiqjeng*, “the World of the Dead” (from *gbohii*, “dead people”, and *jeng*, “world”), also called *sisaiqjeng*, “the World of Ghosts”.

But on earth his ghost may be seen for up to about three weeks after death. This is about the period it takes for someone’s *susuma* to become impotent and lose contact with people in the physical world. The ghost may be seen in different places, sometimes far apart, usually by people who knew the deceased well. It is most commonly seen in the first three days after death. It can enter a room through even the smallest hole. It may be seen by one or more of the people in a room without being seen by all. Its presence can be detected by a characteristic fragrance of *krōbō*<sup>25</sup> or by a sensation of cold even when it is not seen, or seen by only some of those present. To see a ghost is always a frightening experience. To sit on a chair upon which a ghost has been or is sitting is widely believed to result in impotence, infertility or even death. For *sisai nii lō, atasa he*, “one does not touch the things belonging to a ghost”. For this reason upright chairs are often faced about and tipped against the wall after use, so that ghosts will not sit on them. Animals are also believed to be capable of seeing ghosts. When a dog starts barking furiously for no apparent reason, the explanation is liable to be given that he has seen a ghost.

The ghost is universally identified with the *susuma*: *susuma lō ji sisia ni akōō le*, “what we call the ghost is the *susuma*”. To convey the meaning “I have seen a ghost”, *mina susuma* is often used instead of *mina sisia* (as being less frightening). The Ga affirm that we receive a new body at death. But questioning always elicits that this new body is none other than the *susuma*. It is a new body in the sense that it has not previously been the person’s outer garment, as it were; he is now unencumbered by the visible body, which he has laid aside. His new body cannot only move

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<sup>25</sup>*Krōbō* is a white powder derived from the fragrant bark of a tree which grows in the forest zone. When a baby is born, it is applied in the way as talcum powder. A bride wears it on her marriage day. Women also put it on for other festive occasions. It is applied to a body lying in state. Thus it is used in all the three important transitions of life. I have been told that it is a meeting place of matter and spirit, but have not yet been able to explore the meaning of this.

faster but also see more than the old one; it is said picturesquely that ghosts have four eyes.

While the *susuma* goes to the world of the Dead, the *kla*, which is believed to be the presence of God in us, goes to God. What happens to it is not known. But some say that it loses its individuality. For example, one informant said "When you die, you are in two different places. The spirit of God which is in me goes back to God. But what makes me Tettey is my *susuma*. That goes to *gbohiiajeng*. That is what has the scent of *krōbō*. It doesn't lose its individuality as the other does." The matter of the *kla*'s loss of individuality belongs to the section below on the *kla*, where I shall attempt to cast some light on the doctrine, at first sight puzzling, of the dual destination of the dead. Here it may merely be noted that it appears to be a unanimously held doctrine, and that there also appears to be general agreement on the point that it is the *susuma* which sustains the individuality of the person. The *susuma* is the person who has died, but it is *less than* the person. God has taken his own power away; the body is in the grave; what remains is the *susuma*, and this still actively works.

Four kinds of powers are attributed to it in relation to the physical world.

Firstly, it may hover around and become visible, or otherwise perceptible, to the living as *sisa*, just described.

Secondly, it may possess a living person, usually a medium, as *wōng*. There exist professional mediums who are reputed able to contact virtually any dead person. They make use of a *sōsi*, a big wooden bowl containing water, herbs, etc. It is believed that the reflection of a ghost in a mirror, in water, etc., is sometimes visible when the ghost itself cannot be seen. After invocation the medium and the client see the dead person in the water; the medium may speak in a voice which the client identifies as that of the dead person.

Thirdly, it may materialize, assuming the appearance, voice, etc., which the person had while living, so as to deceive anyone who sees it into thinking that they are looking at a normal living person. This usually only happens in an hour of need of a child or grandchild of the deceased. He appears not to them, but to an intermediary, sometimes a total stranger or a distant acquaintance who has not heard of the death, saying, for example, "Take this money and give it to Akeley. Tell her Auntie Akoshia sent it for her." Messages, for example, instructions as to the disposal of property, are believed to be sent in the same way. But the dead are shy of being seen and recognised by the living, except when they have a special purpose such as this in view. Anecdotes of people who have casually caught sight of an acquaintance looking just as he did in life are numerous. This is not considered a frightening experience. Indeed, the acquaintance may be addressed almost like a naughty child, to the effect that "I have spotted you". He is typically unwilling to engage in conversation, and gets out of sight as soon as possible.

Fourthly, the dead are believed to be able to influence events on earth by means not ordinarily perceptible, as they are in the other three cases. They are, therefore, not specified but the reality is firmly believed in to the extent that prayers to the dead for peace, prosperity and other blessings are a normal feature of traditional life. A considerable body of belief, into which I need not enter here, centers on the occasions and exigencies that stir the dead to exercise their powers of intervention in the world of the living.

With regard to the nature and quality of life within the World of the Dead, it is said that the dead who possess mediums do not reveal this. But some at least of the dead are thought to be more pure and holy than men on the earth, and their life to be more sublime.

As to whether judgment is a feature of the World of the Dead, there appears to be no belief in a general judgment, though it is left open that individuals might be rewarded or punished. The common phrase, *Nyōngmō baawo bo nyōmō*, "God will punish you", is often taken to refer to this life or to a subsequent life on earth, rather than to anything which is to happen in the World of the Dead; but the ancestors are believed to administer judgment upon the individual there.

The location of the World of the Dead is indeterminate. Ga see the world as composed of three main levels. *Ngwei* is "sky", "heaven"; it can also function adverbially as "on high", "upwards". Whatever is above us, like the moon, stars, airplanes, is at *ngwōi*. It is the word used for the Christian concept of heaven, the place where God is, often conceived of as existing above us. *Shikpōng* is the earth on which we tread; anything below it is at *shishi*, "underneath", "bottom part". Within this scheme the World of the Dead is assigned no definite place. It is not specifically held to be below the earth, as the Igbo believe; nor is it above us, as the Ewe believe.<sup>26</sup> The implications of the absence of any definite location for the World of the Dead will be considered below.

Much more might be said concerning beliefs about the after-life. For instance, the interesting Ga beliefs about the "sky family" have not been touched upon. But the above are the main beliefs relevant to establishing that for the Ga, personal survival of death consists in the continued existence of the person's *susuma*, and (in conjunction with the beliefs about the *susuma* of a living person described in the previous section on the *susuma* after death) to supplying a basis for analysis of the concept of the *susuma*, a task to which I now turn.

#### *The Nature of the Susuma*

The *susuma* cannot be understood behaviouristically as a set of dispositions belonging to a person. It is itself a substance or owner of

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 103-104.



properties. But is it an immaterial or non-physical substance, in effect a Cartesian ego as Gyekye has maintained the Akan *susuma* to be? I shall argue that the *susuma* does not answer to this description. For while one cannot say straightforwardly that the *susuma* is a physical thing, it yet seems to have some physical properties. I shall, firstly, indicate what these are; secondly, attempt to answer an argument brought by Gyekye against Wiredu's characterization of the Akan *ōkra* as quasi-physical which would apply equally to my characterization of the *susuma*; and, thirdly, show why (if we have to choose) it is better to say that the *susuma* is a physical thing than to say that it is non-physical. I shall then suggest a different characterization of the *susuma*.

The *susuma* is plainly not gross matter like the flesh and bones of the body. At the same time, it seems to have some of the properties of a physical object. In the first place, it exhibits movement through space. As we saw in the section above regarding the *susuma* after death, the *susuma* moves from the body in dreams and may also do so when the person is approaching death. Neither of these movements are subject to volition; but the *susuma* of a witch can move through space at will. And the *susuma*, as we saw, can move in time as well as in space. In either case its movement is extremely rapid. Perhaps we can compare the Western belief that the whole life of a drowning man passes before him in a flash. Now if the *susuma* can move through space (and time), this presumably means that it occupies space (and time). And this is surely the defining characteristic of a physical object. The same applies to the movements of the *susuma* after death which were discussed in the previous section. Whether manifesting itself as *sisā*, possessing a medium as *wōng*, or materializing to appear just like a living person, it is present in a specific location, and, occupying space, must be physical in nature. If the word "occupies" is thought to be inappropriate, we could alternatively say that it "occurs in" space (and time). Then while it might not be appropriate to say that it is a physical *object*, yet still we would surely have to accept that insofar as it moves through space the characterization "physical" must be applied, just as, for example, a wave is physical, although not a physical object.

What about the collection of *susumai* which is *gbohiiājeng*? Because it is not assigned any specific place in the three levels of the physical world, should we draw the conclusion that it is not located anywhere and, therefore, (as Professor Gyekye has claimed of the seemingly parallel Akan *asamando*)<sup>27</sup> does not exist in space? This conclusion does not seem reconcilable with beliefs about the local presence of ghosts, etc. It would seem more consistent with these to suppose that the World of the Dead exists somewhere in the three levels, but we do not know where: perhaps in several "departments", some of which may be superimposed upon our level. How else could one accommodate beliefs about ghosts haunting places on earth? Thus the absence of any specific

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<sup>27</sup>Gyekye, pp. 86-87.

assigned location for the World of the Dead should not upset our conclusion that its inhabitants move in space and have spatial and temporal locations.

Secondly, the *susuma* has electromagnetic properties. When it becomes visible as a ghost, it presumably emits photons. The same applies to the “witch-light”, a rapidly oscillating glow which the *susuma* of a witch is supposed to give off as it travels through the air. The *susuma* in its ghostly form is supposed also to be perceptible to the other distance senses, hearing and smell. In parenthesis, we note here again the prominence of observation as grounding for statements about the *susuma*: what counts as evidence of the presence of a ghost is visual, auditory and olfactory sensations.

Wiredu suggested that it is a reason for characterizing the Akan *ōkra* as quasi-physical, that medicine-men or people with ESP or medicinally-heightened perception are said to be capable of seeing the *ōkra*. This is in essence the same argument as the one I have just used about the *susuma*. Gyekye has objected that:

It must be noted, however, that these phenomena do not take place in the ordinary physical world; otherwise anyone would be able to see or communicate with the *ōkra*. This must mean that what those with special abilities see or communicate with is something non-spatial. Thus, the fact that the *okra* can be seen by such people does not make it physical or quasi-physical (whatever that expression means), since this act or mode of seeing is not at the physical or spatial level.<sup>28</sup>

But if the *ōkra* really is seen at a particular spot, we surely cannot rebuke the inference that it exists in space. At least, it would not seem possible to do so by means of the argument here used, that the object seen is not physical because the act of seeing is not physical, otherwise everyone would be able to perform it. For by the same token one might argue that dogs do not physically hear the high notes of a dog whistle, otherwise humans would be able to hear them.

How does Gyekye account for the mobility and perceptibility of the *susuma* on his Cartesian interpretation of it, or, more precisely, of the *okra* of which he takes the *sunsum* to form a part? The answer is contained in the following words:

[i]t cannot be inferred that they [spiritual beings] are physical or have permanent physical properties. It means that a spiritual being can, when it so desires, take on physical properties. That is, even though a spiritual being

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<sup>28</sup>Gyekye, p. 86.

is nonspatial in essence, it can, by the sheer operation of its power, assume spatial properties.<sup>29</sup>

Gyekye here envisages a temporary assumption of physical properties by a spiritual being. Since he goes on to quote with approval Mbiti's statement "Spirits are invisible, but they make themselves visible", this is tantamount to an agreement that, when a ghost is seen, it is seen physically and in space. (Since ghosts are often not seen by everyone in the room, this admission would seem incompatible with his earlier position.) So the matter appears to devolve upon the following question: what is the nature of that being which, when it is physically observed, is a ghost, and again when it is not so observed, is a ghost? Are we to say it is physical or non-physical?

The theory wisely avoids committing itself here, and no doubt it would be better if we did the same. Once the contents of beliefs are agreed upon, and their implications drawn out, there is little point in pressing them for a decision on questions couched in terminology to which they have nothing to correspond. (There appears to be no word for "matter", "material" or "physical" in Ga.) But if we must make a choice, it would seem better to describe the *susuma* as "physical", rather than as "non-physical but possessing a capacity for materialization through the sheer exercise of its power"-- i.e., presumably, by thought. For the description of it as physical licenses a reason why it is now in a particular place which is familiar and comprehensible to us ("it has moved"). The other approach offers a reason ("it has thought") which is not comprehensible, or at least not familiar. And I think we may get some confirmation for the preference for the former alternative from the statement that we receive a new body at death. As was pointed out in II (d), this new body is agreed to be the *susuma*. If the *susuma* can be described as a body, it is presumably conceived as an organized physical entity.

It is appropriate at this point to consider the significance of the fact that the word *susuma* also means "shadow". Why is the *susuma* so called, and what, if anything, is it the shadow of? There is no agreement on these points among informants. Two hypotheses are worth considering.

(i) The *susuma* is the shadow of *kla*. It is the representation of it, the only thing which enables us to know what the *kla* is like. Here one must bear in mind the belief that one may see the reflection of something which is not itself seeable (for example, the reflection of a ghost may be seen in water or a mirror when it itself is not seen).

(ii) The meaning "shade", i.e., "ghost", is paramount. The ghost is a shadow of the body: it is not the body, but a reflection or projection of it. Because the in-life component of the person is taken as being identical with the post-death apparition, it is given the name "shadow", which is really or

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<sup>29</sup>Gyekye, p. 93.

primarily appropriate to the shadowlike--seeable but untouchable--appearance after death.

(i) is supported by some highly knowledgeable informants. Otherwise, one would have tended to prefer (ii), which is more straightforward and draws more closely on the literal meaning of "shadow". Moreover, one is familiar from other languages with the word for "shadow" being used for "ghost", e.g., Latin *umbra*, though it is a special feature of the Ga usage that the same word is used for an in-life component of the person.<sup>30</sup> Had (ii) been the correct explanation, it would perhaps have provided further support for the preference for the description "physical" over "non-physical" (for the perceptibility of the *susuma* would then be revealed as so essential a feature of it as to have determined even its name).

But even though this discussion of shadowiness has not yielded clear support for our preference, it seems to me that the arguments which preceded it do show clearly that (whatever we may later find to be the case with the *kla*) we cannot give a Cartesian account of the *susuma* as pure consciousness devoid of any physical properties, such as is the *sunsum* of Akan thought on the Gyekye interpretation of it. Far from being an immaterial entity inhabiting a body, the *susuma* is itself a body, and shares with the material body the properties of being organized and of possessing a spatial and temporal location, and the powers of movement through space and time and (intermittently) of perceptibility to the distance senses of human beings and animals.

Thus I suggest that the correct account of the *susuma* is that it is a Strawsonian person, to which both mental and physical predicates are applicable, and not a Cartesian ego, to which only the former category would apply. Strawson in *Individuals* argued that the fact that we apply predicates ascribing physical characteristics, and predicates ascribing states of consciousness to a person, should not lead us to think a person consists of two things: a body, which is the real subject of the mental predicates, and a mind, which is the real subject of the physical predicates (any more than when we say "The brick is square" and "The brick is red", we should then think that squareness and redness do not both characterize the brick, but independently characterize two distinct things, the brick's shape and the brick's color). Persons just are a kind of things to which both mental and physical predicates apply (just as bricks are a kind of things to which both shape- and color-predicates apply); and the notion of a person is logically prior to that of an individual consciousness. Since, as we have seen, the *susuma* possesses physical properties as well as mental ones, it falls under the concept of a person as that concept is analyzed by Strawson. It can only be represented as a pure consciousness or immaterial ego at the price of

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<sup>30</sup>Likewise, in Twi, the word *sunsum* means both "shadow" and "soul" or "spirit". The significance of this has not, as far as I am aware, been explained by expositors of Akan thought.

neglecting some beliefs which form a salient part of Ga conceptions of human nature and personal immortality.

If the *susuma* is a person in this sense, does this mean I am two persons, and not one? If so, (a) how do we reconcile this with our usual intuitions that I am only one? and (b) how are the two persons related? If not, what explanation can we give of why a person plus a person does not yield two persons? To these and other questions which are raised by our account of the *susuma* as a person in the Strawsonian sense, an answer can be attempted only after the nature of the *kla* has been considered.

### THE *KLA*

#### *Concepts of the Kla*

The variety of the statements made by Ga about the *kla* is most striking, and creates initial bewilderment. For example, on the one hand the *kla* is said to be the highest element in man's nature, while on the other it is said that plants too have *kla*. Each of these statements is corroborated by a number of informants; and such apparent incompatibilities can be multiplied. One very obvious task which an analysis of the concept of the *kla* must fulfill is to account for these glaring discrepancies. It would seem that a fuller investigation must yield one of four possible conclusions.

(i) The inconsistencies are only apparent and disappear when the complex concept of the *kla* is understood. (ii) The concept of the *kla* is hopelessly confused. The best one can do is to document the various beliefs and idioms concerning it. But to articulate them in a coherent manner is an enterprise doomed to failure. (iii) Different people hold different concepts of the *kla*, and these rival views have taken hold--now here, now there--within the community. (Here one may invoke Gyekye's thesis of the importance of individual reflection in the formation of traditional thought systems.) (iv) With the *kla*, we are dealing not with one concept but with several, different to the extent that they could with a gain in clarity be expressed in different words. If (iii) were correct, thinkers a, b and c would all hold that we have a *kla*, but they would differ as to what kind of thing the *kla* was. If (iv) were correct, one and the same thinker would hold that we have a *kla* in sense a, a *kla* in sense b, and a *kla* in sense c. For (iv) to be correct, indeed, it should be the case that many people are prepared to acknowledge, when they are invited to consider the matter, that they do have belief answering to each such statement.

The conclusion to which the evidence seems to me to point is (iv), that the *kla* is not a single complex concept, nor yet rival versions of the same concept, but more than one as relatively simple concepts which have gotten grouped together under the same name. (Indications that one of these is the original one, and the other or others later comers, will be mentioned as a matter of interest; but this is a historical matter on which I am not really equipped to comment.) As was stated above, a rich and varied

collection of beliefs, linguistic idioms and customs has grown up around the *kla*, and the distinctions we shall draw between senses of *kla* must be based on and interspersed with short descriptive accounts of some of these.

The *kla* is said by Ga to be a part of God's nature in man. It is regarded by them as higher than the *susuma*. If it be asked "higher in what sense?", the answer is threefold.

Firstly, the *kla* is more powerful than the *susuma*. It can direct the *susuma*, whereas the *susuma* never directs it. The *kla* dictates a man's destiny, the message he is to bring into the world and the task he is to fulfill in it. We are said to take leave of our *kla* when we come into the world. It normally continues to guide and protect a man throughout his life. Someone who enjoys good fortune or has had a series of lucky escapes may be described as *kla kpakpa tsō*, "the owner of a good *kla*". To say of someone that *Ekla nyiō esōe*, "His *kl a* is following him", means that he is lucky. The *kla* is sometimes actually identified with destiny: *Okla lō,oshadi ni*, "Your *kla* is your destiny".

A creative as well as directive power is sometimes attributed to the *kla*, for it is even said that *Le ebōbo*, "He is the one who created you". Since it is his *kla* which makes a person what he is, gratitude to him may be expressed by referring to his *kla*: "Thanks be to your *kla*", "May God bless your *kla*". By the same token, a person's *kla* may be abused with all the insults which might be heaped upon its owner: "Your roguish *kla*", "Your *kla*'s foolish face", etc. The *kla* is strongly associated with physical health and vigor. If you are allergic to something, your *kla* does not like it. *Obō kla*, "You have not got a *kla*", is a statement made to someone who is thought to be too passive, someone who puts up with things against which he should react or rebel.

Secondly, the *kla* is morally perfect. It is tarnished when its owner commits a serious misdeed, and because of its association with health, its displeasure may be manifested in sickness. Concerning this there is some evidence dating from the eighteenth century. The Moravian historian Oldendorp writes:

The priests of the Akkran [i.e., the Ga] have a theory about diseases. They see in them a result from a misunderstanding between spirit and soul. In their opinion as long as the two live together in peace and concord like husband and wife, man is healthy, but if one of the two commits a fault, the harmony is disturbed: the pure part wants to separate itself from the impure one, hence arise inner trouble and sickness of the body.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>G.G.A. Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen Bruder auf den Inseln, S. Thomas, S. Croix and S. Jan...* (Barby, 1777), Vol. I, pp. 336f.

It will be noted that Oldendorp records a belief that either the *kla* may be alienated from the impure *susuma*, or vice versa. But I have not found any informant who accepts the latter situation as a possible one, nor is there any evidence to that effect recorded in Field. The *kla* always seems to be regarded as essentially pure; any taint which falls upon it from the action of its owner should be washed off by means of a prescribed ceremony.

Physical illness is not the only possible outcome of offending the *kla*. It may withdraw its protection and offer no more moral or spiritual guidance. The consequences of this are supposed to be dire. *Ekla eje esōō*, "His *kla* has left him" (the opposite of *Ekla nyiō esōō*) is a statement made when madness, alcoholism, etc., has befallen a person. The withdrawal of the *kla*'s protection may be followed by the intrusion into the personality of an alien element known as a *gbeshi*. As mentioned in II (b), this seems to be regarded as a kind of spirit. Any form of socially unacceptable behavior which does not occur in a man's immediate family, and thus cannot be attributed to heredity, is liable to be attributed to a *gbeshi*. It is regarded as a disruptive force which interferes with the links binding the *kla* and the *susuma*, and prevents the victim from fulfilling his destiny. Some medicine-men are believed to be able to perform ceremonies which will rid a person of *gbeshi*.

Thirdly, the *kla* is regarded as more "honorable" than the *susuma*. After childbirth, recovery from a serious illness, survival of an accident, or a signal success of any kind, the *kla* is "washed" and thanked at a special ceremony. Some other ceremonies in connection with the *kla* have been referred to already; yet others are described in Field.<sup>32</sup> The *susuma* however, receives no such veneration.

A fourth point, more controversial than the preceding ones, may be added. This is that the *kla* is never seen; thus it is either immaterial, or further removed from the ordinary material world than the *susuma* which, as we have seen, is intermittently perceptible, either itself or through a reflection. However, some say that medicine-men can see the *kla*. But this is denied by others, who explain that what the client wants to be assured of is that the practitioner has really been in communication with the *kla*: a medicine-man might use the terminology of vision in order to satisfy him of that; but he does not, properly speaking, *see* the *kla*. The question stands in need of closer investigation.

