



QUEST

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# QUEST

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QUEST includes materials on both current subjects related to Africa, and subjects of general philosophical interest, serving an international public of professional philosophers and intellectuals in other disciplines with philosophical interests. Original articles written in either English or French will be published, each with a summary in the other language.

QUEST appears twice <sup>a</sup>per year, in June and December.

**Contributions:** Articles should normally not exceed 6,000 words in length and should be accompanied by an abstract of no more than 200 words. The latter should preferably be in French where the article is in English, and vice-versa. Manuscripts should follow the citation format of the journal. Contributors should provide a short biographical note.

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## EDITORIAL

Ce treizième numéro de QUEST renferme un nombre record d'articles et est donc plus épais qu'à l'habitude.

L'envoi d'articles a été ces derniers mois abondant, ce qui rend un difficile choix entre articles inévitable. Nous nous excusons auprès des collègues dont nous n'avons pas pu retenir les articles.

La rédaction de QUEST a de nouveau <sup>agrandi</sup> augmentée. Après le Dr. J.A.I. Bewaji du Nigeria, c'est maintenant le dr. D.A. Masolo du Kenia, qui a aimablement accepté de ~~se joindre à nous~~, <sup>joindre</sup>.

Les articles de ce numéro portent témoignage de la qualité et de la productivité de la philosophie africaine actuelle.

Les questions de philosophie morale, en particulier, sont bien représentées (Oruka, Eze). Nous avons aussi deux articles critiques subtils de la part des profs. Carew et Keita de Sierra Leone. Prof. Hook nous offre une introduction pleine de clareté du champ de la philosophie africaine, tandis que le dr. Hoffmann commente la façon dont les intellectuels non-africains regarde cette philosophie.

Dans ce numéro nous avons deux articles supplémentaires au sujet du débat basé sur l'article du prof. Wamba-dia-Wamba "Beyond Elite Politics of Democracy in Africa" (Au delà de la politique d'élite de démocratie en Afrique) Quest VI/1 juin 1992. Nous vous invitons à nous faire parvenir vos réactions.

L'organisateur de la conférence annuelle "Ethics, Politics and Society in African Philosophy" (Ethique, Politique et Société dans la philosophie africaine), prof. Abisi M. Sharakiya, de l'Université de Binghamton SUNY, a donné son accord pour que des articles sélectionnés de la conférence soient publiés dans QUEST sur une base continue.

*whose articles, much to our regret, could not be incorporated*

**EDITORIAL**

This thirteenth issue of Quest contains a record <sup>numbers</sup> amount of articles, and as a consequence is now thicker than ever. Due to the abundance of articles coming in these last few months, we were forced to make several difficult choices between them. We apologise to our colleagues ~~who had their articles rejected.~~

The editorial team of Quest has been enlarged again: After Dr. J.A.I. Bewaji from Nigeria, Dr. D.A. Masolo from Kenya ~~has~~ now also kindly agreed to join us.

The articles in this issue show the quality and productivity of African Philosophy today. Especially ~~subjects~~ <sup>essay(?)</sup> on moral philosophy are well represented ~~in this issue~~ (Oruka, Eze). There are two sophisticated critical articles by the Sierra Leonian professors Carew and Keita. Prof. Hook gives a clear introduction to the field of African Philosophy, and Dr. Hoffmann discusses some typical European views on African Philosophy.

In this issue there are also two more contributions to the discussion started by Professor Wamb<sup>di</sup>-dia-Wamba's article "Beyond Elite Politics of Democracy in Africa" (QUEST VI, June 1992). We invite you to send more contributions to this discussion.

Prof. Abisi M. Sharakiya from Binghamton University SUNY, who organises the annual conference "Ethics, Politics & Society in African Philosophy", has agreed to allow papers to be selected from this conference for publication in Quest on a yearly basis.

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### Résumé

La recherche de cet article porte sur la tradition religieuse-herméneutique "Ifa" ("Afa") des Yoruba et Igbo. Ceci afin de les utiliser comme source d'inspiration pour une conception de la rationalité qui formerait une base adéquate pour une théorie éthique et pour la délibération.

La pratique Ifa suggère une interprétation intéressante de questions épistémologiques qui peut être résumé de façon suivante:

- a) Le chemin de la vérité est le chemin de l'interprétation;
- b) La vérité apparaît sous forme de dialogue;
- c) La connaissance n'est pas "desintéressée";
- d) La vérité n'est pas un ensemble de principes généraux, universellement valable, abstraction faite des situations particulières; et
- e) La vérité n'est jamais totalement et une fois pour toutes atteinte, c'est pourquoi Ifa accompagne la vie tout entière.

Ainsi la pratique Ifa suggère une conception de rationalité qui ne part pas d'un concept absolu de la raison et de la vérité.

tion, but also the nature of moral reflection in the philosophical process.

### 1.3 Doing philosophy in the tradition

The core of the *Ifa* corpus is the literary text, *Odu*. *Odu* is a collection of thousands of aphorisms, poems, and riddles passed on from generation to generation of *babalawos*. Every *babalawo*, during and after the mandatory three years of training, is required to have memorized as many of this text as possible. *Odu*, however, is not a dead document merely repeated from one generation to the next. It contains elaborate exegesis on the text, but more importantly, it contains theories about how to read (the text) - i.e., theories about how to do the work of interpretation. It is this unique theoretical potential in/of *Ifa* that Professor Gates (already cited) noted when he points out that *Ifa* is a particular kind of discourse upon text.

Indeed *Ifa* consists of the sacred texts of the Yoruba people, as does the Bible for the Christians, but it also contains the commentaries on these texts, as does the Midrash. [Gates (1988, p.10)]

The commentaries that Professor Gates talks about are not just interpretations but also reflections on the nature of meaning. What is truth? How do we come to truth? and so on. The Commentaries contain implicit theories of reading and understanding, as well as ideas about the nature of truth, knowledge and human understanding. There is, therefore, in the structure of interpretation in *Ifa*, an autochthonous, theoretical consciousness which is relevant to theories of truth and reason, - and by implication - of moral knowledge.

For example, central to the interpretation and understanding of *Odu* is *Esu*. *Odu* is *ashé* conceived of as revealed yet hidden in the *Ifa* text. In fact, the *Odu* is regarded as praise songs to *Esu* - *Esu* being considered the way as well as barrier to *ashé*. *Esu* is the he, who makes understanding possible (or impossible!). He is the mediation

(a) between text and reader

(b) between text and meaning

*Ifa* is a framework for the quest for answers to the questions such as: What is being? What is goal of life? What is destiny? What does reason demand that we do in this particular circumstance? and so on. In short, how can the spiritual and the rational character of humans be more and more made manifest?

### 1.2 *Ifa*: Reason in tradition

*Ifa*-work is, therefore, a quest for discovery of meaning and direction in life, personal or communal, through rational discernment and liberation<sup>3</sup>. I want to argue that, from a theoretical point of view, *Ifa* should be understood as a practice of "deep understanding" (*uche omimi*). This search for deep understanding, I believe, is of philosophic nature, because it is a reflective process of seeking knowledge about human life and action - by way of established discernment and epistemological processes.

The self-consciously epistemological nature of *Ifa* may not be obvious to us, because historically, philosophic thought in traditional Africa seems to have developed a protective tendency - partly because (perhaps, as in medieval scholasticism) - philosophical activity was very closely allied with theology and soteriology. For example, among the Yoruba, the guardians of the *Ifa* text were priests, called the *Babalawo*, a word which literally means "Fathers of Secrets"<sup>4</sup>. Works of philosophical nature in this and other African traditions are often neglected or misunderstood when they are completely confused with the religious or the theological environment.

I believe that there exists an implicit theoretical infrastructure that grounds *Ifa* practice, and if we examine the complex theoretical framework, we shall see that the African tradition had theorized about the practice as a form of rational activity based upon specific philosophic and epistemologic principles. We can legitimately make use of the theoretic and the epistemologic principles as tools for examining not only the implicit understanding of reason embedded in the tradi-



According to Professor Gates,

We can translate *ase* in many ways, but the *ase* used to create the universe I translate as "logos", as the word as understanding, the word as the audible, and later the visible, sign of reason. [Gates (1988, p.7)]

*Ashé*, then, can be understood as the principle of intelligibility in the universe and in humans, or as rationality itself. It is creative power, the word, reason, the logos which underlie reality. More specifically, *ashé* is that principle which accounts for the uniqueness of humans; it is a rational and spiritual principle which confers upon humans their identity and destiny. It endows individuals with *ori* - which is the Yoruba word for destiny.

But what is destiny? *Ori*, understood as destiny, is the defining character of the individual and of society. It is that sense of being an existential project, a *homo viator*, which comes from the spiritual and the rational character of the human person. Destiny comes from/as an awareness of being and at the same time being-yet - being-yet-to-fully-become. It is this' projective nature of the individual that we call destiny<sup>2</sup>. Destiny as a projective course of self is a characteristic unique to the spiritual and rational being that is the human. Life fully alive is a life on course, i.e., a life fully *tendue* towards its historical self-actualization. The Igbo, for example, measures achievement in terms how successful a rational course of has been achieved in the journey of life, and success is measured in terms of growth in wisdom, community, and wealth.

*Ifa* is a process of pursuit of knowledge about destiny, i.e., about the course of life. It is a quest for greater and greater individual and social self-understanding especially in order to determine the right course of action for life. Because destiny is the sense of becoming endowed the individual by the human spiritual and rational nature, *Ifa* is, in fact, a process of attempting to understand the nature of *ashé*, for *ashé* is that in the human which makes him/her characteristically **destined**. *Ashé* is that which, so to speak, places the demand on the human to realize concretely the fullness of being and of thought.

# TRUTH AND ETHICS IN AFRICAN THOUGHT

Emmanuel Eze

Whether it is the Divine Command theory, the Natural Law theory, the Utilitarian theory or Kant's Categorical Imperative, the quest among philosophers has been to find objective criteria with which actions or conduct can be established as right or wrong.

The difficulty in establishing such objective criteria has become compounded by the current crisis in the conception of the nature of reason, and consequently, of truth. When the nature of reason and of truth is questioned, the nature of moral knowledge becomes a major philosophical issue.

What I intend to do is to offer a specific conception of reason, a particular understanding of rationality which I believe offers an acceptable and adequate basis for ethical reasoning and deliberation. The conception of reason, and of truth that follows from it, is inspired by a particular study of a process of understanding in an African tradition. I chose to look at moral thought from the perspective of *Ifa*, a system - or rather a "way" - of interpretation and understanding inscribed in the religious-hermeneutic tradition of the Yorubas as well as of many other African peoples.

## 1.1 Ifa: The ontological background

The starting point of thought in *Ifa* is not Idea in the abstract, but rather a fundamental experience - the experience of life itself. Within the Yoruba tradition, thought has its origin in *ashé*. And what is *ashé*?

*Ashé* often translated as "power", is a concept that designates the dynamism of being and the very vitality of life. *Ashé* is the creative source of all that is; it is the power-to-be, the principle in things that enables them to be<sup>1</sup>.

Scholars like Henry Louis Gates often emphasize this creative role of *ashé* (i.e., its nature as the primal "stuff" of being and of the universe). This emphasis leads to the now canonical translation of *ashé* as the word - the "creative Word," or "logos".

(c) between truth and understanding (or lack thereof)

In fact, in Yoruba language, *Esu* is called *Onitumo*, "one who loosens knowledge", i.e. the interpreter. As "the way", *Esu* is the unconcealment of *ashé*, the presence, or the revealing of meaning and truth. But as barrier, *Esu* is also concealment, or absence of truth - and as such, a critique of presence. It can "condemn" (the revealing of) meaning and truth, and so dooms the attempts at understanding. Thus, as presence and absence, *Esu* is the concealment and unconcealment of truth, and in *Ifa*, its role as mediation is crucial to any (successful or unsuccessful) experience of meaning, truth, or understanding.

Now, if the philosopher is one whose work is to "loosen" knowledge, i.e., one who, like *Esu*, attempts to bridge the gap between truth and human understanding, if the philosopher is the person who attempts to make human knowledge possible (including knowledge about how we know), then *esu-tufunaalo* (or the work unravelling the "knot" of *Esu*<sup>5</sup>, in *Ifa*,) is eminently a philosophical work. In one sense, it is a critical project: it attempts to account for how understanding is at all possible. It touches upon the question of the conditions of the possibility of understanding. It raises the issue of how at all we achieve meaning.

These hermeneutical questions (and questions about hermeneutics) which are clearly involved in the *Ifa* process, constitute one way of gaining a fresh and unusual perspective on the serious philosophical issue of how we obtain knowledge, especially moral knowledge.

Let us now examine the remaining infrastructures of *Ifa* and then determine the scope of its importance to moral epistemology.

#### 1.4 Reading and interpretation by the *babalawo*

The other components of the *Ifa* corpus consists of sixteen palmnuts (or a string of beads), a divining board<sup>6</sup> and white chalk. When palmnuts are used, the *babalawo* places the sixteen nuts on his left hand and then attempts to take, with the right hand, as many of

them as possible. If only one nut remains, he will make a double mark with the chalk on the board. If two nuts remain, he will make a single mark. If no nuts or more than two remain, he will make no marks. These marks are arranged in double columns, and the process goes on until he arrives at four sets of marks in each column - like the following<sup>7</sup>:

//	/
/	//
/	/
//	//

There are 256 possible permutations of such marks, and each permutation has a definite name, and has a number of verses of the *odu* text which specifically corresponds to it. When the palmnuts are "thrown", the *ese* or the verses of *odu* that are recited is based upon the permutations arrived at by casting the palmnuts. The *babalawo* recites the verses of the figures at random, while the inquirer listens for the words or verse that relate to his quandary. When the inquirer hears words or parables that resonates with him, he stops the *babalawo* and requests interpretation of the particular aphorism or verse<sup>8</sup>.

Because the words have the poetic and creative power of *ashé*, the *babalawo*, in order to perform the work of interpretation of the text, places himself under the inspiration *Esu*, whose mediative role is crucial to bridging the gap between human understanding and the truth of *Odu*. After listening to the *babalawo*'s interpretation of the usually highly metaphorical verses, the inquirer walks away to reflect on their possible meaning in light of his personal questions.

## 2. Reflection

Now, the question is: What is the nature of human understanding in the *Ifa* practice? What kind of "truth" is that sought after by the

inquirer? And how does one, through/in *Ifa* process, distinguish between the true and the false, the right and the wrong - course of action, direction of life, and so on?

I believe that if we examine closely the nature of *Ifa* practice as described above, we can easily sketch out basic theoretic and epistemological assumptions implicit in the practice. We can establish some of the principles at work when someone in the tradition says: "Now I understand that this is what is a 'true' course of action in this case"; or "Now I 'know' that this is the 'right' course of action" (Or negations of such statements). The practice of *Ifa*, I argue, is aimed at reaching understanding - especially moral understanding. *Ifa* is an institutionalized process of gaining reflective ("deep") knowledge. It is the "way" of wisdom, a way of reflective inquiry.

And as a process of inquiry, *Ifa* has a definite epistemological structure. For example, in a situation when consultation takes place between the *babalawo* and the inquirer, one can observe that the following specific interpretative structures (and strictures) are presupposed:

- (a) the way of truth is the way of interpretation
- (b) truth is a dialogical event
- (c) knowledge is not "dis-interested"
- (d) truth is not a set of general **principia**, applicable to all and every one in every situation and
- (e) truth is never gained totally or once and for all.

Let us examine each of these short statements

ad (a)

"The way of truth is the way of interpretation": There are no eternally fixed meanings of the *Odu*. There is no one and only correct interpretation of the text - and so the quest here is not for absolute knowledge. Inquiry here is simply the willingness to submit one's intuitions to an objective, i.e., inter-subjective process of inquiry - through which a possible birth (or re-birth) of understanding may occur.

ad (b)

"Truth and understanding are dialogical events": This is discussed below.

ad (c)

"Truth is not 'dis-interested'": By this I mean that the inquirer is not the Cartesian ego poised over and against a situation or reality in order to enjoy an analytical point of view outside of the given. The subject here is not a detached knower, s/he is rather radically implicated in the question. Because the question is about who am I? What do I do?, and such like, the inquiry is an absorbing quest for truth that bears upon the immediate and long-term course of one's destiny. Truth here is a "being on the way": in fact, truth is the enlightenment that happens on the way of inquiry.

ad (d)

"Truth is not abstract generalizations": Reasoning in *Ifa* is based not on "the knowledge of a set of generalizations or maxims which may provide our practical inferences with major premisses", but on a "capacity of judgement". What is pursued in *Ifa* is not the abstract rational generalizations but concrete universality. Thinking here is discourse that inhabits a particular frame of reference. Meaning or truth emerges not "from above" but from the experience of the question - i.e., from the contingencies of the inquirer's particular situation.

*Ifa* does not yield the kind of knowledge that some abstract methods generate for universal application; it yields the kind of knowledge that emerges from authentic discernment: it is capacity for judgment that determines not just what is **true** but also what is **right** within a particular context.

ad (e)

"Human knowledge is finite": There is an implicit recognition that humans and our capacity for understanding is limited. We are

embedded in the contingencies of history, and so we cannot grasp the totality of truth once and for all. Because inquiries are bound to yield limited insights, life becomes defined by a continuous quest to know, which means continuous recourse to *Ifa*. Self-knowledge grows only through experience and maturity.

### 3. Truth and ethics

Now, I want to argue that the above form of rationality, embodied in *Ifa*, is particularly appropriate for moral inquiry, for the following reasons.

First, it articulates a conception of reason that appeals to freedom. The *Ifa* process works in such a way as to appeal to the freedom and the spontaneity of the individual. There is no predetermined interpretation of "truth" that ought be imposed upon the inquirer. Not even the *babalawo* upholds his understanding of *Odu* as the one and only, and so the inquirer seeks, through the contingencies of his/her historical experience, to determine in liberty a course of life.

And because there is neither pre-determined understanding of *Odu* nor of an individual's course of life, human understanding of the moral good is not statically prefixed, but always subject to inquiry. *Ifa* as a form of reasoning is itself an on-going, open-ended history of text and inquiry. What the *babalawo* reads, although fixed and passed on through the generations, the interpretations are ever changing - according to the circumstances of individuals and of society. Each inquirer appropriates the word for interpretation according to his/her needs and the prevailing situation. Thus, *Ifa*, in its structure, guarantees the moral freedom of the inquirer as a rational deliberator.

Second, although the individual enjoys freedom in the interpretation of *Odu*, s/he - and this is important - is aware that one is not the foundation of truth. Far from being a monad reasoning "for himself", the inquirer is a co-subject, dependent upon (a) the text and (b) the tradition: i.e., how other people of the tradition had interpreted the

text. Thus, although the rational character of the individual reveals itself in spontaneity, and although the element of interpretative freedom allows for specific or individual and local understandings, *Ifa* avoids the danger of subjectivism through what one might call a **vertical** and a **horizontal** co-determinative process of interpretation.

