Preface to the revised edition

The purpose of this book is fourfold: to stress the fact of the universal character of the intellectual activity called philosophy – of the propensity of some individuals in all human cultures to reflect deeply and critically about fundamental questions of human experience; to point out that philosophy is essentially a cultural phenomenon; to argue the legitimacy or appropriateness of the idea of African philosophy and attempt a definition of (modern) African philosophy; and to demonstrate that there were sages or thinkers in Africa's cultural past who gave reflective attention to matters of human existence at the fundamental level, and, as part of the demonstration, to critically explore the philosophical ideas of the Akan traditional thinkers (of Ghana).

Since this book was first published in hardcover in 1987, there have been several reviews. In this preface to the revised edition, I do not intend to respond directly to those reviews and will therefore not refer to them, even though a number of them were favorable and full of praises for the effort. Neither do I intend to respond to criticisms of some of the positions or approaches taken in the book – criticisms some of which reveal an incurable addiction to, or inebriation with, the way the philosophical enterprise emerged and has been prosecuted in the West. Nor will I respond to the contrary views expressed by others in relation to my own, except where those views derive from clear misunderstanding or misstatement of my position. I would like, rather, to use this opportunity to clarify or amplify a couple of positions previously taken by me regarding what would count as (modern) African philosophy, to say something about what is called "ethnophilosophy," and to express some views on the 'invention of Africa' idea.

Before I move on to these important matters, however, I wish to refer to my view on African ontology. It now appears to me that I was less than clear on what I said in the second paragraph on p. 197. There is a need for revision. The third sentence in that paragraph should read: "This distinction is *projected* onto the level of being. . . ." And, a few lines down, the word "homogenous" in the sentence "Reality in African thought appears to be homogenous" should read "heterogenous" to remove any ambivalence on my part. This revision agrees with what I say in Chapter 5, Section 1.

1. On the nature of African philosophy

The question of what would, or should, count as a genuine African philosophy has exercised the minds of contemporary African philosophers, including myself. I have reason to believe that that kind of question would not arise for Chinese, Japanese, or Indian philosophers who have had long traditions of (mostly) written philosophy *linked* to their cultural and historical experiences. The question has, however, arisen for contemporary African philosophers for two main reasons. First, the lack of an indigenous written philosophical tradition in Africa (with the exception of Ethiopian and ancient Egyptian philosophy) meant that there was no existing tradition of written philosophy not only to guide their perceptions of the nature of African philosophy, but also to constitute a coherent and viable conceptual and normative framework that they could explore and develop. Second, having received their philosophical training mostly in Western countries, such as Britain, France, and the United States, or based largely on the education systems of these countries, contemporary African philosophers are more likely than not – in fact predisposed – to be greatly influenced by that training in their conceptions of the nature of African philosophy: to think, for instance, that a philosophical heritage must be a written one, and that, in the absence of an indigenous written philosophical heritage, what they can – and must – do is simply to take over the entire corpus of a philosophical tradition developed in some other cultures and contribute to the appreciation of that tradition in the hope that some day it will become their own. Even though I very much appreciate the historical phenomenon of cultural borrowing, including the borrowing of ideas (see Section 3 below), nevertheless, I do not think that the entire complex of the philosophical tradition of one cultural group can or should emerge

in that way – that is, by simply taking over a whole philosophical tradition of another cultural group.

There is no good reason to suppose that the lack of written sources implies the absence of philosophical thinking. Yet, the lack of an indigenous written philosophical heritage most probably led some contemporary African philosophers to maintain that African philosophy "is still in the making" or "is yet to come" (see p. 8). Such a view of course implies a rejection of philosophy as a component of African traditional thought, and, in consequence, of African traditional philosophical thought as part of the *history* of philosophical thought in Africa. It was as a part of my critical response to such a view that I made the statement on p. 12 that seems to suggest, rather unwittingly on my part, that a necessary condition for a modern African philosophy is that it be *connected* to the traditional. I need to clarify that statement, as it may give a wrong impression of my conception of a modern African philosophy. (I was alerted to this possible interpretation of my position through correspondence with Kwasi Wiredu.)

I maintain that a history of philosophical thought in Africa will have to include the philosophical productions of past African traditional thinkers (or sages). A good deal of evidence is emerging – based on ancient sources such as Herodotus, Aristotle, Diodorus, and Strabo – to indicate that the civilization of ancient Egypt was African. Four renowned historians of Africa affirm that Egypt was "the first African civilization" (Curtin et al., p. 44). In addition, the late erudite Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop demonstrated with conviction that ancient Egyptians were an African people, and thus, their civilization was African. If the ancient Egyptian civilization was indeed African, then ancient Egyptian philosophical thought – a well documented intellectual component of that civilization – can be said to be African. This conclusion provides African philosophical thought with a very long tradition (on this topic see also Théophile Obenga, Edward P. Philip, Henry Olela, and Lancinay Keita), even though there does not appear to be a continuity in the historical trajectory of that ancient thought with subsequent African thought. The influence of the former on the latter is yet to be fully explored and assessed.