To the question: How do we know that we have a *kla*? What is thought to make the postulation of it necessary? the answer is obscure. There is, or at least is considered to be, a lot of empirical evidence, known to the ordinary person, to support the theory of the nature and activities of the *susuma*. But the theory of the *kla* seems to enjoy no such backing. It is possible that the pronouncements of medicine-men, who, as just remarked

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<sup>32</sup>For some of the ceremonies referred to in the preceding paragraphs, see Field, pp. 95-97.

are believed able to communicate with the *kla*, have formed an important source of the beliefs relating to it.

What conception of the *kla* is suggested by these beliefs, idioms and observances? I believe it is one which figured largely in the popular thought of the Western world in earlier times: that of an individual of a higher-than-human order of being, who determines one's destiny and watches over one's welfare: an attendant personal spirit like the Greek personal *daimon*, the Roman genius, or the Christian guardian angel. I have found that when this interpretation of the *kla* is put to informants, it is readily accepted. If correct, it explains among other things the honors paid to the *Kla* after successes and deliverances from danger; why your *kla* may be said to abandon you or to follow you; why (a matter not touched upon above) prayers to the dead can continue even when a reincarnation of them is believed to be alive; and why Gas sometimes feel perplexity as to whether the *kla* is oneself or is outside oneself. Since a spirit of the kind in question is a more divine being than a man this interpretation of the *kla* also accounts for why the *kla* is said to be God's power in man.

A person's *kla* is sometimes said to be related to the day of the week on which he was born. Miss Field writes as follows:

The "day-name" which is given according to the day of the week on which a person is born, is often known as the "*kla*-name". It is said that "all people born on the same day have the same *kla*". . . . The day-name may be used by medicine-men in killing, and furthermore the killing may reach the wrong person as well as the right one through their common name. For instance, if you want to kill a man named Kwaku (the name means "born on Wednesday") you call in a bad medicine-man, and he prepares a medicine using the name of Kwaku, lays it on the ground and arranges that when Kwaku walks over it he will sicken and die. However, another Kwaku may walk over it and die instead of the first.<sup>33</sup>

Any ceremony involving the *kla* is held on the day of the week on which one was born; and because of the belief that all those born on the same day have the same *kla*, the presence of people born on that day is considered especially appropriate. The belief that those born on the same day have the same *kla* is also found among the Akans. Eva Mayerowitz reported that the Akan assign each day of the week to the rulership of the deity of a particular planet who protects those born on that day and whose influence is

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<sup>33</sup>Field, pp. 93-94.



responsible for the common traits of character supposedly possessed by them.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to see how this particular astrological conception of the *kla*, whereby there are only seven forms of *kla*, can plausibly be combined with a conception of the *kla* as the guardian spirit of an individual. What would happen when the interests of two Kwakus conflicted? But the Greeks and Romans also used to worship their *daimon* or *genius* on their birthday (once a year, however). The connection between astrology and the concept of a guardian spirit is a time-honored one, and therefore the difficulties in understanding any version of the connection, let alone the present simple one, should not necessarily lead us to feel that the indications that the *kla* is to some extent astrologically determined cast doubt on our interpretation of the *kla* as a guardian spirit. The belief that each person has an individual guardian spirit, and the belief that the character and destiny accruing to one from such a spirit are determined by the disposition of the planets at one's birth have, however mysteriously, often been conjoined in popular thought over the centuries.

Miss Field also records another view linking the *kla* with names. This concerns the Ga naming system whereby names determined by order of birth, one set for male children and another for female, recur in alternate generations of a family. According to Miss Field, it is a postulate of this system that a child (a) possesses the same *kla* as, and (b) is a reincarnation of, the grandfather, grandmother, great-uncle or great-aunt whose name he bears.<sup>35</sup> If (a) alone were believed, then one would be able to infer either (i) that possession of the same *kla* is not, for the Ga, constitutive of personal identity, or (ii) that personal identity is not, for the Ga, a one-one relation. For an eldest son, for example, who had several sons of his own, some of whom in turn had a son, would have the same *kla* as each of his eldest grandsons. If he is not regarded as the same person as them, then possession of the same *kla* does not constitute personal identity; if he is, then a single person can be identical with more than one person--not merely after his death, but during his lifetime. But Miss Field's explicit addition of (b) to (a) at first sight seems to necessitate (ii) (since a reincarnate is presumably the same person as he of whom he is a reincarnation). The only way of avoiding (ii) would be to infer (iii) that, for the Ga, "Y is a reincarnation of X" does not entail "Y is the same person as X".

If, then, these beliefs were held by the Ga, one would have to conclude that they had either a very unusual notion of personal identity, whereby a person could be identical with one or more of his contemporaries, or a very weak notion of reincarnation, whereby X may be

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<sup>34</sup>Eva Meyerowitz, "Concepts of the Soul Among the Akan", *Africa* XXI (1951), pp. 24-31. The rulerships are as follows: Sunday, the sun; Monday, the moon; Tuesday, Mars; Wednesday, Mercury; Thursday, Jupiter; Friday, Venus; Saturday, Saturn.

<sup>35</sup>Field, pp. 174-75.

a reincarnation of Y without being the same person as Y. It is also worth noting that there are obvious difficulties in combining the beliefs linking the *kla* with lineage-names with the beliefs referred to in connection with day-names; for two possessors of the same lineage-name might not be born on the same day, so that by the one criterion they had the same *kla*, but by the other they did not.

My inquiries however, yielded different results, which would not involve these difficulties; for my informants all denied that possessors of the same lineage-names necessarily have the same *kla*. They had, indeed, never heard of more than one person being supposed to reincarnate the same person at the same time, and evinced hesitation and unease at the question whether it was possible for this to happen. My impression was that they found the question conceptually odd. The explanation of this which most naturally suggests itself is that they look on personal identity as inherently a one-one relation. It is certainly often believed that children take on the characteristics of those whose names they bear. But this appears to be most usually attributed to a rather vague "influence" which comes short of full-scale reincarnation. One also hears of members of the grandchild generation who after the death of the member of the grandparent generation whose name they bear, are perceived by those around as becoming more like him. Whatever else this may suggest, it at least supports the conclusion that the junior is not regarded as a reincarnation of the senior either during his lifetime, or merely in virtue of bearing his name, and doubt is cast upon the assertion that namesakes are automatically looked upon as reincarnating their eponyms. For these reasons, I believe we can discount the suggestion that there is a relationship between the *kla* and lineage-names, and justifiably sidestep the task of deciding what conception of the *kla* would be involved in such a belief.

A further set of beliefs concerns the *kla* and witchcraft. Beliefs to the effect that witches operate by eating the *kla* of their victims are amply documented in Field and Debrunner, and I shall not dwell upon them here. Witches are said to eat the *kla* limb by limb and organ by organ, either on one night or over a longer period; when the heart is taken, the victim dies. Since each part of the physical body has a *kla* counterpart, the conception of the *kla* involved in such beliefs is, as Field describes it, "an invisible body, the perfect double of the physical body".<sup>36</sup> The *kla* is said to reside in the blood, and an alternative way in which witches are said to operate is by sucking the blood of their victims. The expression *Obe kla*, literally "You haven't got a *kla*", means "You are able to withstand witchcraft".

The conception of the *kla* involved in this set of beliefs, which for convenience we shall call *kla* II, has it in common with that of the *kla* as guardian spirit ("*kla* I") that in both cases the *kla* is essential to physical health and vigor. But otherwise they seem rather different from each other. Firstly, *kla* I is pre-existent--one takes leave of it in coming into the world--

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<sup>36</sup>Field, p. 93.

whereas *kla* II resides in the blood of the physical body, and its existence is, therefore, presumably contemporaneous with that of the body. Secondly, *kla* I is a divine and powerful part of man and the *susuma* is subject to it; whereas *kla* II is something which can be preyed upon by the *susuma* of a witch. Thirdly, the results of *kla* I's abandoning a person are moral weakness, folly or madness, and it abandons him as a whole; whereas *kla* II can be taken from him piecemeal, and the results are not moral or intellectual weakness, but physical weakness. Finally, *kla* II seems to be an impersonal entity, not the sort of thing which could be thanked for good fortune or in general to which agency could be ascribed, as it freely is to *kla* I.

Because of all these differences, I believe that *kla* I and *kla* II are actually quite different conceptions which have been grouped together under the same name. *Kla* II may perhaps be described as a "life-force", or what I believe theosophists call the "life-body". An indication of the difference may be found in the fact that the phrase *Ebe kla* ("He has no *kla*") has two quite different, and almost opposite meanings. These have already been explained: the phrase can mean "He has no spirit" (in the sense of "spunk") and "He is not vulnerable to witchcraft". In the former sense it speaks of weakness, and in the latter sense, of strength. The fact that identical sentences containing the word can have almost opposite meanings seems strongly to confirm the hypothesis that the word itself has two quite different meanings, and also to suggest that one of them is not original to the language; for languages normally tolerate ambiguous words only to the extent that they do not occur in similar contexts.

There is reason to think that, if one of these meanings is a later comer, it is *kla* II and not *kla* I. In the first place, the only area where *kla* II seems to enter in is attacks by witchcraft. And Miss Field observes that witchcraft may not be indigenous to the Ga, citing two facts. First, the witchcraft practices are less common among them than among the neighboring ethnic groups; and secondly, there is no Ga word for a witch, instead, the Fante *aye* or the Twi *Obeyefu* is used.<sup>37</sup> Further, a view of the *Kla* as capable of agency, which we have seen to be characteristic of *kla* I, is deeply entrenched in both language and custom. It would be tedious to demonstrate this in detail; a review of the idioms and customs referred to will make it sufficiently plain. *Kla* I, therefore, has a title to be regarded as the original Ga concept, on to which *kla* II has been grafted--a process perhaps helped by the presumed connection of them both with physical life and health. But *kla* I is presumed to affect health in ways that *kla* II is not. For example, it is supposed to be displeased when its owner is a victim of neglect or improper treatment. It may manifest its displeasure, among other ways, in the person's falling prey to a long wasting sickness, which may lead those around to inquire into the cause of the problem and rectify the grievance. *Kla* II is not credited with motives of this high-personal type.

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<sup>37</sup>Field, p. 137.

*Relation of the Kla to the Susuma and the Body*

It has just been suggested that the word *kla* is used in two quite different senses. In discussing the relations which the *kla* bears to the *susuma* and the body, it is obviously very necessary to determine whether we are talking about *kla* I or *kla* II in any given case. In practice, however, almost all the evidence bearing on this topic fairly clearly concern *kla* I. This is not surprising if, firstly, the suggestion that *kla* II is a latecomer to the Ga conceptual scheme is correct and, secondly, it is borne in mind that *kla* II seems to be mainly confined to contexts of witchcraft.

The doctrine that the *kla* leaves the body at death might be thought an exception to this. Might not this be referring to *kla* II, if *kla* II is a kind of life-force? But a fuller statement of the doctrine runs, "The *kla* leaves the body at death and goes back to God", and it therefore almost certainly refers to *kla* I. In what follows then, "*kla*" will refer to *kla* I. What is the relation of the *kla* to the other two "parts" of the human being?

Presence "in" or "with" the body is ascribed to the *kla* by some Ga. This appears to be the only candidate for a physical attribute of the *kla* (apart perhaps from its being seen by medicine-men; although this was provisionally rejected). But others think of the connection between *kla* and *susuma* plus body (as a shorthand device I shall refer to the latter pair as "person" in the next few paragraphs) as a force binding them together rather than as a compresence.

A relation of possession or ownership holds between a person and his *kla*. The person is said to be the owner of his *kla*, and not vice versa. The *kla* is the *kla* of that particular person. Can we go further and say that the *kla* could only be the *kla* of that particular person? Probably not. There is, as far as I know, no evidence of the belief that your *kla* is uniquely yours. (Indeed, the belief that persons born on the same day have the same *kla* seems to be evidence to the contrary. But it is not quite clear whether this is so, and what is common to them is the full *kla* of each, or whether one of two other possibilities holds: (a) it is not the entire *kla* that they share, but there is an individual residue; or (b) the *kla* falls into types and those born on the same day have the same *type* of *kla*.)

On the other hand, we can say that the person could only have that particular *kla*, for "it is your *kla* that makes you what you are". Thus a causative, creative or productive relation exists between a *kla* and its owner. How this is implemented is left as mysterious as the nature of the *kla* itself. Whether the *susuma* resembles the *kla*, so that the *kla*'s making you what you are consists at least partially in imparting its nature to you, is also left unstated; although if the view that the *susuma* is the shadow of the *kla* is correct, presumably *some* resemblance must obtain between them.

The role of the *kla* which most arouses the interest and engages the emotion is that of director of destiny. We must say that the *kla* directs, not that the *kla* controls. The person has freedom, has a mind of his own, and the unity between him and his *kla* is not that between a robot and his

program. It will be recalled that a person may displease his *kla* to the extent that the *kla* withdraws his guidance and abandons him to an intrusive *gbeshi*. Again, the mechanics whereby the *kla* directs the person are not spelled out.

It will be seen that we have got along very nicely referring to the body plus the *susuma* as “the person”. This has not led to any problems. The fact is symptomatic of the *kla*’s being, in a sense, external to the body plus *susuma*, as they are not to each other. All the relations which hold between the *kla* and the body plus *susuma*--compresence (?), possession, causation, direction--are ones which may hold between two quite separate entities. The body and the *susuma* are connected in a close though not inseparable unity; but the *kla* cannot really be said to be a constituent of, or element in, the person.

This fact may help to explain why, after death, the identity of the person is sustained by his *susuma*, while the *kla* is said to lose its individuality. By this it is perhaps meant, as we can now see, that it loses its association with the individual who has owned it, not its own individuality; on our interpretation of *kla* I, its individuality and that of its owner are distinct. The import of the belief can now be seen to be as follows: that upon a person’s death, the connection between him and his guardian spirit is dissolved; that the guardian spirit returns to God; and that the person, in the form of his *susuma*, enters the World of the Dead. The unity of the *kla* with the *susuma* does not persist through death, any more than does its unity with the body. The *kla* survives death, but the immortality of the person does not consist in *its* survival, but in the survival of the *susuma*, which is supposed to retain a considerable range of the characteristics of the living person. The separation of *kla* and *susuma* after death is one of the strongest indications that the *susuma* is not a part of the *kla*, as, according to Gyekye, the *susuma* is of the *okra*, but is ontologically as well as logically distinct from it.

#### *Personal Identity, Unity and Immortality*

It was shown in II (d) that a person’s survival of death, the identity of the person who exists after death with the person who existed before it, can be said to consist on the Ga view in the continued existence of his *susuma*, which is conceived as a substance or owner of properties. This sounds like a Cartesian account of survival, but the analysis of the concept of *susuma* in the above section on *susuma* after death will have made it clear that the *susuma* is vastly different. For the *susuma* is itself a body which exists in time and space, so that its movements should in principle be able to be mapped continuously in both dimensions for any beings with the means of monitoring and recording them. This view of personal survival would thus not face some of the logical difficulties which critics of Cartesianism have shown to attach to the notion of personal identity in the absence of spatiotemporal continuity. But at least two other problems arise

from it. Firstly, since human beings do not meet the specifications of the beings by whom such continuity would be checkable, and hence usable as a criterion, what grounds can the theory proffer for maintaining that the *susuma* continues to exist and to retain its identity?

An answer to this question has to be elicited by the interpreter from the nexus of received ideas and arguments; he will not find the answer ready-made. I would hazard the following account as the kind of justification which is suggested by the views recorded in the above section on the *susuma* after death. Reports of instances in which the dead have appeared to the living in any one of the three (or four) recognized ways--ghostly apparition, possession, materialization (and reflection)--are taken to license the statement "Some of the dead have been perceived by the living on at least one occasion". To the question "How do you know that the person exists before and after such a manifestation--or between such manifestations if there are more than one?" it might be answered that the assumption that he does so exist is rendered much easier than the hypothesis that he comes into being afresh on each manifestation, by the parallel assumption we make about human beings whom we meet intermittently in life. To the further question "Granted the authenticity of the evidence and granted the last-mentioned assumption-- supposing, that is, that *some* men survive death--how do we know that *all* do?" The answer might be to the effect that those who have been perceived cover such a range of variables conceivably relevant to fitness for survival that no such characteristics has yet been found which has not been instantiated both among those who have, and those who have not, appeared to the living. Pending therefore the discovery of some relevant difference between the two groups, the evidence points to the conclusion of the universal human survival of death.

Such might be the shape which a response to the request for a justification of assertions of survival consonant with Ga beliefs would take. It will be clear that the onus falls mainly on the question of the authenticity of the reported sightings, hearings and smellings. Here again, in the area of survival of death, we find the views of the Ga exhibiting the same empirical bias that we discovered in their account of the nature and activities of the *susuma* of a living man.

The grounds for supposing the *susuma* to continue in existence involve positing a continuity of physical appearance (face, stature, voice, etc.) between the person in life and his *susuma* after his death. Psychological continuity in the form of identity of memories, affections, objectives, etc., is also held to exist. This gives rise to the second problem with which the Ga view of personal survival might seem to be faced. We have argued that the *susuma* duplicates the structure of the human being in possessing both physical and mental attributes. (This becomes fully evident only when the beliefs about the *susuma* after death are considered. For after death, the *susuma* is believed to be intermittently perceptible to waking human beings in a normal state, as it had not been in life--in dreams it may

be perceived by the *susuma* of another person, but not by a non-dreamer or someone not exercising special psychic powers.) How is this duplication compatible with the unity of the person in life?

Again, one can only attempt an answer which is as far as possible consonant with known beliefs. Such an answer might appeal to the fact that in life there is no temporal overlap between the activities of the body and the *susuma*. They are like workers on different shifts and with different schedules. When the body (which includes the mind) is on duty, it might be said, the *susuma* is off duty, and neither is able to perform the other's functions. The well-known fact that dreams often occur in series might be cited to show that dream life has a continuity of its own, just as waking life does. Since body and *susuma* complement one another both temporally and functionally, they are candidates for a holistic union.

However, the more the lack of overlap between the body and the *susuma* be stressed, the more puzzling it becomes that the *susuma*, alone, can represent, or be, the person after death. For we seem almost to have the case imagined by Locke:

Could we suppose two distinct incommunicable consciousnesses acting in the same body, the one constantly by day, the other by night; . . . I ask . . . whether the day and the night man would not be two as distinct persons as Socrates and Plato.<sup>38</sup>

This can be sharpened by introducing some considerations about moral responsibility. I am surely not responsible for what my *susuma* does in dreams; and *it* is presumably not responsible for any conscious misdeeds committed by me in my waking life. Now in the World of the Dead, the *susuma* is punished for wrongs consciously performed by the person in his lifetime. How does it come to bear the responsibility for them? It should be noted that unlike the Akan, who speak of a "good *sunsum*", meaning a generous disposition,<sup>39</sup> the Ga do not appear to apply moral predicates to the *susuma* at all. This seems to be only consistent with the plausible position that it is conscious choices which determine our moral character. But how is it consistent with the belief that it is the *susuma* which faces reward or punishment hereafter? Is the *susuma* not being punished for what is not its fault, or rewarded for what is not to its credit? As Locke forcibly argued:

If the same Socrates waking and sleeping does not partake of the same consciousness, Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same person; and to punish waking Socrates for what sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was

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<sup>38</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II. 27. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gyekye, pp. 96, 97.

never conscious of, would be no more of right then to punish one twin for what his brother-twin did, whereof he knew nothing, because their outsides were so like they could not be distinguished.<sup>40</sup>

These considerations suggest that an attempt to account for the unity of the person cannot succeed by setting up a demarcation between our day-time and our night-time consciousness. Another consideration which tends in the same direction is that whereas the *susuma* can, when it is apart from the body (in dreams) function in the manner characteristic of it as an individual entity, the mind apparently has no such power. It can produce its own characteristic operations (i.e., ratiocination and other conscious thought processes) only when the *susuma* is present with the body. This leaves it open for thoughts which occur when the *susuma* is present with the body to be the product of the joint operation of the two of them. This is consistent with the fact that the human *susuma* is certainly regarded by the Ga as being rational, and also with the fact that dreams may have reference to events of our waking life long since forgotten, whereas in our waking life we are unaware of most of our dream-experiences. To express this difference in terms of a distribution of knowledge between the mind and the *susuma*, we may say that the *susuma* has access to the mind's information, whereas the mind has access to only a limited amount of the *susuma*'s information. Perhaps it is partly for this reason that the Ga say that the *susuma* is "wiser than the man himself", or "knows more than the man himself". But the question of the unity of the person may be approached from another angle as well.

Adapting Plato, who said that life is a practice for death, the Ga might well say that sleep is a practice for death. For, as we have seen, they believe that sleep consists in the existence of the *susuma* in independence both of the *kla* and of the body; and this is precisely the state it is in after death. Thus the Ga view of immortality has affinities to Christian descriptions of the pre-resurrection life after death as a sleep. This has to be inferred; it is not stated, because sleep would be an unsuitable metaphor for death from the Ga point of view. In the first place, death (i.e., here the mode of existence of the dead) is not regarded as essentially a halfway house to another mode of existence, for some but not all of the dead are reincarnated, and in the second place it is not seen as preparatory to a *fuller* existence, for there is no conception of a condition for human beings which would be superior to it.

If both sleep and death consist in the independent existence of the *susuma*, wherein lies the difference between the two states? One difference presumably stems from the more final separation of the *susuma* from the body which death involves. Whereas in sleep the *susuma* is bound to return to the body, and, therefore, it cannot establish a full life of its own, after

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<sup>40</sup>Locke, II. 27. 19.



death it has no such ties and is able to establish a life on its own account. Its powers of perception, feeling, thought and volition could attain whatever perfection they are capable of when their exercise is not continually being interrupted by the necessity of attention to needs and interests arising from embodied existence. We recall the belief that the *susuma* only gradually, over a period of about three weeks, loses its attachment to the places and pursuits it had frequented in the body; but then it generally does lose it, except in cases of exceptional physical or emotional trauma.

Another difference between sleep and death might be found in the fact mentioned above, that it is only after death that the *susuma* is perceptible to a waking human being in a normal state; in dreams the *susuma* may be perceived by the *susumai* of other persons, but not by the persons themselves.