Meaning is **vertically** co-determined through the interplay of the inquirer and the text, the particular and the universal, the practical and the speculative, and **horizontally** through dialogue with *babalawo* and with the tradition. To guard against subjectivist or arbitrary and incorrect understanding, the interpretation of *Odu* is carried out with sensitivity to existing bodies of cultural knowledge: precedents, usages, and so on. The inquirer's interpretation of the *Odu* must be somehow meaningful in relation to the already existing forms of meaning - for understanding does not happen in isolation (*Onweghi onye bu omada omachara*), but in relationship of agreement or in critical dialogue with prior forms of understandings. Thus, in *Ifa*, truth emerges in a "trialogue" (between the text/the word, the *babalawo*, and the inquirer) regarding the course of the inquirer's destiny.

**Third**, it follows from the above that *Ifa* contains an intersubjective notion of truth. Objectivity is sought by subjecting preunderstandings to the interplay of possible interpretations. Dialogue "purifies" points of views and perspectives, against self-centredness and for shared meanings.

**Finally**, truth in *Ifa* is the same as truth-claim. To "understand" in *Ifa* is to be open and addressed by a truth-claim, a claim which says much more than "here are a set of true or false propositions". Truth-claims demand rational as well as real assent. It appeals to the determination of a moral being which requires commitment to rational and ethical virtues. The inquirer "understands" the text's meaning when s/he comes to insight, i.e., when s/he grasps, in the particular circumstances, rational and ethical principles involved in concrete actions. The true or the false in this sense simply cannot be a set of correct or



incorrect answers, detached from being, for truth has bearing on the meaning of life.

Pursuit of this kind of understanding makes the individual vulnerable, for in engaging in the *Ifa* process I put myself to risk: I expose my preoccupations and beliefs - in search of that which may well change or reshape them. The quest for understanding through the *Ifa* presupposes openness not only to possible speculative insight, but also the possibility of a new self-understanding. This is a challenge at once threatening and exhilarating, for it is a situation where **who** I am is just as important as **what** I know.

#### 4. Conclusion

To summarize, by revealing truth as a form of coming to awareness, *Ifa* provides a hermeneutic framework within which understanding is at once ontological, cognitive/conceptual and ethical.

First, **ontologically**, *Ifa* is a process in and through which a mode of being is sought to be revealed. The interpretative work is not merely information-seeking, but rather a quest for unities of meaning about the relation between life and experience, or between a particular line of action and the totality of life.

Secondly, as a **cognitive** process, *Ifa* is a means of acquiring conceptual understanding of one's experience in a situation. Concept, in this sense, is not mere abstraction but an idea - "idea" understood as element in the life process itself<sup>9</sup>. Conception here is not abstraction made of an entity or an object, but the insightful grasping of effective truth which is directed towards transforming one's life.

Finally, **ethically**, *Ifa* is a quest - a search for self-knowledge<sup>10</sup>. What drives the Yoruba to seek reflective or "deep" knowledge (*uche omimì*) is the attempt to understand oneself, one's *chi* or destiny and one's place in nature and the universe. It is a process of pursuit of the totality of virtues that respond to the demand placed upon humans by *ashé*. It is a search to ethically and morally grasp a concrete course of

life - not through blind application of pre-determined general laws, but rather through the effort to elevate the concrete to the universal.\*

\*) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the SSIPS/SAGP on "Ethics, Aesthetics and Ontology in Antiquity and in Greek, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Sikh and African Philosophy", Columbia University, Oct. 1992.

### Notes

1. The Yoruba concept of *ashé* is parallel to the Igbo concept of *iké*, the Bantu notion of *ntu*.
2. It should become obvious that "destiny" as understood here hasn't the ring of determinism (or fatalism) which the word might suggest in the English language. Destiny (*chi*, *akara-aka*) is the projected course of the individual or social existence, labile, and its understanding and interpretation subject to incessant discernment, deliberation and choices in concrete (historical, political and existential) life-situations. The historical actualization of destiny is open-ended, and that is why the seeking of self-knowledge regarding the course of individual and communal life through/in *Ifá* is a constant practice.
3. No major decision or course of action, personal or communal, is made or undertaken without first engaging in the practice of *Ifá*.
4. Philosophical "schools" in traditional Africa were almost always associated with mystery religions. They kept their texts secret. Thus, propagation of ideas through readily accessible forms, such as writing, was perhaps never practised. There are, however, forms of writings known to have belonged to "schools" of initiates, such as the *nsibidi* of the *Ekpe* Society (Nigeria). See, for

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example: Kalu [1978, pp.76-85]; also Kotei [1972] or Battestini [in press].

5. Professor Gates [1988, p.9 footnote] explains that the Nigerian Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, suggested the term *esu-tufunaalo* as in the current use.
6. To symbolize the relation between *Ifa* and *Esu*, *Esu's* image is usually carved at the upper strip of the divining board.
7. For further details, see, for example, Lawson [1985].
8. There are, however, occasions when the inquirer does recognize, or fails to appropriate to his situation the metaphorical language of the poem. (But, then, not everyone is sensitive or 'ripe' all the time for the deep wisdom of *Ifa*.)
9. In the manner of which Kierkegaard asks: "What is truth but to live for an idea?"
10. My father always argued that *Anu na-amaghi onwe ya bu uhugari*. [One without self-knowledge is not (truly) alive (free translation)]. Or, as St. Augustine in *De Libero Arbitro* would have it: "A certain higher and truer life consists in the knowledge of life, which no one can have except those who have understanding. For what is understanding but living more clearly and perfectly by the very light of mind?"

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### Résumé

Dans cet article Oruka repense la position qu'il avait défendue dans son essai "The Philosophy of Foreign Aid" ("La philosophie de l'aide étrangère"). C'est en même temps une alternative pour la "Life Boat Ethics", telle que Garrett Hardin l'a présentée.

La "Parental Earth Ethics" avance que l'humanité peut être conçue comme un genre de famille, dont les membres ont des devoirs et des droits les uns envers les autres, qui proviennent de leur interdépendance et de leur histoire familiale commune. Ce type de relation familiale peut être rendue explicite à l'aide de divers principes et règles socio-éthiques.

La "Parental Earth Ethics" revendique, tout comme les philosophes de l'environnement, que la terre soit un bien commun de tout l'humanité.

## PARENTAL EARTH ETHICS

H. Odera Oruka

In his now well known paper<sup>1</sup> Garrett Hardin introduces "Life Boat Ethics" to help him defend a position that finds it senseless and suicidal for the rich nations to offer charitable or humanitarian aid to the poor nations.

Hardin's paper is most likely a response to two basic directions in the modern practice of foreign aid. First there is the environmentalist ethics with an emphasis on the notion of the "Spaceship Earth" or the "Finite Global Truth". In the second place there are the usual International Philanthropists who are inclined to the eradication of hunger and general poverty as an understandable responsibility for any reasonable moral agent.

Against the first group Hardin advances the argument that the notion of spaceship earth would make sense only if the world had a governing sovereign. Such a sovereign would need to make sure that within the spaceship those on board have their rights only in so far as they have corresponding responsibilities.

What about spaceship Earth? It certainly has no captain and no executive committee; The United Nations is a toothless tiger because the signatories of its charter wanted it that way. The spaceship metaphor is used only to justify spaceship demands on common resources without acknowledging corresponding spaceship responsibilities. [Hardin (1980, p.172)]

Against the second group i.e. the philanthropists, Hardin advances two reductio ad absurdum arguments: First, let us accept the Christians' and Marxists' maxims and admit into our rich boat all those who approach us for help. Since the boat has only a limited capacity we

shall eventually all sink. "Complete justice, complete catastrophe". The second argument by Hardin runs as follows: Our boat has a population of, say, 50 persons with unused excess capacity of 10 more which we treat as "a safety factor". Now, our humanitarianism moves us to ignore the safety factor and we would welcome 10 persons into the boat. The question then is, which among the so many swarming the boat for help are to be among the 10? Would we not feel guilty for admitting some and leaving out others? Those admitted will not themselves feel guilty for their luck, for if they are, they would not in the first place accept the offer.

To avoid such absurdities, the way out as Hardin sees it is: "Don't admit anymore to the boat and preserve the safety factor. Survival of the people in the life boat is then possible" (p.173), though they will have to be on their guard against the intruders. Such, the author advises, is the realistic truth that should prevail in the modern world even if many will see it as unjust. The complainants, he says, have no acceptable argument to the overriding question of the survival of the life boat.

In practice, Hardin observes, the aid from the rich to the poor nations is made absurd and unsolvable because the former control their population growth, while the latter are breeding exponentially and often even in direct proportion to the aid which they receive from outside. Without foreign aid they would sooner be checked in their human growth by pestilence, wars, earthquakes etc. But with foreign aid they continue to multiply and the doomsday is postponed. Yet, when it comes, it will be doomsday for the aid receivers, but also for the aid donors.

In my 1986 paper<sup>2</sup> "The Philosophy of Foreign Aid", I advanced arguments in favour of foreign aid. I was at the time not aware of Hardin's paper. Now, Hardin's paper and the concerns of the environ-



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mentalists in the 1980's and 1990's bring me to a reexamination of my 1986 position. I will do this in the form of the formulation of a new position: the Parental Earth Ethics.

### An ethics of distribution

In my 1986 paper I considered several reasons for the practice of foreign aid. They were international charity, international trade and historical rectification. Then I dismissed all the three as being singly or together insufficient as a rationale for the practice of foreign aid, and substituted a fourth reason termed **the right to a human minimum**. This is the right of every moral agent, which the world owes him or her, to a life with the dignity of a human being. It is the very minimum a human being demands from the world so that he or she may be in a position to understand and recognise the rights of others. Otherwise he or she would become morally *blameless* if he refuses to acknowledge the right of anybody or any nation to anything however legal.

The right to a human minimum does by definition impose a duty on every moral agent (no matter from what part of the globe) to help ensure that there are no human beings who lack the means to fulfil this right. It then follows, as Peter Singer has already argued, that those affluent individuals who are able to, but refrain from, helping to alleviate poverty from any region of the world, are partly responsible for the consequences arising from such poverty.

Let me now expand on this argument to counter Hardin's position.

The argument for the right to a human minimum, it seems, would not make sense if one does not assume some **common wealth** for all human beings. There is indeed such common wealths.

One problem with Hardin's thesis is that it is given as if there are no debts or common wealth between the boaters and the swimming millions. A connected problem is that he assumes that there is just one boat. Indeed in the real world there are many life boats. A few are affluent while the large majority of boats are poor. Those in the

affluent boats have pipes connecting their boats with the numerous numbers of poor boats. Part of the little wealth and safety gadgets that are in the poor boats do find their way out for use in the rich boats. Indeed, in the beginning all boats were poor. Then a number of the sailors of the now rich boats sailed to the now poor boats and by all means possible, plundered the wealth of many of those boats and used the gain to cause economic and safety disparity between the boats.

The rich boats owe part of their current self-preservation to the gains brought to them by the inter-boat pipes. If indeed all the poor boats would sink, eventually the rich boats would also sink. It is known, for example, that up to a quarter of the jobs in the USA would disappear if that country would divest from the third world.

### Parental Earth Ethics

Imagine a family with six children. Two of the six are relatively rich and four generally poor. Among the rich, one is extremely rich, while among the poor, three are very poor. The reasons for the differences in wealth have to do partly with the family history, partly with personal luck, and partly with individual talents.

The children have certain things in common, while they also have their own completely separate individual possessions. The most basic factors they have in common are the parents (whether alive or deceased), i.e. they have a common origin. The other factor they have in common is that each of them has his or her status and achievement based upon the tutorage which the family as a whole provided. Some made better use of that tutorage, while others may have squandered it.

The children find that from time immemorial their life and relationship are guided by the unwritten ethical laws which can best be summarised under two main principles:

- 1) the parental debt (or bound) principle (PP), and
- 2) the individual luck principle (IP).

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The Parental Debt Principle

This principle consists of four related shared assumptions, which can be formulated as rules:

1a) The Family Security Rule, which states that the fate and security (physical or welfare) of each of the members is ultimately bound up with the existential reality of the family as a whole. Any one of the six members may, for example, be arrogant and have enough to claim self-sufficiency and independence from the rest. But sooner or later he or his own children or his grandchildren will experience a turn of events which must surely make them desperately in need of protection from the Family Tree!

History abound with examples. Both the Roman and the Ottoman Empire disintegrated and their children and dependents sought their security from elsewhere. Western Europe was liberated from subjugation and economic ruin after the Second World War by powers from far outside her borders.

1b) The Kinshipshame Rule, which states that the life conditions of any one member of the family affect all of them both materially and emotionally, so none of the members can reasonably be proud of his situation however "happy", if any member of the Family tree lives in decadence.

1c) The Parental Debt Rule, which states that whoever in the family is affluent or destitute partly owes his fortune or misfortune to the parental and historical factors inherent in the development of the Family. Hence, within the Family no one is alone fully responsible for his affluence, nor for his misfortune.

1d) Individual and Family Survival, which states the ethical rule that anyone member of the family has, given 1)a,b,c, no moral obligation to refrain from interfering with the possessions of any other affluent or destitute brother or sister who ignores the obligation to abide by the rules of the Family ethics. This rule allows the disadvantaged to demand assistance from the affluent, but it also allows creative and hardworking members of the family to repossess undeveloped possessions of the idle relatives and develop them for use to posterity.

### The Individual Luck Principle

This principle is made up of three constituent rules:

- 2a) The Personal Achievement Rule, which states that what a member possesses is due *mainly* to his or her special talents and work.
- 2b) The Personal Supererogation Rule, which states that every member has the right to do whatever he wishes with his possessions.
- 2c) The Public Law Rule, which states that any member of the family who contravenes the right of another member as given by the second principle will be subject to the Family Public Law, and punished or reprimanded to restore justice.

### The Priority Order

The Parental Debt principle is prior to the Individual Luck principle, so that if any of the rules in 1 comes into conflict with any of the rules in 2, then the 1 takes priority. And this is as it should be. The ethics of common sense shows that when in any given community matters of common wealth and security conflict with matters of personal possession, luck or achievement, the former must prevail over the latter. There is no country in which, for example, one would accept a wish or a will from one of its citizens which stipulates that upon death all his achievements, however dear to the country, should be exterminated or kept out of use by anybody. The reason for such will would be that those achievements are personal and hence the personal supererogation rule is to prevail. The objection to this will can be supported by invoking the issues of common origin, common security and common wealth of the community of which the person was a member.

### That the Earth is a Common Wealth

It is now clear, I hope, that I make the claim that the earth, or the world, is a kind of Family Unit, in which the members have kith and kin relationship with one another. The earth is a commonwealth to all humanity.

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This claim can not be dispelled by the argument of Hardin that the world is not a nation or a cluster of nations with a sovereign, since the U.N. is but a toothless body. I am prepared to concede that the world has no sovereign. But this does not affect the claim that the planet earth, not the world, is a common good to all humankind.

The question of the right by first occupation or personal achievement does not overrule this truth. If it did, then it would make no sense to accept the territorial rights of the Europeans who migrated to the Americas after Christopher Columbus "discovered" that continent five hundred years ago. The territorial right and sovereignty in the Americas would in that case rightly and legitimately belong to the American Indians. However, the reality today is such that the American Indians have no more a legitimate claim to that part of the earth than the migrants who invaded it five hundred years ago.

Again if the right of first occupation is to prevail over the principle of the earth as a common good for all mankind, then all that was plundered from the colonised places like Africa or India should long have been returned to those former colonies. Concerning colonisation we, by this time, just lament the fact that those who developed themselves by colonisation have turned their backs on us and now claim that we have no share in, or claim to, any of their current possessions. If we are not getting our shares, it is only because we do not have enough weapons to grab our shares by force. This is the truth for now, for the future matters may be quite different.

The earth is a common good for all. This is the basic principle on which all concerns of the environmentalists would appeal to their listeners. All the talks of the earth being a finite globe or that the 'carrying capacity' of the globe has been exceeded, would be empty rhetoric, if we were insulated from the principles of the Parental Earth Ethics. This is a basic ethics for both a global environmental concern and for global redistribution, i.e. aid.

### **Résumé**

*Cet article offre un aperçu des tendances et développements différents de la philosophie contemporaine africaine. Les interprétations sur ce que la philosophie africaine est ou devrait être correspondent à une vision de la philosophie à tendance universaliste ou, au contraire, particulariste.*

*L'auteur suggère qu'une conception de la philosophie telle que celle de Richard Rorty apporterait une nouvelle perspective au problème de l'identité de la philosophie africaine.*

## AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: ITS QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Jay M. Van Hook

Some time ago I happened to tell an American colleague that I was doing research in African philosophy. His immediate response, one invariably repeated whenever I refer to this research, was the sceptical query: "Is there such a thing?" My irritation with the transparent Western arrogance behind this response was only slightly tempered by the fact that this question, ironically, is precisely the one which dominates recent discussions by Africans and African-Americans concerning African philosophy. Even a cursory survey of the work of prominent African philosophers today demonstrates this. Thus Innocent Onyewuenyi asks: "Is There an African Philosophy?" [Onyewuenyi (1991, p.29)] Peter Bodunrin repeats the question and adds, "and if there is, what is it?" [Bodunrin (1991, p.63)] Paulin Hountondji answers: "African philosophy exists, but it is not what it is believed to be." [Hountondji (1983, p.69)] Henri Maurier, however, asserts: "The answer must surely be: No! Not Yet!" [Maurier (1984, p.25)]

Whatever the answer, however, there is almost complete agreement that the question concerning the existence and nature of African philosophy has been the central focus of discussion and argument among African philosophers during the past couple decades. Professor Sogolo observes that one frequently gets the "uncomfortable impression that that question itself is what constitutes African philosophy." [Sogolo (1990, p.41)]

Now why should the question, "Is there an African philosophy?" be so central? And what sort of a question is it? Anyone even superficially acquainted with Western philosophy is familiar with talk about British or American, French or German, or more broadly, Anglo-American and Continental philosophy. These labels seem to puzzle no one. And reference even to Asian philosophy has become increasingly common in the West. So what is the problem with "African philosophy?" Why is its existence and nature in doubt, and what implications would a satisfactory answer have?