In terms of the philosophical output of African thinkers, then, it can be said that what 'is still in the making' is modern African philosophy – the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary African philosophers. By "connection to the traditional," I was

only calling for some analytic attention to be paid *also* to the traditional thought categories, values, outlooks, and so on, as a way of affirming an existing African philosophical tradition, some features or elements of which may be considered worthy of further philosophical pursuit.

Thus, I did not mean by "connection" that modern African philosophy must be tethered to African traditional thought – that every piece of philosophical work by the modern African philosopher should involve inquiry into, or reference to, the traditional. Such a view would be inconsistent with my emphasis on the need to perceive philosophy as a conceptual response to human problems at different epochs (see pp. 39, 40, 42). The kinds of problems that philosophy grapples with are not invariant; they may – in fact some of them often do – vary from time to time. It follows, then, that some of the modern philosophical concepts or issues might not have occurred to the traditional thinkers. This is the reason why I maintained that the philosophical output of contemporary African philosophers – or a great part of it – "must reflect the contemporary African situation" (p. 40). Thus, the first sentence on p. 12 should read: "The history of philosophical thought in Africa requires that, while addressing concepts and issues of modern life, modern African philosophers must also give analytic and critical attention to concepts or ideas of traditional philosophy." The assumption here, of course, is that very little, if any, attention has been given to the critical analysis and interpretation of the traditional conceptions of things.

In light of the foregoing remarks, it must be clear that at the initial stage of development, my argument focused on history – history of philosophical thought in Africa – rather than on establishing elaborate criteria of what would count as a genuine African philosophy, criteria that are addressed later in the book. In terms of the criteria or conditions for a genuine African philosophy, my substantive position has been that a modern African philosophy must be linked to – take its rise from – African cultural and historical experience. Just as the African experience can be said to be a many-sided experience, so African culture, like the cultures of other peoples, can be said to have incorporated elements from other (alien) sources. Thus, when I speak of African culture (or cultures), I have in mind the complex of ideas, beliefs, values, outlooks, habits, practices, and institutions that can justifiably be said to have been endogenously created *as well as* those that can be said

to have been inherited or appropriated exogenously; the latter, however, having in time gained footing in the indigenous culture – having, thus, taken root in the entire way of life and thought of the African people.

A sufficient condition for considering what was originally an alien (nonAfrican) cultural value as now part of the system of the cultural values of another people will be constituted by a synergy of certain factors or circumstances. One important factor is that an alien cultural value would have lost, in the fullness of time, its 'alienness' from the point of view of its recipients, for it would have for a considerable length of time been flowing down the indigenous cultural stream along with the endogenous elements of the culture. Another factor is that the alien cultural value would have been so fully incorporated into the culture of the recipients that it would have profoundly and thoroughly shaped the life and thought of the indigenous culture for generations. Another important factor is that, as far as subsequent generations are concerned, the question about the origin or paternity of that (alien) cultural value would have become meaningless and irrelevant: for them, the appropriated cultural value is simply a part of their cultural heritage. Yet another factor is that the impact of the inherited cultural value is felt, directly or indirectly, by a wider section of the recipient society, not just among its elites.

This last factor is terribly important if an inherited cultural value or practice *is* to be an aspect of that society's culture. Let me give a concrete example. During the colonial days in Ghana, British (or, European) music and dance forms such as waltz, slow fox-trot, and quick-step were played at dance halls side by side with the endogenous Ghanaian music and dance such as high-life. At most dances when music for a quick-step dance, for instance, was played, only a few people – usually some elites and 'been-to's' (those who had *been to* Britain) – would take to the dance floor. Whenever the Ghanaian high-life music was played, however, the floor was filled to capacity. It was clear that very few of the Ghanaians appreciated and enjoyed the British dance music. It is not surprising that such imported or adopted forms of music and dance have, to all intents and purposes, disappeared from dance halls in Ghana today. For an appropriated cultural value or practice to take root in its new cultural environment, it must, as it were, become the property of a very large section of that environment. That is to say, it must in time be appreciated, enjoyed, and participated in by

most members of the society, otherwise it will remain a thin veneer and peter out sooner rather than later.

The requirement that the impact of an inherited cultural value be widely felt in the recipient society should, in my view, apply also to the intellectual or philosophical culture of that society, even though one is here referring specifically to a society's group of philosophers rather than the entire membership of the society as such. If a set of philosophical ideas clearly of an alien origin is to become part of the philosophical heritage of a recipient society, then an enduring interest should be shown in it by a wider section of its philosophers. That set of originally alien ideas should not remain an attraction for only an individual philosopher; its worth should be recognized by a large section of the society's philosophers for it to gain an appreciated status in the philosophical culture of the society. I strongly suspect that if an African philosopher isolates his philosophical thought or analysis from its cultural context – his reflections bearing no immediate relation to the values, sentiments, experiences, and issues of that context – his philosophical works will most probably remain a lonely voice in the wilderness, as he will hardly have any impact on the intellectual and philosophical climate of his society. It is known that a handful of American philosophers, for instance, have for a long time shown interest in, and have been writing about, some ideas in Indian philosophical thought; but it is also known that the philosophical exertions of these American philosophers enamored of the philosophical thought of India have hardly made any notable entry into the citadel of ideas that resiliently concern and influence American philosophers and their society.