The (intermittent) perceptibility of the *susuma* after death, it might be said, should properly not be taken, as it was in the above section regarding the nature of the *susuma*, as an indication of what the *susuma* was like all the time, and used as an argument for the physical nature of the *susuma* generally, in life as well as after death. The beliefs on which that argument was based do not entail that death is a separation of three things previously combined, one of which, the body, undergoes change from the moment of death onwards, while the other two, the *susuma* and the *kla* remain unchanged. The beliefs in question are quite consistent with the possibility that the *susuma* is itself changed in nature, either (like the body) after death, perhaps in virtue of its entry into the World of the Dead, or at the time of death, or perhaps even before death. The last of these three possibilities might seem appropriately consistent with the supposed “travelling” of the *susuma* of a living person in a terminal illness. But however this may be, the occurrence of a change in the *susuma* may be reflected in the statement that we receive a new body after death; although, as we saw, this always refers to the *susuma*, the description of it as a “new body” perhaps indicates that it now takes on some physical characteristics not possessed by it before.

This point, if accepted, does not altogether undercut the arguments for the physical nature of the *susuma* in life. We are still left with the spatial mobility of the *susuma*. But it might very well be argued that the erosion of the claims about perceptibility, as regards the living, constitutes a serious weakening of the grounds on which the concept of the *susuma* was claimed to have a similar structure to the concept of the person, i.e., that the *susuma* is a bearer of physical as well as mental properties. This, it might be said, applies only to the *susuma* after death; before death, the *susuma* does not have a sufficient range of physical properties for us properly to call it a person. Once it is admitted that any commentary on the Ga theory of man must allow for the possibility of a change, perhaps a quite radical change, in the nature of the *susuma* at or around death—a change whereby it takes on a power to manifest itself to the senses of waking human beings in a normal state which it did not previously possess—we are acknowledging the

possibility of a discontinuity in the status of the *susuma*. The *susuma* is a kind of understudy whose role in the provinces is confined to rehearsals, but when the play opens in the capitol it appears in the leading role. Features of the *susuma* after death cannot just be lumped together with those before death to yield a composite portrait of the *susuma* which perhaps is not true of it at any stage of its history.

Acceptance of this point, then, might mitigate the rather stiff problems which the Ga doctrines initially seemed to face in the areas of the unity of the person in life. The considerations about moral responsibility showed that we cannot deal with these problems by setting up sharp barriers between our daytime and our nighttime consciousness. Then considerations about the dependence of the mind's operation on the presence of the *susuma*, and about the distribution of knowledge between them, further showed that the *susuma*'s consciousness comprises the mind's, but not vice versa. Finally, the discussion of how, on the Ga teachings, sleep can be differentiated from death showed that at or around death may, or perhaps even must, be posited, not merely a change in the *susuma*'s relation to the body, but an intrinsic change in the *susuma* itself, whereby it acquires, in addition to its mental characteristics and its power of independent motion, the full range of physical characteristics minimally necessary for human personhood. What precedes then, is far from explaining the unity between the *susuma* and the body; but it is hoped that it serves to indicate that the explanation must lie in one direction rather than another.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to clarify the Ga concepts of the *kla* and the *susuma*, to explain their relationships to the body and to each other, and to show how they function as a framework for beliefs about one of the two forms of immortality accepted by the Ga, disembodied survival. (Within the bounds of this study the other, reincarnation, could only be touched upon in passing.)

The puzzling diversity of beliefs about the *kla* has been tentatively explained by the hypothesis that the word *kla* is used in two senses, that of guardian spirit and that of life-force or life-body. The first of these is capable of accommodating the connection of the *kla* with the day-names; but an attempt to link the *kla* with lineage-names faces serious problems. The *kla*, in the first sense (the most firmly entrenched and perhaps the original one), stands in a somewhat external relation to the *susuma* plus body: though each human being has a *kla*, the *kla* is not a part of him in the sense of being an element of him. For this reason, the *kla* is not involved in disembodied survival (although it is involved in reincarnation; if X is a reincarnation of Y, X has the same *kla* as Y). Uniqueness of one's *kla* is thus not part of what it is to be an individual human being. The source of beliefs about the *kla* is probably esoteric, and the links between it and the

individual were found at certain points to be too mysterious to permit of meaningful discussion.

A Cartesian interpretation of the *susuma* is rejected, on the grounds of the physical attributes which it possesses: mobility in space and (after death) perceptibility to the distance senses. The *susuma* of a living person comprises, but is not confined to, the unconscious mind: the *susuma* overlaps with the *jwengmō*, or (conscious) mind, which appears to be conceived in a materialistic fashion. Some of the problems which these views raise for the unity of the person are considered. Four states in which the *susuma* is held to exist independently of the body are shown to require a closer characterization or a more explicit causal explanation than the theory seems to provide. The Ga hold both physical and psychological continuity to obtain between a person in life and *susuma* after his death. Since it is the *susuma* which after death sustains the individuality of the person, the *susuma* after death is a Strawsonian person, a bearer of both physical and mental properties. In this way, it is a shadow (*susuma*) of the person. But in life it has this status only potentially, being not yet possessed of the full range of physical characteristics essential to human personhood. It is clear at many points that the theory of the *susuma* has an empirical basis, in the sense that it is a means of explaining phenomena whose occurrence its proponents regard as having been adequately established by either observation or testimonial evidence.



## **PART IV**

### **ETHICS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**



**CHAPTER IX**  
**THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS**  
**OF AN AFRICAN CULTURE**

*KWASI WIREDU*

**INTRODUCTION**

Morality in the strictest sense is universal to human culture.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is *essential* to all human culture. Any society without a modicum of morality must collapse. But what is morality in this sense? It is simply the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of the individual to those of others in society. This, of course, is a minimal concept of morality. A richer concept of morality, even more pertinent to human flourishing, will have an essential reference to that special kind of motivation called the sense of duty. Morality in this sense involves not just the *de facto* conformity to the requirements of the harmony of interests, but also that conformity to those requirements which is inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others, even at the cost of a possible abridgement of one's own interests. This is not a demand for a supererogatory altruism. But a certain minimum of altruism is absolutely essential to the moral motivation. In this sense too morality is probably universal to all human societies, though, most certainly, not to all known individuals.

The foregoing reflection still does not exclude the possibility of a legitimate basis for differentiating the morals of the various peoples of the world. This is so for at least three reasons. First of all, although morality, in both of the senses just discriminated, is the same wherever and whenever it is practiced, different peoples, groups and individuals have different understandings of it. The contrasting moral standpoints of humanism and supernaturalism, for example, illustrate this diversity. Secondly, the concrete cultural context in which a moral principle is applied may give it a distinctive coloring. Lastly, but most importantly, there is a broad concept of morals closely contiguous to the narrow one -- which is what the two concepts of morality noted earlier on together amount to -- in regard to which the contingencies of space, time and clime may play quite a constitutive role. This appertains to the domain that, speaking very broadly, may be called custom. In view here are such things as the prescriptions and proscriptions operative in a community regarding life and death, work and

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leisure, reward and retribution, aspirations and aversions, pleasure and pain, and the relationships between the sexes, the generations and other social categories and classes. The combined impact of such norms of life and thought in a society should give a distinctive impression of its morals.

### AKAN HUMANISM

But let me start with the manner of conceiving morals. African conceptions of morals would seem generally to be of a humanistic orientation. Anthropological studies lend substantial support to this claim. Nevertheless, the accounts are not always philosophically inquisitive, and I prefer, in elaborating on this characterization, to rely on my own native knowledge of the life and thought of the Akans of Ghana.<sup>2</sup> On this basis, I can affirm the humanism in question more uninhibitedly. The commonest formulation of this outlook is in the saying, which almost any Akan adult or even young hopeful will proffer on the slightest provocation, that it is the human being that has value: *Onipa na ohia*. The English translation just given of the Akan saying, though pertinent, needs supplementation, for the crucial term here has a double connotation. The word “(o)hia” in this context means both that which is of value and that which is needed.

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<sup>2</sup> The Akans are found in large areas of the southern and middle parts of Ghana and also in some parts of the Republic of Ivory Coast. They speak a family of intimately related languages whose most general name is Akan and account for something in the region of half the population of Ghana, which, by last count (1985) was about fourteen million. The Ashantis, Fantes, Akwapims, Akims, Denkyiras, Kwahus, Brongs, and Nzimas are all subgroups of the Akan family. The Akans have been the subject of some famous anthropological, linguistic and philosophical studies by foreign and indigenous scholars. Of the foreign scholars the most famous are J.G. Christaller and R.S. Rattray. Christaller wrote the first detailed dictionary of the Akan language which he entitled *A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Chwee, Twi)*, (Basel: The Evangelical Society, [1881] 1933). Rattray made an intensive study of the Ashantis and wrote, among others, the following books. *Ashanti* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1923); *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford, 1927) and *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford, 1939). His *Ashanti Proverbs* (Oxford, 1916) was a translation and exegetical annotation of a selection from a collection of 3600 Akan proverbs that Christaller published in the vernacular in 1879. J.B. Danquah was the most celebrated of the indigenous students of Akan culture and his *The Akan Doctrine of God* is the best established classic of Akan philosophy. K.A. Busia also wrote an important treatise on the Ashanti political system and its underlying philosophy entitled *The position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Frank Cass, 1968). W.E. Abraham's *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Kwame Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) are works by contemporary Akans continuing the Akan tradition of philosophy.



Through the first meaning the message is imparted that all value derives from human interests and through the second that human fellowship is the most important of human needs. When this last thought is uppermost in consciousness an Akan would be likely to add to the maxim under discussion an elucidation to the effect that you might have all the gold in the world and the best stocked wardrobe, but if you were to appeal to these in the hour of need they would not respond; only a human being will. (*Onipa ne asem: mefre sika a, sika nnye so; mefre ntama a, ntama nnye so; onipa ne asem.*) Already beginning to emerge is the great stress on human sociality in Akan thought, but before pursuing this angle of the subject, let me tarry a while on the significance of Akan humanism.

One important implication of the founding of value on human interests is the independence of morality from religion in the Akan outlook: What is good, in general, is what promotes human interests. Correspondingly, what is good in the more narrowly ethical sense is, by definition, what is conducive to the harmonization of those interests. Thus, the will of God, not to talk of that of any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good. On the Akan understanding of things, indeed, God is good in the highest; but his goodness is conceptually of a type with the goodness of a just and benevolent ancestor, only in his case quality and scale are assumed to be limitless. The prospect of punishment from God or some lesser being may concentrate the mind on the narrow path of virtue, but it is not this that creates the sense of moral obligation. Similarly, the probability of police intervention might conceivably give pause to a would-be safe breaker, though if he or she had any sense of morals at all it would not be thanks to the collective will of the police or even the state.

This conceptual separation of morals from religion is, most likely, responsible in some measure for the remarkable fact that there is no such thing as an institutional religion in Akan culture. The procedures associated with the belief in sundry extra-human beings of varying powers and inclinations, so often given pride of place in accounts of African religions, are in fact practical utilitarian programs for tapping the resources of this world. The idea, in a nutshell, is that God invested the Cosmos with all sorts of potentialities, physical and quasi-physical, personal and quasi-personal, which human beings may bend to their purposes, if they learn how. Naturally, in dealing with beings and powers believed to be of a quasi-personal character, certain aspects of behavior patterns will manifest important analogies to the canons of ordinary human interactions. For example, if you wanted something from a being of superhuman repute who is open to persuasion mixed with praise, pragmatic common sense alone would recommend an attitude of demonstrative respect and circumspection and a language of laudatory circumlocution reminiscent of worship, but the calculative and utilitarian purpose would belie any attribution of a specifically religious motivation. In fact, the Akans are known to be sharply

contemptuous of “gods” who fail to deliver; continued respect is conditional on a high percentage of scoring by the Akan reckoning.

In total contrast to the foregoing is the Akan attitude to the Supreme Being, which is one of unconditional reverence and absolute trust. Absent here is any notion that so perfect a being requires or welcomes institutions for singing or reciting his praises. Nor, relatedly, are any such institutions felt to be necessary for the dissemination of moral education or the reinforcement of the will to virtue. The theater of moral upbringing is the home, at parents’ feet and within range of kinsmen’s inputs. The mechanism is precept, example and correction. The temporal span of the process is life-long, for, although upbringing belongs to the beginning of our earthly careers, the need for correction is an unending contingency in the lives of mortals. At adulthood, of course, as opposed to earlier stages in life, moral correction involves discourses of a higher level and may entail, besides the imposition of compensatory obligations (of which more later); but, at all stages, verbal lessons in morality are grounded in conceptual and empirical considerations about human well-being. All this is why the term “humanistic” is so very apt as a characterization of Akan moral thinking. At least in part, this is why it is correct to describe that ethic as non-supernaturalistic in spite of the sincere belief in a Supreme Being.

In so far, then, as the concept of religion is applicable to the Akan outlook on life and reality, it can refer only to the belief and trust in the Supreme Being. In this respect, Akan religion is purely intellectual. In this respect too it is purely personal, being just a tenet of an individual’s voluntary metaphysic, devoid of social entanglements. In truth, most Akans espouse that metaphysic as a matter of course. Akan conventional wisdom actually holds that the existence of God is so obvious that it does not need to be taught even to a child. (*Obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame.*) Nevertheless, skeptics are not unknown in Akan society, and a time-honored policy of peaceful *laissez faire* extends to them as to all others in matters of private persuasion.

## DEFINING MORALITY

Morality, too, is intellectual, by Akan lights. Concrete moral situations in real life are frequently highly composite tangles of imponderables, and perceiving them in their true lineaments is a cognitive accomplishment in itself. So, too, is the sure grasping of first principles and their judicious application to the particulars of conduct. Morality is also personal, for in the last analysis the individual must take responsibility for his or her own actions. But surely morality is neither purely intellectual, for it has an irreducible passion ingredient, nor purely personal, for it is quintessentially social.

All these insights are encapsulated in various Akan maxims and turns of phrase. Recognition of the intellectual dimension of right conduct is evidenced in the Akan description of a person of ethical maturity as an

*obadwenma*. This word means one possessed of high thinking powers. Literally, it says “child, thinking child”, in other words, a thinking child of the species. The Akans are no less emphatic in their articulation of their sense of individual responsibility. According to a very popular proverb, it is because God dislikes injustice that he gave everyone their own name (thereby forestalling any misattribution of responsibility). Along with this clear sense of individual responsibility went an equally strong sense of the social reverberations of an individual’s conduct. The primary responsibility for an action, positive or negative, rests with the doer, but a non-trivial secondary responsibility extends to the individual’s family and, in some cases, to the environing community. This brings us to the social orientation of the Akan concept of a person. We will not be able to elaborate it fully in the present discussion, but a crucial consideration will be adduced here. It is that, for the Akans, a person is social not only because he or she lives in a community, which is the only context in which full development, or indeed any sort of human development is possible, but also because, by his original constitution, a human being is part of a social whole.

The underlying doctrine is this. A person consists of three elements. One of these comes *directly* from God and is, in fact, a speck of the divine substance. This is the life principle. In virtue of this constituent, all human beings are one; they are all members of the universal family of humankind whose head and spring is God. *Nipa nyinaa ye Nyame mma: obiara nnye asaase ba*. Literally: all human beings are the children of God; none is the child of the earth. The two remaining elements are more mundane in origin. There is what might be called the blood principle which derives from the mother and, somewhat more stipulatively, there is what might be called the charisma principle which comes from the father. The blood from the mother is what principally gives rise to a person’s body. The biological input from the father is responsible for the degree of personal presence that each individual develops at the appropriate stage. (This is what I would like the license to call the individual’s degree of charisma.) The ontological classification of these elements is not exactly straightforward. Suffice it to warn that the physical/spiritual dichotomy is unlikely to be a source of light in this connection. In any case, our interest here is in the social significance of those components.

Both the maternal and paternal contributions to the make-up of a person are the bases of membership in specific social units. The Akans being a matrilineal group, it is the blood principle that situates a person in the most important kinship unit, namely, the lineage or, more extensively, the clan. Through the charisma principle one is a member of a grouping on the father’s side which, although largely ceremonial, is nevertheless the framework of a lot of goodwill.

The point now is that, on this Akan showing, a person has a well-structured social identity even before birth. Thus, when an Akan maxim points out that when a human being descends from on high, he or she alights in a town (*se onipa siane fi soro a obesi kuro mu*) the idea is that

one comes into a community in which one already has well-defined social affiliations. But society presupposes rules, and moral rules are the most essential of these. Since all rules have their rationale, a question that challenges the ethical imagination, especially one thoroughly impregnated with visions of the ineluctable sociality of human existence, is: What is the rationale of moral rules? Among the Akans some of the most profound philosophic conceptions are expressed by way of art motifs, and a celebrated answer to this question is offered in one such construct of fine art: a crocodile with one stomach and two heads locked in combat. Lessons: (1) Although human beings have a core of common interests, they also have conflicting interests that precipitate real struggles. (2) The aim of morality, as also derivative of statesmanship, is to harmonize those warring interests through systematic adjustment and adaptation. The one stomach symbolizes not only the commonality of interests, but also a natural basis for the possibility of a solution to the existential antinomy.

Two levels of solution are distinguishable, corresponding to a distinction foreshadowed in our opening paragraph. There is the level of prudence or enlightened self-interest, and there is that of pure moral motivation. Both species of thought and intention may be equally adapted to securing the social good, the first through cool and calm ratiocination, the second through both rational reflection and human sympathy. But they evoke different appraisals from people of goodwill. There will always be something unlovable about correctness of conduct bereft of passion. A Ghanaian comedian puts it even more strongly. Speaking with a deliberately unidiomatic bombast, he opines: "Ability without sentimentality is nothing short of barbarity." Nevertheless, it appears that teachers of morals everywhere have tended to find prudential considerations more psychologically efficacious in moral persuasion than abstract appeals to goodwill. Certainly, Akan ethical reflection does not stay immobile at this level of ethics, but Akan discourse abounds in prudential maxims. Here are a few.

1. If you do not allow your neighbor to reach nine you will never reach ten. (*Woamma wo yonko antwa nkrong a worentwa edu.*)
2. Somebody's troubles have arrived; those of another are on the way. (*Obi de aba; obi de nam kwan so.*)
3. It is a fool that says, "My neighbor is the butt of the attack not me." (*Kwasea na ose, "Ye de meyonko, yenne me."*)
4. The stick that was used to beat Takyi is the same that will be used to beat Nyankomago. (*Abaa a yede boo Takyi no aa na ye de bebo Nyankomago.*)
5. One person's path will intersect with another's before too long. (*Obi Kwan nkye na asi obi de mu.*)

That Akan ethics transcends this level of moral understanding is evident from other parts of their corpus of moral sayings. I will comment

here on one particularly instructive form of moral expostulation. To a person whose conduct betrays obliviousness to the interests of others it is said, "Sticking into your neighbor's flesh, it might just as well be sticking into a piece of wood" (*Etua woyonko ho a etua dua mu*), than which there can scarcely be a lower rating for a person's moral stature. On this reading of morals, the ultimate moral inadequacy consists in that lack of feeling which is the root of all selfishness. The implied imperative is: "In all interpersonal situations put yourself into the skin of the other and see if you can contemplate the consequences of your proposed action with equanimity." If we call the recommended frame of mind sympathetic impartiality, we may elicit from the Akan maxim under discussion the view that sympathetic impartiality is the first principle of all morals. This principle is the logical basis of the golden rule, or the obverse of it that is frequently heard in Akan ethical talk, namely, "Do not do onto others what you would not that they do onto you." (*Nea wo yonko de ye wo a erenye wo de no mfa nye no*. More literally: What you would not find acceptable if it were done to you by another, do not do to him or her.) To be sure, this does not sound, even in our vernacular, as epigrammatic as the normal run of Akan apothegms, but it provides, nonetheless, a solid foundation for the definition of moral worth in its most edifying sense.

#### **ETHICS AND PRACTICE**

The foregoing account of the Akan perspective on moral first principles, however brief, must form the basis of our next question, which is: "In what basic ways do the Akans endeavor to translate their ethical understanding into practical fact?" In this regard the single most important consideration concerns the depth of the Akan sense of what we have called the sociality of human existence. Morality is, of course, necessarily social. Hence any group of humans that can be credited with any sense of morals at all -- surely, a most minimal species credential -- will have some sense of human sociality. But in the consciousness of moral humankind there is a finely graduated continuum of the intensity of this feeling which ranges, in an ascending order, from the austere delimited social sympathies of rigorous individualism to the pervasive commitment to social involvement characteristic of communalism. It is a commonplace of anthropological wisdom that African social organization manifests the last type of outlook. Akan society is eminently true to this typology.

What this means, more amply, is that Akan society is of a type in which the greatest value is attached to communal belonging. And the way in which a sense of communal belonging is fostered in the individual is through the concentrated stress on kinship identity already adumbrated in our earlier allusions to the Akan concept of a person. Not only is there what might perhaps be called an ontological basis for this identity in terms of the constituents of personhood, but there is also a distinct normative layer of a profound social significance in that concept. Thus conceived, a human

person is essentially the center of a thick set of concentric circles of obligations and responsibilities matched by rights and privileges, revolving round levels of relationships irradiating from the consanguinity of household kith and kin, through the "blood" ties of lineage and clan, and to the wider circumference of human familihood based on the common possession of the divine spark.

In consequence of this character of the Akan concept of a person, habitual default in duties and responsibilities could lead to a diminution in one's status as a person in the eyes of the community. Not, of course, that becoming less and less of a person implies being thought more and more unworthy of human rights. On the contrary, there is a strong sense of the irreducibility of human dignity in Akan thought. However socially inept an individual may be, he or she still remains a being begotten of a direct gift of God incarnated through the intimacy of man and woman. He or she remains, in other words, a human being and as such is deserving of a certain basic respect and sympathy. Indeed, as soon as confirmed social futility begins to look pathologically chronic, animadversion quickly turns into solicitude, and any previous efforts in hortatory correction or in the application of more concrete sanctions are redirected towards rehabilitation, usually with the aid of indigenous specialists in bodily and mental health.

Nevertheless, any Akan steeped in the culture or even just sensitive to surrounding social norms constantly watches and prays lest he or she be overtaken by the specter of loss of personhood (in any degree). More positively and also more optimistically, every cultivated Akan (*Okaniba*) sees life as a scenario of continual striving after personhood in ever increasing dimensions. The details of this life mission, so to speak, will also be the details of the Akan vision of the ethical life. We must here content ourselves with only broad outlines. But before going on, let us note that since two paragraphs ago our focus has been on ethics or morals in the sense in which morality is a matter of *mores*, rather than of the categorical imperative or even of the less hallowed canons of prudence.