Suppose it should turn out that there is no African philosophy or that Africans do not philosophize. Would that make any difference? Should every aspect of Western culture have an African counterpart? But such a casual dismissal of the problem ignores the important observation of both Kwame Anthony Appiah and Lucius Outlaw concerning the high status of philosophy in Western culture. Commenting on this, Appiah says that "the urge to find something in Africa that 'lives up to' the label is, in part, a question of wanting to find something that *deserves* the dignity ... ." [Appiah (1992, p.93)] And Outlaw adds:

"Philosophy has been one of the most privileged of disciplines, especially in its self-appointed role as guardian of the self-image of the brokers of Western history and culture. Were this not the case, there would have been no debate about 'African philosophy'. Thus any discussion of *African* philosophy involves, *necessarily*, confronting this privileged self-image." [Outlaw (1987a, p.35)]

Questions concerning the existence of African philosophy are thus perceived as reflecting a Western colonial bias that there is no such thing as and has never been (and some would even say, cannot be) an African philosophy, because Africans are not rational or not as rational as Westerners, or do not have the temperament needed to produce philosophy. It is this perception, no doubt, which lies behind Outlaw's denial that questions about African philosophy's existence are "benign queries", and his accusation that "they convey the putrid stench of a wretchedness that fertilizes the soil from which they grow." [Outlaw (1987b, p.9)] For the deeper issue, as he correctly points out, "is one with much higher stakes: it is a struggle over the meaning of 'man' and 'civilized human'." Compared to this deeper issue, questions about the nature of a specific academic discipline are relatively minor. [Outlaw (1987b, p.11)]

Even if Outlaw is correct about questions concerning the *existence* of African philosophy, questions concerning the *nature* of that philosophy need not be viewed as diabolical. For one may argue quite plausibly that questions concerning the *nature* of *African* philosophy



are indicative, at least in part, of a much more general concern about the necessary and sufficient conditions for anything to count as *philosophy*. Bodunrin observes 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." [Bodunrin (1991, p.65)] These different understandings, moreover, are by no means unique to Africa; for they are to be found in Europe and America as well. As G. Salemohamed notes, there is no "general agreement within Western philosophy about the criteria applicable to philosophy." [Salemohamed (1983, p.535)] This is evident in the frequent charges and counter-charges that this or that philosopher or school of philosophy is "not really philosophy." The issue of philosophy's identity may be more visible in Africa than in the West, however, because dominant and marginal philosophical traditions are neither as clear nor as firmly established.

This paper does not pretend to resolve the question concerning the identity of African philosophy. Such a resolution, if it is to occur, will be the outcome of debate and discussion among African philosophers themselves. What I propose to do instead is to survey some of the recent literature in order to gain a better understanding of the complex issues involved in the attempt to answer the twofold question: What is philosophy and what can and should philosophy be in an African context? In what follows I shall first attempt to place the question of the identity of African philosophy in its recent historical setting. (I say "recent" because I shall not address the interesting and important issue of the role and influence of Africa in the development of classical Greek philosophy here, or other issues of the sort which surround debates generated by books like Professor Bernal's *Black Athena*.) The second part of the paper describes alternative philosophical models or types currently advocated and practised among members of the African philosophical community. The third part attempts to isolate some of the fundamental issues involved in the question, "What is African Philosophy?" and to indicate some of the complexities involved in trying to answer that question. In conclusion, I offer some

suggestions which may serve as a prelude to further attempts to resolve the questions considered here.

First, then, a setting of the stage for the current debate.

### 1. Placide Tempels and Bantu Philosophy

It is widely acknowledged that current discussions about African philosophy are in some way a reaction to Father Placide Tempels' book Bantu Philosophy, originally published in 1945. Tempels, a Belgian missionary to the Congo - now Zaire - is both hero and villain in the story of African philosophy. No doubt the term "hero" is too strong; but Tempels is credited with being the first among his peers to argue that Africans have a philosophy. In the words of Serequeberhan, "Tempels was forced to admit - against the grain of the then established 'knowledge' - that the Bantu/African is not a mere beast devoid of consciousness, but a human being whose conscious awareness of existence is grounded on certain foundational notions." [Serequeberhan (1991, p.11)] V. Y. Mudimbe notes that Tempels' book "cast doubts on the greatness of the colonial venture" and provoked the anger of those "who considered the right to colonize as a natural right." [Mudimbe (1988, p.137)] And Hountondji observes that Tempels was a voice for humanitarianism and social justice within the framework of colonialism. [Hountondji (1984, p.50)]

But Tempels is also the villain of the story. For while he acknowledged that the Bantu had a philosophy, he maintained that they were for the most part unconscious of that philosophy. He says with characteristic paternalism:

"We do not claim that Bantus are capable of presenting us with a philosophical treatise complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our own intellectual training that enables us to effect its systematic development. It is up to us to provide them with an accurate account of their conception of entities, in such a way that they will recognize themselves in our words and will agree." [Tempels (1959, p.24)]

Further, as Mudimbe argues, Tempels does not totally reject the ideology of colonialism but rather "proposes more efficient means to his avowed goal, the task of civilizing and evangelizing Bantu peoples." [Mudimbe (1988, pp.137-138)]

Moreover, as Hountondji remarked, while crediting the Bantus with a philosophy, Tempels' own philosophical credentials were minimal and he used the word "philosophy" loosely to mean little more than a coherent, rich, and complex way of thinking. [Hountondji (1984, p.50)]

While few African philosophers today consider themselves disciples of Tempels, Mudimbe claims that "his ghost is still present" and that "the most inspiring trends in the field still define themselves with respect to Tempels" [Mudimbe (1988, p.153)] And although most African philosophers react more or less strongly to both the methodology and the presumptions inherent in Tempels' project, there is no agreement about either what African philosophy should be or how current practice should be described.

## 2. Models of African Philosophy

In surveying the current scene in African philosophy, H. Odera Oruka identifies four main types of philosophy being defended and practised today. He labels these: "ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy." [Oruka (1991, p.49)]

"Ethnophilosophy" is basically a "folk philosophy", and resembles most closely the paradigm of Tempels. According to Serequeberhan, the proponents of this type think of African philosophy as embedded in "the mythical/religious conceptions, worldviews, and lived ritual practices of ethnic Africans, which can and should be documented by Europeans and Africans with a Western education." [Serequeberhan (1991, p.19)] Ethnophilosophy, according to Oruka, views philosophy as implicit in the collective and basically religious experience of everyone, rather than as the explicit thought or rational argument of anyone in particular; and it regards African philosophy as

fundamentally different from Western philosophy in "meaning, logic, and content" because of their very different respective mental orientations. [Oruka (1987, p.63)]

Oruka's second type of philosophy, and the focus of his own distinguished work, is called "philosophic sagacity" or "sage philosophy". Some of Oruka's critics have disparagingly called his sage philosophy "culture philosophy", claiming that it is indistinguishable from ethnophilosophy. Oruka makes it clear, however, that his aim is to "invalidate the claim that traditional African peoples were innocent of logical and critical thinking" and thus also the belief that "traditional African Philosophy does not go beyond folk-wisdom and non-critical thought." [Oruka (1987, pp.51-52)] Serequeberhan sees sage philosophy as Oruka's attempt to carve out a middle way between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, and describes it as the thought of indigenous wise men "who critically engage the established tradition and culture of their respective ethnic groups and/or societies." [Serequeberhan (1991, p.19)] These sages, says Serequeberhan, occupy a critical space in their culture; they are not merely preservers of tradition. Practitioners of this type attempt to extract the philosophical wisdom from these sages through dialogue. Examples of this type can be found in Oruka's recent book, Sage Philosophy. [Oruka (1990)]

The third type in Oruka's classification is "national-ideological philosophy." It is basically political philosophy and is found in manifestos, pamphlets, and discourse related to the African anticolonial struggle for liberation. It mostly refers to the political thought of the post-independence African leaders, but it could also refer more generally to radical political thought. E. Wamba-dia-Wamba says that African philosophy should be the "struggle for the complete liberation of the entire African people, ... the struggle to destroy every form of exploitation of man by man, of African nations by other nations ... ." [Wamba-dia-Wamba (1991, p.224)] He goes on to say that an African philosophy department which teaches only Western philosophy is "principally an oppressive, and thus pro imperialist, structure." [Wamba-dia-Wamba (1991, p.240)]

Finally, "professional philosophy" sees the discipline of philosophy as on a par with other scientific and technological disciplines. It is "professional," says Oruka following a classical line of thought, "precisely because it is technical philosophy having professionally trained philosophers as its managers." [Oruka (1991, p.48)] These techniques are usually associated with Western philosophy and are employed by philosophers whose philosophical training has been in the West or from other philosophers who were trained in the West. Advocates of professional philosophy are united in their opposition to ethnophilosophy and in their affirmation of the centrality of critical rationality in the activity of philosophy. There are differences of emphasis among them, however, about the importance of African philosophy's "relevance" to independence and development.

More recently Oruka has acknowledged the emergence of a fifth type, namely, "hermeneutical philosophy." Okonda Okolo observes that "the interest in hermeneutics arises out of the reality of ... a generalized identity crisis due to the presence of a culture - a foreign and dominating tradition - and the necessity for a self-affirmation in the construction of an authentic culture and tradition." [Okolo (1991, p.201)] Serequeberhan observes that "it is no accident that the discussion of African philosophy is taking place in the context of the increasing contemporary importance of hermeneutics, deconstruction, and ... context-oriented modes of doing philosophy in the discipline at large." [Serequeberhan (1991, p.14)] This type is evident in Outlaw's call for African philosophers to deconstruct the colonial heritage by "de-colonizing the mind" and to reconstruct a shattered indigenous African heritage. [Outlaw (1987b, p.11)] It is apparent, at any rate, that the hermeneutical and deconstructive trends in African philosophy draw heavily upon similar trends in Western philosophy.

Mudimbe speaks of three main approaches in current African philosophical practice. First is the critique of ethno-philosophy, a critique which draws upon the Western philosophical tradition's view of appropriate philosophical practice. The second is the "foundational" which questions the epistemological foundations of the human and social sciences. The third approach includes "philological studies,

critical anthropology, and hermeneutics ... ." [Mudimbe (1988, p.154)] Kwame Gyekye, however, distinguishes between traditional and modern African philosophy [Gyekye (1987, pp.11-12)], while others simply distinguish between professional and traditional African philosophy.

If one examines the discussion surrounding the various types of African philosophy mentioned so far, one recurring issue which emerges is whether philosophy is to be construed primarily as "professional philosophy," and thus ultimately along the lines of the institution of Western philosophy, or to be construed contextually as some form of culture philosophy. And among those who think of philosophy contextually, there are those whose effort is directed toward making explicit the worldviews of traditional cultures while others are more concerned that philosophy be relevant to issues of independence, modernization, and development. Perhaps a better way of stating this may be to say that the fundamental issue is a debate between universalist and particularist conceptions of philosophy. One important aspect of this dispute concerns the role of "rationality" in African philosophy. And it should also be noted that the concern about African philosophy's "relevance" cuts across universalist and particularist lines.

### 3. Universalism, particularism and rationality

So the central point at issue may be put in the form of a few questions. First: Is philosophy the product of a universal human reason or is every philosophy in some significant way an expression of the culture which produces it? And a different but closely related question: Are logic, rationality, and argumentation intrinsic and even necessary characteristics of anything which claims to be philosophy, or are these just peculiar to Western philosophy and thus not normative for African philosophy?

In the controversy about the first question, those who I call universalists argue that philosophy is philosophy regardless of where and when it is practised. While the specific issues at the centre of

attention may vary contextually, the activity of philosophy is essentially the same from culture to culture. Some find the notion of "African philosophy" as peculiar as that of "African physics" or "African mathematics"; if such a concept is to be used, however, it can only mean philosophy which happens to be produced by Africans. Particularists, by contrast, regard philosophies as expressions of specific historical and cultural contexts and of the problems and proposed solutions, as well as of the worldviews, found in them. They think that "African philosophy" should be African in content - relevant to African tradition, history, culture, and contemporary struggles - and free to develop its own methodology.

Oruka describes the controversy surrounding the second question thus:

"Some wish to deny critical rationality, at least as it is understood in the West, to African Philosophy, claiming indeed that it is precisely lack of critical reasoning that helps to distinguish African philosophy from Western philosophy. Yet others think that philosophy, whether *African* or not, is not worth the name if rationality and logicity are ejected from it." [Oruka (1987, p.56)]

Ironically, each side accuses the other of playing into the hands of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. The universalists accuse the particularists of settling for an inferior and idiosyncratic conception of philosophy which lacks the intellectual rigor of Western professional philosophy and thereby virtually guarantees its own marginalization in the world market. The particularists accuse the universalists of letting the West dictate the rules and agenda of the philosophical enterprise, thus playing the game as their oppressors would have it played and guaranteeing its irrelevance to the issues and struggles of Africans. Speaking for the universalists, Oruka states: "Reason is a universal human trait. And the greatest disservice to African Philosophy is to deny it reason and dress it in magic and extra-rational traditionalism." [Oruka (1987, p.66)] Particularists retort that their universalist opponents are claiming as universal what is really only another particular - the particular of Western culture. Thus, for example, Outlaw argues

that the concept of rationality itself as used in philosophy is a product of Western culture. [Outlaw (1987b, pp.13 and 35)]

A survey of current philosophical literature provides abundant evidence of this fundamental disagreement among African philosophers; there is, however, more overlap and subtle shading of positions among individual philosophers than the above description would indicate. An excellent example of this overlap is found in Oruka himself. Oruka always classifies himself (and is classified by others) as a "professional" philosopher along with Hountondji, Bodunrin, and Wiredu, among others. His insistence on the universality of reason, common to this group, has already been noted. But he also insists that there is and must be a distinction between African and Western philosophy; and he is more interested in and occupied with traditional thought than many of the other so-called professional philosophers. Moreover, his defense of philosophic sagacity rests on his conviction that it constitutes the best refutation of ethnophilosophy. Professional philosophy alone is ineffective because it is seen as "smuggling Western techniques into African philosophy." [Oruka (1991, p.49)]

Turning then to the work of other universalists, Bodunrin claims that he and his fellow professional philosophers "take a universalist view of philosophy", arguing that it "must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects which receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation ... ." [Bodunrin (1991, p.64)] African philosophy, he claims, is simply philosophy done by African philosophers, whether it be in logic or ethics, or an analysis of Plato or Kant. Bodunrin also warns against romanticizing the African past. "A way of life", he says, "which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious." [Bodunrin (1991, p.70)]

Hountondji is perhaps the most extreme member of this group. At one time, at least, he insisted that the defining criterion of African philosophy is "the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content." Tempels' book, for example, would not qualify even though it was about African thought; for he was Belgian.



[Hountondji (1983, pp.62-66)] He also argued that philosophy must be written, thus excluding thought extracted from oral traditions from the domain of philosophy.

Kwasi Wiredu, although basically in agreement with Hountondji, allows the work of non-Africans to be considered a part of African philosophy if it becomes a genuine part of the African philosophical tradition, in much the same way, for example, as the Austrian Wittgenstein became an integral part of the British philosophical tradition. [Wiredu (1991, p.93)] Wiredu is also more sympathetic to the study of African traditional philosophy than is Hountondji. He urges avoidance of both reactionary traditionalism and hasty surrender to philosophy as done by Western colonizers.

Those who I call particularists, however, are critical of the stance of the professional philosophers, particularly that of Hountondji. Lucius Outlaw takes issue with both Hountondji's geographical criterion for African philosophy and his universalist view of philosophy in general. He rejects the geographical criterion as a piece of Western metaphysical mythology which distinguishes between substantial humanity and accidental ethnicity. He also argues against the notion that philosophy has a universal essence. He claims that Western philosophy "has served as court rationalist for false universalisms" that exclude Africans among others and that such false universalisms are used to rationalize cultural imperialism. [Outlaw (1987b, p.48)]

K. C. Anyanwu also rejects the idea of universal philosophy valid for all peoples and cultures. He says:

"Philosophy is a product of or a reflection on experience, a guide to life; and the experience out of which philosophy emerges is determined by what people have lived and historical situations. It is unfortunate that academic philosophy is largely addressing itself to academic philosophers and not to human beings in their historical circumstances." [Anyanwu (1987, p.237)]

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to outline and document the current debate among African and African-American philosophers concerning the existence and nature of African philosophy. There is, I think, no entirely satisfactory resolution of the issues involved. The concern of Hountondji and company about the marginalization of an African philosophy which develops idiosyncratically apart from established philosophical tradition is a legitimate one. But the concern of others about the relevance to African philosophy of traditional thought and their fears of Western dominance are also justified.

Without pretending to resolve the debate about African philosophy, I conclude with some thoughts which may serve as a prelude to further fruitful discussion of issues involved in the question of African philosophy.

The first relates to how we might think about philosophy. The American philosopher Richard Rorty distinguishes between "PHILOSOPHY" and "philosophy." PHILOSOPHY is the quest for truth about the essential nature of things; it is, in short, the Platonic quest for the universal, for a unified vision of the whole of reality. It is essentially an *argumentative* endeavour, for it lives by argument and counter-argument. By contrast, philosophy is the quest for meaning, an attempt to create self and reality rather than discover what is already out there. It seeks diversity rather than unity; it is *narrative* rather than argumentative. [Rorty (1982, pp.28-34) and (1989, chapters 1 and 4)] Rorty chooses, as I do, for the side of philosophy. He believes that PHILOSOPHY has reached a dead end and has become increasingly irrelevant to Western culture.

If Rorty is at all correct about the sterility of Western academic philosophy, it seems to me that African philosophers should be dubious about attempts to erect a replica of this moribund institution on African soil. African philosophers would do well to articulate their own stories rather than to take their agendas from Western professionals. To follow this path risks, given the current Western philosophical power-structure, the continued marginalization of African

philosophy. If, however, abandoning PHILOSOPHY is judged to be unacceptable, Rorty's distinction between PHILOSOPHY and philosophy may encourage tolerance of diversity by helping African philosophers distinguish between professional argumentative philosophy and attempts to construct relevant philosophical narratives in tune with, but not enslaved to, traditional cultural values.

Another reason to be suspicious of efforts to recreate the institution of Western philosophy (or one resembling it) in Africa has been forcefully presented by Lucius Outlaw. Outlaw argues that the institution of Western philosophy is more than just accidentally racist. His evidence is not only the familiar racist remarks to be found in such philosophers as Hume, Kant, and Hegel, but even more emphatically the racist character of the Enlightenment; the silence of the Western philosophical establishment in the face of slavery, colonialism, and racial discrimination; and the absence of a significant African and African-American presence in the American philosophical community. [Outlaw (1987a) and (1987b)] Outlaw makes a strong case for a particularist view of philosophy.

