The Question of African Philosophy

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Philosophy in Africa has for more than a decade now been dominated by the discussion of one compound question, namely, is there an African philosophy, and if there is, what is it? The first part of the question has generally been unhesitatingly answered in the affirmative. Dispute has been primarily over the second part of the question as various specimens of African philosophy presented do not seem to pass muster. Those of us who refuse to accept certain specimens as philosophy have generally been rather illogically said also to deny an affirmative answer to the first part of the question. In a paper presented at the International Symposium in Memory of Dr William Amo,[1] the Ghanaian philosopher who taught in German universities in the early part of the eighteenth century, Professor Odera Oruka identified four trends, perhaps more appropriately approaches, in current African philosophy. The four trends identified by Oruka are as follows:

1. *Ethno-philosophy*. This is the term Paulin Hountondji used to refer to the works of those anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers and philosophers who present the collective world views of African peoples, their myths and folk-lores and folk-wisdom, as philosophy.[2] What ethno-philosophers try to do is 'to describe a world outlook or thought system of a particular African community or the whole of Africa'. As opposed to seeing philosophy as a body of logically argued thoughts of individuals, ethno-philosophers see African philosophy as communal thought and give its emotional appeal as one of its unique features. Representative authors in this category are Tempels, Senghor, Mbiti and Kagame.[3] Oruka says that

[1] H. O. Oruka, 'Four Trends in Current African Philosophy', presented at the *William Amo Symposium* in Accra, 24–29 July 1978.

[2] Paulin Hountondji, 'Le Mythe de la Philosophie Spontanée', in *Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*, No. 1 (Lubumbashi, 1972). Although Oruka had Hountondji in mind, it must be realized that Hountondji was not the first to use this expression. Kwame Nkrumah had written a thesis on 'Ethno-philosophy' in his student days in America.

[3] (i) Placid Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959); (ii) Leopold S. Senghor, *On African Socialism*, trans. with introduction by Mercer Cook (New York: Frederic A. Praeger, 1964); (iii) J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); (iv) *La Philosophie Bantu—Rwandaise de l'Etre* (Brussels: Académie des Sciences Coloniales, 1956).

this is strictly speaking not philosophy, but philosophy only in a 'debased' sense of the word.

2. *Philosophic sagacity*. This trend implicitly rejects a holistic approach to African philosophy. Rather than seek African philosophy by the study of general world outlooks, customs, folk-lores, etc., the attempt is made to identify men in the society who are reputed for their wisdom. The aim is to show that 'literacy is not a necessary condition for philosophical reflection and exposition', and that in Africa there are 'critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgments by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus',[4] and that there are in Africa men uninfluenced by outside sources who are capable of critical and dialectical inquiry. In Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmeli*: *An Introduction to Dogan Religious Ideas*, published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press (1965), Ogotemmeli displays a great philosophic sagacity in his exposition of the secret doctrines of his group. How much is Ogotemmeli's own philosophy and how much belongs to his secret group may not be known.

3. *Nationalist–ideological philosophy*. This is represented by the works of politicians like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Leopold Senghor.[5] It is an attempt to evolve a new and, if possible, unique political theory based on traditional African socialism and familyhood. It is argued that a true and meaningful freedom must be accompanied by a true mental liberation and a return, whenever possible and desirable, to genuine and authentic traditional African humanism.

4. *Professional philosophy*. This is the work of many trained philosophers. Many of them reject the assumptions of ethno-philosophy and take a universalist view of philosophy. Philosophy, many of them argue, must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects that receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation in the society within which the philosophers operate. According to this school, African philosophy is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics or history of philosophy. It is desirable that the works be set in some African context, but it is not necessary that they be so. Thus, if African philosophers were to engage in debates on Plato's epistemology, or on theoretical identities, their works would qualify as African philosophy. It is the view of this school that debate among African philosophers is only just beginning and that the tradition of philosophy in the strict sense of the word is just now being established. According to this

[4] This is from an unpublished version of the paper referred to in footnote 1 above.

[5] Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism*: *Philosophy and Ideology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970) and J. K. Nyerere, *Ujamaa*: *Essays in Socialism* (OUP 1968).

school, criticism and argument are essential characteristics of anything which is to pass as philosophy. Hence mere descriptive accounts of African thought systems or the thought systems of any other society would not pass as philosophy. Oruka identifies four African philosophers—Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, himself and myself—whose works reflect this position.[6] I agree with Oruka that the four of us broadly belong to the same 'school'. We have met more frequently perhaps than any other group in Africa and have exchanged and discussed our published and unpublished works to the extent that I am afraid I may be doing just what Ayer did in *Language, Truth and Logic*, expounding, explaining and defending the views of a school. Nevertheless, some subtle differences, as is to be expected, remain among us. In this paper, I shall not repeat in detail our usual arguments for rejecting the works of others as not being philosophical.

Recent discussions and further reflections on the matter have convinced me that the different positions as to the nature of African philosophy held by various contemporary Africans reflect different understandings of the meanings of philosophy itself. I now think that our not wholly terminological dispute as to what is and what is not to count as African philosophy cannot be settled without answering some important questions. Some of these questions are: What exactly are African philosophers trying to do, namely, what challenges are they trying to meet? What is the proper answer to these challenges? In other words, what would constitute an appropriate answer to the problems African philosophers are trying to solve? What is the difference between a piece of philosophical discourse and discourse in some other discipline? What is it for a given idea or philosophy to be correctly definable as African philosophy? I shall attempt in this paper to answer these and related questions.