What, then, in its social bearings, is the Akan ideal of personhood? It is the conception of an individual who through mature reflection and steady motivation is able to carve out a reasonably ample livelihood for self, "family" and a potentially wide group of kin dependents, besides making substantial contributions to the well-being of society at large. The communalistic orientation of the society in question means that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his or her actions benefit others than himself, not, of course, by accident or coincidence but by design. The implied counsel, though, is not one of unrelieved self-denial, for the Akans are well aware that charity further afield must start at home. More pertinently, they are apt to point out that one cannot blow a horn on an empty stomach. (*Yede ayaase na ehyen aben.*) Still an individual who remained content with self-regarding successes would be viewed as so circumscribed in outlook as not to merit the title of a real person.

Opportunities for other-regarding exertions in Akan society were legion in the past and remain so, even now. By the very nature of the traditional economy, which was predominantly agricultural and based on individual self-employment, public works had, as a rule, to be done by voluntary communal labor. Habitual absences or malingering or half-hearted participation marked an individual down as a useless person (*onipa hunu*) or, by an easily deduced Akan equation, a non-person (*onye onipa*). In contemporary Ghana (and Ivory Coast), where the Akans live, much of the public works are financed out of mandatory taxes and carried out by professionals with hired labor. Nevertheless, in the villages and small towns a significant portion of such work is still done by voluntary communal labor and a good proportion also through voluntary contributions of money and materials.

### **SOME CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS**

Here comes a contemporary complication: with the growth of commerce and industry, including the industry of modern politics, a non-negligible number of Akans have become very rich. In the Akan manner, they make voluntary contributions of unprecedented magnitudes to their communities; and the communities, for their part, reciprocate in fine eulogistic style and lionize them in other ways, too, as is traditional. So far so good, except for the following circumstance. Some of these rich people are known to have come by their assets through debatable techniques of acquisition. The unfortunate effects of this situation on the ideals of the young constitute some of the more intractable problems generated by the impact of industrialization on the Akan traditional ethic.

Another aspect of Akan communalism imperiled by modern conditions, through atrophy rather than adulteration, is the practice of neighborhood mutual aid. This practice had its foundation deep in the Akan conception of values. It is relevant here to recall the Akan adage: *Onipa na ohyia* quoted early in this discussion. It was interpreted as affirming, through the semantic fecundity of the word *hyia*, both that human interest is the basis of all value and that human fellowship is the most important of human needs. The concept of *Hyia* in the context of that adage is, in fact, a veritable mine of ethical meanings. In that context it also bears the seeds of another fundamental thought in the Akan philosophy of life, which is made explicit in the maxim: *Onipa hia moa*, meaning, by way of first approximation, "a human being needs help". The intent of the maxim, however, is not just to observe a fact, but also to prescribe a line of conduct. The imperative here is carried by the word '*hia*', which in this context also has a connotation of entitlement: A human being deserves, ought, to be helped.

This imperative is born of an acute sense of the essential dependency of the human condition. The idea of dependency may even be taken as a component of the Akan conception of a person. "A human

being,” says a noted Akan proverb, “is not a palm tree so as to be self-sufficient”: *Onipa nye abe na ne ho ahyia ne ho*. Indeed, at birth, a human being is not only not self-sufficient but also radically self-insufficient, if one may be permitted the expression: he or she is totally dependent on others. In due course, through growth and acculturation, acquired skills and abilities will reduce this dependency but will never eliminate it completely. Self-reliance is, of course, understood and recommended by the Akans, but its very possibility is predicated upon this ineliminable residue of human dependency. Human beings, therefore, at all times, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, need the help of their kind.

One very standard situation in Akan life in which this truth was continually illustrated was in traditional agriculture. As hinted earlier, this was generally based on small holdings worked by individual farmers and their households. In such a mode of production, recurrent stages were easily foreseeable at which the resources of any one farmer would be insufficient to accomplish, with the required dispatch, a necessary task--be it the initial clearing of the ground or the scooping out of, say, cocoa beans from great heaps of pods. In such moments, all that was necessary was for one to send word to one's neighbors indicating the time, place and the nature of help needed. Very much as day follows night, the people would assemble at the right time at the indicated place with their own implements of work and together help get the job done speedily and almost with festive enthusiasm, in full and warranted conviction that when their turn came the same gesture would be returned in exactly the same spirit. Anybody who availed himself of the benefits of this system and yet dragged his feet when the call came from others was liable to be convicted, at the bar of public opinion, of such fathomless degeneracy as to be branded a social outcast. The type of mutual aid here discussed, probably occurs in varying intensities in rural communities all over the world, but in traditional Akan society it was so much and so palpably a part of working experience that the Akans actually came to think of life (*obra*) as one continuous drama of mutual aid (*nnoboa*). *Obra ye nnoboa*: “Life is mutual aid,” according to an Akan saying.

In recent times, however, amidst the exigencies of urbanization and the increasing--if not as yet preponderant--commercialization of agriculture, the ideology of mutual aid is losing some of its hold; and the spirit of neighborhood solidarity, though by no means extinguished, is finding fewer sweeping avenues of expression. It has not escaped some leaders of opinion that the traditional ethos of mutual aid might profitably be channelled into a strong movement of modern cooperatives, but as yet organized effort in this direction is halting in momentum and paltry in results.

Nevertheless, in countless small ways the sense of human solidarity continues to manifest itself quite pervasively in the daily life of the Akans and of the peoples of Ghana generally, of whom these moral characterizations remain true, if not to the letter, then at least to the syllable. Happily too, the threat of individualism posed by urbanization has not as



yet proved unduly deleterious to this national trait. Thus, even now a Ghanaian on the countryside or in a large city, coming upon another human being, Ghanaian or foreigner, in some difficulty, will go well out of his way to help. As far as he or she is concerned, the bad person is exactly the one who would walk off on the excuse of some pressing business. Of course, if urbanization and other apparent concomitants of modernization are not controlled with conscious and rational planning based on the humane sensitivities of the communalistic ethic, then this fund of automatic good will dry up and African life will experience increasingly the Hobbesian rigors of a single-minded commercialism.

### **KINSHIP AND MORALITY**

The allusion to foreigners in the last paragraph prompts a further observation. The sense of human solidarity which we have been discussing works particularly to the advantage of foreigners, who, in the deeply felt opinion of the Akans, are doubly deserving of sympathy; on grounds, first, of their common humanity and, second, of their vulnerability as individuals cut off for the time being, at any rate, from the emotional and material supports of their kinship environment. Accordingly, when some time ago an Akan guitarist and lyricist, Kwabena Onyina, sang *Akwantu mu sem: Akwantufo ye mmobo* ("Think of the woes of travel: the plight of a traveller is rueful") he struck a sympathetic cord at the deepest reaches of the Akan consciousness. Gratified visitors to Ghana have often been quick to acknowledge the benefits accruing.

Again, to pursue an allusion in the preceding paragraph: the notion of kinship support just mentioned is of the highest importance in the Akan communal set-up, for it is the basis of the sense of belonging which gives the individual much of his psychological stability. (This, incidentally, is why a traveller bereft of it struck the Akan so much as a hardship case). It was also, *conversely*, the basis of a good proportion of the obligations in terms of which his moral standing was assessed. The smallest and the most intimate Akan kinship unit is the matrilineal household. This includes a person's mother and his mother's children, his mother's sisters and brothers, the children of the mother's sisters and, at the top, the grandmother. It is instructive to observe that the English words "aunt" and "cousin" fail to capture the depth of kinship feelings corresponding to the relations of mother's sister and mother's sister's children respectively, in spite of their mechanical correctness as translations. In the Akan language the words for mother and mother's children are the same as for mother's sisters and mother's sister's children. Since the relationships noted already comprehend quite a sizable community, especially if the grandmother concerned has been even averagely fertile, this guarantees that in the traditional setting an Akan child begins life with quite a large sense of belonging and a broad sweep of sympathies.

The next extension of the circle of the kinship relations just described brings us to the level of the lineage. Here the *basic* unit consists of a person's grandmother and her children and grandchildren together with the grandmother's brothers and sisters and the children and grandchildren of her sisters. This unit quickly swells up with the culturally legitimate addition of grandmother's maternal 'cousins' and their descendants. From the point of view of a person's civic existence, this is the most significant circle of relations, for it was through the head of the lineage that, in traditional times, a person had his political representation. The lineage, as can easily be imagined, is a quite considerable group of people, but it is small in comparison with the maximal limit of kinship grouping, which is the set of all the people descending from one woman. The latter is the clan. For a quick idea of magnitude, consider that the Akans, now numbering in the region of seven million, trace their collective ancestry to seven women. Patently, individual Akans will never know all their relatives, but they can rest assured that they have a million of them.

For many practical purposes, however, it is the household and (basic) lineage circles of relations that have the most significance in terms of informal rights and obligations. Two illustrations must suffice here. Adult members of the lineage may be called upon each to make financial contributions to rescue one of the fold fallen on hard times, say, threatening insolvency. In view of the powers of arithmetic, this did not necessarily take a heavy toll of individual pockets. Moreover, it was not lost upon the reflective individual that he or she might conceivably have been the beneficiary.

The next illustration has to do with a lugubrious subject. Bereavement is one of the severest trials of the human psyche; unfortunately, it is recurrent. By both precept and practice Akan traditional culture engages itself, pre-eminently, one might even say, with finding ways to soothe lacerated emotions in such crises. The lineage system incorporates in its arrangements just such a mechanism. In full operation everyone in the lineage is expected to play his part by word, song, dance and material resource. Nor does the culture leave this to the lineage alone. Friends, neighbors and even indirect acquaintances can always be counted upon to help in various ways to lighten the burden of sorrows. The framework for all this is the quite elaborate system of the Akan funeral. In spite of the excesses to which this institution has become subject through the rising tide of commercialism and egotistical exhibitionism, it remains an avenue for the expression of human solidarity at its most heartfelt depth. Proper participation thereto is, in Akan eyes, contributory proof of real personhood.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the foregoing that socialization in the broad context of the lineage can be a veritable school for morality in its Akan acceptance.

It is through the kinship channels of the lineage set-up that the Akan sense of the sociality of human beings finds its most natural expression. Moral life in the wider community is only an extension of a pattern of conduct inculcated at the lineage level. The fundamental values, some of which we have already outlined above, are the same on the two planes, and may be briefly summarized. A communalistic orientation will naturally prize social harmony. A characteristic Akan, and, as it seems, African way of pursuing this ideal is through decision-making by consensus rather than by majority opinion. In politics--traditional African politics, not the modern travesties rampant on the continent--this leads to a form of democracy very different from the Western variety.

A thoroughgoing consensual approach to social issues can be expected to lead to corresponding procedures in other areas of social life too. A particularly interesting case relates to the Akan reaction to wrong doing. Though the retributive spirit is not totally absent from reactions, especially at the state level, to some forms of wrong doing, the predominant tendency is to seek compensation or reconciliation or, in cases where extra-human forces are thought to be estranged, purification. I abstain from using the word "punishment" in this context advisedly, for given this last remark it may well be that there is no unproblematic rendition of this notion in the Akan conceptual framework. I cannot, however, pursue this question here.

A well-known feature of Akan morals is respect for age. This is intelligible not only from the fact that we are dealing with a society strongly based on kinship relations, which are naturally patterned into hierarchies based on age, but also because in traditional societies, which in part Akan society still remains, age is associated with knowledge, experience and wisdom.

Akan moral thinking in regard to sex and marriage also deserves special mention. Here the humanistic and the communalistic aspects of the Akan outlook come into play with interesting results. Because only empirical considerations bearing on human interests are admitted in moral evaluation, such unconditional proscriptions of pre-marital sex as are found in Christian teaching are absent from the moral rules of the Akans. From their point of view, it would be irrational to stop a prospective couple from seeking full knowledge of each other, moral, psychological, sexual and so on. There is, of course, no sexual free-for-all; but, still, a non-furtive relationship between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman need not be restricted to hugging. The only proviso is that it should be above board. On the other hand, the high value placed on reproductive fertility in a communalistic society based on single-family-unit agriculture will predictably lead to the greatest emphasis being placed on the desirability of marriage and procreation. So much is this the case that being married with children well-raised is part of the necessary conditions for personhood in the normative sense. A non-marrying, non-procreative person, however normal otherwise--not to talk of a Casanova equivalent--can permanently forget any prospect of this type of recognition in traditional Akan society.

The only conceivable exceptions will be ones based on the noblest of alternative life commitments.

To understand all these facts about the Akan conception of morals is not necessarily to understand the culture in its entirety, but it is to have some sense of its foundations.

**CHAPTER X**

**TOWARDS  
MORAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA:  
INSIGHTS FROM DANGME  
TRADITIONAL MORAL EXPERIENCE**

*J.N. KUDADJIE*

The submission of this paper is that, if contemporary Africa is to experience real development, then Africa must aim at the moral development of her people. Not only is moral development justifiable in its own right, but it is also a necessary condition for all other aspects of development.

**DEVELOPMENT, ECONOMIC AND MORAL**

*Development as Economic*

Common views of what constitutes development in contemporary Africa are narrow and inadequate: for example, the view that development is coterminous with a buoyant economy or technological advancement.

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, first President of the Republic of Ghana, and for a considerable number of years the dominant voice of African politics and emancipation in our time, stated that the survival of Ghana as an independent nation was contingent on her achieving a 'jet-propelled' rate of economic development.<sup>1</sup> Nearly all the leaders of the newly emergent states made similar proclamations.

In their view, economic development was indispensable; we must catch up with the industrialized West. They were right; for by the standards of the West, where they themselves were educated, conditions in Africa, whence the Western nations had siphoned their wealth, were deplorable. There would be no real independence for the new nations if their economies remained 'undeveloped'. Furthermore, economic development was seen as the means to an attainment of higher standards of living. Therefore, the new nations saw the path to development as consisting in establishing industries, constructing new buildings and roads, and laying a whole host of infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup>Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (New York, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1957), p. x.

We came to accept this concept of development. The indices used to measure a country's development are such things as the types of building, highways, forms of transportation and communication, the number of high-technology industries, sources of energy, forms of entertainment, etc. The more these approximate European patterns and standards then, the more developed a society is supposed to be. This view sees development in 'quantitative' and 'external' terms only.

We consider this a narrow and inadequate concept, for development is total; it has to do with the whole of the inhabited world and the environment, including society, human beings themselves, as well as social systems and institutions. The above concept leaves out the more 'qualitative' and 'internal', i.e., the humanistic and spiritual components of development--such as humaneness, integrity, justice, freedom of the individual, harmony, community, self-fulfillment, contentment, etc.

The narrow view, which unconsolingly lamented the underdevelopment of Africa, seemed oblivious of what was obvious and needed to be preserved and improved upon, namely, that:

traditional societies were in some important respects superior to the Western capitalist societies by which they were ruled. Instead of the self-seeking of the Western way, in terms of which it was a virtue and duty for man to prey upon man, there was an ethic that came much nearer to the Christian doctrine. Neighbor and stranger were treated with consideration, there was an instant and unquestioning willingness to share. Disputes were settled by discussion, verdicts implemented by force of public opinion and without the intervention of police.<sup>2</sup>

Oblivious of such truths about ourselves, we have succumbed to condemning everything about ourselves as not being good enough. We compare ourselves with the West and give ourselves second place. It is not surprising that even African leaders so readily accepted such value-loaded terms as 'underdeveloped nations', or even 'developing nations' to describe our nations; while we saw Western nations as the 'developed societies'--when all that should be meant is 'technologically underdeveloped' or 'technologically developed', and so on.

When development programs are preoccupied with economic development, there is danger of losing that component of development that our forefathers fostered: real humanity, humaneness, fellow-feeling, and concern for one another.

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<sup>2</sup>Guy Routh, "Development Paths in Tanzania", in *Development Paths in Africa and China*, ed. U.G. Damachi, et al. (International Institute for Labor Studies, 1976), p. 10.

*Consequences of the Narrow View of Development*

Several consequences follow. One is that this dimension is not included in many national development plans. Therefore, there is very little, if anything, by way of a national policy for the cultivation of such values. At most, development plans have something on human resource development; but this has meant no more than training for skills to operate the increasingly sophisticated machineries of modern industry and administration or mobilization of the human factor to promote development only in the narrow sense.

We have a situation where many of the traditional and indigenous institutions and systems of inculcating and developing these values have been eroded by modernism, with no concerted effort to salvage or even replace them. Yet the connections between economic development, social development and morality should be clear.

It is comforting to note that some African leaders have seen the connection. Julius Nyerere, for instance, made it clear that: “[f]or socialism the basic purpose is the well-being of the people, and the basic assumption is an acceptance of human equality.”<sup>3</sup>

The late Lieutenant General, A.A. Afrifa, a member of the then Government of Ghana, said in an address to the First Parliament of the Second Republic of Ghana--in the context of a passionate call for national reconstruction--that: “[i]t is being both realistic and revolutionary to acknowledge that there is a relation between morality and national development and to accept the challenge for social behavior that it implies.”<sup>4</sup>

J.J. Rawlings, Chairman of Ghana’s Provisional National Defence Council, from the very onset of his revolution saw that one must tackle both economic and social development together. In an address to the chiefs and people of one of the districts, he declared in one and the same breath that: “[t]oday, the struggle is for economic emancipation, it is a struggle for a closely-knit national unity, devoid of the shameful and haunting shadows of divisionism. Today, it is a struggle for the restoration of the principles of integrity and morality in our national life.”<sup>5</sup> It will not work to neglect either.

The paucity of morally good human resources has thwarted efforts to bring about development even in its narrow sense. There is no lack of evidence that development projects have been left incomplete or severely

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<sup>3</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 303.

<sup>4</sup> Africa, Sessional Address at the state opening of First Sitting of First Parliament of 2nd Republic, 2 October 1969 (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> J.J. Rawlings, *Selected Speeches*, Vol.V--*The New Direction and Purpose* (Information Services Department, Accra, 1988), p. 38.

truncated. In some cases they did not even begin, though plans were drawn up, funds available, and contracts awarded and paid for. Tenders have been inflated to include kick-backs; at work sites materials, never delivered, were nonetheless booked and paid for, ghost names have appeared on payment vouchers and emoluments, while claims and entitlements were paid out to non-existent workers. Workers have pilfered parts of the very machines they were to work with, and millions of meters of copper telephone cables have been cut off by gangs, thus disabling a whole network of telephone systems. Food items, meant for school children have been diverted or their prices inflated; parts of foreign loans for the nation have found their way into people's private bank accounts.

Thus many development projects have not materialized, simply because of the poor human factor. We are speaking of corruption in its broadest connotation. In many of our societies there is no sign of abatement in the situation. In fact, the malady is on the increase and is assuming epidemic proportions as people and officers of all ranks join in these evil syndicates. Governments have been oppressive and have violated fundamental human rights. Lack of serious moral, social and political commitment, sensitivity and probity, has thwarted many development projects. Consequently, development whether in the total or narrow sense, has become an unattained goal in Africa.

#### *Factors Accounting for the Failure*

It would be naïve to suggest that moral turpitude alone is responsible for the state of relative under-development in Africa. The factors that militate against development are many. To mention a few, there are economic factors, such as the relatively low level of industrialization, the general poverty of the people, unfavorable international terms of trade, problems of balance of payments and the strangling effect of the workings of the international economic order generally. There are also ideological and political factors, such as political intrigue and instability, lack of continuity of national policies, intolerance of dissent, arrogant non-cooperation and misuse of talents. Besides these are the demographic factors of migration and a brain-drain. Nor can we forget the social, religious and other cultural obstacles such as fear and superstition, demonic activity, the subordinate role of women, systems of land tenure, a cultural inferiority complex, added to inappropriate technologies and the uncritical acceptance of foreign values and usages. We have, as well, an irrational adherence to custom and tradition. There is an underlying lack of clear, coherent and co-ordinated policies.

An analysis of the foregoing factors would show how large is the human factor component of the obstacles to development on the continent. For meaningful development and true progress to be realized, the importance of the human factor cannot be underestimated, since humans are the chief actors in the whole drama of development. Adequate engagement



with the human factor would necessitate dealing with the total human person and seeking to make the best of him or her--as a physical, political, psycho-social, rational, spiritual and moral being.

*The Moral Factor in Development*

Here we single out moral development for discussion. Certainly, it is an aspect of total development, but we would contend also that moral development is a *sine qua non* of all development. Although the presence and activity of a few moral giants in a community can and has made a difference, it is important to have a whole community of persons who are morally alert, responsible and patriotic. Such a community may be created by forging together, through a series of deliberate and organized acts, a society of persons who take morality seriously; who are deeply concerned about the moral aspect of things, just as they are concerned about other aspects of things, material, economic or politic; who endeavor both in public and in private life to do what is morally right, while avoiding the morally evil.

Such a community would share and cherish in common some basic, fundamental moral values. Some broad ideal which would determine what ought or ought not be done is needed to serve both as a solid springboard for--and the target of--all development efforts. When such an ideal or national goal has been worked out, the sub-ideals and sub-goals as well as their implications must also be drawn out, and the steps to their attainment carefully worked out.

Creating a community of moral individuals will necessitate moral education of the members of the society. The values thus inculcated will have to be enforced through various sanctions in order to get the moral agents to pursue what is right and avoid what is wrong. Being human, people will naturally, from time to time, fall short of the ideal and do what is not right: no matter how much moral education you give or how rigorously you apply the sanctions. Therefore, it is desirable to have a means of restoring offenders and enabling them to resume their position as moral members of the community.

To achieve these objectives a variety of agencies and social institutions will have to be used--particularly the family, the educational institutions, persons in leadership positions, religious bodies, and the state or community, as such. The goal is to produce moral beings of character who, because of what and who they are, will build structures and systems that can contribute to progress, thus enhancing the quality of the life of the individual himself and, consequently, of the wider society.

**AN AFRICAN SYSTEM OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT THE DANGME EXPERIENCE**

This idea is not entirely new or foreign to Africa: through and

through it is a traditional system. This section will be devoted to sketching in outline what is done in traditional Dangme society to make members of the society responsible individuals who can contribute to the realization of the good life.

In Dangme<sup>6</sup> traditional thought a human being is a composite being with three aspects.

(i) *nōmō tso*, the physical body: made up of the *he lo* (flesh), *pani* (sinews), *wu* (bones), and *muō* (blood); it comes from one's self. Of itself, the physical body cannot and does not do anything.

(ii) *mumi* (spirit) which may be seen as the life force or principle which animates the body and makes it function; when it leaves the body, a person is said to be dead. *Mumi* is believed to come from *kujamo*, God of the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

(iii) *Kla* or *susuma* or *nini*, often spoken of as a person's real self or double. It pre-exists and survives the body. It is the carrier of a person's *sese* (literally message, errand, parting word, or farewell address). *Sōsōō* embodies the kind of person one will be on earth, and the major events of his life. Fulfilling one's *sōsōō* is one of two great ideals of life.