On the other hand, it seems to me justifiable to think of philosophy as both universal and particular. Its universality, perhaps, consists only in the fact that it involves thinking about issues which confront human beings, some of which are local and peculiar, and some like the meaning of life which are themselves universal. The particularity of philosophy consists in the fact that within any culture issues arise within specific contexts, and these issues as well as styles of thinking about them vary from time to time and place to place. The universality of philosophy is based on a common humanity in spite of cultural diversity. As a result, there can be discussion and communication, however difficult at times, across divergent cultures. In philosophy as in culture generally we should encourage diversity and pluralism without losing sight of our common humanity. \*

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### **Résumé**

*Cet article analyse et juge différentes attitudes de philosophes européens envers la philosophie africaine. Celle que l'on rencontre le plus souvent est un manque complet de connaissance de ce qu'est la philosophie africaine. A part cela, l'auteur distingue l'attitude 'exotisme', l'attitude du 'missionnaire tolérant' et l'attitude de 'philosophie interculturelle'. Il estime que c'est cette 'philosophie interculturelle', développée par le philosophe autrichien Franz Wimmer, qui est la plus féconde.*

*L'article conclut avec 5 arguments indiquant les raisons pour lesquelles la philosophie africaine est intéressante pour les philosophes européens.*

## EUROPEAN ATTITUDES TO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Gerd-Rüdiger Hoffmann

In 1988 we published a book Wie und warum entstand Philosophie? (How and why did philosophy arise?). In the bookshop at Leipzig University I saw the surprised faces of those who read the full title of this book which reads: Wie und warum entstand Philosophie in verschiedenen Regionen der Erde? (How and why did philosophy arise in different regions of the world?). I do not want to go into the contents of this book with more detail because we have already started to consider some of our hypotheses quite critically since then. But in any case we made an attempt which has still remained quite rare, i.e. to deal with the genesis of philosophy considering ancient India, China, Japan, ancient Greece, the Islamic world, Sub-saharan Africa and pre-Columbian Mexico to be of equal significance. The provocation was deliberate as the average European intellectual expects of a book with a title like "The history of philosophy" that it mainly refers to European philosophy or as Walther Kranz expressed it in 1941: "... he who philosophizes, thinks in Greek terms anyway". And there has hardly been any student yet who has learnt to contradict such a point of view seriously. The European relationship to African philosophy is changing nevertheless.

The first volume of a comprehensive Unesco study into philosophical research and teaching in the world of today, Teaching and Research in Philosophy Throughout the World - I: Africa, was published in 1984. Less than twenty years ago, nobody would have really believed that such an ambitious series could ever start with a volume on Africa. However, at the 16th World Congress of Philosophy in Düsseldorf in 1978, it was understood by some European philosophers that the opinions of African philosophers must be heard when such great subjects as "Philosophy and the World View of Modern Sciences" [Düsseldorf, 1978], "Philosophy and Culture" (17th World Congress of Philosophy, Montréal, 1983), or "The Philosophical View of Man" (18th World Congress of Philosophy, Brighton, 1988) were under discussion. African philosophy is present

now in the international philosophical discussion. We should, however, ask for the motives of this recognition. African philosophy is mentioned, but rarely recognized as a serious intellectual counter-part. Therefore this paper aims to examine the various ways in which Europeans are dealing with African philosophy. Before my short attempt to characterize these trends I would like to make two preliminary remarks:

Firstly: Strictly speaking one can say that the term *African philosophy* is not quite exact as we should speak about *African philosophies* or even more precise about *philosophies in countries of a continent which are quite different in their cultural, political and economic situation*. I employ the term African philosophy because it is easier to understand. In my opinion the expression African philosophy is widely accepted nowadays and I think that all African philosophies do have some common characteristics which justify such a general description in spite of all advisable caution.

Secondly: I will not try to understand African philosophy from the inside, or in other words; I am not an African insider. I do not deny my European point of view, otherwise I could be considered an arrogant charlatan or - as speakers of Kikongo could call me - *a nzonzi za luvumu* (a master of rhetoric but a liar).

The most common attitude towards African philosophy in Europe is to ignore it. Considering syllabuses of universities, philosophical dictionaries or books on the general history of philosophy it seems to be quite normal to pay no attention to the existence of African philosophy at all. Even if its existence is taken note of, it seems to be quite hard to consider it being of any relevance to Europe. There is no doubt that one can find various arguments against studying and teaching African philosophy - money constraints force one to make priorities. But the major reason for ignoring African philosophy is to be found in the university model of the 19th century, the idea of 'universitas litterarum', which tended to institutionalize the cultural prejudice of European superiority. Few would openly admit this now,



but the historical (and maybe present-day) reason for ignoring African philosophy lies in racism.

Among those who do take an interest in non-western philosophies, the most widespread motive seems to be 'exotism'. As far as philosophy is concerned I would like to define exotism as the attitude of acquiring foreign, 'strange' conceptions, starting from a position of superiority. Although it may also seem to be exotic to find portraits of Kant, Hegel, Fichte or Marx hanging about on the wall of a department for philosophy at any African university, this is not a case of exotism at all. Predominant Western standards of education, publishing houses, professional journals and mass media have already given Kant, Hegel, Fichte or Marx the prominent position. Therefore nobody would be surprised at seeing these portraits. Paulin J. Hountondji is absolutely right when he says that sciences in Africa are a facet of underdevelopment. All research, including philosophy is as externally orientated as the economy is. Its impetuses and theoretical results are still "directly or indirectly given and determined by the needs of the imperialist economy" [Hountondji (1983, p.14)]. Hountondji's view might have to be qualified, but it is valid for the types of autochthonous African philosophy that are booming at the moment in Africa and Europe. Attempts of African colleagues to reconstruct pre-colonial African philosophy should be appreciated, but one should also accept that this research and the European consumption of it, often comes from a romantic criticism of capitalism. Much European interest in African philosophy is in the first place a reflection of the crisis of European civilisation itself: the end of the unlimited belief in reason. This European interest needs an African philosophy which is radically different from its own, which is why modern African philosophy tends to be ignored. African philosophy is made synonymous with 'tradition', 'harmony', 'intuition', 'real spirituality' etc. Kwasi Wiredu says " ... there is a tendency to construe African philosophy as being identical with traditional African philosophy. This tendency has a colonial ancestry" [Wiredu (1984, p.31)].

European interest in African philosophy can also find expression in what could be called 'tolerant missionarism'. This approach is represented by those who are convinced of the higher values of their own philosophy and civilization but who are still able to consider their own civilization critically and who are ready therefore to get to know other civilizations. The main aim of these missions in the end is to bring the 'real faith' to the Africans and to convince them of the necessity of the 'modernization' according to the European model or the 'only revolutionary ideology'. Like modern missionaries, the apostles of capitalist concepts of modernization and the remained teachers of the missionary variant of Marxism/Leninism know that they can only be successful by finding a connecting link between their own and African thinking. Examples for this new strategy are the decret *Ad gentes* of the Vatican II [Abbott (1965)], the slogan of the moderate neo-colonialism "Custom-suits only fit the black man to a T" [Ortlieb (1979)] or several Marxist-Leninist textbooks written for the '3rd World' [Spirkin (1983)]. As Aimé Césaire wrote in his letter to Maurice Thorez in 1956: "Je crois en avoir assez dit pour faire comprendre que ce n'est ni le marxisme ni le communisme que je renie, que c'est l'usage que certains ont fait du marxisme et du communisme que je réproouve. Que ce que je veux, c'est que marxisme et communisme soient mis au service des peuples noirs, et non les peuples noirs au service du marxisme et du communisme. Que la doctrine et le mouvement soient faits pour les hommes, non les hommes pour la doctrine ou pour le mouvement." [Césaire (1956, p.12)]

Finally, a more satisfactory way to deal with African philosophy has been developed in intercultural philosophical studies. The idea of intercultural philosophy is that there are many philosophical traditions of significance in all regions of the world, rather than just a few, or one. As Franz Wimmer expressed in his book Interkulturelle Philosophie. Geschichte und Theorie (Intercultural Philosophy. History and Theory): "After it became possible to influence or even to determine the life of all people on the planet by decisions which are

made by a small part of mankind - or even on behalf of it only - no part can claim anymore to represent the whole as the results and consequences of the thoughts and decisions also affect the other parts necessarily." [Wimmer (1990, p.79)] Considering these conditions it is not difficult to understand that eurocentrism has become obsolete as other forms of centrism have.

Intercultural philosophy builds on two basic assumptions:

Firstly: We must not speak on behalf of others, who are able to speak for themselves. And these others might even be more resolute when speaking for themselves. As Aimé Césaire described it in his heuristic letter to Maurice Thorez this could be considered "une véritable révolution copernicienne" [Césaire (1956, p.12)].

Secondly: We must not consider everything unknown in Europe important without critically investigating it. We should not "start a blind African or oriental travel" [Wimmer (1990, p.114)]; i.e., we should not try to substitute uncritical exoticism for eurocentrism.

European philosophies have played, for good reasons I presume, a leading part in the world history of philosophy for a long time and may still be able to act an important part at the present time, but one amongst others only. Its representatives have to be careful not to lose even this part in the end which could happen if they continue to embrace a concept of 'progress' which takes 'progress' to refer to a minority in the so-called centres only, ignoring the periphery which constitutes the majority. The western contribution might also become obsolete if it is limited to a concept of rationality which justifies totalitarian rule and militarization of international relations, often under the banner of 'democracy'. As Frantz Fanon said: "When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man and an avalanche of murders." [Fanon (1967, p.252)]; Finally, I think it is a mistake if the Europeans have no better idea than looking for 'the totally different world' and strive to find this world in Africa, traditional Africa.

Let us now come back to the four types of European attitudes towards African philosophy with some evaluating remarks.

It is understandable that the preoccupation with so-called traditional African philosophies leads to an enthusiasm for 'La philosophie bantou', 'Yoruba philosophy of life', 'Hunhuism or Ubuntuism' and 'Sage-philosophy'. Knowledge of these could even help to re-orientate an industrialized and anti-human world towards more humane and spiritual values. I do not want to contest that it can be useful to remind people of these values which have not been geared to technical progress and domination of man over nature only. But it should be noted that the process of becoming aware of the civil social and cultural crisis in Europe has led to the uncritical acceptance of non-philosophical views of life as to be philosophies. A standardised Tempelsian picture of traditional African philosophy has been studied instead of the matter itself; even the colonial features of this Bantu-philosophy have been neglected. It should be remembered that serious objections have been raised against this kind of study of African views and thought-systems. Some people in the ethno-philosophical tradition believe to know what the essence of 'the' African philosophy looks like. Kwasi Wiredu concludes that: "Hitherto there has been a tendency for facile generalizations to be made about African traditional philosophy. It seems to be assumed that what is true of one or two African peoples is true for all Africans." [Wiredu (1984, p.42)]. And let us remember to the warning words of Frantz Fanon who pointed out: "Pour beaucoup d'intellectuels de couleur, la culture européenne présente un caractère d'extériorité. De plus, dans les rapports humains, le Noir peut se sentir étranger au monde occidental. Ne voulant pas faire figure de parent pauvre, de fils adoptif, de rejeton bâtard, va-t-il tenter fébrilement de découvrir une civilisation nègre? Que surtout l'on nous comprenne. Nous sommes convaincu qu'il y aurait un grand intérêt à entrer en contact avec une littérature ou une architecture nègres du IIIe siècle avant Jésus-Christ. Nous serions très heureux de savoir qu'il exista une correspondance entre tel philosophe nègre et Platon. Mais nous ne voyons absolument pas ce que ce fait pourrait changer dans la situation des petits gamins de huit ans qui

travaillent dans les champs de canne en Martinique ou en Guadeloupe." [Fanon (1975/1952, p.186/187)]

In any case modern African philosophy has been ignored and as the European preoccupation with African philosophy has its influence again on Africa, the impression that African philosophy does not change is even strengthened. The opportunity to profit from the knowledge of African philosophy has hardly ever been made use of. What shall we learn if we find only what we want to find?

In view of these considerations, it seems that the chances to learn from African philosophy are a lot greater if we take the approach of intercultural philosophy as proposed by Franz Wimmer. Intercultural philosophy aims to discuss different philosophies equally seriously. This means that African philosophy is dealt with as any other philosophy would be, namely critically and not as if it is an ethnological exhibit standing about in the glass show-case of the museum of ethnology. Ten years ago Paulin J. Hountondji said: "The dilemma between a blind defence and a total rejection of tradition arises only insofar as one takes the latter in the passive, instead of the active sense of the term. Originally, tradition does not mean a given set of customs, but a movement: that of transmitting (Latin: tradere = to transmit) habits and values from one generation to another. In its passive sense, the word has come to mean the result of this movement, i.e. the total legacy, cultural, political, social, economic, intellectual, etc., of a given society. We badly need, in Africa today, to remember that, behind tradition is movement, a process of transmitting which points back to an original and essential process of social creation of values. We need to realise that what happened yesterday can still happen today, and try to be creative, here and now, as our ancestors were in their time. In this way, we shall no longer close up our tradition into the past, as if it were something dead, external and/or superior to us. We shall deal with it, theoretically and practically, as a living heritage, which calls upon our free, rational, critical evaluation and initiative." [Hountondji (1981, p.139)]

In conclusion, let us put forward the reasons why we as Europeans should take a keen interest in African philosophy. I shall mention five reasons.

Firstly: African philosophy could question old structures of thought, raise other questions and challenge generally accepted answers. It could reshape our idea of the history and of methods for the historiography of philosophy. All this will be missed as long as we continue to believe that we know each answer, thereby admitting only to our own questions.

Secondly: The preoccupation with African philosophy could cast new light on the question 'What is philosophy?'. The accepted concept of philosophy is obviously not generally valid, but is tailored to European thought. As Oruka commenting upon different trends in African philosophy suggests: "... we should initially suspend our judgement as to what constitutes philosophy in the strict sense of the term. Yet this point of philosophy in the strict sense remains important in our research. The classification of the different trends should be seen as a means for us in Africa to identify philosophy in the strict sense from philosophy in the broad and all-embracing sense. This is one way of invalidating the idea that some particular definition of philosophy is the authentic African philosophy while philosophy in any other sense is foreign to Africa." [Oruka (1990, p.28)]

Thirdly: African philosophy could bring types of philosophy and types of ideas, which have been ignored or neglected when European thought started to dominate the world back on the philosophical agenda. I would like to mention especially problems of 'life in nature', as opposed to 'rule-over-nature', and the idea of a solidarity-society. Both of these were raised e.g. in the utopian philosophy of Nyerere: the Ujamaa-idea which was to indicate a third alternative between socialism based on the command structure that has been described as 'real socialism' and modern capitalism. Similar ideas were presented by Zera Yakob, Mbiti, Senghor, Fanon or Kaunda. These ideas may have been useless to practical life from the very beginning, but that is

no reason to forget the original question which they were addressing, namely to find key ideas for a more humane social system.

Fourthly: African philosophy could remind us of the fact that the link between philosophy and the real world must be maintained. That philosophy should raise questions like 'What is philosophy good for in a world which suffers from hunger?' or 'What is the sense of words like humanism, peace and progress?'. I think that Africa does not show us the limits of such ideas, but the necessity of thinking in such general categories as the only way to draw out the global connection of local crises. On the other hand Africa also shows that one can discuss these categories only as quite concrete matters.

Fifthly: Several modern African Philosophers should be recognized as very original contributors to ideas on social development. In my opinion some African philosophers have done unprecedented work as for example Frantz Fanon who has developed a liberation ideology for the oppressed peoples starting from a preoccupation with Marx and other European thinkers, Kwame Nkrumah who interpreted the philosophy of Kant to produce his Consciencism or Paulin J. Hountondji - to mention a few names only - who develops a philosophy for Africa despite his European studies of philosophy.

But relevance to European intellectuals should of course not be the main concern of African philosophy. The social need for philosophy is growing in many African countries. This need, however, can develop into quite different directions. The crises in many African countries make people call for a 'Weltanschauung', they make people look for 'shelter', so to say, in esoteric philosophizing. Others indulge in classical philosophy, following patterns of old British and French syllabuses. But there are also philosophies of the social forces capable of real progressive historical action. These have always made an essential contribution to fixing objectives for the people to attain, discovering progressive potential in society, and pointing out a way to freedom. This could also be the roll of intercultural philosophy. It could have "a humanistic function while mediating and deepening the

apprehension of strange views of world and that is the way it can contribute to the friendship between the peoples" [Wimmer (1990, p.116)]. We might be able to back up the idea of solidarity, internationalism and equal rights for every man and every woman, in spite of the scepticism which is part of our profession. Therefore, I express my sympathy to all African philosophers who are ready to face the challenge and help an 'intercultural' reason along the road to success.

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### Résumé

*Cet article explique que la théorie économique néo-classique, paradigme dominant de la théorie de l'économie dans le monde occidental industrialisé, est saisie par ses théoriciens comme science authentique et peut-être empiriquement fondée.*

*La maximisation de l'utilité et la maximisation du profit, découlant toutes deux du postulat de rationalité, sont à présent implicitement perçues comme des manifestations objectives de la connaissance humaine. Bref on assume qu'il est normal pour l'être humain de chercher à profiter aux dépens d'autres individus.*

*Cet essai veut montrer que le postulat de rationalité n'est qu'un postulat évaluatif, qui reflète des circonstances sociales historiquement contingentes. Il n'y a aucune nécessité logique à ce que les individus cherchent à maximiser utilité et profit. La normalité des intérêts, du profit ou de l'argent peut donc être mise en question d'un point de vue épistémologique.*

*L'auteur montre que la structure de la société et le rôle attribué aux individus à l'intérieur de cette société, offre la possibilité de paradigme de théories économiques différentes. Les règles du 'zero-sum-game' de l'économie globale démontrent facilement que le paradigme de la théorie économique néo-classique ne peut pas être rendu universel et que des alternatives sont nécessaires.*

## NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMICS: SCIENCE OR IDEOLOGY?

Lansana Keita

It is generally understood that if some body of knowledge  $S$  is a science, then  $S$  must satisfy certain methodological and epistemological criteria. It is expected that  $S$  must be empirically grounded, and possess a body of predictive and explanatory statements, that is, laws which might be of general or probabilistic form. It is also understood that the stock of statements that constitute  $S$  be systematically formulated into modules of knowledge known as theories. More comprehensively, it is the theories themselves that are assumed to possess predictive and explanatory power. Of crucial importance though is the requirement that any theory of  $S$  must be potentially testable within experimental parameters established by the theory itself.

Such as been the success of natural science in terms of cognitive yield and technological applications that its methodology and techniques have been increasingly adopted by the social sciences, that is, those purportedly empirical disciplines that study the behaviour of human beings. Accordingly, of all the social sciences, economics seems to be the most adoptive of the techniques of the empirical sciences. Contemporary neoclassical economic theory, for example, is very quantitative in expression, and some have stated that it gives the appearance of being some species of engineering.

This is to be expected, given that the major theoreticians in the formulation of modern economics were trained in quantitative methods. Jevons, Walras, Pareto, Marshall and Keynes are examples of this. The assumption made by the practitioners of neoclassical economics is that economics is firmly establishing its credentials as an empirical science.

Yet the quest for scientific status on the part of economics has not been successful as expected, mainly because of the problematic nature of human behaviour. A genuine scientific theory, it was argued above, is one that is able to explain and predict events or phenomena in some portion of the empirical world. But the theories of economics have not been particularly successful in predicting or explaining human choice.