I argue that philosophy is a universal intellectual activity that has been pursued by peoples of all cultures and that the propensity to raise fundamental questions about human experience can be found in peoples belonging to different cultures, even though the answers may be different, despite our common humanity, and may not all be equally compelling. Yet, our common humanity, which inclines human beings to adopt similar (or near similar) responses to experiences of various kinds, tends to lead thinkers to be exercised about fairly similar questions or puzzles and to reflect on them in search of answers or explanations. The human capacity to wonder is not only boundless but also *universal*. The context of our wonder is of course human experience: We wonder about the nature of the universe and our place in it, about who or what we are, the

existence of some ultimate being, the nature of the good life, and about many other aspects of our experience that are beyond our ken and are, thus, not immediately rationally explicable to us. Wonder leads some individuals in various cultures to raise fundamental questions and, in this way, to engage in philosophical reflections.

The limitations of human intelligence – which limit what humans can possibly know – and the enigmas of human life can lead thinkers from different cultural backgrounds to raise similar questions about whether human beings have destiny, whether the human person is entirely physical (corporeal) or is constituted in part by some nonphysical (mental, spiritual) substance, and so on. I claim that a number of such intellectual or conceptual issues are bound to be raised by thinkers from different cultures. Thus, I try to show through interpretive analysis that, against the background of their own culture and experience, Akan traditional thinkers have raised questions about the origin of the world, the existence of an ultimate being, the nature of the human person, causality, human destiny, and so forth (see Part II), and have produced some thoughts on these matters – matters that cannot in any way be said to be unique to the Akan experience of humanity and of the world.

However, I do not claim, by any means, that the conceptual matters taken up in Akan traditional thought are distinctive of that thought and that they do not appear in the systems of thought of other peoples or cultures. That would not only be an extravagant claim, but would simply be false. On the contrary, I do emphasize the nonuniqueness of concepts in Akan philosophical thought. Yet, D. A. Masolo totally misunderstands my point. He mistakenly interprets what I take to be elements of the Akan conceptual scheme as uniquely Akan. After listing some of the matters on which the Akan thinkers also reflected, Masolo adds: "However, one sees little that is fundamentally Akan or African in the listed items beyond linguistic variances of conceptual expression" (p. 192). I attribute no such uniqueness (this is how I understand Masolo's term "fundamentally") to the elements of the Akan conceptual scheme. I say on p. 10: "When I claim that philosophical activity is universal, I mean simply that thinkers from different cultures or philosophical traditions ask similar philosophical questions and think deeply about them." And, in the concluding pages, I make the following observation: "I do not claim that the features of the African life and thought I have presented are *peculiarly*

African. . . . But this observation is harmless in itself, and does not detract from the need to explore ideas *from the African perspective.* African philosophical systems will not be unique. . . . African perspectives on these ideas may be similar to those of others; nevertheless, they are worth examining within the African conceptual crucible" (pp. 210–11; emphasis not in the original). Thus, I make no claim to uniqueness for the concepts or issues discussed in Akan or African philosophy. (Incidentally, a couple of those who wrote reviews of the book also misunderstood me on this point.)

If there are features of human culture that can be said to belong uniquely to the culture of a single group of people, those features would be *very* few indeed. The reason is this: If one were to make profound, extensive, and sustained investigations into the cultural systems of different peoples – such as social structures – one would find on the cultural landscape of one people reverberations of features of the cultural forms of another people. One explanation of this phenomenon – that is, the replication of cultural features – is the historical fact of cultural borrowing where there is evidence of contact, direct or indirect. Another explanation is that the convergence of ideas nurtured and held by people from different cultures – concerning various aspects of human life – can give rise to cultural commonalities even where there has been no enduring cultural contact.

2. On ethnophilosophy

I did not use the term "ethnophilosophy" in the book because I did not fully understand its real meaning, even though I referred critically to some features of the conception of African philosophy held by Paulin Hountondji, who claims to have "coined" it (1983, p. 34). In a more recent publication (Mosley, 1995, p. 175), however, Hountondji acknowledges that the term had been employed almost three decades earlier by Kwame Nkrumah – later to become the president of Ghana – in the formulation of his doctoral thesis undertaken (but uncompleted) at the University of Pennsylvania. But he does not indicate clearly whether Nkrumah used the term in the same sense as he does. I suspect that "ethnophilosophy" is used to refer, at least in part, to collective thought (Hountondji, 1983, pp. 60–61, 173–74, et passim), the latter itself being a vague and bizarre notion. Thus, my criticisms of collective thought (pp. 24–29) will also apply to ethnophilosophy. Even