Philosophy begins in wonder. The universe itself provided men with the first source of wonder. There are the stars, the oceans, the phenomena of birth, life, death, growth and decay. Men wondered about the fate of the dead. About the living, they wondered about the purpose of life, about what is the proper way to behave. They wonder about whether there is a guiding force behind all these things, etc. All human societies have answers to these questions. The life of a society is organized according to what are accepted as the answers to these fundamental questions. These answers may in fact be grounded in error and ignorance but they are usually not questioned. Rarely do men turn around to criticize themselves without some (usually external) impetus, rarely do men feel the necessity to provide justifications for their beliefs without some challenge.

In Africa, the challenge to the traditional world view and belief systems came chiefly from contact with Western Europeans. For although there must have been some contact through trade and other means between the

[6] See the revised version of Oruka's paper referred to in note 4, footnote 15.

different peoples of sub-Saharan Africa from time immemorial, yet because of the similarity of their environment and hence the similarity of the problems the universe posed for them, the world views of these peoples, their customs and social organizations were not sufficiently dissimilar to provide significant challenges to one another. The similarity which social anthropologists have found among several African cultures is not surprising for, given identical problems, it is to be expected that some solutions would be similar since human options are not infinite. But things changed upon contact with the West. Large parts of Africa were colonized, evangelization began and writing was introduced. Two different world views came face to face.[7] The four trends identified by Oruka are different attempts to meet the challenges created by the new situation. What are those challenges?

1. Partly out of a desire to understand the Africans better in order to make their governance or conversion to Christianity easier, or, simply out of curiosity in the presence of new and, to the Europeans, strange ways of life, European ethnographers began to study the Africans. Their findings were unanimous in concluding that not only were the Africans radically different from Europeans in the hue of their skin, but that they were also radically different in their mode of life and in their capacity for rational thinking. They emphasized the irrational and non-logical nature of African thought. Many of the early anthropologists and ethnographers being clergymen, their interest was in the religious and spiritistic thoughts of the African. The usual verdict was that the African mentality was primitive, irrational and illogical. With the growth of education among Africans it began to be realized that an unworthy picture of Africans was being presented and that a misinformed and false interpretation was being given to African thought and way of life. A new interpretation which would do the black man proud was called for.[8] This is what the authors described by Oruka as practitioners of ethno-philosophy are trying to do.

2. The second challenge came with the rise of African, or shall we say, black nationalism. There was struggle for political independence. It was felt that political independence must be accompanied with a total mental liberation, and if possible a total severance of all intellectual ties with the colonial masters. By this time Africans had acquired western modes of life in many ways—we wore Western type of dress, spoke English or French, etc. The political system was modelled after the Westminster pattern or after that of some other European parliament. The traditional method of government was displaced in most places. This was not without tension. It is easier and less damaging to a people's self-pride to adopt a foreign

[7] Just as the contact of the Greeks with the Egyptians, and that of Medieval Europe with Arabic thought had influences on the thoughts of those peoples.

[8] Jean-Paul Lebeuf called attention to this in 1962. See 'The Philosopher's Interest in African Thought: A Synopsis,' *Second Order*: *An African Journal of Philosophy* **1**, No. 1 (1972), 43.

language, a foreign mode of dress and culinary habits than it is to adopt and internalize foreign ways of social organization. The Westminster model was failing in several places. We began to think of the traditional social order and to seek salvation in the pristine values of our ancestors. Nationalist–ideological philosophy is a response to this challenge.

3. A third challenge arises from man's natural urge to look for comparisons everywhere. The way we understand the world is by putting things into categories. If you come across a strange object somewhere you think of what it is like, you compare it with other things of the same sort you have seen elsewhere. Africans who study the intellectual history of other peoples naturally want to know the intellectual history of their own people. They are naturally curious to find out whether there are African opposite numbers to the philosophers they have studied, say, in Western intellectual history, or least whether there are equivalent concepts to the ones they have come across in Western philosophy, and if so how the concepts are related or different in their logical behaviour from those of Western philosophy. This point has become immensely important because of the honorific way in which philosophy has come to be seen. Philosophy has become a value-laden expression such that for a people not to have philosophy is for them to be considered intellectually inferior to others who have. No one laments the lack of African physics. African mathematicians have, as far as I know, not been asked to produce African mathematics. No one has asked that our increasing number of express-ways be built the African way. Yet philosophers in Africa are asked, if not directly, yet in a subtle way, to produce an autochthonous African species of their discipline.[9] It is natural for the nationalist non-philosopher colleague on a university curriculum committee to wonder why a philosophy department in an African university is not offering courses in African philosophy while there are courses on British philosophy, American philosophy, European philosophy, etc. He would simply argue that if these other peoples have philosophies, the African too must have a philosophy. Unacquainted with what is taught in these other courses and fully acquainted with the many rich 'philosophical' and witty sayings and religious practices of his own people, the nationalist cannot understand why African philosophers do not teach African philosophy. To fail to teach African philosophy is almost tantamount to crime and an unpatriotic omission. What seems to be unclear to many is the sense in which a philosophy or an idea is described as the philosophy or idea of a people. What does an expression like 'British philosophy' really mean? I shall address myself to this question towards the end of this paper.