The reason for this is that control conditions necessary for explanation and prediction are nonexistent for economists. Furthermore, and more importantly, the ultimate explanatory basis for human decision making is human thought (motives, desires, etc.), which is mentalistic, private and hitherto impervious to the public scrutiny required by science. What is required of economics, if it were to be genuinely scientific, is a stock of general law-like statements descriptive of human choice. And such statements would necessarily be reducible to other general statements about mental motives. Of course, such explanatory statements are often appealed to, but they lack the quantitative conciseness required by a scientific proposition, and are often based on casual impressions.

It is for this reason that theoreticians of economics are constrained to appeal to purely theoretical assumptions in order to establish an articulate system of economic choice. This is the basis for the assumption of rational choice on the part of the practitioners of neoclassical economics and other paradigms. But economic decision making is of great importance in the structuring and organizing of human social life. In general, economic choice concerns the schemes or methods whereby individuals or groups of individuals garner resources for the maintenance of social life. The study of economic decision making is of importance, therefore, in the understanding of the dynamics of human society. Given the multiplicity of human wants and needs, but the differentiated availability of resources, conditions are thereby established for human conflict and struggle. In this connection, individuals and groups formulate strategies whose function is to maximize the possibilities of gaining access to available though relatively limited resources. And the social sciences, and economics in particular, play a crucial role in the formulation of maximizing strategies. Given such a holistic role for the social sciences, even the social application and meaning of the theories of the empirical sciences are ascribed a role in the formulation of strategies for the maximizing of access to resources.

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The stock of beliefs and strategies which are necessarily marshalled by individuals and groups in human social conflict, if they project only relative one-sided viewpoints which seem to maintain or maximize access to resources to the disadvantage of others, is what may be referred to as ideology.

I am inclined to believe that modern industrial society, characterized by an unequal access to resources in the form of capital (physical or human), privilege, etc., seeks justification for the existing state of affairs by encouraging the formulation of theories in the social sciences. This is the ideological role played by the social sciences in contemporary society. Of course, this need not to be the case: a universal and more humanistic social science founded on principles of social justice and equity could indeed be developed. It is in the context of this possibility that the question of whether neoclassical economics is science or ideology assumes some importance.

It is the purpose of this paper, however, to argue that the neoclassical economics theory ought not to be regarded as scientific in the physical science sense of that term. I shall argue, rather, that neoclassical economics is at base founded on certain ideological principles which serve as theoretical support for the free enterprise system. Accordingly, I shall focus my analysis on the role played by the concept of rational choice in the formulation of neoclassical economics theory. Specifically, it will be argued that the postulate of rationality in which the concept of rationality is embedded is noncognitive and evaluative in structure. It would be instructive, however, to comment on the attempts made by the early neoclassical theorists to establish a genuine science of economics. In a latter section of the paper I shall examine the theoretical basis for certain important elements of the neoclassical economy, such as interest, profit and money. The intention here would be to establish grounds for the claim that economics should be studied more in the context of sociology and political decision making than otherwise.

Science and neoclassical economics

Following the idea of a quantifiable utility initially formulated by the English jurist Jeremy Bentham, the path was then established for theorists such as Jevons, Menger and Walras (the marginalist trio) to seek to establish the discipline of economics on firm scientific grounds. Jevons, for example, was convinced that economics ought to be formulated along the lines of the discipline engineering mechanics [Jevons (1970, p.10)]. But consider the statements thereon by Walras, considered by many theorists as the most important formulator of neoclassical equilibrium theory. He writes:

In any case, the establishment sooner or later of economics as an exact science is no longer in our hands and need not concern us. It is already perfectly clear that economics, like astronomy and mechanics, is both an empirical and rational science. [Walras (1954, p.71)]

And once again we have Alfred Marshall, an important theorist in the development of neoclassical economics, claiming that economics "shuns many political issues which the practical man cannot ignore: and it is therefore a science, pure and applied, rather than a science and an art." [Marshall (1961, p.43)]

Thus neoclassical economics since the time of the marginalist trio has developed into a mature paradigm theoretically supported by a neopositivist theory of science. Further refinements of the thesis that economics is scientific in content were carried out by Paul Samuelson (United States) and John Hicks (United Kingdom). It is assumed, therefore, that neoclassical economics affords the best available scientific tools for proper appraisal of economic behaviour in terms of explanation and prediction. In support of this thesis the majority of research papers in economics are written in highly technical mathematical language and are assumed to represent theoretical or empirical aspects of the economy. The notion that economics is an empirical science is further reinforced by the role that econometrics is assumed to play in the analysis of economic data.

Neoclassical theory is founded on what is generally referred to as the postulate of rationality which states that, in general, economic decision makers are rational and that their choices conform to the postulate of rationality. The context of the postulate of rationality is one in which individuals rank their choices ordinally (the cardinal or measurable theory of utility having been eclipsed) in their constant attempt to maximize their choices according to utility. It should be noted that a major problem confronting the theorists of ordinal neoclassical economics is that in the absence of interpersonal comparisons of utility among agents, universalizing propositions founded on measurement, necessary for scientific theorizing, cannot be formulated. This is the basis for the theoretical construction of the postulate of rationality to serve as the normative guide for the idealized choices of that substitute for real individuals: rational economic man. His main personality traits are that he is an individualist utility maximizer concerned only with his own satisfaction. The neoclassical universe is, therefore, populated only with utility maximizing agents, each competing for maximal utility advantages.

It is instructive to state the formal contours of neoclassical economic theory according to the following. It is generally assumed that for any economic situation involving pairwise choices among objects the relations of strict preference (P), weak preference (R) and indifference (I), hold. Consider now the following definitions and properties of the fundamental structure of neoclassical theory:

**Definition 1:** for any  $x$  and  $y$  (members of a choice set  $S$ )  $xPy$  forbids  $yRx$ .

**Definition 2:** for any  $x$  and  $y$  (members of a choice set  $S$ )  $xly$  means  $ylx$ .

**Completeness Property:** If  $x, y \in S$  then  $xRy$  or  $yRx$ .

**Transitivity Property:** If  $x, y, z \in S$  then If  $xRy$  and  $yRz$  then  $xRz$ .

**Reflexivity Property:** If  $x \in S$  then  $xRx$ .

Neoclassical theory assumes that the economic agent who conforms to the above definitions and properties is by definition a rational agent according to the postulate of rationality. Yet I shall want to

demonstrate that neoclassical theory is structurally noncognitive since it relies maximally on an evidently normative set of basic statements. A nonrecognition or veiling of this fact would tend to provide grounds for the claim that neoclassical theory serves an ideological function within those economic systems that regard themselves as *the liberal market economics*.

According to neoclassical theory, all agents or decision makers are assumed, by definition, to be rational and to effect choices which lead to the maximization of utility (for consumers) or the maximization of profits (for entrepreneurs). In a formal sense, what the consumer must maximize is a utility function of the form:  $U=f(x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n)$  subject to some finite financial constraint. Similarly, the entrepreneur must maximize profits subject to constraints. It should be noted that agents who do not conform to the principle of utility or profit maximization (as calculated by the theory) are viewed as objectively irrational. Yet, empirical observation informs us that economic agents often fail to maximize utility or profits according to the neoclassical theory.

### The question of rationality

Economists generally recognize the importance of the concept of rationality in economic theorizing; and it is assumed that the concept possesses cognitive content<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the postulate of rationality is so well entrenched in the formulations of neoclassical economics that it has become the standard for textbooks to state this as a matter of fact. As a generic example, consider the observation made by popular textbook authors Henderson and Quandt that "the postulate of rationality is the customary point of departure in the theory of consumer's behaviour" [Henderson and Quandt (1980, p.5)]. This assumption is viewed to hold not only for the orthodox neoclassical economics, but also for other paradigms such as the Austrian school [Mises (1963, p.18)].

The cognitive function of the postulate of rationality in neoclassical theory is further supported by the neopositivist philosophy of



science [Hempel (1965, pp.463-464)], although here and there epistemological doubts about its viability are expressed. But it should be noted that, were the concept of rationality to be examined analytically, it could be shown that claims supporting its cognitive content are indeed suspect. In ordinary discourse rationality is generally equated with *correct thinking* in the sense of the individual choosing not only proper ends or goals, but also the most efficient way of obtaining those ends. From the above generalized definition of rationality the idea of rationality has come to be associated with all facets of human thought and action. Thus morally acceptable actions are perceived as rational; so too acts which are viewed as normal within the context of social psychology. Thus, for example, individuals who are viewed as being mentally impaired are so regarded because their actions are considered to be not rational, that is, irrational.

There is also a strong cognitive element usually associated with rationality. It is assumed that the truth or facts about phenomena in general may be obtained only by the appeal to rational modes of inquiry. In this sense, *rational* is taken to mean *epistemologically sound*. It is for this reason that the methodologies of modern empirical science are viewed as being inherently rational, hence appropriate for the acquiring of knowledge. Accordingly, physics and astronomy are regarded as rational disciplines in contradiction to alchemy and astrology, say.

But a less colloquial reflection on the concept of rationality brings us back to the original statement concerning means and ends. This is because the colloquial definitions cited above are context bound in the sense of the means and ends being taken for granted. Thus it is viewed as rational, for example, that nations with nuclear weapons capabilities have as their ends the preservation of peace and as their means the most efficient of attaining such, that is, step-by-step disarmament. Many examples of this nature abound.

It is evident, however, that no valid arguments could be brought against the choice of any particular end as such. The reason is that ends do not constitute the result of some chain of logical reasoning,

but are merely experiences or phenomena posited as objects willed for. The thesis that though one could make cognitive claims about means, one could not do so with regards to ends, is not accepted, however, by all epistemologists. Nicholas Rescher, for example, speaks of the utilization of means for "inappropriate ends" [Rescher (1988, p.97)]. Rescher does recognize though that there is an epistemological disjunction between the ideas of means and ends in the concept of rationality. The idea expressed here is that rational thought or action is not unimodal; it possesses two aspects, not only the logical, but also the evaluative [Rescher (1988, p.97)]. Yet questions can also be raised about the cognitive content of *means* in the means-ends structure of rationality. It is generally assumed that the cognitive content of the *means* aspect of some choice path derives from taking into consideration questions of efficiency given stated background assumptions.

Thus, for example, if some individual wanted to travel from point A to point B as quickly as possible then, according to some cognitive theory of rationality, it would be argued that the fastest mode of transportation constituted the rational choice of means. However, if gaining access to the quickest means of transportation entailed the transgressing of some context-dependent ethical principle, then questions would be necessarily raised about the rationality of the means chosen.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously then, serious epistemological questions could be raised about the cognitive content of rationality both in terms of its means and ends components. Yet, despite epistemological caveats, Hempel argues that *rational agent* could be construed as a *descriptive-psychological* predicate reflecting a *broadly dispositional trait*. Thus "to say of someone that he is a rational agent is to attribute to him, by implication, a complete bundle of dispositions" [Hempel (1965, p.472)]. The intent of this characterization is to equate it qualitatively with quasi-empirical dispositions, such as *verbal aptitude*, *mathematical aptitude*, and the like. Yet surely qualitative similarities would be forced in this instance. It is indeed possible to formulate some quantitative (and hence empirical) measure of mathematical or verbal

aptitudes as reflective of particular capacities or dispositions. Similarly, empirical science has developed basic quantitative methods for determining the strength of materials or the viscosity of liquids, etc..

Rationality, on the other hand, is not subject to such quantitative formulation. While noncontradictory criteria for mathematical aptitude, say, could be easily formulated, such would not be the case for rational behaviour. Contemporary decision theory defines rational choice as the maximization of expected utility. Yet this definition of rational choice cannot serve in any cognitive capacity in any avowedly scientific theory. For example, the maximization of utility for some agent A could be the amassing of great wealth, while for another agent B it could mean a life of self-abnegation in a Buddhist Monastery. And even if one assumes that *maximization of expected utility* means *maximization of satisfaction*, then on what epistemological basis could one distinguish between the individual who makes masochistic choices and another who views such choices as representative of extreme disutility? The cognitive problem engendered by the principle of *maximization of expected utility* is that its empirically observable instantiations by different individuals could be quantitatively and qualitatively distinct.

Given that it is provable that the cognitive content of rationality is indeed suspect, the question now is, What is its epistemological status? Some analysis would be instructive. Consider the proposition: 'A is a good man' as synonymous with 'A performs or is disposed to perform good acts'. Assume now that *good action* is defined as any action, chosen among alternatives, that maximizes the amount of happiness in society. This sort of language is generally acknowledged within the same social context where the notion of rationality is assumed to possess cognitive content. It is generally assumed that the term *good* is evaluative, hence devoid of real cognitive content because qualitatively different acts could be regarded as good without risk of contradiction by different individuals, or by the same individual at different times.

On the basis of the above discussion, it is evident that the epistemological status of the term *rational* is similar to that generally

ascribed to evaluative terms such as *good*, as *bad*, and the like. Yet it is on this concept and its attendant postulate and axioms that the whole structure of neoclassical economics is founded. The evaluative structure of the foundations of neoclassical economics is made explicit by the proviso that the maximization of utility for economic agents signifies the maximization of satisfaction in its grossest terms. The neoclassical agent maximizes utility in the technical sense of attaining the highest degree of consumption satisfaction subject to the limitations only of financial constraints or psychological satiation. The student of neoclassical economics is taught that the economic agent maximizes utility at the point where personal *indifference curves* intersect with the agent's *budget line*. In more technical language, it is argued that the agent maximizes utility where first order differentiation of the agent's utility function equals zero and second order derivatives alternate in sign according to the solutions to what are called **bordered Hessians** (i.e. special matrices). Similar mechanics apply to the neoclassical entrepreneur's profit functions. The maximization of profits replaces the maximization of utility.

### Neoclassical theory in practice

The significance of the empty technical exercises that neoclassical economic theory engages in, derivative from the postulate of rationality, is that all economic agents are selfish, utility seeking social atoms, necessarily competing with each other for scarce resources. This is the basis on which the so-called market economies operate. The economic agent is viewed as a creature of wants who seeks only to maximize consumption and profits, constrained only by financial resources.

It is this view that ideologically justifies on the one hand vast concentrations of wealth and on the other hand extreme penury within society. It is also the view that promotes the thesis that the maximization of profits should be the primary goal of economic activity rather than the maximization of human welfare. One might consider in this regard the deleterious social effects of workers made unemployed in the interests of the maximization of profits. It is this ideological belief

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that profit maximization ought to be the major consideration of the market economy that continues to be its bane. What salvages modern industrial society from the social chaos of an unbridled social Darwinism is the tentative and hesitant social welfare programs introduced by governments on the recommendation of society's citizens.

The social impact of the neoclassical paradigm with its emphasis on individualistic maximizations in the form of utility and profits has been the maintenance of societies in which a minority of individuals own capital and the majority rent themselves out in the service of capital. The capital owner loans portions of the existing stock to the entrepreneur (indirectly by way of banks) who then seeks to maximize profits at the expense of the workers.

In the global economy the industrialized nations have overvalued their currencies at the expense of the non-industrialized nations, again for the purpose of the maximization of profits. The net impact of the overvalued currencies of the industrialized nations has been the creation of an international workforce ready to be employed by capital for the maximization of profits. Yet this economic system, functional only because of the market demand for consumer items, is highly unstable because of the intense competition between stocks of capital. The macroeconomic neoclassical economic system must either be gaining momentum in the form of growth or losing momentum, leading to unemployment, bankruptcies and attendant miseries. Yet the social instabilities engendered by the practice of the neoclassical economic system is viewed by its theoreticians as the inevitable result of the *free market system*.

### Interest, profits and money

It was pointed out above that neoclassical economics founded on the evaluative postulate of rationality should be best viewed as a theory that serves as the ideological rationalization of free market economic systems. However, neoclassical economics does not present itself as ideology but as a scientifically oriented discipline. On account of this, the concepts and claims of the discipline are regarded as objective. The same may be said for the role that the key concepts of interest,

profits and money play in the neoclassical theory. A theoretical analysis of such concepts would demonstrate that they do not represent any necessary state of affairs in the economic world, and are indeed reducible to value judgments descriptive of essentially arbitrary modes of economic operation.

It is generally taken for granted that the role of interest in economic transactions is a necessary one: that is, the movement of capital in the economic market place would be impossible without the guiding rule of the rate of interest. Yet, an analysis of the concept of *interest* easily demonstrates that it is a term with important ethical implications. Consider the fact that individuals who would think it immoral to loan funds to a close relative (siblings, parents, etc.) at the market rate of interest, would not hesitate to purchase bank stock at the highest available rate of interest.

The idea that there must be a charge for the *hire* of funds would seem to predate the advent of what is generally known as the era of capitalism. Even in the religious literature of the Judaeo-Christian world, though there are directives against lending one's kin funds at any rate of interest, it is acceptable to lend money to strangers at some cost [Tiemstra (1990, p.104)]. In the European world historical evidence tells us that in the Roman times loaning funds at interest was acceptable, although there were restrictions against usury - a problematic notion. But it should be noted that Aristotle and later the theologian St. Thomas raised questions about the moral basis of charging interest on money lent. It is erroneous to believe that the loaning of funds at interest has been universally acceptable. Classical Islam, for example, has always been opposed to the charging of interest, and in traditional Africa and Asia cooperative forms of loaning funds have long been practised. As an example, consider the practice of loaning collected funds to individual members of a group over a period of time.

Yet, modern capitalism as an economic system is founded to a large extent on funds being loaned at a cost. The capital owner provides the funds, the entrepreneur borrows funds at a cost, then engages in some business enterprise for the purpose of profit making. In this process it is the individuals (labour) hired by the entrepreneur from whom interest costs and profits are extracted. The theoretical

basis for the notion that funds must bear a price for not being immediately spent on consumption items has been much debated by neoclassical economists and their precursors. For Marshall, interest was a reward for *waiting* or for the postponement of consumption. It was the reward for saving [Marshall (1961, p.581)]. For the Austrian theorist Bohm-Bawerk, interest represents the incremental value that present goods (values or sums) possess in excess of future goods [Bohm-Bawerk (1970, pp.257-259 et passim)]. Keynes and other prominent economists did have much to say about interest, but rarely was it ever questioned. The assumption was that interest was a necessary feature of economic decision making, to be explained rather than questioned.

But I have pointed out that there are epistemological problems with the notion that the charging of interest for funds loaned is necessary for the functioning of an economy, given that it is generally viewed as morally problematic to charge interest on funds loaned to one's kin. One might consider a viable economic system in which all its members are kin related and consequently loan each other funds while eschewing the idea of interest charges. In this social environment funds would be loaned to satisfy needs rather than for eventual gain. In the modern market system, however, the charging of interest leads in the eventual exploitation of individuals involved in the enterprise process. It is just this imbalance that leads to the periodic *business cycle* and chronic unemployment of the market economies.