though the term was used by Hountondji and Marcien Towa to characterize the work of Placide Tempels and Alexis Kagame, its use also reflects the attitudes of Hountondji and Towa toward the philosophical status of African traditional thought. These attitudes derive from two basic – albeit false – assumptions that have earned it the label of "ethnophilosophy" or "collective thought." One assumption is the alleged communal subscription to a 'monolithic' set of ideas or beliefs, and hence to 'unanimism'. The other is the alleged lack of individualist elements in traditional philosophical thought. This (second) assumption implies that African philosophical thought in the traditional setting was the work of a collectivity, of a whole tribe (*ethnos*), thinking together – thinking with *one* mind. These assumptions have led some scholars to suppose that African thought is a system of ideas or beliefs produced and unanimously adhered to by an ethnos, and that it was this amorphous ethno-thought that Tempels and Kagame were studying. However, the two assumptions are in fact groundless in terms of both the production of philosophical ideas and the subscription to those ideas by members of a society.

It is undoubtedly the preliterate cultural milieu from which African traditional philosophical thought emerged that lies at the bottom of those assumptions. Owing to the lack of texts produced by specific individuals, the term 'ethnos' has come to be applied to the intellectual enterprises of a preliterate culture: thus, ethnomusicology, ethnophilosophy, and so on. The assumption is that these cultural productions, whose specific authors or creators are indiscriminable from the collectivity due to the absence of written evidence of specific authorship, are therefore the work of the whole collectivity. To study the music of a preliterate – for example, an African – cultural group, then, is to engage in 'ethnomusicology'; similarly, to critically assess the philosophical thought of a particular African people is to do 'ethnophilosophy'. On the other hand, to study the intellectual or musical productions of a particular literate culture is to do philosophy or musicology.

It is not necessary or appropriate, however, to describe a scholar's study of the thought of a particular people as ethnophilosophy. We do not describe a scholar's study of the philosophic thought of the ancient Greek people as ethnophilosophy. Even though the scholar would be studying the philosophic thought of a *particular* people – namely, the ancient Greeks (or the Athenians) – we would not say that she is therefore engaged in ethnophiloso-

phy (or, that her work is to be described as ethnophilosophical). The main reason why the term "ethnophilosophy" is not applied to the study of the philosophic thought of the Athenians is because of the identifiability of the individual thinkers who produced that philosophic thought. To talk about their thought, therefore, is not to engage in ethnophilosophy: It is simply to talk about their (philosophic) thought; that's all. In short, to talk about the thought of a particular people cannot appropriately be described as ethnophilosophy.

It is pretty clear that in the characterization of the study of the philosophic thought of a particular people, whether as ethnophilosophy or not, literacy or the existence of texts is regarded as crucial, perhaps also as canonical. Thus, Hountondji's main reason for rejecting what he refers to as "ethnophilosophy" is that it has no textual sources and therefore no textual support, and so cannot lend itself to the kind of reliable, or less whimsical, interpretation as Hegelianism, for instance, can or would (Hountondji, p. 42). And, in his view, the lack of philosophical texts leads scholars such as Tempels to speak as though unanimism prevailed in the intellectual or philosophical orientations of a cultural group. Such scholars, according to Hountondji, erroneously presented African philosophy as a "collective system of thought, common to all Africans, or at least to all members severally, past, present and future, of such-and-such an African ethnic group" (ibid. pp. 55–56; see also pp. 51–52).

Hountondji might be taken, then, to have implicitly alluded to the existence of (some) individualist elements in traditional thought, both in terms of its production and its acceptance. Yet, he denies any individualist elements in African traditional philosophical thought (ibid. pp. 53, 63). His denial may be taken as implying a belief in the collective and unanimist character of that thought, hence his use of the term 'ethnos'. Even though the assumption about unanimism would, in my view, be false, its falsity does not – should not – in any way detract from the existence of philosophical thought in the traditional setting of Africa. If Tempels' work or methodology led to the impression that traditional philosophy in Africa was collectively produced and unanimously adhered to, it does not follow that that impression was necessarily correct. But to reject his approach or methodology is not to reject the existence of traditional philosophical thought, as Hountondji does – that would be a clear case of throwing away the baby with the bathwater.

I totally reject the characterization of African traditional philosophy as an ethnophilosophy. (See my criticisms of "collective thought," pp. 24–29.) The reason for the firm position I have taken on this issue is *conceptual:* thought (Akan: *adwen*) can only be an activity of individual intellects. Thus, the philosophical thought or ideas of a group of people can only have resulted from the reflective enterprises of certain *individuals* whose name identities have, due to a lack of records, fallen into oblivion. The individualist elements that Hountondji and others would like to use as a paradigm of genuine philosophical thinking are not, in my opinion, absent from the thought of African people in the traditional setting. As to his view of unanimism held as concomitant to the so-called ethnophilosophy (ibid. p. 174), it cannot be correct because it is inconceivable that all the individual persons in a community would share the same ideas or beliefs, even though the ideas of some individuals may attract the adherence of a number of other individuals in the community.