If one fulfills one's *Sōsōō* in his earthly sojourn, one will regain admission to the world of spirits where one had pre-existed. The fulfillment of *sōsōō* is determined partly by the quality of a person's life, how one relates to other persons in the community; and one's response to the likes and dislikes of the gods and ancestors. Re-entry to the spirit world and peaceful reunion with one's forebearers in the hereafter is a motivating factor for striving to be morally and religiously responsible.

The other ideal of life--perhaps the stronger of the two--is to enjoy the good life here on earth. The good life on earth is lived and realized in the community. The Dangme have a vision of the ideal society in which the good life may be realized. The vision, which is the Dangme *summum bonum*, may be summed up in the one word *kplōkōtō*. The word *kplōkōtō* literally means abundance or well-being. When unpacked, *kplōkōtō* denotes: A society in which maximum health and long life are enjoyed by all; where men and women have children of their own flesh and blood; where each is at liberty to pursue his or her interests, provided these enhance the general good, or do not hinder the general good; where nature, and the gods and the ancestors and Nyingmo (God) himself smile on the community and shower on it their blessings; where there is abundant yield;

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<sup>6</sup>The Dangme live in the south eastern corner of Ghana in a rough triangle whose base is the Atlantic Ocean and running from Kpone twenty miles east of Accra the capital, for 70 miles up to the estuary of the Volta River, then northward from both Kpone and the Adaestuary for some sixty miles to the Afram River.

where misfortunes are no more, and evil men and forces are non-existent or, where existent, subdued; where there is contentment and harmony, peace and progress; where no man is an island unto himself, but the concerns of each are part of those of the other, and what affects one affects all.

Founders of towns and villages have this vision, and they impress it upon their descendants and others who sojourn among them. They direct whatever is done in the community to the realization of that vision.

The Danish existentialist philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, observed that natural man lies between being an angel and a beast; to be human is not automatic, it is a task. This view of man would be also the view of the Dangme. It is said that in the olden days, when a male child was born, their midwives would sing a song in which they inquired whether what had been born was *Adō eko*, i.e., just any sort of man; whether it was *Adō mluku*, i.e., a man without any useful parts, just a lump of human flesh--in other words, a stupid person; or whether it was, indeed, *Adō ngmiingmi*, that is, a man--in the sense of a strong, brave, heroic, level-headed type of man, without any adulterating elements.<sup>7</sup> In other words, they were expressing the desire for a truly humane person.

Knowing that it is not automatic to be humane, the Dangme take deliberate steps to make members of the society moral, through a three-fold system of moral education, enforcement of the moral norms and values, and the reformation of moral offenders. We shall sketch the practice.

(i) *Moral education* is both formal and non-formal. It starts very early, is intensified during the child's formative years between ages five and fifteen, and continues in various forms until one dies. In many ethnic groups moral education starts at the outdooring of the baby. Among the Dangme the celebrant, who must be a respectable, good, elderly man or woman (depending on the sex of the baby), dips his or her finger into a mixture of water and roasted corn flour; puts it on the baby's tongue and speaks to it. He or she tells the baby to become a true Dangme; one who is honest and truthful, not given to lying; one quick to see and hear, but slow to speak; one who is humble, who eats from his own labor, does not covet, steal, or live a promiscuous life. Although this may be regarded more as symbolic than a real education, it is an important symbol and foundation that reminds those gathered about what society expects from them. The outdooring of a baby is an occasion for formal moral education.

Other formal occasions are when a head of family or clan convenes a meeting of the family, usually at dawn, and talks to them about life and how they should live good lives in order not to fail and thus bring disgrace upon the family; how to be successful and bring honor to the family. Again, at the passage from one stage or state in life to another--such as adolescence, marriage, becoming a master herbalist or priest--the novices

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<sup>7</sup>D.A. Puplampu, *Dangme Munyu Tub>--Adangme Manner of Speech*, Parts 1 and 2 (London: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 13, 18.

are equipped with both professional and moral knowledge pertaining both to their prospective roles and to the general values of the society.

The bulk of moral education is non-formal, and is given by parents, elders, chiefs and all in a leadership role, when the opportunity presents itself to prompt, direct advise, admonish, or even punish or reward somebody for their conduct.

(ii) *Enforcement of morality*: The values thus inculcated are enforced and re-enforced through a variety of practices. For example, religious sanctions are used. An offended party may have a culprit accursed at a shrine for the god or spirit to 'arrest' him. There is a trial by ordeal. Magical objects are hung in farms or other property which scare away would-be thieves. Even marital fidelity is sought by the use of padlocks in sympathetic and homeopathic magic. Oath swearing and covenanting are also used to keep people faithful. Thus, the belief in and fear of God and the invocation of the divinities to bless the good and punish the evil help to encourage virtue and discourage vice.

Non-religious sanctions are also used such as: 'taking away' the family name from an unrepentant criminal and disinheriting him; ostracizing and excluding an immoral person from social intercourse; disgracing notoriously evil persons such as sorcerers and witches by dragging about or burning their corpses; casting insinuation in song and drumming at festivals, sometimes in plain and direct language; summoning to a chief's court resulting in fines or serious upbraiding.

There are also positive sanctions such as giving gifts of property to, or conferring honorific titles on, singularly good or brave people; offering them a seat on the Council of Elders; and performing special dirges and drumming at their funerals. Trustworthy youth may be given some property or valuable personal effects to start life with or take into marriage; to others family secrets may be revealed, or the secret powers of herbs, etc.

(iii) *Moral Reformation*: A person who has committed a moral offence may become agonizingly aware of it through his own (psychological) feeling or reflection, through some other person's prompting, through some physical sign of illness, or through revelation in a dream, vision, or spirit possession. Steps are then taken for him to confess the offence and to purge himself through religious rituals of its vitiating effect on his personality. That done and his personality thus restored, he is believed to have new power generated in him to enable him to lead a good life. He then makes resolutions and pledges, and is counselled to turn a new leaf.

Through this three-fold system, together with other social institutions, the Dangme like other traditional societies have managed to create for themselves communities with fairly high moral standards. Unfortunately, this traditional method of assuring proper moral development has been swept away in the tide of the complex phenomenon of modernization. The traditional system is, of course, not perfect. It cannot be used wholesale in contemporary society on account of such factors as

urbanization, pluralism, the influence of new religions (Christianity, Islam, etc.), the school system, and the legacy of British law and practice. Nevertheless, its spectrum is a good model and can be used for moral development.

The hasty quest for modernization has led to uncritical adoption of all manner of so-called modern values and practices, and the refusal to adapt the old ways. This attitude has contributed to the emotional and moral ambivalencies,<sup>8</sup> the poverty, and the feelings of non-fulfillment plaguing many of the so-called Third World countries which are still undergoing rapid social change. There is an urgent need to save the situation. Institutions, agencies and persons committed to the promotion of human development must actively assist interested parties to document the dying systems and values that sustained traditional societies and to work out suitable adaptations through seminars, workshops, writing, etc. Such gestures will be as great a contribution to development as are grants or loans to build hospitals to cure sick persons, or the funding of other 'development projects'.

#### **SOME OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

We observed earlier that the low level of development on the African continent may be traced partially to the relatively low level of moral probity in contemporary society. We have substantiated the opinion with examples, although without specific reference to time and place. We do not think that the statement can be seriously controverted.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that in all our countries pronouncements by governments and high government officials, natural rulers, religious bodies and personalities, and their constitutions, laws and traditional usages contain very high and lofty ideals and moral values. In some cases, we have also acknowledged God and pledged to keep faith with Him. While some of these ideals have been realized in some measure, many have remained unrealized.

There are numerous causes and reasons for the yawning gap between the ideals and the realities.

(1) In a number of cases, the ideals are not well known to the people who are expected to be guided by them, but remain the private visions only of visionaries.

(2) In some cases, the visions are shared with the people but they are too abstract to be appreciated by most. Many people can be moved to action only when they are shown in concrete terms what they should do or

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<sup>8</sup>This has been researched and well-documented by eminent scholars. See for example studies published in *African Worlds--Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954).

not do in order to live in the manner of a given virtue; or when they are shown vividly what chain of consequences--good or evil--flow from particular acts or class of acts or attitudes.

(3) Generally speaking, our moral education is inadequate, and is given very little formal attention especially in the post-primary educational institutions, professional colleges and apprenticeship workshops. Much of what may pass for moral education is no more than moral discussions or exhortations. But mere exhortations are not enough if the hearers do not really know what they ought to do in particular situations or why they must do so.

(4) Sometimes, people know what they should do or should not do, as well as the possible consequences of their acts, but because they lack the will to persevere, they take the easier way out and so do not do the right thing.

(5) Another important reason for the failure is the lack of inspiring examples by those in positions of leadership--in homes, schools, workplaces, church, state, clubs, professions, etc. It is a fact of life that the leaders affect the led.

(6) We should mention also the uncritical adoption of foreign practices and values, and the iconoclastic rejection of established such indigenous Ghanaian values and concepts as honesty, senses of honor or shame, modesty, godliness.

(7) There seem also to be legalism and over-externalization in our moral education and in the endorsement of morals. There is too much emphasis on getting people to perform the right acts, not so much for their own sake or for the sake of dignity and honor of the moral agent, or even for the benefit of others; but rather in order to receive praise or reward, or, on the other hand, in order to avoid blame or punishment. As long as the prospects of praise and reward or the threat of blame and punishment are there, people tend to do the right thing or avoid evil. But once these sanctions are removed, or dismantled and rendered ineffectual, they quickly fall into the immoral way. Although the enforcement of morality by punishment is essential for making people moral, this must not be done in isolation and to the neglect of the other two requirements--moral education and moral recovery and reformation.

(8) There is an increasingly poor outlook on life as a whole. We do not seem to understand the meaning of life; our ideas of what makes a good life--i.e., true well-being, success, fulfillment--are faulty. Consequently we pursue a host of mirages such as vain-glory, pleasure, wealth however gained, power (political, economic, spiritual) for its own sake, and so on. As Plato would put it, instead of being lovers of true wisdom regarding life (i.e., philosophers), we are lovers of appearance, or of mere belief (i.e., we are philodoxical).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, Book 5.

(9) Another reason for our generally low moral performance is the prevalence of frustrating official policies and the prevailing difficult economic and social conditions. Sometimes people blame the breakdown in our national moral fiber on the harsh economic conditions. That could be overdone, for, in many of the cases of misappropriation, diversion, embezzlement, smuggling, fraud, etc., the culprits do not commit these evils merely to survive; they are clearly misguided wealth-seekers and power-seekers. We should not so quickly blame the economic situation for our immorality. If anything, the reverse is nearer the truth: our lack of sense of duty, our irresponsibility and lack of integrity are partly responsible for our economic difficulties. As a northern Ghanaian proverb goes: "You do not blame the ground on which you have fallen; rather, you should blame the stone that tripped you." We have fallen on economic difficulties, but the stone that tripped us is moral ineptitude.

Having said that, it must also be acknowledged that in a situation where economic and social conditions do not allow one to procure so basic a necessity for biological survival as adequate food from one's honest earnings, not to speak of meeting other legitimate needs, it is not easy to keep one's moral fiber intact. Official policies that perpetrate or perpetuate such harsh conditions are, therefore, also blamable.

Another example of a frustrating official policy is the promotion of gambling in one form or another. This contradicts efforts to build a society of people who are responsible, hardworking, contented with honest earnings. The promotion of gambling and the high rate of patronage it enjoys are at once causes and symptoms of our moral decadence.

(10) The contribution of the foregoing factors to our moral problems will be the more appreciated if the human condition as a basic factor in the moral life is remembered. There is a natural tendency in man to be selfish, to give in to the emotions, passions, and sentiments, and to disobey conscience which, properly, should control instincts and passions.<sup>10</sup>

The Greek philosopher, Socrates, wondered why in Athenian society there were teachers of every conceivable trade and art--shipbuilding, carpentry, masonry, shoemaking, sculpture, etc.--but in the most crucial area of *arete*, the virtuous and upright life, there were no teachers. Everybody was supposed to be a teacher of *arete*,<sup>11</sup> and that explains why the society was corrupt. For the supposed teachers--parents, teachers, politicians, rulers, etc.--did not themselves know what goodness was and so naturally taught the wrong thing and gave poor examples. It was this observation mainly that made Plato developed the theory of philosopher-kings--leaders who, through special education and commitment, would know and live the morally good life, and would, therefore, manage the affairs of the state most effectively.

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<sup>10</sup>Joseph Butler, Sermon 2 from his Fifteen Sermons.

<sup>11</sup>Plato, *Protagoras*, and *Meno*.

Like the Greeks, we expect all people in positions of leadership to be teachers and exemplars of *arete*, and rightly so; but we do not equip them for these roles. In traditional African societies, before anyone assumes a new role or status in society--as herbalist, or priest, or chief, or parent, or ordinary adult--he or she is put in confinement and educated, not only in the professional and technical know-how but in the ethics and values of the society in general and those pertaining to his or her particular prospective role. This is lacking in contemporary African society and is one reason for our failure. We assume wrongly that without tutoring, a person can exhibit moral qualities once he is a leader or parent, even if he had never really been moral or responsible; or that it is enough if he can give moralistic talks.

(11) The final reason we wish to adduce is the neglect of religion. We have ridiculed religion or else paid lip service to it. Consequently, we have not realized its full impact. As St. Paul so aptly put it, in the last days people "will hold to the outward form of our religion, but reject its real power". Because of the absence of the power of religion in them, such people:

will be selfish, greedy, boastful, and conceited; they will be insulting, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, and irreligious; they will be unkind, merciless, slanderers, violent, and fierce; they will hate the good; they will be treacherous, reckless, and swollen with pride; they will love pleasure rather than God.<sup>12</sup>

## THE WAY FORWARD

What then shall we do? There are countless possibilities, but I would submit only eight for discussion and action.

1. *Home and Parental Training.* First and foremost, we must intensify home training, and find appropriate ways of making it work. The formative years of a child are known to be most crucial in his or her character formation. The old saying is true: train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. (Proverbs 22: 6) Much of what the adult man will be in society is what the child already is in its mother's lap. Societies of parents and especially women's organizations should play a leading role in the moral transformation crusade. We must help children to form the right habits and values right from the beginning, both by precept and by example. To this end, the parents themselves need to be equipped. Once a good foundation has been laid in the home, we will get somewhere. The other re-enforcement will come from school, church, and the wider community.

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<sup>12</sup>2nd Timothy 3: 1-4, Good News Bible.



2. *Moral Education in Educational Institutions.* In traditional African society, moral education was provided in the home, in the institutions in which people learned their trades, and during the confinement or camping preceding their assumption of new roles. In modern times, a great deal of time is spent away from home, and the 'school and church' have taken over most of the functions of the traditional home and institutions. Yet the school has neglected character formation. At most, morality and civil responsibility are taught only in the lower or primary level institutions. But moral education must not be confined to small children; it must be a life-long affair.

Education itself has always been understood to be a three-part affair: the imparting and acquiring of (i) information, (ii) skills, and (iii) aptitudes and values. Somehow, gradually we have progressively left out the third dimension which is meant to bring about character development and moral virtue. This third dimension of education must be provided by the school at all levels of education.

It is pertinent to remember that in America, as part of the American Revolution and the effort in its systematic national development plan, the colleges (and later the universities) were charged with the responsibility of preparing and producing leaders for the newly developing nation. This need was met in the provision of a wide range of courses, chief of which was moral philosophy. This course was taught to all seniors (those in their final year and about to complete their college career) by no less a person than the college president himself--i.e., the principal or vice chancellor. The colleges and universities were developed by educational reformers with an overriding purpose, namely, "to train up a generation of leaders imbued with a sense of responsibility and commitment to the nation."<sup>13</sup> Daniel C. Gilman, president of Johns Hopkins University, acknowledged as the model of the research university, is reported to have said (representing the dominant view of university reformers), that "[t]he object of the university is to develop character--to make men."<sup>14</sup> The American colleges may not have made all their products into angels; but it cannot be disputed that by a deliberate policy they produced enough men of integrity and with a sense of responsibility and character to provide good leadership and laid the foundation for the nation's political, social, business, and religious life.

Contemporary Africa is very much like the America of the 18th and 19th centuries. Our colleges of education and universities must aim to produce not only brilliant, first class, theologians, or lawyers, or accountants or medical doctors or politicians. If these are not morally equipped, they are a liability to society. We must produce men and women of character. We would propose that 'Morals' or 'Education in Values' be taught in all African educational and vocational institutions and

<sup>13</sup>The John Hastings Center Report, Vol. 9, No. 6, December, 1979; p. 24.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* Quoted from Richard J. Storr, "Academic Culture and the History of American Higher Education", *Journal of General Education* (1950), p. 13.

apprenticeship workshops, including the institutions of higher learning. It must be a compulsory ancillary or ceiling course for every student.

3. *Philosophy and Education.* To buttress the foregoing, we strongly suggest that our educational planners and policy makers should as a matter of urgency evolve an educational policy and philosophy that will address the moral issue. Such a policy must, among other things, recognize the crucial role of morality in the life of the individuals and the community. The content of educational programs must, therefore, be couched in such a way as to lay the foundations for the development not only of an 'economic man' but also of a moral being imbued with the spirit of service to his fellows and love for his country.<sup>15</sup>

4. *The Meaning of Life.* It is a fact of life that our general outlook on life and our actions arise from our presuppositions. Our ideals also are laden with presuppositions. Answers to questions like: What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is the good life?, etc., can make useful contributions to the quest for total development. We are convinced that some of the unhelpful attitudes and behavior exhibited in our societies is due to poor understanding of the nature of man, the meaning of life, what constitutes success, etc. We would, therefore, call on the experts who are concerned with human values and conduct--such as moral philosophers, theologians, sociologists, psychologists, jurists--to take up the challenge and prepare simple, clear materials for education: in books, for radio, and for television programs, etc.

5. *Rediscovering Our Values.* We have observed that many of our values are being swept away by the tide of modernization. Some effort is being made by various institutions and individuals to document or preserve them. The effort needs to be intensified. There is need also to work out replacements or modifications for systems, practices and values that are obsolete. This needs adequate, appropriate knowledge, good research and reflection. How can we get people who are sufficiently knowledgeable in the traditional things as well as contemporary conceptions and trends to do effective contextualization? If we have the people, can we set them aside for this all-important work, seeing that most of such competent people are already engaged in other ways? How can we fund their work, which can be very expensive? Perhaps this is one area to which international agencies interested in promoting development should turn their energies.

6. *National Goals and Values.* African countries are passing through a phase of rapid turnover of regimes and governments. As each regime comes into office with its own package of policies and goals, usually quite

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<sup>15</sup>See The Third Report of the Education Commission on Basic Education (Accra, August, 1986) p. 56, para. 190. The commission set up by the Ghana Government submitted an excellent recommendation in this regard. Of the thirteen objectives of education which they outlined, five are geared towards morality, namely, patriotism, citizenship, fellow-feeling, internationalism, and morality. The objectives are meant to ensure real development of the nation.

different and even opposed to their predecessor's, we have, in important respects, divergent goals and values. In other respects, however, there are a number of converging points. In the quest for national moral development, it is desirable that we know what broad goals and values we should cherish and share. Once we know this, we can find means of attaining them and pass them on to future leaders. In this respect, we should work out what is expected of various national offices and functionaries. Such a document will help people appointed to these positions as well as the rest of the community to know exactly what is expected of them as leaders. With such goals and values formulated, various manuals can then be produced for teaching and training purposes, and for the preparation of those aspiring to leadership roles in the community. It should not be impossible to synthesize the various ideals enshrined in manifestos, constitutions, traditional ideals, etc. Needless to say, such national goals or values will have to transcend the narrow views of any particular regime or ethnic or religious group in order to make it possible for all to have allegiance to them.

7. *Moral Reformation or Recovery Program.* Nearly all African nationals have embarked upon economic recovery programs to save their ailing economies and revive them. This is laudable. With equal justification, indeed, *a fortiori*, we must have moral recovery programs, too. If we do not, the economic recovery programs will not achieve much; for if we have morally corrupt persons to man our industries and work our policies, we can be sure that they will succumb to the usual human weaknesses. They may even use their peculiar knowledge and ingenuity to subvert the very systems they are supposed to work in for their own personal and private interests and to the detriment of the whole community. We should urge our governments and other agencies, such as religious bodies, to take up this crusade.

8. *The Religious Factor in Moral Development.* Much of our moral education has taken the form of getting a person, through habituation, to perform the right external acts. Habituation has proved to be inadequate for lasting moral character formation. Since morality has to do with both conduct and being, moral character must be moulded not only through habituation and external acts but through molding the inner man.

In this, religion is very important. The making of moral beings is essentially creating or even recreating the very fabric of the person. Essentially, it must come from within, though externals may help. Religion itself claims the ability to bring about radical change in a person and give one power to live the good life. Some may contend that religion is not all that important even for moral regeneration, and that what we need is scientific knowledge, technology, viable economic enterprises, industries, etc. Put in that way, one forgets that through history man's quest for God has inspired his art, his poetry, music, literature, morality, etc. To neglect the role of religion in any attempt to create a moral community would be an exercise in futility.

The religious claim is that when the inner man is renewed and God's power dwells in the person, his desires change, his life is ennobled, and his moral sense is strengthened and toughened. Much empirical evidence supports the claim.

To have real development in contemporary Africa we must, among other things, have moral character. We must educate ourselves and enforce our morals and values. It is necessary to build the infrastructure and political institutions, but above all to nurture the inner man for experience shows that genuinely right acts and good conduct can only be produced by a morally good person. In our bid to realize total development the human heart must be made good. Thus, will our moral and social development be attained.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

We have attempted to show that the common concepts of development held in contemporary Africa are narrow, leading to preoccupation with economic development to the almost total neglect of organized moral development. We observed that such neglect has resulted in lowering moral probity among our people and thwarted many development efforts. Moreover, certain official policies and development projects blunt moral sensitivity.

A detailed analysis of the causes and reasons of the deteriorating moral standards has been made. A case has been established for conscious efforts to tackle the issue of moral development as both an end in itself and as a necessary condition for real and total development on the continent.

We have submitted that in traditional African society, there are systems and models which we can adapt and employ in the contemporary situation. The Dangme experience and practice have been used to demonstrate the submission. A number of concrete and practical steps have been suggested which, if followed, we are convinced, will enable us to attain our desired goal of true development in contemporary Africa.