Philosophers might try to face the challenges by introducing ethnophilosophy or teaching the political ideologies of African politicians as

[9] Some of my colleagues criticized the syllabus I drew up for the Philosophy Department, University of Ibadan, in 1974 as being not sufficiently African and too Western.

philosophy. They may also adopt the method of the social anthropologists and engage in field work: have a tape recorder in hand and visit, and conduct interviews with, people who are reputed to be wise men in the society, hoping that they will discover African philosophy that way.

4. Added to the foregoing, there is a rather recent and growing challenge arising from the scarcity of resources in Africa. Philosophy, and indeed the whole of the education sector, has to compete with other social needs in the allocation of scarce resources. Roads must be built, hospitals equipped and agriculture developed. In these circumstances, that a philosopher like any one else may be required to show the relevance of his discipline is understandable. The emergence of African this and African that is a familiar phenomenon in the African academic scene. It is as if anything becomes relevant once you stick on it the prefix 'African'. It might even be argued that if historians and students of literature have succeeded in creating African history and African literature, we too ought to create African philosophy. It is against these challenges that we must now examine the different approaches mentioned earlier. We shall consider them in a rather different order, treating nationalist-ideological and philosophic sagacity first, and ethno-philosophy last. Ethno-philosophy is the one which stands in the sharpest opposition to the position we wish to urge, and it is in consideration of it that our own conception of philosophy will become clearer. We can give the other positions a fair day fairly quickly.

I sympathize with the efforts of our African political thinkers. It would be great indeed if we could evolve a new political system, a new socio-political order which is different from those found elsewhere and based on an autochthonous African philosophy. That indeed is a worthwhile aspiration which one must not give up without trial. But I am disturbed at certain presuppositions of attempts so far made. To begin with, I think that the past the political philosophers seek to recapture cannot be recaptured. Nkrumah seems to realize this in his *Consciencism*. That is why he advocates a new African socialism that would take into account the existential situation of Africa. Contact with the West through colonization and Christianity and the spread of Islam have had far-reaching effects on African traditional life. Any reconstruction of our social order must take these into account. Yet Nkrumah and Nyerere both think that the traditional way of life must be their *point de départ*. But the traditional African society was not as complex as the modern African societies. The crisis of conscience which we have in the modern African society was not there. In the sphere of morality there was a fairly general agreement as to what was right and what was expected of one. In a predominantly non-money economy where people lived and worked all their lives in the same locale and among the same close relatives African communalism was workable. Africa is becoming rapidly urbanized. The population of a typical big city neighbourhood today is heterogeneous. People come from different places, have different back-

grounds, do not necessarily have blood ties and are less concerned with the affairs of one another than people used to be. The security of the traditional setting is disappearing. African traditional communalism worked because of the feelings of familyhood that sustained it. This was not a feeling of familyhood of the human race, but a feeling of closeness among those who could claim a common ancestry.[10] I do not know how to check continued urbanization with its attendant problems. We may advocate the organization of our cities into manageable units and encourage the sense of belonging among people however diverse their origins, as Wiredu suggested.[11] Still, it should be realized that this would have to be based on new premises, not on the old ones.

Political thinkers are also guilty of romanticizing the African past. Certainly not everything about our past was glorious. Anyone who has watched *Roots* (even if he has not read the book), and however melodramatic the movie version might have been, does not need to be told that.[12] The interminable land disputes between communities, sometimes within the same village, show that the communalism we talk about was between members of very closed groups. A way of life which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious. Any reconstruction of our past must examine features of our thought system and our society that made this possible.[13] African humanism must not be a backward-looking humanism. There is no country whose traditional ideology could cope with the demands of the modern world. Despite claims to the contrary, the works of Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere are not entirely divorced from foreign influence. Indeed they have studied philosophy in Western schools and the influence of this training is noticeable in their idioms. However, they do not claim to be merely describing for us the African traditional philosophy, nor do they claim that their work represents the collective view of the traditional African. What they are doing is trying to *base* a philosophy of *their own* on the traditional African past. The fact that they may have given an inaccurate picture of the past is beside the point. Divorced from their nationalistic-ideological bias and with a more critical approach, their work may be significant contributions to political theory, and it is hair splitting trying to make a distinction between political theory and political philosophy. What is needed in these works is more rigour and more systematization.

There appear to be two ways of approaching the investigation of philosophic sagacity. One is the procedure currently being used by Dr Barry

[10] This is in disagreement with Professor Ntumba's universalist interpretation of African familyhood, and Nyerere's own claim in his *Ujamaa*. See note 5 above.

[11] Kwasi Wiredu, 'Philosophy and Our Culture', *Proceedings of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences* (forthcoming).

[12] Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

[13] Kwasi Wiredu, loc. cit.