Mudimbe does not seem to be comfortable with the notion of ethnophilosophy either. He does not directly and critically confront the employment of that notion, but does not pejoratively use it to characterize African traditional philosophy either. He would rather talk in terms of a *Weltanschauung* (a world-view) than of ethnophilosophy, "using the term in its etymological value: ethnos-philosophia or weltanschauung of a community" (1983, p. 149, note 7). It is possible, I think, for a world-view to be the result of a critical reflection on a people's experience of the world, and, to the extent that this is so, a *Weltanschauung* could embody a philosophy.

Those who characterize the study of African traditional philosophy as ethnophilosophy suppose that they are rejecting the existence of philosophy in the traditional setting of Africa because of the collective and unanimist elements it is supposed to contain. But, as we have seen, we can reject ethnophilosophy – we can say that there is no such thing as ethnophilosophy, while strongly affirming the existence of philosophy in that setting, a philosophy that was produced by some (now) unidentifiable individuals.

Let me say something, parenthetically, to support the view that the lack of literacy is at the base of the characterization of cultural or intellectual productions of preliterate cultures as "ethno-so-and-so." In present day Ghana, for instance, we know by name those individual creators of endogenous music forms, such as Kaikaiku,

Kwabena Onyina, Kwaw Mensah, and Koo Nimo, to mention a few of the most famous musicians and guitarists. Their contributions to Ghanaian music are well known. Owing to the fact that their compositions are being recorded in their names and they are being studied by students of Ghanaian music, future generations will be able to identify them as the *individual* creators of Ghanaian music forms. Even though a large section of Ghanaian society participates in the appreciation and enjoyment of their music, the creation of that music is *not* by any means the work of a collectivity, an ethnos; it is the creation of individual artists. If these individual creators lived in the sixteenth or seventeenth century when "Ghanaian" society was preliterate, their individual contributions would not have been recorded as productions of some specific individuals, but would have in time descended into the pool of communal or collective artistic productions; the individuality of their creations would have sunk into eternal oblivion. What can be said with regard to the emergence of a dance or music form can also be said with regard to a philosophical idea or argument: both are productions of individual intellects.

As part of the research toward the publication of this book, I traveled to towns and villages in Ghana in search of traditional sages. Every place I went, I would invariably be directed to one or two individuals known to the townsfolk as those interested in the kinds of "discussions or problems or ideas you are interested in," as some chief or elder would put it. On no occasion was I directed to a group or a collectivity! The chief or elder (whom I would see on arrival) realized that only a few individuals – a few "Socrateses" if you will – in the town were capable, interested, and willing to engage in discussions of the "difficult questions" I was interested in. Thus, thought is indeed a production *ab initio* of an individual intellect. It would be true to say, therefore, that the creators of cultural products of any human culture are not the collectivities; they are invariably individual intellectuals: artists, thinkers, and others endowed with particular capacities, talents, and visions, notwithstanding the social context of an individual's production. It may be true that in respect to the productions of scientists, technologists and herbalists, two or more individuals may sometimes pool their resources or talents for the purpose of achieving a certain goal. Such professional collaborations, however, hardly have parallels in philosophical productions.

I said that it would be false to suppose that all members of a so-

ciety – in this case of an ethnos – would unanimously adhere to the same corpus of philosophical ideas or beliefs, as those who characterize the study of traditional philosophy as "ethnophilosophy" also imply. The reason is that communal living does not absolutely obliterate individual religious, philosophical, moral, or political beliefs and convictions. Even though there is no such thing as ideational unanimism (I use 'ideation' to refer to ideas, beliefs, convictions, and values), nevertheless, we can still assume that the stable and continuous functioning of society requires a general or wide acceptance of some set of ideas and beliefs. This set of ideas constitutes itself into what may be called a public conception of things, or public philosophy. There are reasons behind such conceptions. (It is the reasons behind conceptions that may lead to the application of the word 'philosophy' in a broad sense.) And, if we talked of public philosophy or even of a *Weltanschauung* instead of "ethnophilosophy," we would probably make some headway in our conviction that some set of basic ideas can be said to be shared by most people in a society, even though this will not lead to unanimism as such. The notion of a public philosophy is a plausible and defensible one.

Writing about African philosophical speculation a little over three decades ago, W. E. Abraham rightly distinguished between two species of that activity: a public and a private philosophy. He considered public philosophy to involve "tracing out the theoretical foundations of the traditional society, . . . a laying-bare of the communal mind" (p. 104). Even though I am in sympathy with Abraham's distinction, I object to his confining the application of public philosophy to "the traditional society." The reason is that the satisfactory functioning of a society, "traditional" or "modern," requires that it have or evolve some basic set of ideas and values to underpin and give meaning to its ways of life and thought. What Abraham refers to as "the communal mind" may in some imprecise sense be said to be a feature of any society: traditional, modern, literate, or preliterate (see p. 27 for my understanding of the term 'mind' in such phrases as "the Oriental mind"). A public philosophy will refer to a corpus of basic ideas and beliefs, an underlying layer of values, perceptions, outlooks, feelings, fundamental convictions and truths shared by a large section of a society. It is to be contrasted with a private philosophy, the ideas or convictions of which will be confined to the individual.