**CHAPTER XI**  
**VALUES IN A CHANGING SOCIETY**  
**MAN, ANCESTORS AND GOD**

*N.K. DZOBO*

One aspect of life which many people fear and find very unsettling is the aspect of change. But whether we like it or not, change is the law of growth, and growth is the law of life: change, therefore, is the basic law of life. The late world-renowned anthropologist, Margaret Mead, said: "No one will live all his life in the world into which he was born, and no one will die in the world in which he worked in his maturity." Change must be accepted as an inevitable condition of a meaningful life.

All significant social changes are related to changes in the need situations of man, which vary from the needs of social and physical life to those of the moral and spiritual life. In different parts of the world people respond to the changing needs of life on the basis of what they consider to be desirable and satisfying, that is, on the basis of values. These give direction to human behavior and serve as a lodestar through the various changing processes of life.

My first major submission, therefore, is that the present socio-economic and political confusion and impotence of African nations is a reflection of the fundamental changes that have come about as the result of the meeting of indigenous humanistic value systems with the Western market-value orientation, and our inability to assimilate these changes effectively to a new way of life. Any attempt, therefore, to work out a theory of education and development, any attempt to forge a consistent and united theory of value that will serve as a guiding principle for the building of a nation and as a guide to the individual in the creative use of his energy, time and opportunities, must identify and clarify the relative worth of the indigenous humanistic orientation, on the one hand, and the market-value orientation, on the other.

This conclusion points to one general function of education in our fast-changing social context. To be meaningful in our situation, education should be able to help the child to have a clear notion of the nature of both the invading and indigenous values that impinge upon his or her experience. It should help him/her work out principles for selecting the values they will need in order to cope effectively with the demands of modern living, while maintaining at the same time the integrity of their indigenous cultural identity.

Value clarification, the working out of sound and objective principles of value selection and the preservation of the integrity of our indigenous culture, are of crucial importance for two main reasons. Africa

today is a world of shaken beliefs and uncertain and changing values. This is the time when we, as self-governing people, need a framework of ideas, guiding principles and clear values that will help us define and determine our collective as well as individual destiny, and retrieve and maintain our self-respect as a people. The study of values is, therefore, not a mere academic exercise; it is an inescapable imperative for rational and meaningful national development.

## VALUES

### *Definition of Value*

Before we look in some detail at the two major value orientations that have formed the main reference points for our social and individual behavior and suggest a procedure for their use as subject matter of education, I want to be clear about the use of some axiological terms: What are values, and what indigenous and emergent values do we have?

As there is no universally agreed definition of values, they have been interpreted in a number of different ways. Raths, Harmin and Simon contend that "out of experience may come certain general guides to behavior. These guides tend to give direction to life and may be called values." The major function of values is to provide the basic standards against which people can judge a given act, the direction which the political and religious leadership is taking, and other factors that determine the drift of society.

The definition of value I have referred to so far is associated with the philosophical systems known as pragmatism and realism. These philosophical systems maintain that values have no ontological status and so are not found ready-made in the natural or supernatural order of things. They are dependent upon efforts, interests and the needs of people; in other words, values are created by people out of their experienced needs and desires. Values therefore are bio-social and spiritual creations, and are invented like any other social creations by individuals and societies to serve the purpose of guiding human choices and behavior. Such values are derived from experience and tested, verified and maintained by experience.

### *Indigenous African Conceptions of Value*

There is an interesting African conception of values which we find in some proverbs and maxims. To our people, value is primarily the power to satisfy human needs. It is found in a person, in things, in situations and relationships. It is this ability of value to satisfy needs and desires that causes people to desire those things in which value is found. I want to use three proverbs to illustrate the African conception of value.

1. It is the tasty soup that draws seats around it.

2. Goodness sells itself, badness walks about looking for buyers.
3. The beautiful bead does not speak, i.e., does not advertise its beauty.

In the first proverb the value of the soup or meal is its ability to satisfy human hunger in a palatable way. In the second and third proverbs, goodness and beauty are abstract values which have the power to satisfy the need to be creative and to behold what is pleasing to the soul.

Values, however, have a potential and instrumental character. The potential and instrumental character of value is brought out clearly in one proverb which says: "The shrew mouse (which stinks) says: 'They say I am no good, but I become good when the juju-man is preparing his medicine.'" The instrumental (or, actual) value of the shrew mouse is relative to certain need situations, but it always has the power, i.e., a potential value, to satisfy needs, whether the needs arise or not.

This conception of value has some implications for marriage in our indigenous society. When a man marries a woman, he marries her in the first place for her potential value, that is, for the power to produce children, which power we call fertility. He also marries her for the sake of her instrumental value, that is, for her ability to extend his lineage by bringing forth children. When the woman comes into the marriage and she is not able to actualize her power to reproduce, then troubles begin. This can lead to a divorce, to the man marrying another woman provided his own potency has been proved; it can also lead to a strained marital relationship in which the value of the woman is said "to have been dead" (*Asi ku le enu*--Ewe).

The major functions of values are, as already stated, to serve as guides and judges for individual actions and to direct the choices and conduct of people in a culture. In respect of individuals and cultures, values are interdependent. They are first created by individuals out of their group experience, and then flow into and help to shape the culture. The culture in turn helps to maintain, diffuse and nurture those values created by individuals and accepted into the culture. In time, all individuals habitually introject certain values from their respective cultures. Individuals who are more independent in their thinking, however, are able to rise above at least many of the culture's values that impinge upon them. These individuals, e.g., Freud, Karl Marx, Jesus and Copernicus, in fact, are the prime movers of progress. Such independent individuals change the course of ideas and loosen the hold of obsolete values, and, in the end, change the course of history itself.

It is, therefore, not enough to have teachers and teacher-surrogates who can pass on values from one generation and culture to another. We must have original individual teachers who can transform and adapt values and invent new ones to meet the need for modernization and progress. The teacher of value education should always keep in mind that:

Time makes ancient good uncouth,  
 They must upward still and onward  
 Who would keep abreast of Truth.

Present socio-economic and political confusion in Africa reflects fundamental conflicts and changes that result from the meeting of our indigenous value orientation, which is basically humanistic, with the imported Western value system, which is mainly market oriented. This position must be qualified, e.g., by adding the fact of contact with all kinds of invading values, among which we may mention Christian, Islamic and socialist values. However, the most serious clash is the meeting of our humanistic values with market values.

I will first discuss our humanistic value orientation because it is the root of our value system.

### **THE MARKET VALUE ORIENTATION**

While the humanistic value orientation derives its origin from man's devotion to the ultimate or the infinite in the finite, market value orientation derives its source from devotion to man's economic and social interests and well-being, which are believed to be the chief ends of life. Instead of being seen as made up of creative humanities, society is viewed as comprising incompatible individual socio-economic interests, divided into groups with opposing socio-economic interests. There is, therefore, a constant struggle in society to maintain and safeguard privileged socio-economic interests and positions. Life then becomes a struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, with the weak falling by the way.

The most cherished value in a system which is based upon conflict and struggle is power. This is not the same type of power we encounter in the African humanistic value orientation. Where life is seen to be based mainly on conflict and competition, power becomes the ability of each competitor to realize his goals and objectives in the face of opposition from competitors. Success is regarded as a satisfactory outcome of the competition. Feelings of insecurity are usually heightened in a society that is based on such competition. Cooperation is not completely eliminated from a conflict-based society, but it is not an absolute value, and is significant only as it contributes to the competitive struggle.

Market-oriented values are not totally alien to African societies. They have emerged prominently in our time and have become the prime and leading movers of both social and individual behavior. Such main principles of a market-oriented life as competition and unbridled individualism have been introduced into the fabric of our society. Various national governments either consciously or unconsciously have been attempting to build their nations upon market values.



## AFRICAN HUMANISTIC ORIENTATION

Three salient features of the African humanistic orientation are:

1. the value of life,
2. the value of human being,
3. the value of communal social organization.

### *The Value of Human Life*

Dr. K.A. Busia remarked that among Africans there was always the awareness that human life was the greatest value. The Ewe sum up this view of life with two personal names: *Agbenyega* and *Agbewu*, meaning “life is the greatest thing and is more important than anything else,” and the Akan expressed it with the maxim, *Su nkwa na mma nsu adze*, meaning “Cry or pray for life and not for things, because it is the most important of all things.”

The life that is regarded as the greatest value, however, is not the vegetative and instinctual life that human beings share with plants and animals, but rather the life that is founded on the principle of syntropy. This maintains that there is an urge or dynamic creative energy in life, called *Se*, which works towards wholeness and healing, towards building up and not pulling down, towards creating and not destroying and towards synthesis and not conflict. Our people, therefore, conceive human life as a force or power that continuously recreates itself and so is characterized by continuous change and growth which depends upon its own inner source of power. This principle of continuous rejuvenation is represented in our indigenous religious tradition by the goddess of the earth: *Miano* (Ewe), *Asase Yaa/Efua* (Akan). One proverb expresses this conception of the ideal life thus: “The termite says that human life is like an anthill; it is built from inside out.”

Since the essence of the ideal life is regarded as power and creativity, growth, creative work and increase have become essential values. Powerlessness or loss of vitality, unproductive living, and growthlessness become ultimate evils in our indigenous culture. For many Africans one of man’s chief ends, as an individual and as a member of an extended family, is to multiply and increase, because he is the repository of the life force, and the right use of it is his responsibility. The loss of vitality, i.e., impotence, is, therefore, the worst tragedy that can happen to a man; to a woman it is infertility.

The second greatest end of man is to live productively, i.e., to work, because work is considered as the only way of realizing one’s creative potential. Several proverbs and maxims in our indigenous culture extol the virtue of work. One says, that nobody cultivates his farm the same way as he courts a woman. (*Ahia media abe agble eneo*--Ewe). This is a way of saying that the value of work comes before that of pleasure. Today

the order has been reversed: pleasure comes before work, which is no longer a joy but a curse to be endured. We have become a pleasure-seeking and pleasure-loving people. Yet a new nation can be built only on hard work, not on pleasure.

The value of hard work was very deeply entrenched in our indigenous society and found expression in various ways of greeting. Both Ewe and Akan greetings illustrate this point.

Ewe: Greeting: *Dono, dono* "Mother of Work" "Mother of Work."

Akan: Greeting: *Adwuma, adwuma*: "Work, Work."

Response: *Adwuma ye*: "Work is good."

The first and greatest humanistic value is, then, the *syntropic life* which is essentially creative power expressing itself as work, and as change and growth. True human life is thus dynamic and progressive as it unfolds in the observable life of the individual. Our present stagnant life is, therefore, a poor reflection of the indigenous conception of life.

#### *The Value of the Human Being*

Two proverbs state that:

1. It is the human being who counts:  
Call on gold, gold does not respond;  
Call on clothes, clothes do not respond;  
It is the human being who counts:
2. "One who has family and friends is richer than one who has money."

The human being who counts more than material and economic values in these proverbs is the one who, among other things, embodies the dynamic creative power. He or she is described as having that creative personality or creative humanity which is the supreme goal and end of human development, i.e., of education. In the humanistic orientation persons are treated as ends and not as tools because they have a creative purpose to fulfill in life; this is one's ultimate destiny, called in Ewe *du* or *dzoghese*.

The greatest evil of which man is capable is the use of his energy without discipline. The Greeks referred to this state of being as *hubris*, which is wrongly translated into English as 'pride'. Whenever one uses his or her energy without creative discipline, one becomes destructive. The Ewe characterize such behavior as '*nuvowowo*,' which means "doing something that should be feared because it is destructive." Discipline, then, is a necessary factor for creative living; as such it is a cardinal humanistic value.

A person, therefore, is good not because he is good for something, but primarily because he has a creative humanity and so is a creator of the good. Likewise, behavior is right in humanistic morality not because it conforms to a code of conduct which has been laid-down, but because it builds up instead of pulling down--in short, because it is syntropic.

### *The Value of Social Organization*

In the African humanistic value system the community, as well as the individual, has a creative purpose to fulfill because the community is seen as a network of relationships of people, and creative power is the essence of such personal relationships. This point is forcefully made by J.S. Mbiti in his *African Religions and Philosophy*, (p. 2) "To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community." One can be a person only through others. Creative personal relationship is, therefore, always regarded as a basic value in humanistic society.

As has been pointed out above, the relationship between the individual and the society is mutual and interdependent; each has a mutual responsibility for the other. The individual in our indigenous society is always aware that his well-being lies in the welfare of his society. He is taught to live for his society just as his society lives for him, and to cooperate with others to create a wholesome society. In other words, the individual is expected to contribute to the educative power of society which in turn helps to develop the individual's creative powers.

This awareness is responsible for the unique indigenous social orientation which may be characterized as the "we orientation." In the "we orientation" life is comprehended not from the perspective of 'I' or 'they' alone, but from that of both which unite to become 'we'. This 'we' comprehension of life is given expression in various forms of speech, greeting and action.

The best symbol used to express the 'we-istic' comprehension of life is the hand. In the symbol of the hand, the fingers represent individual members of society, who are free, unique and independent. But they are firmly rooted in the whole which is the hand, and derive their being and importance from their relatedness in the whole, individually and collectively. The community, symbolized by the whole hand, derives its existence from the interrelatedness of its fingers. Without the fingers there will be no hand, without the hand there will be no fingers.

Inter-dependence and inter-relatedness are, therefore, very important values in the building of the African humanistic society. Several proverbs express their importance:

1. "When the right hand washes the left the left also washes the right, then both of them will be clean."

Julius Nyerere stated this proverb vividly in another way by saying: "In Africa your neighbor is your other arm."

2. "If your parents look after you to grow your teeth, you must look after them to grow theirs."

The point of this proverb is seen in the relationship between parents and their children. Parents help their children to grow up, and their children must also help them to live in their old age.

3. "No housewife keeps the dish in which her neighbor sends her food. She returns it with her own food in it."

In a humanistically-oriented society, the individual always has a stake in the welfare of the community and vice versa, but room is also made for individual initiative, drive and enterprise. This last point is symbolized by the traditional motif of crocodiles with one stomach and two heads. They work individually for their sustenance, but what they get goes into the same stomach.

To summarize: indigenous African humanism is founded on a trio of values. The first is the value of human life. Human life is considered one of the greatest values because it has within itself the power of change, growth and development. This dynamic, creative energy in life works towards building up instead of pulling down, towards creating and not destroying. Life becomes meaningful and worth living because of the dynamic creative energy that is lodged at the heart of human existence.

Human beings share in this creative energy; they are the only beings who are conscious of the creative power in them. The human being is then, the greatest value in the trio, because he/she is endowed with that creative urge which makes one restless until one has expressed this energy creatively and productively.

This power, however, is initially only a possibility and must be developed. The purpose of its development is to enable one to realize a creative humanity in actual living. This creative humanity enables one to use one's energy purposefully and productively, which can only be done through rigorous discipline. Moreover, this is a necessary factor in creativity because whenever one uses one's life-energy without purposeful discipline, one becomes destructive. Discipline, then, is a very important value in a humanistic value system, and is the second in the trio of values. The third is creative sociality. Society was never seen by our forefathers as made up of a collection of human beings who happen to be thrown together by chance; rather, they saw it as an association of individuals trying to express their creative energies cooperatively in constructive and purposeful living. Society is, therefore, built on the personal relationships of individuals who only become truly themselves as they creatively employ their life forces as a community. The individual contributes to the transformative power of society, which in turn helps to develop the individual's creative powers.

## VALUES AND THE AFRICAN NOTION OF ANCESTORS

The African's devotion to his ancestors has been taken as the singular characteristic of African religious awareness. This devotion and its object, however, have been misinterpreted by several scholars of the indigenous African culture. Our purpose here is to present a careful analysis and exposition of this very important African cultural practice and to draw from the study conclusions relevant to nation building.

### *The Concept of Ancestor*

Reverence for the ancestors has been regarded as so typical of the indigenous African culture that some early writers referred to African religion as "ancestor worship." This is an unfortunate misrepresentation of the ancestor ritual due to lack of understanding of the African conception of the ancestor and the moral significance of the ritual. The questions then, are, who is an ancestor, according to the African conception, and what is the significance and meaning of the ancestor ritual?

*Who is an Ancestor?* The English word "ancestor," meaning "one from whom one is descended and who is usually more remote in the line of descent than a grandparent," is used to translate African words which are not quite similar in meaning. The Akan and Ewe words for "ancestor" illustrate this point. The Akan and Ewe words for ancestor, as used in the ancestor cult, are *nana saman* (sing.), *nananom nsamanfo* (Akan: plural), and *togbui* (sing.) *togbuiwo* (Ewe: plural), respectively. The plural forms of these words, viz., *nananom nsamanfo* (Akan) and *togbuiwo* (Ewe) are usually employed in the libation prayer, and so they will be mainly used here.<sup>1</sup>

In the first place the words *togbuiwo* and *nananom* are titles among the Ewe and Akan of Ghana, as are the words "lord" and "knight" among the English. They are conferred upon those who earn them by the excellent way they conduct their lives. *Nananom* is then, first and foremost, a moral title and is earned by living virtuously *in this life*. Once earned in this life, it is taken with one into the other world. The title *nananom* or *togbuiwo* is conferred upon living chiefs and elders of the society who are usually considered its moral paragons. They are collectively called *nananom* or *togbuiwo* while they are alive, and *nananom nsamanfo* (Akan), or *togbuiwo* (Ewe) when they are dead. Strictly speaking then, there are two classes of *nananom* or moral exemplars in the indigenous society: The *living moral*

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<sup>1</sup>Different words are used by different ethnic groups in Africa to translate the English word "ancestor." Usually the English word "ancestor" is not the appropriate term.

*exemplars*, called *nananom*, and the living dead *moral exemplars*, called *nananom nsamanfo*.<sup>2</sup>

The important thing about them is that they are moral paragons; death is not a factor in their exaltation to this enviable moral and social status. Thus Bishop Sarpong said, "In determining the status of a dead person, the Lugbara (of Uganda and Zaire) take into account also his position in life, the manner of his death, the age at which he departed, and so forth."<sup>3</sup> This means that it is not just anyone who dies who is called *nana* or *togbui*. As P.K. Ametozion said, "It is our custom to remember as our forebears particularly those who behaved bravely during their lives and those whose actions brought and still bring honor and acclaim to their clan or to the society to which they belonged." He concluded his conception of *nana* by saying "The veneration is also accorded to those who have had many children, or have led particularly constructive and dignified lives."<sup>4</sup> In short, to become *nana* or *togbui* one must lead a creative, productive and dignified life.

Thus the English word "ancestor," meaning simply a "remote great grandparent," cannot be used to translate *nana* which has a moral connotation. *Nana* or *nananom* is a moral title rather than a label for the dead great grandparents. Thus it is sometimes prefixed to names of God, e.g., *Nana Bluku*.

*Ancestor Statues*: The essence of the title *nana*, which unfortunately has been translated "ancestor," is therefore not personal and human at all. The reverential attitude to *nana* is a way of conceptualizing the ideal life among Africans. Ancestral statues and masks are artistically fashioned symbols aiming to depict human beings not as they are seen, but as they are thought to be. They are symbolic representations,<sup>5</sup> communicating to us a message that must be read. Thus, the individuality of the *nana saman* is not as important as it would be in Christian hagiography. The ancestors are usually not shown in the statues and masks clad in raiment; their nakedness accentuates their universal and abstract character.

The ancestor figure is also the symbol of the source of life and power. This is shown in the pervading sexuality of the figure, which is not erotic but didactic. It stresses the fact that procreation and increase of the lineage is the chief responsibility of the lineage. The expression of the importance of potency and fertility by the ancestor statues points to the primacy of creativity in the African view of the world.<sup>6</sup>

To Africans, then, one is less important as a unique individual than as an individual link in the chain of generations. The creative powers of life

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<sup>2</sup>I adapt the phrase "living dead" from J.S. Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969, p. 25 and passim).

<sup>3</sup>Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect* (G.P.C., 1947), p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>P.K. Ametozion, *A Spark of the African Soul*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Maquet, *Africanity* (London: O.U.P., 1972), p. 61.

<sup>6</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 63.

pass through him, rather than belonging to him as his own. Through his participation in the ancestor relationship, the African sees himself as a part of the great creative powers of life that transcend him and so he does not consider it sacrilegious to be given a name of the High God. Thus, *Nyame* (Akan), *Mawu* (Ewe), *Kra* (Ewe) and Akan) are personal and family names.

*Nananom as Source of Moral Sanctions:* Due to the superior moral and constructive qualities of the ancestors, the pattern of their lives and the values and principles they cherish have been used as normative standards of conduct. For that reason, chiefs and elders become character trainers and models of the ideal life. The ancestors, likewise, exercise moral constraints in the behavior of the living through the periodic rituals which remind people of what they stand for. They are able to play this role not because they have become “spirits” or “ghosts,” but because they have become internalized super-egos as well as moral authorities. Thus, the exemplary way they lived can be used to help others grow and pursue the ideal life. Just as the lives of Jesus and the apostles have become ideal standards of behaviour for Christians, so the exemplary lives of the *nananom* have been used by Africans as models of the ideal life. Consequently, the primary thrust of the ancestor institution is moral and general human creativity, even though it may contain some religious elements. This point will become clearer as we examine the conditions of *nanahood*.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Conditions of Nanahood (Ancestorship)*

It has become evident from the preceding discussion that an exemplary life is the primary and the most essential condition for exaltation to the status of *nananom*. A person does not have to wait to die before he or she becomes *nana*, and, as we have already seen, it is not everybody who dies who becomes *nana*, nor is every living adult addressed as *nana*. The first and necessary condition for becoming *nana* is that one must live a life worthy of emulation. What then are the criteria of the exemplary life?

*Marriage:* The first mark of an exemplary life according to the African understanding, is marriage and the having of children. Permanent bachelorhood and spinsterhood will disqualify a person from becoming *nana* because a bachelor/spinster does not help to increase the number of his relatives. Confirmed singles are thus considered useless persons whose names should be blotted out of memory. p'Bitek brought out clearly in one of his poems this African understanding of the importance of marriage. He said:

You may be a giant  
Of a man,

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<sup>7</sup>I use the word *nana hood* here to mean the character of *nana* because *ancestorhood* does not bring out the African conception of ancestor, which is a moral title rather than a label.