Hallen, an American philosopher at the University of Ife. He is investigating the Yoruba concept of a person. Certain persons who are reputed for their knowledge of Yoruba thought and religion are identified. The philosopher, tape-recorder in hand, visits them and attempts to get into a real dialogue with them on the Yoruba concept of a person. The answers obtained are as diverse in their details as the persons interviewed, but contain essential similarities. These essential similarities or common features are then written up by the trained philosopher to get the Yoruba concept of a person. He may do follow-up visits to have his account checked. In the dialogue the philosopher is expected to try not to impose pre-established conceptual categories on his African colleague. Perhaps during the dialogue both parties would point out the inconsistencies[14] in each other's position, leading to abandonment of, or amendments to, positions. I see nothing in principle unphilosophical in this approach and would not object to it. One might wish to point out that that is not how we approach our study of Western philosophy. This would not be a valid objection. Philosophers still visit one another for philosophical discussions although conferences, seminars and the pages of learned journals are now the principal forums for philosophic exchanges. In a predominantly illiterate culture it is not obvious that the method described above is an unphilosophical way of approaching our subject, if one had the interest in probing folk thought. Another is the method of Dr Oruka and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. It consists in recording the philosophy of an individual Kenyan (they hope to find many more such Kenyans) uninfluenced by modern education. It is not pretended that they are recording the common thought of the Kenyan Luo tribe. The purpose seems to be to find out the critical thinking of some native Kenyans, and thereby establish that there are native Africans capable of doing rigorous philosophy.

But a number of questions must be asked. First, whose philosophy does the philosopher produce as a result of such research? What does he succeed in doing *vis-à-vis* the challenges earlier discussed? I suggest that what the philosopher is doing here is helping people to give birth to philosophical ideas already in them. The product of the joint enquiry of the traditional sage and the trained philosopher is a new phenomenon. Both the traditional sage and the trained philosopher inevitably enter the dialogue with certain presuppositions. What they come out with is a new creation out of their reflections on the beliefs previously held by them. But, and this is the important point to remember, the philosopher and the sage are 'doing their own thing'. They are doing African philosophy only because the participants are Africans *or* are working in Africa, *and* are interested in a philosophical problem (howbeit universal) from an African point of view. As will be argued later, if they were merely interested in how and what Africans

[14] *Inconsistencies*? This point will be discussed later.

think about persons their work would not be philosophically interesting, not any more interesting than the works of ethnographers. Second, this 'going out quite literally into the market place . . . something we are told philosophers used to do before they became encapsulated in our academic institutions',[15] is not to be understood as being the same as what Socrates and his contemporaries did in the Athenian *agora*. Metaphors can be misleading. Socrates' interlocutors, if Plato's dialogues have any verisimilitude, are his intellectual peers. Among them were etymologists like Euthyphro (*Cratylus* 396d) after whom Plato named the *Euthyphro*, renowned orators like Gorgias (*Symposium* 198c), mathematicians like Theaetetus, etc. The Athenian *agora* was not a mere market place in our sense of the word; it was the speakers' corner, the conference centre and the seminar auditorium of the Athenian free and leisure class citizenry. Socrates did not leave us any written work but he was not an illiterate. There is indeed evidence that Socrates and a large section of the Athenian free adult male citizenry was not illiterate.[16] It is reasonable to assume that those who met in the *agora* for intellectual discussions were well-educated persons thoroughly familiar with the written and oral traditions of their people. Their search was not for the Athenian conception of justice, piety or what have you. In fact, Socrates insisted almost *ad nauseam* on the necessity of distinguishing between popular conceptions of notions like justice and piety and the real meaning of these concepts—what the thing is in itself. It was in this process of searching for the real meaning of concepts (mostly ethical concepts, at first) as opposed to popular beliefs about them that Greek philosophy was born. It was a criticism of traditional cultural beliefs.

Philosophy is a conscious creation. One cannot be said to have a philosophy in the strict sense of the word until one has consciously reflected on one's beliefs. It is unlikely that such conscious reflection did not take place in traditional Africa; it is however left to research to show to what extent it has. That it has cannot be denied *a priori*. However, this social-anthropologist's method of field enquiry seems to me to be an implicit admission that an African philosophical tradition is yet in the making. The philosopher and the sage are helping this creative work. Those interested in philosophic sagacity would succeed and have succeeded in showing that ability to philosophize is not necessarily tied to literacy and that there exist

[15] Barry Hallen, 'A Philosopher's Approach to Traditional Culture', *Theoria to Theory* **9**, No. 4 (1975), 259-272.

[16] In defending himself against the charge of atheism brought against him by Meletus, Socrates said that the views attributed to him were in fact those of Anaxagoras whom he would not plagiarize. Anaxagoras' book, Socrates adds, was readily available at a cheap price at every corner store. Of the Athenian jury Socrates asks Meletus, 'Have you so poor an opinion of these gentlemen, and do you assume them to be so illiterate as not to know that the writings of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae are full of theories like these?' (Plato, *Apology*, 26d).

among Africans men and women capable of engaging in serious philosophical discourse. Still, it does not seem to me that this last point is what those who do not see the definitive establishment of African philosophy in the results of such researches are denying; none but the extremely naive person could deny all the members of a whole race philosophic abilities. What some seem to be denying is the existence of a tradition of organized critical reflections such as the philosopher and the sage are trying to help create. For, it is one thing to show that there are men capable of philosophical dialogue in Africa and another to show that there are African philosophers in the sense of those who have engaged in organized systematic reflections on the thoughts, beliefs and practices of their people. Even if writing cannot be a precondition for philosophy, nevertheless, the role of writing in the creation of a philosophical tradition cannot be underrated. More will be said about this later.