I take it that Hountondji will object to the characterization of

some shared ideation as philosophy not only because they are shared, but because they are, in his view, not articulated by identifiable individuals. But this wouldn't do. It would be unreasonable to deny that a number of philosophers and others can share – or be convinced by – a set of ideas. What will be the purpose of philosophical arguments if they are not aimed at convincing others of the truths purported to be embodied in, or borne by, those arguments? And what prevents any individual – philosopher or non-philosopher – from being convinced or attracted by some philosophical argument, and thus eventually coming to share in those truths or ideas? How do what are referred to as philosophical 'schools' or philosophical traditions such as Platonism or neo-Platonism, Kantianism or neo-Kantianism emerge if the ideas of such philosophical systems are not shared by some individual philosophers and others? The exploration of these questions will indicate the absurdity of the view that if a set of ideas is shared, then it cannot be a philosophy! Also, it goes without saying that ideas are always produced and articulated by individuals, identifiable in literate cultures, unidentifiable in preliterate cultures. It is possible, of course, for two or more individuals to articulate one and the same idea; yet, the articulation as such is the function of an individual intellect.

The manner of the production or emergence of a public philosophy is not easy to decipher. It seems that both the public and individual members play some role in its emergence. Thus, a public philosophy is, in part, the production of the intellectual exertions of certain individuals that gain currency among the wider society and becomes influential in that society, animating its life and thought. I use the phrase 'in part' advisedly: I believe that part of the makings of a public philosophy comprises the values of a society. These values – moral, social, and political – can hardly be said to be the production of an individual. It seems that they emerge to fulfill the goals and aspirations of a society in its search for harmonious and cooperative living. In this way, they may be said to have been evolved by the society. A public philosophy, thus, eventuates both from the dynamic impact on the society of the intellectual activities of some individuals and the society's perception of its own needs, interests, and goals.

The foregoing definition of public philosophy makes it distinguishable from "ethnophilosophy": The latter, as we understand it from Hountondji and his cohorts, is supposed to be an attribute

only of the thought system of a preliterate society; but the former, in my view, is to be found in every human society, literate or preliterate, traditional or modern. African traditional societies, like other societies, produced public philosophies regarding general principles of life, principles that themselves have reasons behind them. To the extent that "ethnophilosophy" is viewed by its inventors, Hountondji and others, as the production solely of an ethnos and as implying unanimism on the part of the members of the ethnos, it is distinguishable from a public philosophy.

3. The 'invention' of Africa

If there is a continent whose people and cultures have been denigrated and, thus, received much less appreciation by scholars and others, that continent is Africa. In the nineteenth century, it was said that Africa was a "geographical expression," a mere name or sound applied to some well defined land mass inhabited by a conglomerate of peoples so fundamentally different from one another that their cultures bore no relation one to the other. The implication here was that it was in order to facilitate the classification and definition of places on the globe that the term 'Africa' was adopted, not that there were people on that continent who could be described as *Africans* as such. That was the beginning of the European invention of Africa. Today, more than a century later, the denial of any cultural unity in Africa is maintained to the hilt by a number of scholars. And, the current term bandied about by some of them is 'invention': thus, the invention of Africa. The first chapter of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House* is headed "The Invention of Africa," and the title of V. Y. Mudimbe's book is *The Invention of Africa* (1988).

I must point out, however, that the two scholars do not use 'invention' in exactly the same sense. Mudimbe uses the term to refer to "European constructs" of Africa (ibid. p. 1), referring to the negative theories constructed by Europeans about Africa and Africans (ibid. p. 71 et passim). In his most recent book, he opines that "Africa . . . is represented in Western scholarship by 'fantasies' and 'constructs' made up by scholars and writers since Greek times" (1994, p. xv). Mudimbe uses the term 'invention' to refer to how particular Europeans coming to the continent as colonialists, researchers, and missionaries constructed certain views about Africa and its peoples for their own purposes, using their own cat-

egories and conceptual schemes to interpret and understand the values, outlooks, and practices of the Africans. The European invention of Africa resulted in fantasies and fictions being created about Africa. Whereas, Mudimbe says, "there are natural features, cultural characteristics, and, probably, values that contribute to the *reality* of Africa as a continent and its civilizations as constituting a totality different from those of, say, Asia and Europe" (1994, p. xv; emphasis mine).