The economic process involved here is one in which the capitalist who provides the funds for loan at interest eventually adds to his/her capital stock. The consumption items produced by the entrepreneur by way of the worker cannot all be purchased at profit making prices if the former is to make profit. The consumer must then purchase on credit, which only compounds the problem. The neoclassical principle at work here derives from the evaluative assumption of the theory; that is, rational individuals maximize utility and profits. In practical terms, this would also mean loaning funds for the purpose of maximizing profits.

Some argue [Keynes (1936), for example] that interest is the price that must be paid to maintain an operating economy. The argument promoted in this instance is that individuals who possesses funds would be inclined to hoard their surpluses unless there was some

incentive not to do so. The assumption here is that those individuals with excess funds play the classical capitalist role of solely being the provider of funds to the entrepreneur. Such individuals, theoretically, play no active role in the production of goods and services. If this is the case, than it is not absolutely necessary that those who possesses excess funds loan such funds at interest. Production is still possible if it is understood that funds are loaned specifically for the manufacture of items and the creation of social services. In fact, it could be argued that an economic system where there are no interest charges on funds loaned for production purposes would be maximally advantaged, since the entrepreneur would not be concerned primarily with profits at the expense of the worker. In short, the necessity for interests charges in the economy would be justified only in the social context of individualist and selfinterested decision making.

The question concerning interest rates arises only because of the role money plays in neoclassical market economies. In itself, money is of no value; it acquires value only when there is a socially sanctioned agreement to attribute it with value representative of differing amounts of labour and its products. The value of money is intrinsically symbolic, yet because it is the ultimate store of value, it loses its symbolic status and becomes value itself. Thus, while it is not possible to own a product of labour without first working at it or appropriating from another, it is indeed possible to earn wealth represented by money indirectly by way of the medium interest.

It could be argued that because of the advanced division of labour characteristic of market economies, money, as a mechanism whereby the exchange of goods could take place, is indeed a necessity. The alternative to the use of money, of course, would be barter. Interestingly enough though, were an exchange economy in which money was the medium of exchange to be transformed to one of pure barter exploitative relationships, were they to exist, would be more easily identifiable.

Consider, for example, a society consisting only of land, labour and individuals who own tools, a necessity for tilling the land for the purpose of growing crops. The capitalist (the tool owner) could in turn lease his tools to the entrepreneur who could then hire labour for the purpose of tilling the soil to grow crops for consumption purposes. At



crop time the labourers would be *paid* at subsistence level, with the surplus accruing both to the entrepreneur and the capitalist. The capitalist would have no need to work beyond establishing that the contractual arrangement with the entrepreneur and the workers be maintained. A pool of surplus labour would be useful in this regard. The entrepreneur's function would be to ensure that all factors of production be employed as efficiently as possible so as to maximize output. This process could eventually lead to unconsumed surpluses in the possession of the entrepreneur and capitalist. Crop production could then be decelerated at the instigation of entrepreneur and capitalist. The consequence of this decision would be to reduce the number of employed workers.

It should be evident that the kind of economic system portrayed by the simple model above is not necessarily optimal, and is founded only on circumstances determined by sociological contingencies. One could indeed envisage a sociological structure in which all members of society own or collectively share implements of production (capital) and produce all that is necessary to satisfy demand needs, with surpluses sold or bartered away. The role of interest in this instance would not be so decisive in the accumulation of wealth as in the neoclassical economy. It should be reiterated that in a neoclassical market economy the joint purpose of interest and money is to ensure that those who own capital continue to add to their stock without equivalent productive efforts.

In sum: neoclassical economic theory with its maximizing pronouncements on utility and profits is what serves as the theoretical support for an economic system based on the accumulation of unearned wealth for certain social sectors. The special roles of interest and money are crucial in this regard. But the principle of the maximization of utility and profits viewed as rational by the theorists of neoclassical theory is implementable only in a society constituting of individualistic, competitive, and socially antagonistic individuals. The ideal neoclassical economy argues for a social system in which maximizing behaviour takes precedence over social welfare engendered by a communitarian ethos. The ultimate product of the postulate of rationality, as defined by neoclassical theory, is a social order characterized by great imbalance in wealth and life opportunities.

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### Economics and its polity

It was pointed out above that economic decision making within society need not assume the structure of the neoclassical economy. This argument has had much currency in the forms of *critiques of capitalism* best exemplified by Marxian economics. Marxian economics sets out to demonstrate the ideological nature of neoclassical economics by analyses founded on a frame work of history, sociology, and political economy. And the Marxian critique of the neoclassical economy sought support however attenuated in the praxis of communist political economy in the erstwhile Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. This was the basis for the theoretical and practical appeal of socialist economic theory in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in some circles. But the purported failure of the communist experiment in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has provided more ideological support for the neoclassical economics paradigm.

Emboldened ideological arguments are now appealed to encourage the governments of the *Third World* to *privatise*, to avoid the *socialist option* and to embrace the market economy. And at the universities the neoclassical economics paradigm is taught without apology. But neoclassical economics, wherever practised in the global economy has always sought zero-sum game solutions. In this regard, the *Third World* economy continues to be its victim. It is evident that if Third World nations were to fully embrace the neoclassical economics model, then on purely competitive grounds their economies would be condemned to failure. The problems of the Third World economies and particularly those in Africa require experimental solutions such as some form of delinking from the market economies of the industrialized nations and the establishing of regional economic groupings. In other words, the path that must be taken would include considerations that are not only purely economic, but also political and sociological in nature. The solutions to the economic problems of those areas peripheral to the comparatively capital rich nations do not lie in the unfruitful analyses of neoclassical economics but in the holistic research of political economy.

It is only by appeal to a political economic approach that the student of economics could grasp the significance of *exchange rates*,

*devaluation, interest, and prices* in economic transactions. It is the possibility of the meta-analysis of economic concepts afforded by the political-economic approach that could eventually lead to the formulation of alternatives to the now dominant, ideological based, neoclassic economic system. One would expect that such alternatives would be theoretical improvements on the simple-minded maximizations of the neoclassical model now assumed to be the only scientifically acceptable model of economic decision making. In short, the political-economic approach to economic behaviour could lead to the demystifying of the theories of economics now dominant in the industrialized world. This approach could lead to the observation that the neoclassical economic model is not a scientific model, founded as it is on an ideological notion of rationality. Its historical contingency and the ideological role it plays in market economies could also be demonstrated. In particular, the economic problems of the world's capital poor regions would be solved only when new ways of thinking about economic decision making are developed within a framework of a general social science.

Within the context of a political-economic approach to decision making, it would be understood that if one accepts the notion of society as a conglomerate of individuals who choose to inhabit a given environment for purposes of individual and general welfare, then it becomes evident that the ideal economic system would be one that would maximize not only individual welfare but also social welfare. In this regard the neoclassical economics paradigm is to be understood as being deficient for this dual purpose. Dogmatic socialism sought to establish economic systems whereby only social welfare was to be maximized by way of the state. Individual welfare both in material and psychological senses was given short shrift. The ongoing structuring of Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union is proof of the structural errors that develop when dogmatic socialist economies is practised. Similar dysfunctions arise when a system of market economics is dogmatically practised. The result could be a plethora of consumer items (some of which admittedly satisfy vulgar wants) but great deficiencies in social welfare and a tolerated psychological and material alienation. Homeless individuals, greed and corruption, rampant individualism, and crimes against property characterize such economies. One might consider as an example the United States of

America which, despite being the world's largest producer of goods and services, has the greatest per capita incarceration rate in the world. Its homeless population is also statistically very noticeable.

As a corrective to the excesses of both economic systems (the archetypical neoclassical and socialist economies), a revised paradigm of economic decision making comprising of provisos that stress both individual and general welfare is urgently needed. As a guarantor of individual welfare the following legally sanctioned prerequisites should be seriously considered:

- i) workers should own the means of production with which they work, whether such ownership is individual or joint
- ii) banks or other loaning institutions should be cooperatively owned with the guarantee that any individual would be guaranteed loans for investment purposes with advisory support offered by the banks themselves
- iii) the individual, after a period of educational training, would be prepared for a multiplicity of productive tasks to which s/he could easily adapt, should there be dislocations in the economy

The function of the government would be reduced essentially to that of a civil service which, funded by taxes, would provide society's general welfare services such as schools, hospitals, roads, etc..

The above description of an economy that stresses social and individual welfare is just a sketch and must be explored further, but its contours are sufficiently delineated to demonstrate that, while economics might appeal (in sensible and illuminating fashion) to the tools of empirical science and mathematics, it cannot be an empirical science as is argued for by the theorists of neoclassical economics. Any discipline that is founded on human choice making cannot merely be an empirical science in the sense of the natural sciences. Such disciplines, though they may rely on empirical data must remain, intrinsically, evaluative fields of inquiry. The aim of the social sciences and economics in particular should, therefore, be the maximization of human welfare, both singly and generally. The theorists of neoclassical economics eschew the evaluative label for the *positive economics* of their discipline, and argued in stead that *positive economics* is essentially a science. In the light of the above discussion, this itself is an evaluative statement.

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### Conclusion

It was argued above that neoclassical economics, the dominant economics paradigm in the western industrialized world, is viewed by its theorists as a genuine or possible empirical science. The ostensible failure of the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union has now imbued the practitioners of neoclassical economics with great confidence in their claim that neoclassical is not *ideology* or *bourgeois economics* as Marxian economists are wont to argue, but genuine science. The maximization of utility and the maximization of profits, both instantiations of the postulate of rationality, are now implicitly viewed as objective manifestations of human cognition. In short, this principle asserts that it is natural for human beings to seek to profit at other individuals' expense.

The discussion in this paper attempts to show that the postulate of rationality is indeed an evaluative postulate reflective of historically contingent sociological circumstances. It is not logically necessary that individuals seek to maximize utility or profits. The normalcy of interest, profits and money could then be questioned epistemologically. It was argued that the structure of society and the role that individuals must play therein afford the case for alternative economic paradigms. The zero-sum game rules of the global economy easily demonstrate the non-universalizability of the neoclassical economics paradigm and the necessity for alternatives.

Notes

1. See Simon [1957, p.241], who writes: "Traditional economic theory postulates an 'economic man' who in the course of being 'economic' is also 'rational'." And consider too Simon's theory of *bounded rationality* as an attempt to develop a more realistic model of rational choice than the one offered by orthodox rationality. Or consider the statement by Tisdell, a contemporary economist: "The rationality of economic man is fundamental to a substantial body of economic theory ... . Indeed, there is hardly any area of economics in which the rationality postulate is unimportant." [Tisdell (1976, p.196)]
2. See Hempel [1965, pp.463-465]. Hempel similarly raises questions about the cognitive content of means when he argues that means on evaluative grounds could "violate certain general constraining principles such as moral or legal norms, contractual commitments, social conventions, the rules of the game being played or the like."

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### Résumé

*L'entreprise de Mbiti d'offrir à la compréhension une vue général des religions traditionnelles africaines a abouti à une structure conceptuelle élaborée d'un système de croyance qui relie le physique au spirituel.*

*La perspective de Mbiti rend l'introduction des deux concepts 'sasa' et 'zamani' nécessaire, afin d'expliquer le contexte qui permet le passage d'un univers à l'autre; c'est à dire, du règne physique au règne spirituel.*

*Le problème de l'interprétation de Mbiti réside dans le fait que ses vues sont empruntées et donc ne sont vraisemblablement pas représentatives de l'expérience africaine. Les deux influences les plus importantes dans son interprétation de l'expérience traditionnelle africaine sont la théologie empirique et le concept du temps de la Boétie.*

*Ma thèse sera que, ajouté au fait que ces deux dernières théories sont empruntées, elles sont de plus conceptuellement défectueuses et rendent en dernière analyse l'argumentation de Mbiti incohérente.*

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## A CRITIQUE OF JOHN S. MBITI'S TRADITIONAL AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

G. Munda Carew

In his attempt to provide a unified account of traditional African religions, John S. Mbiti presupposed a traditional world view or ontology which explains the implicitly shared assumptions about the organization of space and time, the differences among people, animals and things, the differences between men and women, and the differences between life and death [Mbiti (1990)]. Mbiti seems to think that this African world view underlies the African's attitude to religion. I find nothing wrong with this view. Indeed, many scholars have urged that the study of religion should begin with ontology. What I find problematic is that Mbiti's ontology is borrowed; consequently, its application to traditional African religious beliefs gives these beliefs not only a borrowed significance, but also, on at least some points, a clearly erroneous view. Then it also follows that unless all of Africa is comprised of but a single society, we are dealing with more than one social system and religious point of view. In this paper, I will identify the dominant influences on Mbiti's ontology, analyze implications of this ontology, and consider reasons for considering it incoherent. But first, I shall state Mbiti's conception of the traditional African world view.

According to Mbiti, African ontology is essentially spiritual. There are five categories in this anthropocentric spiritual universe. First, God is believed to constitute the fundamental category. Then come the spirits, which explain the destiny of man. Third in line is man himself. He is at the centre of the universe. Fourth come animals and plants, and then finally, phenomena and objects. The last two categories provide man's environment and sustenance. Mbiti further delineates two categories of spiritual beings: (1) Those which were created as spirits and (2) those which were once human beings. A further subdivision follows; there are spirits which are associates of God, ordinary spirits and the *living dead*. Man occupies a fairly unique position in this spiritual conceptual framework. He is at the centre of

the universe; beginning life in the physical universe, his destiny is to become a spirit in the spiritual universe.

The two dominant influences on Mbiti's work are empirical theology and Boethius' conception of time [Mbiti (1990, pp.15-16)]. I shall show that these influences determined the outcome of his investigation on traditional African religious beliefs; at the same time making them also vulnerable to the kind of philosophical objections that are often raised in connection with these theories.

According to Mbiti, events have to be experienced before they can be real or exist, and events can constitute time only if they are real. This view emerges in Mbiti's analysis of the traditional concept of time: "... time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of 'no time'" [Mbiti (1990, p.16)]. "Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real" [Mbiti (1990, p.17)]. In other words, since time is a collection of events which have occurred, events which have not occurred neither constitute time nor are real. In a sense, there is, therefore, a two-dimensionality to time in African ontology; the denial of the future rests on the presumption that "... events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized ...." [Mbiti (1990, p.17)].

Because Mbiti's view constitutes a radical departure from the linear conception of time, it necessitates the introduction of two concepts to explain this phenomenon: the Swahili words of *sasa* and *zamani*. *Sasa* describes the now period; the period of immediacy and nearness. Events in the *sasa* must be either about to occur, in the process of realization, or have been recently experienced. It would be a misconception to view *sasa* as the *present*, a mathematical moment in time, which soon vanishes from the centre stage. "*Sasa* is in itself a complete or full-time dimension with its own short future, dynamic present and an experienced past" [Mbiti (1990, p.22)]. *Zamani*, on the other hand, has the sense of pastness and remoteness; events which lie in it are no longer alive or do not exist because people simply forgot

or ignored the events. In this case, the events would not go out of existence, but would be relegated to the wasteland of the *zamani*. It follows, then, that events which lie in the *sasa* and *zamani* are about to be or have been experienced.

I have claimed that there are two influences on Mbiti's outlook. I wish to pursue both influences separately. First, I will discuss empirical theology.<sup>4</sup> It will be noted that Mbiti argues that the data of our consciousness makes up the world. In other words, unless we perceive an object, we have no way of knowing it exists; there is no meaning attached to the idea of an object which has not been experienced. If an object has not been perceived by me or for that matter by anyone else, it simply cannot be considered to exist. There are clearly overtones of Berkeleyan idealism in Mbiti's approach; like Berkeley, Mbiti wants to formulate a world as near as possible in sensory terms; in terms of percepts rather than concepts. Events that constitute a particular person's *sasa* are accordingly all percepts. Such an assumption, if pursued consistently, would lead to solipsism — the view that I alone exist. This certainly is entailed in Mbiti's philosophy, which denies the independent and public existence of objects and individuals; for if material objects are more than a collection of ideas, then there can be only ideas and the "self" who is aware of them.

Since Mbiti believes in the independent existence of other people and spirits, a solipsistic conclusion would be unacceptable for precisely this reason. He would therefore, like Berkeley, seek to circumvent it by providing a realistic basis for his phenomenalism. This would consequently allow him to escape the solipsistic overtones of the phenomenalist self. He writes:

The spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living dead .... The spirits in general belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man [Mbiti (1990, p.74)].

The publicity and independent existence of objects, of spirits or other people, which are not the ideas of a phenomenalist self, are derived from Mbiti's spiritual ontology. Mbiti's spiritual ontology dictates a

replacement of the solipsistic self with the divine [Mbiti (1990, pp.15-16)]. In essence, the divine self is actually solipsism in a new guise, but it is at least able to get the work done. It allows Mbiti to account for the independent existence of objects and individuals who are not percepts of a phenomenalist self. Divine intelligence encompasses the plural solipsistic worlds of individual minds. Whatever the attributes of the whole are, the solipsistic self knows only a few; just those which it finds as common properties of its own world of ideas. The solipsistic selves are all individual *sasas* which are more or less closed to each other. What they have in common is that they are viewed as content of the divine mind [Mbiti (1990, pp.15-16)].

Mbiti's spiritual ontology generates a new problem. It has already been argued that physical reality is accounted for phenomenally, but the passage from a physical world to a spiritual world could not be accounted for phenomenally because the elements of a spiritual universe are not derivable from sense experience; they are constructs of a divine perspective. Mbiti provides only a crude expression of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual universes:

We have repeatedly emphasized that the spiritual universe is a unity with the physical and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy or even necessary to draw the distinction or separate them [Mbiti (1990, p.74)].

What does Mbiti mean by the intermingling of the spiritual and physical universes? We must look to his treatment of *life* and *death* for an answer to this question. The boundary region between the physical world and the spiritual world is characterized by Mbiti as the world of the *living dead*. According to Mbiti, "The *living dead* is a person who is physically dead, but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of spirits" [Mbiti (1990, p.25)]. For Mbiti, there are two stages of death: Physical death, which is an event in the solipsistic world of the individuals; it marks the separation of body and soul and is the first stage. In the second stage, the individual disappears from the memory of living human beings.

In the first phase, the individual who has died continues to exist physically as a spirit and his existence is contemporaneous with humans in the physical world. Mbiti refers to this stage as the *living dead* because the individual is still in the boundary region of the physical world and the spirit world. In a sense, he still belongs to our human community, even though he is physically dead. The second phase is completed when all the people who knew or remembered him also die. Because he is now no longer personally remembered by any living human, his transition to the spirit world is considered complete.

In Mbiti's view, the ancestors are not dead in the spiritual world, because they continue to be part of the memory of other spirits with whom they are contemporaneous in the spirit world. Mbiti writes:

With the passing of time, the living dead sink beyond the horizon of the *sasa* period. This point is reached when there is no longer anyone alive who remembers them personally by name. Then the process of dying is completed. But the living dead do not vanish out of existence: they now enter into the state of collective immortality [Mbiti (1990, pp.25-26)].