Let us now come to ethno-philosophy. The sources are African folk-lore, tales, myths, proverbs, religious beliefs and practices, and African culture at large. In respect of these it is necessary to make clear what we are denying. We are not denying that they are worthy of the philosopher's attention. We are not denying the existence of respectable and in many ways complex, and in some sense rational and logical conceptual systems in Africa. In one sense a system of beliefs is rational if, once you understand the system, individual beliefs within it make sense; in other words, if one could see why members of the society within the system would hold such beliefs as they do in fact hold. And a belief system is logical if, once you identify the premises or assumptions upon which the system is based, individual beliefs would follow from them and can be deduced from them alone. Such a system may also even be coherent. That there are rational (in the sense described above), logical and respectable conceptual systems among African and other peoples once thought by Europeans to be mentally primitive is no longer the point at issue. As far back (far back?) as 1962 at the First International Congress of Africanists in Accra, Ghana, a well-known anthropologist, Jean-Paul Lebeuf, had asserted (howbeit with some exaggeration) the existence in Africa of 'perfectly balanced metaphysical systems in which all the phenomena of the sensible world are bound together in harmony', adding that 'it cannot be said too often that the recording of these ontologies has rendered accessible a form of thinking which is as unimpeachable in its logic as Cartesianism, although quite separate from it'.[17] The works of Professor Evans-Pritchard and more recent studies of Professor Robin Horton have gone a long way to confirm this. But not every rational, coherent and complicated conceptual system is philosophy. Science and mathematics are eminently rational, logical and, to a large extent, consistent conceptual systems, but they are not philosophical systems.

[17] Quoted by W. A. Hart, loc cit., note 8 above.

I think that many ethno-philosophers mistakenly believe that all rational, logical and complicated conceptual systems are philosophical systems. I believe that they are wrong in this.

The usual criticisms against ethno-philosophers[18] have taken the following forms. (1) That some of the things they say about African culture are false: such as when one shows that Mbiti's claim that Africans have no conception of the future beyond the immediate future to be false by drawing attention to various modes of reference to the distant future in African language and social life,[19] or that Senghor is wrong for claiming that 'Negro African reasoning is intuitive by participation' by showing the unemotional rationality of some African thinking (as in Robin Horton's works). This method by itself does not show that the works so criticized are unphilosophical works. A philosophical work does not cease to be philosophical merely because it contains false claims. (2) Since we hold that philosophy is properly studied, according to us, through the examination of the thoughts of individuals, another argument we have used against ethno-philosophers is that the collective thought of peoples upon which they concentrate is not genuine philosophy. Although any attempt to give an account of the collective thoughts of a whole people lends itself to a usual objection against holistic explanations of social phenomena (namely, that they must posit the existence of group minds), this objection is, in and of itself, not sufficient to dismiss such attempts as non-philosophical. Philosophers like anyone else may err. At any rate, it is not clear why the thought of groups, if there is such a thing, cannot be a proper subject for philosophical study. To argue that it cannot[20] is to beg the question, for it is to assume that the question of what methods and materials belong to philosophy has been settled in advance.[21] The history of philosophy is replete with discussions of different sorts of things and various approaches to the subject. One cannot dismiss the discussion of anything and the use of any method as unphilosophical without argument. To opt for one method is to take a philosophical stance. There is no *a priori* reason why proverbs, myths of gods and angels, social practices, etc., could not be proper subjects for philosophical enquiry.

Ethno-philosophers and ourselves and indeed all who engage in cognitive endeavours have a common object (not objective) of enquiry. What we all wish to know more about is this universe of ours; its content, the events and activities which take place within it. About these things several

[18] I do not use this term with any pejorative connotations.

[19] E. G. J. A. Ayoade's 'Time in Yoruba Thought', *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, Richard A. Wright (ed.) (University Press of America, 1977), 83–106.

[20] I argued this way in my 'Problems and Prescriptions for an Action Philosophy in Africa', *Proceedings of the Inter-African Council of Philosophy*, Proceedings of the 1975 Accra Conference.

[21] See R. Wright's arguments in his book cited in note 19 above, pp. 21–24.

questions may be asked to which different answers are expected. The kind of answers expected depends both on the kind of questions posed *and* on the method of enquiry. Different disciplines approach the study of the world in different ways and seek understanding at different levels and with different goals. Thus, the discovery of the most fundamental laws governing the behaviour of matter is the goal of physics; the discovery of the general laws governing the functioning of the human mind is the goal of psychology. Disciplines are not in water-tight compartments, and areas of interest overlap. And what in one generation belongs to one discipline may in another generation belong to another discipline. Scholars in each discipline generally adopt the methods accepted by their age, and deal with the sorts of questions that are of concern to their age, and work within the background of the basic assumptions of their disciplines—at least until these assumptions 'boil over'. Wright may be right that there is no one method which is *the method* of philosophy today.[22] Still, in whatever tradition of philosophy one is working and whatever method one is applying, some assumptions seem to be generally agreed on today. Thus, when one is putting forward a philosophical thesis for our acceptance, we expect him to state his case clearly, to state the issues at stake as clearly as possible so that we know what we are being invited to accept. We expect him to argue for his case—show us why we must accept his case. He may do this by showing the weaknesses of rival theories, if any, or by showing how his theory solves the problem(s) that has (have) always worried us, or how it enlarges our understanding of something else we already knew. In arguing for his thesis and in showing how the thesis makes a difference he is carrying out a synthesis the result of which may be a new view of the world. If this new view conflicts with other views he must attempt to justify which of them he thinks we ought to opt for. We expect him to let us have a say; let us, that is, ask and raise questions about his thesis. In other words we do not expect him to be so dogmatic as to think that his position is the final word on that with which it deals. We expect him to be prepared to change his view, and are ourselves prepared to change ours, according to evidence. We do not expect him to have a theological dogmatism about his position. We expect these things even of the speculative metaphysician and the existentialist. Philosophers do not always succeed in doing and being all these things. It is only required that they try to. A mere description of the empirical world cannot satisfy these conditions. The pity is that ethnophilosophers usually fall in love so much with the thought system they seek to expound that they become dogmatic in the veneration of the culture to which the thought system belongs. They hardly see why others may refuse totally to share their esteem for the system they describe. They do not raise philosophical issues about the system (because for them no