I do not have any trouble with Mudimbe's use of the word 'invention'. The exaggerated diversity of African cultures is, to my mind, a consequence of the European invention of Africa. Appiah's use of 'invention' appears somewhat different. He is not oblivious to the European images of Africa constructed over the past centuries; yet, for him the invention of Africa has resulted substantially from the intellectual activities of African and African-descended scholars, most of whom constructed an image of Africa as a culturally unified continent where there was (or is), in his view, nothing but a total cultural disunity. Thus, for Appiah, an African world is therefore a myth (ibid. chapter 4 et passim). Any assertion about some form of cultural unity in Africa is merely imaginary: to make any such assertion is to engage oneself in 'inventing' Africa.

In the final analysis, however, the term is used by Mudimbe and Appiah to refer to the same thing, namely, that which is false or unreal, the falsity or unreality stemming from European constructions in one case, or from constructions of African intellectuals in the other.

In such phrases as 'the invention of Africa,' 'the invention of tradition,' and 'the invention of ethnicity,' invention means imagining something to be real when it is not – a false construction. Thus, what is said to be invented is in fact made up, as in a fiction. In *The Invention of Tradition,* edited by Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, an invented tradition is contrasted with "real" or "genuine" tradition (pp. 2, 8). To say, then, that Africa is invented means not that the continent called 'Africa' is not part of the globe or that it is a geographic fiction, but that the cultures of the numerous groups of people who inhabit that continent are so radically diverse that, given cultural heterogeneity, neither the people nor their cultures can really be grouped under the generic term 'African'. In terms of the view of Africa as invented, they can only be grouped under their various ethnic names – Akan, Yoruba, Igbo, Gikuyu, Luo, Ewe, Mende, Shona, and so on – or even un-

der sub-ethnic names such as Asante and Fanti. The multiplicity of ethnic groups in Africa can only spawn a multiplicity of cultures having nothing, or very little, in common. According to that view, the term 'African' used to cover the multiple cultures of Africa cannot be appropriate or genuine; it is a term used to refer to that which is invented and therefore not really the case. (But it must be noted, parenthetically, that other uses of 'invention' do not suggest falsity or fictionality. For instance, in the statement "The French revolution invented the nation-state and the modern institution of national citizenship," what is meant is not that the institutions of the nation-state and national citizenship are false or imaginary, but that the revolution gave rise to the creation of those institutions.)

It must also be noted, however, that the notion of the cultural disunity of Africa is not at all new. Several Western scholars have for decades been harping on the diversities of the cultures of Africa, without showing any awareness of – rather, preferring to ignore – the existence of underlying affinities or similarities between those cultures. Yet, there are many other scholars, including both Western and African anthropologists, who do acknowledge the common features among the cultures of Africa, while not ignoring the diversities of those cultures (see pp. 191–210). Most of these scholars have done field investigations in Africa for years, if not decades, and their observations and analyses are likely to be more penetrating and reliable than those of the tourist and the casual observer.

In a recent publication on the African frontier and the common cultural patterns that emerged therefrom, anthropologist Igor Kopytoff makes no bones in his assertions about "ancestral pan-African culture patterns" (p. 9), "the existence of certain pan-African cultural principles" (p. 15), "the existence in African societies of this common pan-African cultural base" (p. 15), and "pan-African cultural unity" (p. 76). He asserts that pan-African cultural principles "exist on the same level of *generality* as do certain European or Western cultural principles" (p. 15; emphasis mine).

Kopytoff attributes the existence of common African cultural patterns, "the African cultural ecumene" (pp. 10, 15), to several incubational factors. One factor, part of Africa's pre-history, is the concentration of the African ancestral population some thousands of years ago in the then fertile Saharan-Sahelian region of the northern half of the continent. Deemed the ancestral "hearth" of African culture, it was "a region of persistent cultural interaction

and exchange" (p. 10). In the wake of the desiccation of the Saharan-Sahelian belt, a population tide crept slowly southward, out of the expanding Saharan desert into the savannas and, in the course of time, into the equatorial forest zone. Most of sub-Saharan Africa, says Kopytoff, "has been occupied and culturally dominated by populations deriving from this Neolithic Saharan-Sahelian cultural ecumene" (p. 10).

The segmentation and fission in African social groups led to subgroups disengaging themselves from existing groups and constituting themselves into another cultural group, "bringing with them a basically similar kit of cultural and ideological resources" (Kopytoff, p. 10). Hence, the remarkable significance of the book's subtitle: *The* reproduction *of traditional African societies*. According to Kopytoff, studies do "support the commonplace observation that African social groups – be they kin groups, villages, cult groups, chieftaincies, or kingdoms – show consistently a tendency to fission and segment. As a result, the formation of new social groups as offshoots of old ones has been a constant theme in the histories of African societies – histories filled with the movement of the disgruntled, the victimized, the exiled, the refugees, the losers in internecine struggles, the adventurous, and the ambitious" (ibid. p. 18; see also p. 24). Other factors equally relevant to the cultural shaping of African societies include "diffusion, similarities through convergence, and a functional relationship among cultural features" (p. 15).