Professor Ifeanyi A. Menkiti criticizes Mbiti for using the expression, *collective immortality*, to characterize spirits who have entered the *zamani* stage. According to Menkiti, "At the stage of total disincorporation marked by the term, the mere *its* that the dead have now become cannot form a collectivity of any kind ...." [Menkiti (1979, p.161)]. The loss of personhood, due to the fact that there is no longer any human who remembers one, in effect disqualifies one for personal immortality. As a result, Menkiti would appear justified in referring to forgotten spirits as *nameless dead*. I submit, however, that this is not Mbiti's view, because Mbiti's phenomenalism clearly has realist underpinnings, as suggested by his spiritual ontology. Spirits who are no longer members of a human community have become members of the community of spirits, the final resting place and destiny of man. In this view, the indestructibility of spirits is clearly synonymous with the immortality of the soul. Menkiti could not have been more wrong to

think of Mbiti's spirits as *nameless dead*, because the *zamani* stage does not characterize spirits who are *dead* in the literal sense of that word, but of spirits who are now formal members of a new and different community. They may be dead only in the sense that they are no longer remembered by people in the human community, but they clearly continue to live in the spirit world.

I shall now turn to a number of objections which Mbiti's dependence on empirical theology invites:

- 1 How do we know that images are like the sensations which are their prototypes?
- 2 Access to things implies perception, yet if perception only gives us things as they look and not as they are, then access to things as they are is impossible.

I shall proceed in the order in which I have listed these objections.

According to Mbiti, the way we come to be acquainted with reality is through our senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling. These activities are said to take place in the *sasa* period. Since the *sasa* period is "... a complete or full-time dimension, with its own short future, a dynamic present, and an experienced past" [Mbiti (1990, p.22)], events which are about to occur or will occur, as well as events which have occurred, will fall into the *sasa* period. We may now reach a definite conclusion about perception and memory in Mbiti's view. The ideas or images we perceive do not perish, but get stored in the *sasa*. This is what Mbiti means by the *sasa*, being an experiential extension of the *now* moment. This prompts the question as to how we can tell that images resemble the sensations which are their prototypes. One difficulty that is likely to confront one in a matter of this nature is the provision of a sound basis for making such a comparison, since there are no criteria to appeal to outside of the person. For instance when an act of remembering takes place, the individual is believed to recall certain scenes, faces, and places with which he is familiar. How can the individual be sure, though, that his recollection is correct and that his memory is not playing tricks on

him? Consider, for instance, that I am in my village and we are at the graveside of a relative who died several years ago. As we summon his presence, together with the other ancestors whom we remember, I recall a visual image of this relative. I remember how he used to joke and laugh. In all of this, I must rely completely on my memory. I cannot make reference to pictures or anything outside my memory to help me decide whether I have remembered correctly.

Now, if the situation to be imagined is one in which we should appeal to nothing outside of our memory, then our memory must either be an infallible basis or no basis at all for determining memory claims. The images upon which memory relies come to us in different ways and are often vague. Sometimes images come to us through dreams and the mind uncritically accepts them as percepts. Images may also be drawn from memory of some events that took place in the past. There are also images that come to us when we are daydreaming. In all of this, the mind must distinguish between those images which are derived through sense experience and the images which arrive by other means. Since memory does not rely on criteria external to itself, it will find such a task impossible, for if there were something outside the self that one could appeal to, a picture perhaps, to reassure one that the vague image conjured up by the mind is in fact that which the mind says it is, memory will be corroborated.

According to the second criticism, we only know a thing by means of perception. It is precisely this premise that forms the basis for the conclusion that the appearances of objects we receive are the same as the objects themselves. This phenomenalist account of experience prevents Mbiti from recognizing the transition from the view that certain things appear to us to be so, and we only know certain things as appearances. By his own admission, there can be no distinction between what a thing is and what it is for perception. What a thing is outside of what it is for perception has no meaning in Mbiti's view because there is no reality outside of how things appear to us. To see the problem in Mbiti's view, it may be instructive to compare it with realist theories. Direct realism holds that objects exist outside of our

ideas and that our ideas are actually identical with the objects they reveal to us. Indirect realism, on the other hand, while agreeing that our ideas are distinct from objects, refuses to commit itself to the view that our ideas provide an accurate description of objects.

The significant point of difference between the realist theories and phenomenism, therefore, is that the realist theories regard the immediate contents of awareness as a medium that links us with the realist world, while the phenomenalist outlook holds that our percepts by themselves alone would constitute reality. The obvious problem, then, in the phenomenalist view of Mbiti is its failure to distinguish between *ideas* and *objects*. Other people are conceived of as ideas and not as having a separate existence. The public nature of objects and human beings are therefore in jeopardy because of the impossibility of intersubjective observation. The death of a person, for instance, will be no more than a subjective fact in private space. No one else need know of it except the perceiver. There is no way any one could disagree with what he claims to be a fact in his experience. Even if he were wrong, he wouldn't know it, and we will not be expected to be in a position to rectify his erroneous belief. This is certainly contrary to traditional African beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Many tribes I know do not teach that it is impossible to look outside ourselves for the existence of others. The death of a member of the clan is a public event and everyone in turn usually participates in the ceremonies whether or not they saw the corpse.<sup>3</sup> One point is clear, no one would be inclined to deny that such an event took place simply because they did not see it happen. These metaphysical consequences appear to be unavoidable, a function of the phenomenistic point of view that Mbiti adopted.

I shall now turn to the other problem. Boethius' conception of time and eternity has a definite influence on Mbiti's treatment of time. Boethius discusses eternity in two places: The Consolation of Philosophy and De Trinitate.

Eternity, therefore, is a perfect possession altogether of an endless life, which is more manifest by the comparison of temporal things, for whatsoever liveth in time, that being



present, proceedeth from times past to times to come, and there is nothing placed in time which can embrace all the space of its life at once [The Consolation of Philosophy, Book V, Prose 6, 401].

... and there is this great difference between "now," which is our present, and the divine present. Our present connotes changing time and sempiternity; God's present, abiding, unmoved, and immoveable, connotes eternity. Add semper to eternity and you get the constant, incessant and thereby perpetual course of our present time, that is to say, sempiternity (De Trinitate, Chapter 4, 21 and 23).

For Boethius, eternity is a mode of existence that is neither reducible to time nor incompatible with the reality of time for Mbiti. I shall show that this view manifests an apparent incoherence.

Most conceptions of eternity are based on a denial of time, but Mbiti, like Boethius before him, attempts to combine both. He begins his discussion with the assertion that "time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real" [Mbiti (1990, p.17)]. This statement is indicative of his intention to first establish the reality of time, which he conceives of as a composition of events which have occurred. This point of view necessitates a contrast with the linear conception of time. Mbiti writes:

The most significant consequence of this is that, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually no *future*. The linear concept of time in Western thought with an indefinite past, present, and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place .... [Mbiti (1990, pp.16-17)].

What in effect constitutes *time* is what is *present* and *past*. Mbiti refers to time as having a backward progression rather than a forward progression. These views clearly require some clarification.

A *prima facie* view may lead to the conclusion that Mbiti's analysis is in terms of a *temporal present* and a *temporal past*. Consider, for instance, his premise that events which take place or have taken place in space and time determine the authenticity of time. In so far as an event takes place in space and time, it has a present existence in the temporal sense of *present*; yet if that *present* is not flanked by *past* and *future*, it is obviously not the *temporal present* [Mbiti (1990, p.17)]. This consequence is entailed in Mbiti's denial of the reality of future events. Mbiti was not unaware of this because he writes: "To avoid the thought association of the English words, past, present and future, I propose to use the Swahili words, *sasa* and *zamani*" [Mbiti (1990, p.21)].

The introduction of *sasa* and *zamani* into his philosophical system marks a radical and surreptitious transition in Mbiti's characterization of *temporal present*. In his current analysis, he treats a *temporal present* as if it were an *atemporal present* cast in a ratio-temporal universe; what Boethius in effect describes as sempiternity: "... the constant, incessant and thereby perpetual course of our present time ...." [Boethius, 21 and 23].<sup>4</sup> Throughout his treatise on time, Mbiti is following in the tradition of Boethius. Mbiti describes *sasa* as the now period; the period of immediacy and nearness. Events in the *sasa* must be either about to occur, be in the process of realization or have been recently experienced. "*Sasa* is in itself a complete or full-time dimension, with its own short future, dynamic present and an experienced past" [Mbiti (1990, p.22)]. *Zamani* is similarly not limited to what is called the past. "It also has its own past, present and future" [Mbiti (1990, p.22)].

There are at least two misleading features of Mbiti's characterization of *sasa* and *zamani*. In the first place, his treatment of duration is confusing, and secondly, *sasa* entails a combination of two mutually incompatible concepts: atemporality and succession. I shall elaborate:

1. Duration is clearly central to the concept of eternity. We define eternity as the complete possession all at once of unlimited life. The interpretation of unlimited life provided by Boethius involves infinite

duration, without beginning or end. Therefore, any eternally existing entity must possess all its life at once. This implies atemporal duration, but what about temporal duration? Temporal duration gives us an impression of permanence and persistence, but an analysis of time reveals the superficiality of temporal duration. As Eleanore Stump and Norman Kretzmann put it:

The existence of a typical existent temporal entity, such as a human being, is spread over years of the past, through the present, and into years of the future; but the past is not, the future is not, and the present must be understood as no time at all, a durationless instant, a mere point at which the past is continuous with the future. Such radically evanescent existence cannot be the foundation of existence [Stump and Kretzmann (1981, pp.444-445)].

This brings us to our second point.

2. If an entity has infinite duration, does that imply succession? I have suggested already that extended existence through time, which is entailed in the conception of *sasa* and *zamani* is theoretically impossible. The *sasa* is said to refer to events and entities that are stretched over the entire life of the individual whose *sasa* it is. But if events constituting the life of an entity are said to have infinite duration in a given *sasa* period, they could only have all occurred at once. Can Mbiti reconcile this implication of his notion of extended existence through time with his other claim that a given *sasa's* experiences are ordered sequentially? If events in a given *sasa* are ordered sequentially, they have only temporal duration, not infinite duration. Therefore, if the *sasa* period is characterized as having entities with infinite duration, then it must be a duration without succession because no entities that exist infinitely can be said to have a past or a future. One concludes therefore, that since the *sasa* combines infinite duration and succession, it creates a clearly absurd and self-contradictory condition in which events are said to be at once both temporal and atemporal.

The reasons for rejecting the *sasa* as incoherent applies *mutatis mutandis* to the *zamani* period. The *zamani* is similarly an experimental extension of the *past* with a complete time frame of *past, present and future*. Events therefore have duration and succession in the *zamani*. But I have already shown that if events or entities have infinite duration in the *zamani*, that implies that they all occurred at the same time. But if they all occurred at the same time, then they are not temporal events but atemporal events. And if they are atemporal events, they cannot occur in succession. Mbiti, however, says that events occur sequentially. If events, however, are subject to succession in the *zamani* period, they are temporal events; but temporal events cannot exist in the *zamani*, because the *past* has no events. Events perish before they become part of the past.

I have addressed only two problems in Mbiti's treatise. There are many more philosophical queries which may be raised against Mbiti's work. I believe some to be defensible, but the majority are vulnerable to philosophical criticisms. It has been suggested that Mbiti, as a theologian, was actually interested in traditional religions and was only using philosophy as a vehicle for explaining his religion. This, in effect, explains why Mbiti raised a number of philosophical issues, but did little in providing a sustained philosophical exposition for any of them.

### Notes

1. The school of empirical theology may have roots in Bishop Berkeley's famous dictum, *esse est percipi*, that is, to be is to be perceived. In Berkeley's opinion, any investigation about the nature and existence of God must start with sense experience.
2. None of the tribes that I know of so far, hold that individuals do not have a public existence. The Mendes, Temnes, Konos and Limbas of Sierra Leone believe that people have an independent

existence. Indeed, common sense supports the view that material objects exist independently of the ideas we have of them.

3. Some secret societies do not permit non-members to view the corpse of deceased members.
4. This view is not original to Boethius, who might have been influenced by both Plato and Plotinius.

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## **Résumé**

*L'auteur partage l'opinion de Wamba qu'il nous faut nous libérer de "l'épistémologie sociale de domination" et éviter la mimesis. Elle est aussi de l'avis de Ramose qui pense que la démocratie de style occidentale n'est ni un appui pour l'émancipation ni une expression authentique de la culture politique africaine contemporaine.*

*Une démocratie d'émancipation en Afrique ne sera pas une démocratie occidentale mais plutôt une démocratie africaine du consensus. Cependant cette dernière devra prendre en compte la question de la participation entière des femmes aux dialogues politiques et aux prises de décisions au sein de la société. La politique d'émancipation de l'Afrique toute entière, hommes et femmes. Afin que la démocratie africaine soit authentique il lui faut une face humaine et une flamme africaine. Elle doit être caractérisée par le système de valeurs humain et tolérant de l'organisation africaine traditionnelle.*

## **DEMOCRACY WITH AN AFRICAN FLAIR**

### **A reply to Wamba-dia-Wamba**

**M.P. Eboh**

A return to democratic rule is a need felt all over Africa. Political instability and economic crisis are ill winds that bring nobody good. It is even worse when people do not have a say in the system by which their lives are run. However, it is an irony of fate that the same West, which undermined the democracy inherent in the traditional African political setup, should now encourage or rather force African Governments to adopt democracy as a precondition for aid. It is equally ironic that African heads of state should plead inability to evolve a democratic society. Alas! our fathers' minds are dead, and we are governed with alien thoughts; our yoke and sufferance show us quasi un-African.

Africa's efforts towards democratic transition, like its economic reform programmes, must grow from within and cannot be imposed from outside, African leaders have warned. Participants at the 8-9 May second Advisory

Committee meeting of the Global Coalition for Africa (GCA) in Kampala, which included five African heads of state, strongly urged donors not to impose specific political conditionalities on their aid. ... Presidents Masire, Soglo and Museveni drew attention to democracy's rich traditions in African Society and warned that it cannot be bestowed by leaders, but must grow from participatory roots and the freedom and civil responsibility of the individual.

Democracy, President Soglo said, must be carefully constructed through consultative and consensus-building process .... Democracy required that basic literacy and minimum economic and food needs were also met. There cannot be development without democracy, the participants noted, but similarly democracy will be meaningless without development and peace. [Harsch (1992, p.10)]

The Dutch Development Cooperation Minister, Jan Pronk, correctly observed that while the range of conditions are getting "broader and broader ... there were limits on conditionality." "The use of aid to foster democracy and human rights may have reach its limit." [Laisley (1992, p.11)]

It is rightly said that "he who goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing"; "he who pays the piper determines the tune"; "the hand that gives is always on top of the one that receives." Under the present circumstances, some curious questions arise: Is the West perhaps not using democracy as a ploy to continue to ignore the pitiable condition in which they plunged Africa? Given that their imperialism supplanted African democracy, what brand of democracy does Africa get into now - African or Western? And after democracy what next?

They emasculated and disorganized Africans with colonialism and neo-colonialism, tricked African governments into the devaluation of their currencies by over 100% and economic strangulation, enervated the African people with Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), and they have continued to drain the economy of the African continent via IMF, debt servicing etc. Now, it is democracy. As they have always

led Africans from frying pan to fire, one cannot help asking Africa's Western big brothers: Into what further dangers would you lead Africa? For, "to say one thing and do another - to take one's own word lightly - cannot inspire trust. To glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism and to negate man is a lie." [Freire (1978, p.136)]

### Western Democracy vis-à-vis African Democracy

Right now, Nigeria is afire with the transition to civil rule programme. The end in view is Western democracy - precisely US style. President Babangida initiated this movement but he acted militarily and undemocratically by disbanding the political parties formed "by the people for the people", and by arbitrarily introducing two new ones created by himself "for the people."

No reasons were given for this subversion of popular efforts. One can only guess the basis for this intrigue. To all intents and purposes, the sole reason is that Nigeria is trying hard to copy US law. *Mutatis mutandis*, the situation did not even improve with the introduction of the two parties, the SDP (Social Democratic Party) and NRC (National Republican Convention). For, after the primaries, Babangida cancelled the results of the elections, disqualified and banned all the presidential aspirants on the grounds that they all broke the rules and so the elections were not free and fair in spite of the open ballot system used. Now, everything is back to square one: new transition to civil rule time table, new transition council, registration and screening of new candidates, fresh elections etc. The date for the handover of power to democratically elected candidates has been rescheduled and postponed to August 1993. The West is invited to supervise the election processes and maybe, in the end, give us a testimonial of good conduct having certified us fit for Western democracy.

The military government is now living on borrowed time. Babangida forgets that the morning shows the day. As the end begins to justify the means, Nigerians keep their fingers crossed. But in spite



of everything, the Nigerian citizenry is all agog with the enthusiasm to usher in the said democracy because they are tired of military rule with its *ad hoc* decisions. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "you are very much mistaken if you imagine that true democracy obtains either in America or England. (...) They live on the coloured races by exploiting them."

Democracy, as it exists today in the Western world, is full of limitations. Governments take decisions that many citizens disapprove of, even among those that elected them. Minorities, even large ones, have no hope of having their political ideals put into practice. The average citizen has effectively no power to alter the network of regulations that govern his life. One of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igboland, was the extent to which democracy was truly practised. An early visitor to a Niger Igbo town said that he felt he was in a free land, among free people [Johnson (1882, p.547)]. Another visitor, a Frenchman, said that true liberty existed in Igboland, though its name was not inscribed on any document. [Ferrier (1907, p.18)]. Igbo political institutions were designed to combine popular participation with weighting for experience and ability. [Isichei (1976, p.21)]

If the African political culture has something like this why do Africans have to be copycats? Or were they perhaps born to borrow - borrow Dollars, borrow technology even if it is decimation-oriented and far from the overriding needs of the African people, borrow political systems even when they are virtually inferior to the African traditional ones? At least one thing is clear from Babangida's shifting-cultivation-politics. The lesson is that there is no way one can successfully transfer Washington D.C. to Abuja. Therefore, there is good reason in Wamba-dia-Wamba's postulate that Africans should be more inclined to the *traditional society* instead of a proclivity to mimesis and political posturing. "Whether the African embrace Western democracy or Eastern socialism they are bound to fail. At the root of Western

democracy is the spirit of individualism which can never create a community of people. ... The principles which govern a people can only be deduced from their character, not invented by *a priori* reason." [Anyanwu (1981, pp.370-371)] African communal living and solidarity should form the bedrock of an authentic African emancipative political system.