[22] Ibid., 23–25.

problems arise once we 'understand' the system); therefore they do not attempt to give a philosophical justification of the belief system or of issues that arise in it. It is for these reasons that we find their works philosophically unsatisfactory; it is not because we consider the material on which they have worked unworthy of the philosopher's attention, or their work unscholarly. It must be pointed out, however, that an otherwise competent professional philosopher may manifest an unexpressed reverence for traditional culture by simply leaving us with an analysis of philosophical concepts and saying nothing about his analysis—as if to say he has found a new and impeccable conceptual system.

The African philosopher cannot *deliberately* ignore the study of the traditional belief system of his people. Philosophical problems arise out of real life situations. In Africa, more than in many other parts of the modern world, traditional culture and beliefs still exercise a great influence on the thinking and actions of men. At a time when many people in the West believe that philosophy has become impoverished and needs redirection, a philosophical study of traditional societies may be the answer. The point, however, is that the philosopher's approach to this study must be one of criticism, by which one does not mean 'negative appraisal, but rational, impartial and articulate appraisal whether positive or negative. To be "critical" of received ideas is accordingly not the same thing as rejecting them: it consists rather in seriously asking oneself whether the ideas in question should be reformed, modified or conserved, and in applying one's entire intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer.'[23] What seems to me clear is that the philosopher cannot embark on a study of African traditional thought wholesale. He would have to proceed piecemeal. He may have to begin by an examination of philosophical issues and concepts that have loomed largely in the history of world philosophy, and he must not be charged for being unoriginal or being irrelevant as an African philosopher simply because he is discussing in the African context issues that have also received attention elsewhere. If a problem is philosophical it must have a universal relevance to all men. Philosophical systems are built up by systematic examination of specific features of the world and out of the relationships that are perceived to obtain between them. Some contemporary African philosophers have begun the piecemeal study of philosophical concepts embedded in African traditional thought. I shall discuss two recent attempts.

In 'Notes on the Concept of Cause and Chance in Yoruba Traditional Thought',[24] by a comparison of several quotations from Yoruba proverbs, the playwright Ogunde, the Ifa corpus, Hume, Horton, etc., and obviously

[23] H. S. Staniland, 'What is Philosophy?' *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (1978).

[24] *Second Order*, 2 No. 2 (1973) 12–20.

doing the same thing which Henri Frankfort has done with Greek pre-scientific pre-philosophic speculative thought,[25] and reaching exactly the the same conclusions, Professor Sodipo successfully established the following theses. (1) That the Yorubas do distinguish between chance and cause. (2) That scientific causal explanations (usually done in terms of impersonal entities) cannot explain certain unique features of some occurrences. Thus while the wetness of the road, the ineffectiveness of the brakes and driver carelessness, etc., may explain why accidents generally happen, they cannot explain why it has happened to a particular person, in a particular place and at exactly the time it happened. (3) That where human personal interests are at stake, as when a coin is tossed to decide who is to reign, the Yorubas believe that in such a case luck is not due to chance but to the action of the gods or some other personal agent.

> (4) The reason for this is that the preoccupation of explanation in Yoruba traditional thought is *religious*; because it is *religious* it must satisfy 'emotional and aesthetic needs' and because of this its explanations *must be given* in terms of persons or entities that are like persons in significant respects. For it is explanations like these that can reveal the motives that lay behind particular happenings; they alone answer the *emotional* question why the thing happened *here*, *now* and to *me* in particular.[26]

I think that we must admit that this account has enabled us to see that the Yoruba conception of cause and chance fits very well into the Yoruba traditional system of beliefs, especially our religious belief system. It also shows that there are reasons, and understandable reasons for that matter, why the traditional Yorubas explain significant occurrences in personal idioms. Professor Sodipo points out that for the Yorubas, the gods take over where the scientists would have a recourse to chance. He also points out that the Yorubas are not unaware of the technical notion of chance. What Professor Sodipo has done is to put these concepts (cause and chance) in this specific category of events (events that are significant for human beings) in context. He has 'put himself in the place of men living [in the traditional Yoruba culture] to understand the principle and pattern of their intentions'.[27] But something is required beyond the analysis provided by Sodipo.