You may begin  
 To grow grey hair  
 You may be bald  
 And toothless with age,  
 But if you are unmarried  
 You are nothing.<sup>8</sup>

*Having Children:* It is not enough to marry, one must have children. A person who dies childless is never acknowledged as *nana* because, as S.G. Williamson observed, in indigenous Africa “Man’s chief end, as an individual and member of his clan, is to multiply and increase.”<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the emphasis upon having as many children as possible in Africa was not a sign of irresponsible parenthood. It was a way of fulfilling an understanding of the essence of human existence which involves full participation in the creativity of humanity and the passing on of the creative power of life from one generation to another through the process of marriage and procreation. A satisfactory discharge of this responsibility partly earns one the title of *nana*.

*Good Health:* The third criterion of *nanahood* is that a person must have a sound mind in a sound body. Especially one must not suffer from any “unclean” diseases like leprosy, dropsy, epilepsy, madness, sleeping sickness, smallpox and blindness. Such diseases are believed to be used by the gods to punish evil-doers and communities. So contracting any of them means that the sufferer is morally unclean and so is disqualified from becoming *nana*.

*Natural Death in Old Age:* It is generally believed that certain deaths defame a person, while others enhance one’s reputation. The deaths that defame a person are suicide, death by drowning, by vehicular crash, all deaths by accident, and especially falling in war while retreating from the enemy. One is honored, however, when one dies defending one’s community. Such a death and also death in old age, when one has fulfilled one’s destiny as a creative being, are considered honorable and earn a person the enviable status of *nana*. By implication bravery is one criterion that qualifies one to become *nana*, because the living dead are said to form a company of warriors in the other world, and so only the brave can join them there.

In addition to the above major factors of the exemplary life, there are some character traits which go to make the exemplary life. A person who desires to be addressed *nana* should not insult others--especially in public--should not steal, take other people’s wives, be a talkative, an alcoholic, or an extravagant type. He/she should not harbor malice towards others, but should be hard-working, kind, loving, pacific, respectful and merciful. One must keep one’s promises, associate with good company, be

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<sup>8</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup>See p. 14 *infra* for reference. (bottom)



truthful and be discrete. Finally, one must be hopeful, cheerful and neat. Anyone known to consistently manifest traits opposite those mentioned above is not a person to be imitated. He cannot be *nana asaman* for, if one is not good in life, how can one's "ghost" be good?

It is interesting to note that wealth does not qualify or disqualify a person from becoming *nana*; it is the use of wealth that determines whether its owner should be called *nana* or not. It is the generous use of wealth that is always encouraged and qualifies a person to be called *nana*. The individual in the indigenous society is, therefore, taught from early childhood to share whatever he has with others, i.e., with both the living and the living dead. For this reason a little water or drink is always sprinkled on the ground for the ancestors when the individual is going to eat or drink. Likewise, in any libation prayer, the gods and ancestors are always called upon to partake of the drink, and in turn are asked to bless the living and help them to prosper, as shown in the following libation prayer:

Oh! Oh! Oh! Three things constitute life.  
 Oh, *Mawu Sodza, Aklama*,<sup>10</sup>  
 The Provider of hunters and palmwine tappers,  
 Take and drink!  
 I call on you the ancestors whom I cannot  
 name one by one,  
 Take and drink!  
 Let my arms and heart enjoy good health,  
 I am in your hand,  
 Grant me a little prosperity,  
 And I will share it with you;  
 May the barren become fertile,  
 And mothers procreate more,  
 Let the beasts of the forest  
 Bring forth males and females  
 And the rivers, too, teem with fish,  
 Pray, *Aklama*, grant my petitions,  
 Let me live in the protection of *Mawu* forever.  
 Peace, Peace, Peace.

This recitation in the libation prayer which is an important aspect of the ancestor ritual, reveal certain very important aspects of African value orientation. To the African, life is a process of never-ending human and communal relationships which are defined in terms of reciprocal obligations and privileges. Death, therefore, does not end the obligations of the living to the living dead or the privileges that the living enjoy from their forebears. Even the relationship between God and man is defined in terms of

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<sup>10</sup> *Mawu* is half of the dual name, *Mawu-Lisa*, for the Ewe High God.

reciprocal obligations and blessings, as is implied in lines ten and eleven of the above prayer.

The living are, therefore, continually interested in the well-being of the living dead and the living dead in the well-being of the living, and especially in the provision of the conditions necessary for the realization of the ideal life.

#### *Conclusion*

This discussion of the procedures relating to the ancestors has concentrated on its moral and philosophical significance because, contrary to popular belief, it is a complete system of moral and social philosophy in itself. As a moral philosophy it portrays what the ideal life is thought to be among Africans. The essence of the ideal life is creativity, which is seen as the foundation of all human existence. Morally conceived, it is a life of one never-ending process of human and communal relationship, defined primarily in terms of reciprocal obligations and rights.

Flowing from this creativity-oriented view of life, the individual is viewed as a channel and part of the great creative power of life. Thus his ultimate end is to create and realize a creative personality as an individual link in the chain of generations born and yet unborn. What Feuerbach said in his manifesto about man is very similar to the indigenous view of man as seen in the ancestor ceremonies, namely, "The individual man for himself does not have man's being in himself, either as a moral being or thinking being. Man's being is contained only in community, in the unity of man with man--a unity which rests, however, only on the reality of the difference between I and Thou."<sup>11</sup>

Finally for the African, life and death are not two antithetical realities, but one single reality in the shape of two phenomena. They form unity in duality and span over time into eternity. All these truths and values, and those enumerated above, are enshrined in the ancestor custom.

The contention of this paper is that the ancestor custom marks the acme of the indigenous African moral, social and spiritual awareness. It is a condensed and dramatized psychology and moral philosophy of life. The exposition has made it clear that the ancestor ceremonies do not constitute a worship of dead grandparents, but rather a devotion to the loftiest spiritual values of creative humanity as well as to the value of sociality which is realized only through a creative dialectical tension between the I and Thou. The ancestor idea, therefore, can form the basis of a safe, creative and positive system of values for any developing nation in Africa.

#### **VALUES AND RELIGION**

The type of interpretation of the Christian faith that does justice to us Africans and brings out the best in us is the one that presents the

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Martin Buber in *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 147-148.

Christian religion as an affirmation of life, including health. I call this type of Christian faith "Affirmative Christianity." To us in Africa, this is what should be called *the true Christianity*. True Christianity affirms, that is, it strengthens and fortifies one's life and health, one's relationships and one's identity; it does not deny anything that will make one's life fuller. Such is the faith of Jesus, and so he said, "I have come that you may have life--life in all its fullness." The ministry of Jesus, therefore, is one of strong affirmation of life in its totality. First, he affirmed his oneness with the Father, i.e., with the supreme creative power, by saying, "The Father and I are one." He also affirmed health by healing the sick, and affirmed the good that was in cheaters like Zacchaeus by lodging him in his house.

### *The Presence of God as Creative Principle*

Africans are an incurably life-affirming people. This is attested to in our daily greetings, expressions and personal names. To say, "How are you"? in one part of the Volta Region, we say, "*Ele Agbea?*" which literally means "Are you existing life?" and the reply is "*Mele agbe*" meaning "*I am existing life*" One way to say "Good night" in Ewe is, "*Do agbe*," meaning "Go and sleep life." The Guan affirm life daily in the expression of gratitude: to say "Thank you" they say "*Nkpedzi wole*," meaning "Life is yours." Our personal names are full of life affirmations, for example, names like *Sunkwa*, meaning "Cry, that is, pray, for life" because it is the greatest value. The Ibo of Nigeria take such personal names as *Ndubisi*, meaning "Life is the head." The head is regarded as the most important part of the body, and so life is considered by them to be the most important thing.

The life that is affirmed in our personal names and daily expressions is not, as I pointed out earlier on, the vegetative or the sensitive life that we share with plants and animals, but rather the life that is a continuous flow of dynamic and creative energy. In African theological thought this is the essence of the godhead. The life that our people primordially sense and daily affirm can best be called the God-life, because it is the supreme creative power of God in the whole of creation. This supreme dynamic and creative power of life is referred to in Ewe as *Se*, in Akan as *Okra* or *Kra*, in Yoruba as *Ori* and the people of the Bible referred to it as *the Messiah*, *the Spirit of God*, *the Power of God* or *the Christ*, which is the Greek translation of *Messiah* (see Luke 1:35; 4:14, Acts 1:8.)

The first and the most important thing to be said about Affirmative Christianity is that it *conceives of God as the dynamic and creative principle of life* whom our people and the people of the Bible confess and affirm in their daily life. God as the dynamic and creative principle/power of life is confessed and affirmed to be the eternal ground of all that exists. St. John in his Gospel referred to this creative power of God as the *Word* or *Logos* and said, "and through him all things came to be; and no single thing was created without him."

*The Christhood of All Peoples*

The second most important thing about Affirmative Christianity is what I call *the Christhood of all peoples*. In Affirmative Christianity it is not only the universal and eternal presence of the dynamic and creative power of God that is affirmed unequivocally; but also its eternal presence in man is equally affirmed.

This spiritual truth of our being is what St. Paul called the glorious secret which God has for all peoples. "The secret is that Christ is in you, which means you will share in the glory of God." In this powerful and revolutionary statement Paul was affirming categorically the divinity of man. In fact, the Christhood of all peoples was affirmed first in Genesis where the author said: "So God created human beings, making them to be like himself." Jesus affirmed and confirmed the Christhood of all peoples when, teaching his disciples to pray, he said: "Our Father . . ." These two words "Our" and "Father" fix the nature of God and at the same time the nature of man. Man partakes of the divine nature of God which we call the *Christ*, the *Messiah*, *Se* or *Okra*. This means that Christ, as the dynamic creative power of God, is not external to anybody; rather he is in us and we are in him. St. Paul expressed this truth beautifully and simply by saying, "The life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me." And to his Christian converts in Colosae he simply said: "Christ is in you; not only in me and not only in the so-called chosen ones of Israel, but in you, too."

This has been a very important belief of our people and is the reason why some Ghanaians do not blaspheme when they call some people in whom there has been a unique revelation of *Christ* (*se*, *Okra*): *yame*, *Mawu* or *Kra*, meaning God. Some are called *Nyame* or *Kra* as mere surnames today, but these names were theologically very meaningful to our forefathers. Christ is in us.

The Christhood of all people is then the second fundamental religious concept that is shared by Africans and the people of the Bible. It develops the first concept, namely, that the eternal and universal presence of God is the dynamic and creative principle, where principle is used as primary source or origin of all life.

*Unity of Peoples*

Christ as the Supreme creative power of God then is our true human commonality, the commonness that we share with people in other countries, in other ethnic groups and cultures. He is the ground that cements us, who are many and different, into one people. He is our spiritual commonality; we have to rediscover the spiritual truth of the Christhood of all people, to see the Christ and not the Ewe, Akan, Ga or Chokosi in our neighbors. To achieve better racial harmony and relations in the world we have to see not black or white, but Christ as the only racial color.

The time has come for us in Africa to stop thinking and saying that the Christian God is an importation and an imposition on us. The time has equally come for Western Christians to stop saying that they are taking Christ to Africa, Christ was in Africa before they came. He is our eternal ground, but we and they did not know it. We have been living in the House of God all these years, but we did not know it. Our religious contact with the West as a whole has helped to raise our consciousness of the universal and eternal presence of the Christ in us and among us to a very high level. Our Christian duty today is to continue devotedly to develop to a new degree the consciousness of Christ in us and in our life-ways.

The eternal and primordial presence of God in Africa explains why religion in Africa from time immemorial is far more than rituals reflecting beliefs; *it is reality reflected in an actual way of life*. Religion, from earliest time, became in Africa the dynamic force in the development of all the major aspects of Black civilization. Christianity as a religious faith can be a dynamic force for reconstruction and development if we come back to understand our practice of the Christian faith not as a status symbol of social respectability, but as a dynamic creative power which God has made available to us and in us for salvation.

Our individual vocation is to express God in glorious ways. Man's spiritual vocation is to let God manifest Himself wholly in him. This is our true human destiny: to existentialize God as best we can; our bodies and cultures are means to that end.

Affirmative African Christianity affirms the individuality and otherness of our expression of the Christ in us. As it respects our otherness in our unity, one can become a true Christian without ceasing to be a genuine African. In other words, in true Christianity, there is no fundamental conflict between the indigenous African and the Christian life-ways. Because true Christianity affirms our Africanness and sees the Christ potential in it, it does not subvert its integrity nor denigrate it.

#### **AIMS OF EDUCATION IN VALUES AND VALUE DEVELOPMENT**

In the light of the crisis in our values one important role of the school is to serve as an agent of social reconstruction through the carefully selected values that it transmits. To some extent I have indicated the content of such education in the body of the discussion; I wish now to outline briefly its purposes. These should be:

- (1) To help the child have a clear notion of the type and nature of indigenous and alien values that impinge upon our experience as individuals and as a group. Since certain values, beliefs and attitudes that are strongly held can become obstacles to one's ability to modify one's environment, the child should be helped to evaluate both indigenous and alien values and to transform

them into nation-building values. This will also involve helping the child to work out principles for selecting from our various cultural traditions, values that he/she will need in order to cope effectively with the demands of progress and modernization. Some of the needed values are: hard work, co-operation, discipline, self-correction, initiative, respect for evidence and verifiable knowledge and the experimental method of solving problems.

(2) To develop and raise the child's consciousness of the presence of the creative dynamic life power in him, in others and in society, and to help him/her make disciplined use of this energy.

(3) To help the child appreciate the value of change and growth in life and to grow through learning. This is the surest way to free the child from the hold of any unworthy traditionalism or authority.

(4) To help the child use values as the basis of all his/her choices and actions and to equip him or her with the ability to develop new values in new problem situations.

(5) To help the child affirm his/her indigenous cultural roots so that he/she does not become alienated.

## CHAPTER XII

# **TRADITIONAL POLITICAL IDEAS: THEIR RELEVANCE TO DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA**

*KWAME GYEKYE*

It is a well-known fact that since the early euphoric days of political independence the politics of many African Nations have been blighted in several ways. The political institutions that were bequeathed to the African people by their colonial masters--institutions that were modeled on those of their rulers--did not function properly. This institutional failure may be explained in several ways. It might be suggested that (i) the African people simply did not have the ability to effectively operate systems of government that were entirely alien to them, (ii) they did not try enough to make a success of those alien institutions, (iii) not having any emotional, ideological or intellectual attachments to those institutions, they had no real desire to operate them, (iv) they lacked certain moral or dispositional virtues or attitudes (such as patience, tolerance, incorruptibility) which would have made for the successful operation of those alien institutions, (v) that the institutions might have worked well enough but for the disruptions of the political processes of the military. The democratic constitutions that have been fashioned by the African peoples themselves, modeled, as they invariable have been, on the European system, have suffered the same fate. The unavoidable consequence of this constitutional failure for many African nations has been political instability, uncertainty and confusion.

In this political uncertainty and confusion, questions are being asked about whether viable political structures can or cannot be forged in the furnace of the African's own traditions of political rule. The positive attitude being evinced toward the traditional system stems from the claim or conviction of a number of people that the traditional system of government did have some democratic features from which a new political system can profit. In light of the problems of establishing democratic institutions experienced by African nations since regaining their political independence, any talk of African traditions of government having democratic features will undoubtedly evoke cynicism, even scandal. But the facts of anthropology speak for themselves.

In times of wonder and uncertainty, in times when the definition and articulation of values and goals become most urgent, in times when the search for fundamental principles of human activity becomes most pressing and is seen as the way to dispel confusions and unclarities, the services of philosophy become indispensable. For philosophy is a conceptual response to the problems posed in any given epoch for a given society. It is therefore

appropriate, even imperative, for contemporary African philosophers to grapple at the conceptual level with the problems and issues of their times, not least of which are the problems of government and political stability.

My intention in this paper is to explore the traditional African values and ideas of government with a view to pointing out the democratic features of this indigenous system of government, and to examine whether or not, and in what ways, such features can be said to be harmonious with the ethics of contemporary political culture and, hence, relevant to developments in political life and thought in modern Africa.

### CHIEFSHIP AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

An inquiry into the status, nature of authority, and role of the chief and the power relationships holding between the chief and the people will disclose certain political values and ideas espoused in the political setting of traditional Africa, for chieftaincy was certainly the most outstanding feature of the African traditional political structure and the linchpin of the political wheel. In pursuit of this inquiry, I shall first provide facts about political institutions and their manner of operation.<sup>1</sup> I shall then investigate the philosophical underpinning of the traditional political institutions. It is hoped that this approach, descriptive as well as conceptual, will provide not only insight into the African traditions of politics, but also an answer to the question of whether or not the indigenous political system exhibited democratic features. For purposes of an in depth study, however, I shall limit my attention to the political thought and practice of the Akan people, the largest ethnic group in Ghana.

#### *Akan Traditional Political Institutions*

In this section I am concerned with the political institutions that bear most directly on the relations between the chief and the people, that is, between the ruler and the ruled; in other words, with the institutions that may be said to be crucial as far as the concrete expression of the democratic idea of the will of the people is concerned.

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to interviews and personal observations, the following sources have been consulted in connection with this account: J.B. Danquah, *Akan Laws and Customs* (London, 1928); John Mensa Sabra, *Fanti National Constitution* (London, 1906); John Mensa Sabra, *Fanti Customary Law* (London, 1897, reissued 1968); K.A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London, 1951); K.A. Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1967), chapter 2; J.E. Castile Hayfork, *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (London, 1903); Brad Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London, 1854); R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford, 1929).



Every Akan town or village is made up of a number of clans (clan: *abusua*). One of these clans, probably the one whose forefathers founded that town or village, constitutes the royal family from which the chiefs or rulers are elected. Each clan comprises many lineages, while each lineage, in turn, comprises many individuals linked by blood relationships. Each town or village constitutes a political unit. A great number of such towns and villages formed a paramountcy, a state (*oman*), such as the Asante state or Akim state, whose head was the paramount chief, the *omanhene*.

Each town or village had a chief and a council of elders, these elders being the heads of the clans (*mbusuapanyin*). The chief presided at the meetings of the council. Just as each town or village had a council, so did the state have a council--the state council, described by Danquah as "the great legislative assembly of the nation".<sup>2</sup> The state council, presided over by the *omanhene*, drew its membership from the chiefs of the towns and villages constituting the state.

*Election of the Chief.* The chief, who was the political head of an Akan town or village, was elected from the royal lineage by the head of the lineage in consultation with the members of the lineage. It was necessary that the person chosen be *acceptable* not only to the councillors--who represented their clans--but also to the Asafo company of young men (*mmerantee*) or 'commoners' who were, in effect, the body of citizens. The paramount chief was chosen in the same way, except that his election had to be acceptable to the chiefs of the constituent towns and villages. Thus, never was a chief imposed upon an Akan community, *a fact of which the self-imposed military rulers of Africa today must make note*.

Now, having been accepted by the people, the chief on the occasion of his formal installation had to take oath publicly before his councilors and the body of citizens to observe the institutions and laws of the town or state. At the installation ceremony a whole series of injunctions were publicly recited before him. These injunctions defined his political authority. The following are typical examples (taken from Rattray<sup>3</sup>) of such injunctions which were declared to him through the chief's spokesman (*okyeame*):

We do not wish that he should curse us.  
We do not wish that he should be greedy.  
We do not wish that he should be disobedient (or, refuse to take advice).  
We do not wish that he should treat us unfairly (*nkwaseabuo*).

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<sup>2</sup>J.B. Danquah: *Akan Laws and Customs*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, p. 82. A couple of the injunctions have been left out, and some changes have also been made in Rattray's translations from the Akan language.

We do not wish that he should act on his own initiative (lit.: “out of his own head,” that is, acting without reference to the views or wishes of the people).

We do not wish that it should ever be that he should say, “I have no time,” “I have no time”.

It appears that the most important injunction was that the chief should never act without the advice and full concurrence of his councilors, as representatives of the people. Acting without the concurrence and advice of his council was a legitimate cause for his deposition.<sup>4</sup> Thus the chief was bound by law to rule with the consent of the people. Similarly, if a paramount chief abused his power, his subordinate chiefs, who were members of his council, could depose him. It may thus be said that the Akan theory of government was a kind of social contract theory. The injunctions submitted by the people to the chief and accepted by him constituted a kind of contract between them. The chief or king was thus to hold power in trust for the people.

*The Chief's Council.* The chief's council was the real governing body of the town. The members of this governing council were usually the heads of the various clans. The council was presided over by the chief. The councilors were the representatives of the people, and, as such, had to confer with them on any issue that was to be discussed in the council. That is to say, the councilors, to whom everyone in the town had access, had to seek popular opinion. “The representative character of a councillor,” wrote Mensa Sarbah almost a century ago, “is well understood and appreciated by the people.”<sup>5</sup> The councillor was obliged to act on the advice and with the concurrence of his people, in the same way as the chief was obliged to act after consultation and with the consent of his councilors, whom he had to summon regularly.

The councilors freely discussed all matters affecting the town or state. And in such an atmosphere of free and frank expression of opinions, disagreements would be inevitable. But in the event of such disagreements the council would continue to listen to arguments until unanimity was achieved with the reconciliation of opposed views. The communal ethos of African culture necessarily placed a great value on solidarity, which in turn necessitated the pursuit of unanimity or consensus not only in such important decisions as those taken by the highest political authority of the town or state, but also in decisions taken by lower assemblies such as those presided over by the heads of the clans, that is, the councilors. Thus it is clear that every command, every move which was adopted by the chief, had been discussed and agreed upon by his councilors (who must have previously sounded popular opinion). For this reason, any publicity made

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<sup>4</sup>R.S. Rattray, p. 82, J.B. Danquah, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup>John Mensa Sabra, *Fanti National Constitution*, p. 11.

by the chief's spokesman (*okveame*) regarding a decree, injunction, command, etc., was made invariably in the name of the chief *and* his elders (that is councilors). Thus, the *okveame* would announce: "Thus say the chief *and* his elders . . ." (*Nana no ne mpanyinfo se . . .*<sup>6</sup>).

Having provided a brief account of Akan traditional political institutions and how they operated, we may now move on to a discussion of the democratic features of these institutions.

### *Elements of Democracy in Traditional Akan Political Practice*

Defining the concept of democracy is not a huge problem. The famous and, perhaps, the most widely accepted definition is that it is government of the people, by the people, for the people. The centrality of the notion of "the people" is crucial to any definition of democracy. The definition implies, as it must, that the standard by which to judge the democratic nature of a political system is the degree of adequacy allowed for the expression of the will of the people, the extent to which the peoples are involved in decision-making processes. The problem of democracy, however, is simply the problem of *how to give institutional expression to the will of the people*; how, that is, to make the will of the people explicit in real and concrete terms. In the nations of the Western world, such institutions as the multi-party system, periodic elections, parliaments or congresses, constitutions containing bills of rights, independent judiciary, and others, have been created not only to give expression to the will of the people, but also to guard against the violation of their rights. These are some of the ingredients of the Western democratic political systems.