In the wake of the effects of these factors, "[i]t is [thus] not surprising," Kopytoff maintains, "that Sub-Saharan Africa should exhibit to such a striking degree a fundamental cultural unity" (p. 10). However, he gives due recognition to the fact of "cultural divergences *within* the African cultural continuities" (p. 76; emphasis in original). Such historically well-grounded observations may, nevertheless, be received with a grain of salt by dyed-in-the-wool skeptics. Yet, those observations made by Kopytoff and other contributors to his book prove false the assumption that the plethora of 'ethnic groups' in Africa necessarily implies an extraordinary diversity in the cultures of the African peoples. One has to recognize – like Kopytoff – that autonomous, segmented sub-groups would in the course of their cultural life evolve cultural values and practices that can be expected to have diverged from those of other groups. This fact, however, would not necessarily obliterate underlying commonalities among the cultures.

The existence of such commonalities was also acknowledged by Philip Curtin and his co-authors in their assertion that, "despite the difference," the cultures that flourished in Africa "all have grown from humble and very similar origins, and underneath all the variation *common themes* can still be discerned, themes and patterns that go back to the hallowed past. The unity, then, derives from the *roots*, for these African cultures have grown up in the surroundings where they flourished for thousands and thousands of years" (p. 1; emphasis mine).

It would be methodologically aberrant, unscientific, and intellectually facile to just shrug off the conclusions of these elaborate empirical investigations of the cultures of African peoples.

Appiah denies any cultural unity among African peoples, joining the strident and long-running chorus in harping on the diversities of African cultures. Yet, the statements he makes in presenting his views push him, perhaps unwittingly, into a position of ambivalence, if not outright inconsistency. Appiah says, on the one hand, that "the peoples of Africa have a good deal less culturally in common than is usually assumed" (p. 17); that "nothing should be more striking for someone without preconceptions than the *extraordinary diversity* of Africa's peoples and its cultures" (p. 24, emphasis mine); and that "we cannot accept . . . the presupposition that there is, even at quite a high level of abstraction, *an* African world view" (p. 82; emphasis in the original). On the other hand, he also says that "some of the *common features* that there *are* in many of the traditional conceptual worlds of Africa plainly persist in the thinking of most Africans. . . . They provide the basis for a *common* set of *African* philosophical problems" (p. 103; emphasis mine except for "are"). I wonder whether one can consistently speak of "common features" of a group of cultures and stress the "diversities" among those cultures at the same time. (Incidentally the existence of common features in African cultures that can be used as a basis and justification for talking in terms of 'African philosophy' constitutes the burden of Chapter 12 in my book.)

Also, can Appiah say, "Most Africans, now, whether converted to Islam or Christianity or not, still *share* the beliefs of their ancestors in an ontology of invisible beings" (p. 134; emphasis mine), and at the same time absolutely deny "a metaphysical unity to African conceptions" (p. 81) or "*an* African worldview"? Note, also, his claim that "there is some truth in this view that Crummell and Blyden shared: in a sense, there truly were 'no atheists and

agnostics in Africa' " (p. 23). Appiah's statement plainly implies that Africans share a common theological or metaphysical perspective and, hence, that the notion of an African religious or metaphysical world – or an African worldview – cannot therefore be a myth.

In his disagreement with Hountondji over the type of conclusion the latter draws from his (that is, Hountondji's) critique of ethnophilosophy, Appiah implies "the possibility that there are specially *African* topics and concepts that deserve philosophical study" (p. 106; emphasis mine). In other words, Appiah objects to Hountondji's rejection of that possibility. But why, or how, are the "topics and concepts" *African,* one may ask, rather than Asante, Fanti, Yoruba, Igbo, or Luo given Appiah's schema of culture in Africa?

Appiah's conception of tradition, which is a consequence of his views on the extraordinary diversity of the cultures of Africa, is also flawed. A discussion of the notion of 'cultural borrowing' will demonstrate the point. It can hardly be doubted, I think, that cultural borrowing is an outstanding *historical* phenomenon in the development of all human cultures. (I am aware of course that in some cases people of one culture come to take up values and practices of another culture by having those cultural values imposed on them. But this fact is really and ultimately irrelevant regarding the makings of a tradition.) And, given this historical fact, it would be true to say that, in the wake of historical encounters between different peoples of the world and the cultural borrowing that results from them, the tradition (or cultural heritage) of any people consists of some elements that must have been appropriated from other cultures or traditions and that have in time become part of their tradition. Given this historically justifiable assumption, I find it difficult to endorse Appiah's skepticisms regarding the possibility of identifying some precolonial system of ideas or values of a particular African people as (part of) *their* tradition. Appiah writes: "[T]he Fanti live on the coast of modern Ghana, and this case allows us to focus on the question whether, in cultures that have exchanged goods, people, and ideas with each other and with Europe (or, in East Africa, with the Middle and Far East) for many centuries, it makes sense to insist on the possibility of identifying some precolonial system of ideas as *the* Fanti tradition" (p. 99; emphasis in the original).

In light of the phenomenon of cultural borrowing, to identify an