Since we have now, through Sodipo's analysis, come to see that there is a difference between the traditional Yoruba account of cause and effect and the scientific account, the important question is: which is the truer account? Which are we to prefer? The only answer one can deduce from Sodipo is; it all depends on what you want. If you want emotional or aesthetic satisfaction you ought to prefer the Yoruba traditional account. If you want

[25] Henri Frankfort, *Before Philosophy* (Penguin, 1951).
[26] Sodipo, op. cit., 18.
[27] W. A. Hart, op. cit. 47, quoting from Evans-Pritchard.

some other thing then ——. If two accounts are so radically different one must be nearer truth than the other, and one of the aims of philosophy is to enable us to decide which. Surely that which is emotionally and aesthetically satisfying does not for that reason alone compel our acceptance. That feature alone cannot confer truth on a proposition.

In a more important sense of 'rational', showing why a people hold a particular belief is not sufficient to show that the belief is rational. Given any human social practice one can always find a reason for it. In the case in point here, an explanation of an event in terms of the motives of a person or a god is rational only if evidence is given for the existence of the person or god, or sufficient reasons given why their existence must be assumed *and* arguments adduced as to why the person or god should be supposed to be implicated in the particular event. Surely, to show that a belief arises from emotional needs, if this is in fact true, can hardly be construed as having shown it to be rational. In all this one notices a reluctance to evaluate lest it be understood as condemning a particular culture. This same reluctance to pass evaluative judgments is evident in Hallen's discussion of the concept of destiny in the Yoruba thought system.[28]

Hallen argues that the Yorubas reject the Western radical dichotomy between the rational and emotional parts of the human personality and that this fundamentally affects the structure of their beliefs and conceptual systems generally. According to Hallen there are three elements in the human personality: the individual spirit (*èmí*) which continues to live after death but without its earthly body (*ara*) and destiny (*orí*). Like the souls in Plato's *Republic* (Book X, 617d–621b) the *èmí* can go through a number of reincarnations. Before each reincarnation, the *èmí* has to choose a new destiny (*orí*) which 'encompasses every event of significance that will take place during his lifetime, including time and manner of both birth and death... The *èmí* is the conscious deciding self; what it decides is determined by the *orí*, a part of the self that is not part of self-consciousness'.[29] The *orí* must be seen as somehow external to and other than the self. Hallen argues that the *orí* must not be compared to the Freudian notion of an unconscious because this would introduce the personality dichotomy into a conceptual system where it does not occur. The *orí* has both reason and desires of his own. Here is the interesting passage from Hallen:

> A Yoruba will say that once a destiny is 'fixed' by *Olórun* it cannot be changed. It must take place. Nevertheless on other occasions the same person will say that it is possible to 'miss' the destiny one has been apportioned, in the sense of becoming confused and lost during one's lifetime and doing things for which one is not at all suited. Or an external force can interfere with one's destiny. Neither of these is entirely consistent

[28] Barry Hallen, loc. cit., note 15 above, pp. 265–270.
[29] Ibid., 266

> with the belief that once a destiny is fixed, it is unalterable and must take place. Or with the fact that people will flatter and praise their destiny in hopes of improving it. Or with the aforementioned possibility that a person might be blamed for not making the most of the destiny allotted to him.[30]

Hallen rightly points out that the inconsistency implied in the Yoruba conception of destiny (*orí*) must not be seen as evidence of primitive mentality. Human beings everywhere sometimes hold (usually unconsciously) inconsistent beliefs. However, Hallen argues that the inconsistency in this case is merely apparent and becomes a problem only if we judge the Yoruba conceptual system in terms of the Western hypothetico-deductive paradigm:

> Rather the various beliefs that may be called upon when an explanation or prediction is required should be compared to the various moveable partitions that are ranged along the wings of a stage and may be swung into position depending upon the demands of the next scene. Each partition corresponds to a certain belief. There are other belief panels in the wings that would be inconsistent with it if they were brought into play simultaneously. But this does not happen (except in very exceptional circumstances) because when a certain kind of problem occupies stage centre the same partition is always moved out to serve as its explanatory background.[31]

Again what we see here as in Sodipo's account of the Yoruba concept of cause and chance is a good account of why the Yorubas do not find it odd to live with inconsistent beliefs. Hallen's account can hardly be construed as showing that the Yorubas hold consistent views on destiny as expressed in their concept of *orí*; rather his account explains why the Yorubas do not *see* any inconsistencies in their belief system. But this does not remove the inconsistency. It is better to recognize here the existence of genuine perennial philosophical problems—the problems of determinism and freedom, the self and consciousness—to which philosophers have not yet found a solution, than to portray the Africans as radically different from the rest of mankind in their conceptual system and in being immune to the laws of logic. In an attempt to establish the uniqueness of the African both Sodipo and Hallen have refused to cite parallel beliefs from elsewhere lest perhaps they be accused of importing alien models into their study or appear to be doing nothing new. Our culture may be dear to us, but truth must be dearer.