Now, in what ways, and to what extent, could the Akan political institutions, just described, be said to have provided a means of expressing the will of the people and ensuring popular participation in the political process? Let us explore this question.

The institution of chiefship was definitely the linchpin of the democratic process in an Akan community. For the nature of the political authority of the chief determined the democratic or undemocratic character of the political process. The chief, it was observed, was elected from the royal lineage. Succession to the high office of the chief was, thus, hereditary. And this hereditary element may be said to have imposed a limitation on the choice of rulers, though not necessarily on all other officeholders. Four points may be made to neutralize the political seriousness and effect of this limiting factor.

First, unlike some monarchies in the world where the next occupant of the throne--the heir apparent--was obvious to everyone in the nation, the particular person to be chosen and installed as chief in an Akan community was generally not so obvious. The reason is that there were several eligible men in the royal lineage, and each one of them had just

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<sup>6</sup>Interview with J.A. Annobil: September 3, 1976.

about equal claim to the throne. Thus the king-makers or electors, who were the elders also of the royal lineage, had a number of candidates to choose from. In deciding whom to choose and present to the people, the electors had to exercise the greatest judiciousness and wisdom, for their choice had to be acceptable to the people as a whole. The political history of many an Akan town or state teems with constitutional disputes arising either out of the lack of consensus on the part of the electors themselves regarding the most suitable candidate, or out of the unacceptability of the nominee to the majority of the people. But the point to be noted, for the moment, is that in choosing the ruler the electors did consider the wishes of the people to whom the nominee was finally to be presented and who had to accept him as their ruler. To the extent that the people had the final say on the suitability of the person chosen to rule them, it could be said that the traditional Akan political structure made it possible for the people to choose their own rulers, even if the initiative was originally taken by some few people.

The second point is that just as the will of the people was of considerable weight in determining the suitability and acceptability of the electors' nominee, so also was it most crucial in determining the continuity, effectiveness and success of a chief's rulership. The 'common people' (*mmerantee*: lit. young men) constituted themselves into Asafo companies which were organized for social, military and political action. "In recent years," wrote Danquah in 1928, "these 'companies' have persistently claimed to possess absolute power to enstool, and chiefly to destool, a chief. This claim seems in a sense to be supported by facts of history and long-established customary practice."<sup>7</sup> Thus even if the people as a whole did not have the power directly to choose their ruler, they had the power directly to remove him or have him removed by the electors. This was another outlet provided in the Akan political system for the expression of the popular will.

The third point is that the limits of the monarchical power were clearly set both by custom and by the series of injunctions publicly recited before the chief and acknowledged publicly by him. These injunctions constitutionally make it impossible, or at least impolitic, for the chief to stubbornly adhere to his views, policies and actions in the teeth of opposition from his councilors and subjects; they also outlawed arbitrary and autocratic government from the Akan political practices. The injunctions, as well as the customs, so severely curtailed the political authority of the chief that, in the words of R.S. Rattray, a British anthropologist in the employ of the colonial administration of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) during the first three decades of this century, "the chief in reality was expected to do little or nothing without having previously consulted his councilors, who in turn conferred with the people in order to

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<sup>7</sup>J.B. Danquah: *Akan Laws and Customs*, p. 119. 'Enstool' and 'destool' are technical terms for 'enthroned' and 'dethroned'.

sound popular opinion.”<sup>8</sup> In connection with the political authority of the chiefs, Brad Cruickshank, a Scotsman who also served in the British colonial administration in Ghana between 1834 and 1854, made the following observation: “But among none of those chiefs living under the protection of the (British) Government, is their authority of such consequence as to withstand the general opinion of their subjects; so that, with all the outward display of regal power, the chief is little more than a puppet moved at the will of the people . . . .”<sup>9</sup> Constitutionally, then, the chief was bound to act only on the advice and with the concurrence of his councilors, and consequently, with the popular will. As noted before, arbitrary and autocratic actions by the chief would lead to his deposition.

The fourth point that may be made against the view that the hereditary character of succession to chiefship might (potentially) throttle the real expression of popular will, is that in any assembly, whether in the council of the chief, in the palace of the chief--where general assemblies of all the people usually took place--or in the house of a councillor (that is, head of a clan), there was free expression of opinion. No one was hindered from fully participating in the deliberations of the councils or public (general) assemblies and thus from contributing to the decisions of these constitutional bodies. It is thus quite clear that the Akan traditional political structure allowed for many to participate in making decisions regarding the affairs of the community. “Anyone--even the most ordinary youth--,” wrote Cruickshank, ‘will offer his opinion or make a suggestion with an equal chance of its being as favorably entertained, as if it proceeded from the most experienced sage.’<sup>10</sup>

The observations made by Rattray about the democratic character of the politics of the Ashanti, a subsection of the Akan people, are worth noting:

Nominally autocratic, the Ashanti constitution was in practice democratic to a degree. I have already on several occasions used this word ‘democratic’, and it is time to explain what the term implies in this part of Africa. We pride ourselves, I believe, on being a democratic people and flatter ourselves that our institutions are of a like nature. An Ashanti who was familiar alike with his own and our [that is, British] Constitution would deny absolutely our right to apply this term either to ourselves or to our Constitution. To him a democracy implies that the affairs of the Tribe (the state) must rest, not in the keeping of the few, but in the hands of the many, that is,

<sup>8</sup> R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> Brad Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa*, Vol. 1, p. 236.

<sup>10</sup> Brad Cruickshank, *Ibid*, Vol. 1, p. 251.

must not alone be the concern of what we should term "The chosen rulers of the people," but should continue to be the concern of a far wider circle. To him the state is literally *Res Publica*; it is everyone's business. The work of an Ashanti citizen did not finish when by his vote he had installed a chief in office. . . . The rights and duties of the Ashanti democrats were really only beginning after (if I may use a homely analogy) the business of the ballot-box was over. In England, the government and House of Commons stand between ourselves and the making of our laws, *but among the Ashanti there was not any such thing as government apart from the people.*<sup>11</sup>

It may be noted that the concept of the divine right of kings which was the basis of the political authority of the Stuart monarchs of 17th century England, was never put forward or pursued by the Akan states. On the contrary, the facts do indicate that they had created political systems that not only made real despotism well-nigh impossible, but also gave due recognition to the wishes of the governed. In all this, the Akan people were *institutionally* expressing, in their own fashion, certain basic ideas of democracy. First and foremost was the idea that the government of a people must be responsive to the wishes of the people. We have noted that although the chief was not directly elected by all the people, the electors in their choice had to consider the wishes of the people; we have also noted that the chief had to govern in accordance with the popular will. Again, the allowance made for the expression of opinion on public matters enabled the people of an Akan community, or many of them at any rate, to be involved in decision-making at all levels. Public criticisms of government policy and action were inevitable in a system which allowed for the frank expression of opinion. Criticisms of government policy and action were made by people as individuals--in accordance with their own light, not as members of "political parties" which did not exist.

The political phenomena that approximated to "political parties" of the type that obtains in Western countries were the groupings of men and women resulting from disagreements and disputes that emerged--and not infrequently--generally over the nomination or election of a chief, but over other matters as well. But, though such groupings were political in terms of their aims, they could hardly be described as political parties. For their aims were *ad hoc* and ephemeral, and they were concerned not so much with the broad political issues of society as with the issue of the person nominated or chosen to hold the office of the chief. For this reason such disputes and oppositions never led to ideological rifts, and were submerged before long by the waves of the characteristic demands of solidarity

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<sup>11</sup> R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, pp. 87-88.

Because of the nonexistence of political parties, some scholars have supposed that African political culture lacked the concept of opposition. However, the existence both of disagreements, divisions and groupings along political lines in the deliberations of the traditional councils and assemblies, as well as the pursuit of consensus, gives the lie to this supposition. Consensus, along with reconciliation, appears in fact to have been a political virtue vigorously pursued in Akan traditional councils and assemblies, and to have become an outstanding feature of the process of reaching decisions. In all kinds of deliberations the aim was to achieve consensus and reconciliation, and this, inevitably, would prolong meetings; but it would allow for argument and exchange of ideas. Consensus logically presupposes dissensus (that is, dissent), the existence of opposed or different views; for it was the opposed views that were, or needed to be, reconciled. If there were no opposition, it would be senseless to talk of reaching a consensus and reconciliation. This is a conceptual truth. Thus, we are forced to conclude that in the traditional Akan politics there was opposition without an organized political party in opposition. Whether or not Akan or African political culture would have in time evolved its own brand of the party system of politics, no one can say for sure. Colonialism slammed the doors against such a possible evolution.

Consensus, as a procedure for arriving at political decisions, was born of the pursuit of the social ideal or goal of solidarity. The concept was thus a feature of the Akan communalist philosophy. It was considered as vital to the Akan conception and practice of democracy; and not without justification. The pursuit of consensus allows for an individual input; it promotes mutual tolerance, patience and an attitude of compromise, all of which are necessary for the democratic practice, in which one voluntarily has to abandon or modify one's own position in the face of more persuasive arguments of the other or others. The pursuit of consensus thus makes for compromise in which the expression of an individual's will becomes effective to a degree and is not cavalierly set aside. Consensus must, therefore, be considered a democratic virtue; it is certainly an ideal for any democratic decision-making assembly. I must note at this point that in Africa the facts about the democratic political practice of the Akan people are by no means idiosyncratic to them alone.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I have neither time nor space to assemble facts about the democratic features of the political systems of other African peoples. I would refer, however, to the views of two notable British anthropologists, Myer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard who expressed in the introduction to their book *African Political Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940): "The societies described are representative of *common types* of African Political Systems . . . [m]ost of the forms described are variants of a *pattern* of political organization found among contiguous or neighboring societies" (p. 1). One of their specific observations was, for instance, that "[t]he structure of African state implies that kings and chiefs *rule by consent*. A ruler's subjects are as fully aware of the

*Conceptual Expression of Democracy*

In the foregoing section an account was given of the Akan political practice. There is no denying, however, that political institutions take their rise from, and are moulded by, a political theory or philosophy. That is to say, underlying political institutions and political practice is a political theory, a philosophy, even though such philosophy may not be *fully* articulated or worked out. My intention in this section, therefore, is to attempt to indicate and examine the ideas underpinning the Akan political practice and how these ideas were formulated. The Akan ideas of politics, as of everything else, were expressed, at the conceptual level, in proverbs and sayings, folk tales, artistic symbols, rituals, and so on.<sup>13</sup> The use of such sources, however, would in fact involve one in an exercise in conceptual ordering, in the logic of ideas, an exercise which is not easy to execute. The well-known Akan proverb:

One head does not go into council (*ti koro nko aqvina*) expresses the political value of consultation or conferring, the idea that deliberation by several heads (that is, minds) on matters of public concern is always better. The proverb (or fragment) says implicitly that the chief cannot or should not alone deliberate and adopt a policy or an action that affects others, for he is (or has) one head. Though the fragment may not immediately advocate a democratic practice, it certainly repudiates autocracy or despotism--which is thus defined here as "one head going into council". This fragment is in fact the logical consequence of another one, namely,

Wisdom is not in the head of one person.  
(*nvansa nni onipa baako ti mu*).

Since, as the fragment clearly states, every person has some ability to think--and to think about, in this case, matters affecting the whole community--it would be senseless or presumptuous for one person to arrogate to himself or herself the right to think or deliberate for others. The fragment implies, then, that matters concerning the whole community ought to be thought about by all the members of the community or by as many of them as possible.

But let us explore this fragment a bit further. The fragment means (1) that other individuals may be equally wise and capable of producing equally good, if not better, ideas and arguments; (2) that one should not, or cannot, regard one's own intellectual position as final or unassailable or beyond criticism, but must expect it to be evaluated by others; and (3) that,

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duties they owe to him, and are able to exert pressure to make him discharge these duties".

<sup>13</sup> See my *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), chapter 2.



in consequence of (2), one should be prepared to modify or even abandon one's position should one's own ideas or arguments be judged unacceptable or implausible by others. The fragment underlines not only the need for, but also the acceptance, of criticism and compromise; just as it points up the need to respect the views of others. In the political context, it enjoins rulers to be undogmatic and tolerant of the views of others. In consequence, the fragment, when logically fleshed out, recommends the choice and practice of consensus in political decision-making.

There are fragments specifically about the limited nature of the power of the ruler, and the power relations that hold between him and the governed, such as:

(i) If a chief reprimands (rebukes, punishes) you for doing something, he does so by the authority of the citizens (*ohen bedi wo kasa a, na efi amanfoo*).

(ii) It is when the state kills you that the chief kills you (*oman kum wo a, na ohen kum wo*).

(iii) It is when a chief has good councilors that his reign becomes peaceful (*ohen nva ahotrafo pa a, na ne bere so dwo*).

(iv) There are no bad rulers, only bad advisors (*ahen bone nni baabi. na asafohene bone na wowo baabi*).

Fragments (i) and (ii) express the idea that the ruler (that is, the chief) acts only on the advice of, or with the concurrence of, or by the authority of, the people. Fragment (iii) underlines the dependence of the ruler on the advice of his councilors, that is, the representatives of the people, for satisfactory and peaceful government. The implications of fragments (i)–(iii), just stated, are summed up in fragment (iv). The thought expressed in fragment (iv) is that theoretically, that is, within the framework of the constitution, there would be no bad rulers, since the ruler would be expected to rely solely on the advice and guidance of his advisors. The presumption is that the advice of the councilors and other lieutenants would be expected to be good, proceeding, as it would, from many heads, rather than from one head, that is, the ruler's.

But the thought expressed in the fragment is only theoretically plausible, and may in practice be false, insofar as it is possible for the ruler to set aside the views or arguments of his advisors. The thought of the fragment expresses a political ideal, but the realization of the ideal would depend very much upon the character, personality and disposition of the ruler: a stupid, arrogant and strong-willed ruler may set aside even the good advice of his lieutenants--to his own chagrin, however. The realization of the ideal would depend also on the extent to which the councilors and the people as a whole are prepared to insist that the ruler bow to the popular will. Thus, the thought of the fragment expresses a political value, the pursuit of which would give an effective role to the will of the people in the political process and ensure democracy.

An emblem embossed in silver or gold on top of a staff often held by the chief's spokesman at public ceremonies depicts an egg in a hand. The saying that goes with it is that holding political power is like holding an egg in one's hand: if you press the egg hard, you break it; but if you do not hold it securely enough, or if you hold it too loosely, it drops and breaks. The symbol expresses an important political thought, which is that a ruler should not oppress his subjects or do anything that could cause them to revolt or rebel, an action that could in turn lead to political chaos or the possible break-up of his kingdom. On the other hand, if the appropriate and judicious measures, policies and actions are not adopted as required by particular circumstance, if the firmness and resoluteness that a situation demands are not shown by the ruler, his indecision, supineness and lack of both political will and strength of purpose will equally wreck his political authority. The symbol is not intended to give the impression that the ruler's position is one of a tangle or paradox; it is intended, rather, to express an important fact about the judicious or prudent use of political power: neither excessive action nor indolent inaction, is a true mark of rulership. Political power or authority should be exercised *when* it should, and wisely.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper some evidence and argument have been deployed to show that ideas and values of politics such as popular will, free expression of opinion, consensus and reconciliation, consultation and conferring, the trusteeship, and hence limited, nature of political power--all of which are ingredients of the democratic idea--were to be found in the African traditions of politics and that they are, thus, by no means alien to the indigenous political cultures of African peoples. The fact, however, is that these political values have not been allowed to affect and shape the contours of modern African politics. The consequences of this neglect of traditional political ideas and values have not been palatable: authoritarian politics and illegitimate seizure of political power are the order of the day. These are features of modern African politics which can hardly be said to derive from African traditions. And so it is that the search for democracy in post-colonial Africa has been an odyssey, a long and arduous journey the end of which is not yet in sight, but still in the womb of time. Resorting to the indigenous values and ideas of politics could be a redemptive approach.

To argue that traditional values and ideas be brought to bear on modern political life and thought however, is not necessarily to exalt those values and ideas; it is only to point up their worthwhileness. The Akan Fragment, "the ancient (or the past) has something to say" (*tete wo bi ka*), implies not that the ancient has said everything that needs to be said and can, therefore, provide us modern people with all the values, ideas, institutions, etc., that we may need, but that if we were objectively to examine the ancient system of values, we will find *some* values that would be relevant to our modern circumstances. But here lies the all-important

question: By what criteria are we to accept or reject traditional values, attitudes, ideas, and institutions? How, that is, do we judge that the legacy of the past is or is not worth being given some attention or place within the scheme of things of the present?

There are, I think, at least two important criteria for judging the relevance or otherwise nonrelevance of values, ideas and institutions of the past to the circumstances of the present. These are (i) the fundamental nature of those pristine values and attitudes, and (ii) the functionality of the ideas and institutions in the setting of the present. There surely are values that are so fundamental to human existence that they can, for that reason, be said to transcend particular generations or epochs. Such fundamental and abiding values must be related to, or generated by, considerations of basic, sedimented human desires, wants, hopes, ideals, and sentiments. A present age must ask whether it can abandon such basic human values and continue to exist as a human society. An age or generation that does not, for instance, pursue the ethic of respect for human life, and where wanton killings of human beings are the order of the day, can not survive as a human *society* for any length of time. Thus, it is the basic, abiding character of certain values cherished and pursued in the past that makes those values relevant and acceptable to a later age.

I am aware, however, that the view I am urging here is clearly at variance with that of the moral relativist who would have no truck with a conception of fundamental or abiding or lasting values. Yet I believe that the possibility of human society is grounded on the reality of a fundamental core of human values, the observance of which makes for the continual existence, stability, and smooth functioning of society. For instance, it cannot be seriously denied that there are certain things which all members of a society want as rational beings. (How to achieve, or whether we shall achieve, all our wants is a different matter.)

The relevance or irrelevance of ideas and institutions of the past to the present would be determined also by their functionality: that is, whether or not they can play any meaningful or efficacious role in the present scheme of things and so be conducive to the attainment of the goals and vision of the present. Ideas and institutions that have stood the test of time and have proved their worth can be considered suitable for the purposes of the present; otherwise they must be regarded as obsolescent and must, consequently, be jettisoned, to be replaced by new ones. It is the profound appreciation of the efficacy and resilience of values, ideas, and institutions of the past that recommends them to the present age, and underpins the significance of such ebullient and euphoric utterances as “our *traditions* of democracy”, “our *traditions* of humanism”, “our *traditions* of hospitality”, and so on. All such traditions are, of course, not a sudden emergence; they are the ideas and values that have been hallowed by time and function. This, in fact, is involved in the meaning of tradition.

Now, against the background of the views expressed in the immediately preceding paragraphs, I shall briefly examine some of the

ideas and institutions of the traditional African political system in terms of their relevance or irrelevance to the modern setting.

It must be borne in mind from the outset that the conditions in which the indigenous democratic institutions were operated many decades ago were different from what they are now, with the emergence both of large political communities (that is, nations) and of the ideas of a central government that controls the political power. The business of government in the modern world is more complex, more ramifying than of yore; we cannot go about such business in the way it was done by our forefathers. The reason is that certain features or aspects of the traditional conceptions of things, but by no means all, may be disharmonious with the modern situation.

For instance, the idea of a *hereditary* head of state, who is not a mere figurehead but wields (or wants to wield) effective political power as in the traditional political setting, will not be hospitable in a modern political community in which several individuals or groups compete for political power. Also, the concept of a regal lineage from which the chief or head of state was chosen is impossible to entertain and apply within the context of a large modern political community constituted by a medley of ethnic groups. Each of the constituent ethnic groups would want the head of state to come from within it, a desire that would, if not fulfilled, almost invariably engender political wrangles, machinations and secessions. Ethnicity has been the bane of the party system of politics in postcolonial Africa: party affiliations have generally been on ethnic lines and ethnicity is known to have played some role in military coups. It is thus undeniable that in the evolution of the democratic system in a large political community some of the traditional political institutions would be a hindrance. Such institutions or practices must, therefore, be expunged.

On the other hand, there were others, to be sure, that would facilitate democratic political development: the town, village or state councils served as instruments of political participation and involvement; ideas of free expression of opinion, popular will, consent, consensus; the fact that wealth was not a basis for membership in the traditional councils--so that both the rich and the poor found themselves there--all these and others discussed earlier are conducive to the evolution of democratic practice even in a large modern political setting.

It must be noted that both colonial and postcolonial governmental systems in Africa created a distance between the government and the governed. This, in turn, engendered attitudes of unconcern and insensitivity to the affairs of the state on the part of the governed. Consequently, the general attitude of the citizen was that it was possible to injure the state without injuring oneself, an attitude that opened the floodgates of bribery, corruption, carelessness about state property or state enterprises, and other unethical or antisocial acts. Traditional ideology, however, positively maintained that any injury done to the community as a whole directly injures the individual. Thus the traditional system evoked sentiments of

personal commitment to the community which the modern African state has yet to create in its citizens. These observations undoubtedly suggest the conviction that it is sensible, even imperative, to revivify those of our ancestral political values and attitudes which are evidently relevant to developments in the democratic politics of the modern world.

The upshot of this discussion then, is that the ideas and values in the traditional system of government must be thoroughly and critically examined and sorted out in a sophisticated manner. Those ideas that appear to be unclear and woolly, but which can, nevertheless, be considered worthwhile, must be explored, refined and trimmed and given a modern translation. Thus what needs to be done, in pursuit of democracy and political stability, is to ingenuously find ways and means of hammering those autochthonous democratic elements on the anvil of prudence, common sense, imagination, creative spirit and a sense of history into an acceptable and viable democratic form in the setting of the modern world. When this task is done, the traditional ideas--some of them at any rate--will be found to be of immense value in the contemporary socio-political developments in Africa. Our culture may yet bring us the much-needed political salvation.



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# **THE COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY**

## **PURPOSE**

Today there is urgent need to attend to the nature and dignity of the person, to the quality of human life, to the purpose and goal of the physical transformation of our environment, and to the relation of all this to the development of social and political life. This, in turn, requires philosophic clarification of the base upon which freedom is exercised, that is, of the values which provide stability and guidance to one's decisions.

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