The discussion is already getting too long, but there are still two more points to be considered. One is the call that we produce an African philo-

[30] Ibid., 268
[31] Ibid., 270.

sophy even if there is yet none, as if philosophers could put up a command performance. We are told that if historians and students of literature could create the African species of their disciplines, African philosophers can do the same. Those who argue this way miss the essential differences between philosophy and these other disciplines. Peoples and nations *necessarily* have a history as long as their existence spans space and time and as long as they engage in human social activities. Unless they are simply stupid, those who are reported to have said that Africans had no history can only mean that they do not know of any significant events (by what standards significance is to be determined is another matter) that took place in African history. Our historians have proved them wrong by a close study of our oral traditions coupled with archaeological and other material evidence. African writers are doing for African literature what Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides did for Greek literature. They took popular myths, well-known celebrations, and popular customs, and gave them a literary twist. It is in doing this that they are helping to create African literature. However, it seems to me that what one may properly compare with philosophy is historical and literary criticism. These are, in Africa, as far as I know, a product of the modern age. The influence of writing in all these cannot be underestimated. Writing helps us to pin down ideas and to crystallize them in our minds. It makes the ideas of one day available for later use. It is by its means that the thoughts of one age are made available to succeeding generations with the least distortion. We do not always, as it were, have to begin again. How much of the present discussion would I carry in my memory ten years from now? How much of it, if I were to rely on oral transmission, would remain undistorted for the future? Surely, writing is not a prerequisite for philosophy but I doubt whether philosophy can progress adequately without writing. Had others not written down the sayings of Socrates, the pre-Socratics and Buddha, we would today not regard them as philosophers, for their thoughts would have been lost in the mythological world of proverbs and pithy sayings.

The remaining point is this: what does an expression like 'British Philosophy' mean?[32] It does not mean the philosophy of the average Englishman, nor a philosophy generally known among the British people. The average Briton is not aware of much of *Principia Mathematica* or of the contents of the *Tractatus*. British philosophy is not a monolithic tradition. At this point in time empiricism and logical analysis seem to be the predominating features of that tradition but by no means can all present philosophers in the British tradition be described as empiricists or analysts. Towards the close of the last century, the dominant figure was Bradley,

[32] In the line of argument that follows I am greatly indebted to Professor Kwasi Wiredu's 'What is African Philosophy?', presented at the *William Amo International Symposium* referred to earlier.

a Hegelian idealist. British philosophy is not a body of thoughts that had its origins in the British Isles. Greek thought (itself informed by early Egyptian thought), continental idealism, and scientific philosophy (the philosophy of the Vienna Circle) have all had influences on British thought. Some of the most influential figures in British philosophy have not even been British by birth—e.g. Wittgenstein and Popper. Similarly, Alfred North Whitehead was born in England and began his philosophical career in England, but his later philosophical work belongs to the history of American philosophy. The thoughts of the ancient Greeks belong to the history of Western philosophy but the ancient Greeks and ancient Britons were mutually ignorant of each other. Caesar described the Britons as barbarians when he first went there. The point I am trying to make is that the philosophy of a country or region of the world is not definable in terms of the thought-content of the tradition nor in terms of the national origins of the thinkers. As Wiredu puts it, 'for a set of ideas to be a genuine possession of a people, they need not have originated them, they need only appropriate them, make use of them, develop them, if the spirit so moves them, and thrive on them. The intellectual history of mankind is a series of mutual borrowings and adaptations among races, nations, tribes, and even smaller sub-groups.'[33] And 'the work of a philosopher is part of a given tradition if and only if it is either produced within the context of that tradition or taken up and used in it'.[34] If these points are realized the philosopher should be allowed the intellectual liberties allowed his colleagues in other disciplines. He may be asked to apply his training to the study of his culture and this would be an understandable request, but it would have to be understood that his reaction will be guided by his own philosophical interests.

The view of philosophy advocated here is not narrow. It enables us to study African traditional thought, but it cautions that it be done properly. Philosophy as a discipline does, and must, have autonomy. The view that anything can pass for philosophy will hurt the development of philosophy in Africa. Not everyone is a philosopher. Philosophy requires training. Why must we lament a late start in philosophy? No one laments our late start in mathematics. I think that we must disabuse ourselves of the evaluative and honorific undertones that philosophy has come to have and regard it just as one discipline among others. That certainly is the way professional philosophers see their subject. It is just another of man's cognitive activities, not especially superior to others. A department of philosophy in a university is one among many other academic departments in the university, but in order that the foundations of the discipline be well laid it is necessary that the boundaries of it be clearly delimited. We are probably all

[33] Ibid., 7.
[34] Ibid., 11–12.

capable of doing philosophy, but we are not all philosophers, just as we are not all historians. We must advocate rigour. Whether we like it or not we will have science and technology. We have to acquire the thought habits needed to cope with life in a technological age. It is now time to begin self-criticism in Africa. Philosophers cannot afford to expend all their energies on the often unproductive and self-stultifying we-versus-you scholarship. We as Africans must talk to one another. We are likely to have a more honest and frank debate that way. If Marx is right that the important thing is to change the world, then it seems to me that our choice is obvious. No doubt many things are worth preserving in our traditional culture—especially in the moral sphere—but we stand in danger of losing these if we do not take pains to separate these from those aspects that are undesirable. This we can do only by the method of philosophical criticism.[35]

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[35] An earlier version of this paper was read to the Philosophy Department, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA, and before the Ibadan Philosophical Society. My thanks are due to the audiences in these two places. My thanks are also due to Professor Kwasi Wiredu of the Department of Philosophy, University of Ghana, Legon, for his useful criticism of a later draft.