But for the exclusion of women from the decision-making body of the community, African traditional consensus democracy would have been a nonpareil. In the light of the present-day awareness of women's potential and emancipation, a re-structuring of the African brand of democracy ought to take this serious omission into consideration. A return to African traditional society does not necessarily imply that everything in the pristine tradition of the Africans was good and so the primordial tradition should be readopted now. That tradition must function as a source from which to extract elements that will help construct an authentic and emancipative paradigm for Africa at this historic moment. However, as an alien culture has conditioned Africa's social reality and is now entrenched as part and parcel of the African experience, we cannot rescind from it. [Ramosé (1992, p.65) and see also Ruch (1981, p.304)]

#### Emancipative politics responsive to the problems of contemporary Africa

Ramosé has it that the issue is not so much which of the two systems of politics is appropriate for Africa, one- or multi-party system. The point is rather "the purposive construction of a mode of politics responsive to the political problems of contemporary Africa." [Ramosé (1992, p.76)] Emancipative politics in Africa would be that which will help Africans return to their authentic selves, real autonomy and to experience once again self-fulfilment as a people. Africans are not used to *oboedientia sicut cadaver* - obeying like a corpse. On the contrary, they are used to discursive obedience or to put it more correctly, consensus democracy.

In this age of dialogue, synergism and ecumenism, the in-thing worldwide is the search for solidarity and the creation of a community spirit. If the whole world has woken up to appreciate this value, why then should Africans, who already have it in their value-system cast it off? Thus whatever will make for true democracy and solidarity will constitute emancipative politics for Africa. In that vein, adversarial politics which Ramose tagged "the hallmark of Western-style multi-party system of democracy" [Ramose (1992, p.75)], may not be the ideal. Even though Ramose shares Wamba-dia-Wamba's assumption that "in Africa emancipative politics will be without parties and will function by means of political organizations" [Wamba-dia-Wamba (1992, pp.35-36)], he tends to reecho Kofi Baako's argument that we cannot afford a disruptive and organized opposition, and we do not need one in order to be truly democratic; indeed our democracy is even more effective in giving the people a direct voice in the nation.[Baako (1961, p.193)]

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) took a real hard look at the complex problems of contemporary Africa and the solutions they proffered are *ad rem*. They suggested that we ensure community empowerment and self-development rooted in the tradition and culture of the African society, establish democratically administered people's organizations which are genuinely grassroots. They recommended the opening up of the political process to accommodate freedom of opinion, toleration of differences, acceptance of consensus and the encouragement of effective mass participation of people in politics. To ensure this, literacy level needs to be raised to enable persons to participate meaningfully in public debates, decision-making and in the overall development process because democracy requires on the part of the citizenry political maturity, good discernment and the preparedness to subordinate their own private interests to the exigency of the common good. Communal unanimity supersedes individual thoughts and preferences. They underscored the need for freedom of press, the accountability of leadership at all levels and the decentralization of decision-making processes and institutions [ECA (1990, pp.19-20 and

pp.31-32)]. The implementation of these, Ihonvbere averred, will enthrone the power and struggles of the people and dethrone waste, corruption, decadence and subservience which have been the bane of elite politics in Africa since the 1960s. "This is where the real struggle for Africa in the 1990s is located, rather than in replicating Western political institutions when the foundation and the environment for the survival of the transferred structures and institutions are weak or very tenuous." [Ihonvbere (1992, p.103)].

Whether true democracy be achieved on African soil through political organisation, one or multiparty systems, may it burgeon to the triumph of the suffering masses of Africans. As our people put it, from whatever source a child re-incarnates, may it survive! These modalities are but political veneer, not the core of African democracy.

### Conclusion

Democracy will be emancipative on the African soil if and only if it is given a human face and an African flair. It would not be emancipative for Africans to jump from military regime or from any other imported system to Western democracy. When people are weary they go home to freshen up. Africa's frustrating experience of political disillusionment is almost total. It is high time Africans went home to reinvigorate their drooping political spirit. They have all it needs for political revival. Perhaps what is needed is more insight, foresight and fresh impetus.

There has been a general tendency to ignore sex differences in the African political climate to the continent's own undoing. African women must attain political and economic parity with men.

The political problems of contemporary Africa which seem to have defied all solutions are largely the aftermath of foreign domination and exploitation. Overdependence on foreign nations runs counter to genuine freedom. So, for a start, politics of emancipation should cut Africa loose from the apron string of Western hegemony. If Africans can look inwards for now and cut their coat according to their

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size, eschew greed, huge import bills, pay adequate attention to the agricultural sector of the economy etc., they could minimize overdependence and gain some reasonable measure of autonomy or home rule. This will stem the tide of resentment against most African governments.

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**BEYOND ELITE POLITICS:  
A COMMENT ON ERNEST WAMBA-DIA-WAMBA'S ESSAY  
"BEYOND ELITE POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA"**

**Jacques Depelchin**

What is at stake

As I understand it, the importance of Wamba's paper rests on calling into question not only politicians, but, more fundamentally, the conceptualization of both politics and institutions around which the democratization process in Africa has remained stuck. The problem which arises is that democratization cannot be reduced to how honest or accountable the politicians promise to be once in power. The question of democracy cannot be defined by the group, the party or the individuals whose democratic credentials only rest on their having fought against a dictatorial regime. Moreover, how parties or groups which challenge a dictatorship constitute themselves should be considered as an important issue, because the overthrowing of a dictatorial regime doesn't necessarily imply inner democratic structures.

Looking at the situation in Zaire, democracy cannot be reduced to an imposed choice between one extreme evil (Mobutu) and a lesser one (Tshisekedi). In other unpublished essays, Wamba (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) has illustrated this very point by showing how the debate over what is at stake in Zairian politics has been distorted by the contending forces. The issue cannot be reduced to just simply "getting Mobutu out of the way" as if it is unimportant how this is carried out and by whom. More seriously, the polarization that has been developed between Tshisekedi and Mobutu has facilitated the reproduction of State and Elite politics favourable to Mobutu's forces. Since the National Sovereign Conference was chaired by a catholic bishop, Monsengwo, it was a foregone conclusion that the deliberations would be conducted by someone who believed in Elite politics and the

maintenance of the State. Bishop Monsengwo belongs, after all, to a catholic Church which is run like a state, and hardly like a democratic one. The national Sovereign Conference showed in a very contradictory manner that emancipative politics do bring results, but if emancipative politics are going to be thoroughly liberating, then they have to be pursued to their ultimate conclusions...

In short, what is called for is a radical change in how power - economic and political - and its ancillary institutions (state, government, opposition parties) are conceptualized. If power is conceptualized for the liberation (emancipation) of the people and therefore by the people, then it would be a contradiction to seek to seize state power as it currently operates, since one would be going after, and valorizing something which is supposed to be dismantled. In Zaire, as in any other country, care must be taken 1) not to let those who have profited from the previous regime to define, even remotely or indirectly, the terms of reconciliation and reconstruction, and 2) the parties which are reconciling must all be clear about what they are reconciling over.

Wamba's call for Palaver Politics simply means reconstructing and practicing politics along institutional practices with which most Africans are familiar. It is western press which romanticized the National Conference by referring to it as the "Big African Palaver" [Braeckman (1991)]. For them the African Palaver still means "idle and endless talk". But, as Wamba is at pains to explain, the Palaver is much more than simply talking. It is a means through which all members of a community are engaged in resolving the problems of the community as seen, lived and experienced by the community as a whole. The Palaver is not just a non elitist mode of politics which is reproduced, but also and above all a mode of thinking about all aspects of life which affect the community.

In this holistic, communal understanding, the politics of the Palaver diminishes the individualistic tendencies for specialists and experts to forge special privileged roles for themselves. There is no

area which is beyond discussion. There is no area which is the exclusive privilege of experts [Wamba-dia-Wamba (1985)].

Wamba's contribution extends one of the most important aspects of Cheikh Ante Diop's work concerning the reconstruction of African societies. Basil Davidson's latest book [1992] points in the same direction, specifically in his case against the European curse of nation-statism which was imposed on Africa. For those who are sceptical only need to look at the histories of resistance during and after colonial rule: popular participation rooted in the political idiom and the cultural histories of people did produce momentary victories.

Another symptom of the changing times: some anthropologists [e.g. Geschiere (1982)] are finally looking at the Palaver as a serious form of living and conducting democracy. It should be obvious why anthropologists did not look at the Palaver as the core of democracy in African communities. To do so earlier, say during colonial ideology which portrayed European mission as an altruistic venture of bringing civilization and democracy to Africa. However, Palaver politics will be difficult to institutionalize if it is restricted to the political arena. It must be extended to the economic arena, a much more difficult, but not impossible task.

### Beyond Elite politics of knowledge

The question for a change towards a democratic, emancipative society could be put as follows: how do intellectuals make sure that, in their own arena, they do not reproduce politics of the state, non-emancipative politics. Insofar as the educational institutions operate according to rules and regulations emanating from the state, they will not encourage as a matter of course the politics of emancipative knowledge especially if such politics are aiming at producing scientists in all spheres, who are able to consider themselves as such, without the paralysing notions that they can only become scientists if they are approved by institutions established in Europe and, in general, in



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"more advanced industrialized countries". The mode of politics which Wamba castigates in relation to how to think about the State has to be extended into all of the areas which, in one way or another, are touched by the state mode of politics.

So how do intellectuals relate to the politics of the people. Insofar as post-colonial universities were the representation of the state, they also have constituted an arena from which to reproduce elite politics. How do we change the nature of institutions which were created to reproduce elite knowledge.

Wamba specifically calls for the democratization of knowledge. In the realm of knowledge, how is the State reproduced? Wamba's call for such a democratization must mean a questioning of the existing institutions, not just simply those of higher learning, but also those which prepare the ground for entry into universities.

To call for a process of democratization of knowledge obviously means more than simply trying to reorganize within the current existing system. How are intellectuals going to break from the practices which were imported from outside? Ironically such a break is taking place as teachers at all levels have to operate outside the academic confines in order to make ends meet, but these practices do not break from the old patterns, they, in fact, reproduce them because, in the process the main preoccupation is "to make ends meet". Everyone fending for themselves and treating the educational process as a task which is satisfied bureaucratically.

The question is often asked, "fine, but what do we do, where do we start?" Just as the question of how to deal with a state which has been moulded by 30 years of crime and looting from within and from outside calls for rethinking the state, likewise one should rethink of what goes on inside the institutions of learning. It is not just a question of rearranging the subjects and disciplines, it is a question of rethinking which education, for whom, for what and by whom? It is often forgotten that when the missionaries came, it took them a long time to produce engineers and medical doctors, but very quickly they had

produced seminarists, priests, theologians, philosophers, classical philologists, bishops, cardinals.

The other question which is often implicit is "where are we going to get the resources?" Often "resources" is understood as grants coming from foundations in the North. Very rarely is resources understood as the result of what we can produce. Intellectually we need to free ourselves from professor C.Y. Thomas' famous definition of underdevelopment: "producing what we do not consume and consuming what we do not produce".

There is no ready made recipe for how an economy is going to be rebuilt so that it serves the interests of the producers and not those who believe in the dogma of private property and the sacro-sanct catechism of the market forces. Such a recipe will come out of developing radically different modes and practices of production and reproduction of knowledge.

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## REJOINDERS

H. Odera Oruka

The Cultural Universal Debate

In his article "Beyond Universalism and Relativism" [Quest, Vol.VI, no.1] Dr. Procee's gives an evaluation of my debate with Kwasi Wiredu on the subject of Cultural Universals and Cultural fundamentals [Quest, Vol.IV, no.1]. I followed this evaluation with a very keen interest. I was satisfied that the author grasps my position pretty well. Mr. Procee, however, claims to transcend the position of universalism and relativism into what he calls *Philosophical Pluralism*.

In my opinion, philosophical pluralism is only a form of relativism, that is, if we take a broad sense of the term relativism. Mr. Procee seems to limit his conception of relativism simply to an intellectual attempt to diminish the negative aspects of universalism, as seen by Oruka. "Relativism implies that every historical epoch and every culture has the equal right to present its perspective on the world. ... There are no standards independent of culture that prove that some perspectives are better than others. Because of this we can only be tolerant of all different perspectives. In this way relativists try to develop a new universalistic ethics of inter-cultural tolerance." [Quest, Vol.VI, no.1, p.47]

Mr. Procee criticizes *tolerance* because it is the ethics of the powerful, who are not interested in the peculiarities of the less powerful. It is also the ethics of *intercultural indifference*. But Philosophical Pluralism, he argues, uses the criteria of non-exclusion and ensures interactions, i.e., in pluralism individuals or cultures have equal value and it makes sense to learn from other cultures. It is a philosophy of intercultural interaction not of intercultural indifference.

I should emphasize that my discussion of cultural fundamentals was not really a moralization of the value of tolerance to other cul-

tures, it was a pointer to the necessity of the need to understand other cultures and our own given cultures better by developing the ability to grasp the *fundamentals* of both our culture and other cultures. Tolerance might merely be a cultural means to help those involved in the dialogue to set up the table for a free and fair exchange. But the goal really is the exchange, the interaction itself.

Hence, I cannot see how Dr. Procee can claim that (my) relativism is transcended by (his) philosophical pluralism. Given his discussion I come to the position that either pluralism is a form of relativism or vice versa.

### Progress in African Philosophy

Ms. J. Kluyskens, in reviewing Tsenary Serequeberhan's book African Philosophy (The Essential Readings) in *Quest* [Vol. VI, no. 1], explains that most of the articles were contributions to the debate on the Nature of African Philosophy during the 1970s and early 1980s. And she adds, "an important characteristic of this debate is its non-philosophical nature. It is about definitions of philosophy" [*Quest*, Vol. VI, no. 1, p. 85]. She is right. Indeed, I already made the same point in my own contribution in the book, Sage Philosophy in African Philosophy [1983]. However, Ms. Kluyskens adds one careless or cynical remarks:

"Next to the unphilosophical nature of the debate about African Philosophy, there is another general observation to make. Some ten years of debate seems to have been followed by ten years of little development of research agenda and methodologies concerning the various topics, schools of thought, different intellectual heritages etc., which had been identified during the debate. What happens after all these intellectual exchanges?" [*Quest*, Vol. VI, no. 1, p. 85]

It may be that the book under review does not highlight the research agenda and methodologies developed following the *ten year* debate. But it is casual to remark that there is little evidence of such developments. The following are examples of the numerous works that have come out as the philosophical fulfilments of the points raised in the debate.

Hallen and Sodipo [1986], Gyekye [1987], Fløistad [1987], Mudimbe [1988] and Odera Oruka [1990/1991 and 1992]

The first two books are works which explain a philosophical research agenda and methodologies developed by the authors and are applied in a philosophical investigation and analysis in Nigeria and Ghana respectively. In the third book, Prof. Wiredu takes up a hermeneutic-cum-epistemological investigation into the concept of **mind** in the Akan culture. In the same book we have Anyanwu's discussion on "The Idea of Art in African Thought".

Mudimbe's work is a general survey and evaluation of what the author conceives as the *African gnosis* following the debate on African philosophy and my own contribution has consisted of two books one on **Sage Philosophy** and one on **Political Philosophy, The Philosophy of Liberty**.

Ms. Kluyskens perhaps needs to consider the above types of work and see if they are irrelevant to the contributions she expected to be the outcomes of the *ten year* debate on the definition and nature of African Philosophy.

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### BOOK REVIEW

Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs by H. Odera Oruka.  
Initiatives Publishers: Nairobi 1992.  
Reviewed by Dr. D.N. Kaphagawani

Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs is the first book in the Sage Philosophy Series edited by Professor Odera Oruka. The main purpose of this Series is to demonstrate the existence of individualised philosophies in Africa (p.21) by detecting "the African Sage and act as midwives to help the (sage) produce his or her wisdom for posterity" (p.19).

Odinga is presented in this book as one such African sage renowned for his "Africanist and international role as a staunch nationalist thinker and activist" (p.vii) very much like Bertrand Russell in his unfaltering "love for truth", unrelenting "will for independence"; and "deepest sympathy with the suffering masses" (p.3). The book indeed manages to substantiate Odinga's commitment to these principles.

Oginga Odinga is foreworded by Professor Sumner, a well known philosopher who has written extensively on Ethiopian Philosophy. In this Foreword Sumner discusses the similarities and differences between his works on Ethiopian Philosophy and Oruka's Sage Philosophy project. As a methodological difference Sage Philosophy is derived from an individual African sage whereas Ethiopian wisdom literature, Sumner points out quite rightly, is essentially collective (p.xiv); both, however, are regarded as similar in, for instance, their moral concerns (p.xv). But what Sumner regards as a methodological difference is an essential difference between culture philosophy and Sage Philosophy insofar as culture philosophy is nothing more than a collective pool of thoughts representative of a people's outlook to life and nature in general. Ethiopian wisdom literature is culture philosophy, not a philosophy of an individual Ethiopian sage.

However, Sumner concludes the Foreword on a note of gratitude that, as evidenced by Oruka's work on Kenyan sages, African



Philosophy "is on the right path" (p.xxi) now quite unlike when scholars were quibbling about the existence and nature of African Philosophy "when people were dying from hunger all round" (p.xx). But Sumner's optimism needs to be handled with caution; for although scholars at this time do indeed agree on the question of the existence and nature of African Philosophy, Sage Philosophy, as a type of African Philosophy, seems as ill equipped to resolve problems of hunger and disease as is, for instance, any other discipline. Sage Philosophy is the ramification of an individual sage's views and beliefs on invariably different issues, for example truth, morality and compromise in politics. The applicability of such views to reality is not as straightforward as Sumner would have us believe.

The book consists of three parts. Part I includes an introduction to Oginga Odinga as a Kenyan sage committed to three principles mentioned above; part II includes conversations between Odinga and Oruka on truth, power, etc., held in 1982; and part III consists of more discussions on democracy, justice, freedom, truth and the second independence of Africa, held in 1992.

The gap of ten years between the two sets of conversations is of significance. Both Odinga and Oruka went through political trials and tribulations during this period (pp.vii-ix). This time lag has been responsible for a number of repetitions made by Odinga on a few concepts and themes which the book would otherwise have done without. For example, the theme of truth in politics features both in the 1982 and 1992 conversations (chaps. 4, 6 and 13). Nevertheless such repetitions should be seen as confirmation of the consistency in Odinga's attitude in being unflinching in his love for speaking the truth in politics.

Part I has two chapters. The first chapter is an apt demonstration of Odinga as a man of principle in:

( i) his truth-loving the reason for which he had conflicts with Kenyan white settlers (p.5), refused favours from the then Kenyan governor

(p.6), and eventually had deep-rooted clashes with both Tom Mboya and Kenyatta (pp. 6-8)

(ii) his will for independence which, against all expectations, compelled him to reveal that "Kenyatta (is) a land grabber; he tried to recruit me but I refused" (p.11)

(iii) his siding with the common man which places him in the Nkrumah-Nyerere camp (p.13)

Chapter two is meant to be a demonstration of "Odinga's uncompromising African nationalism and his strong attachment to the wisdom of his native (Luo) culture" (p.20), and is hence Oruka's rendition of the socio-cultural stratification of wise men and men of achievement in Luo culture, ranging from the *jahulo* (a seer) to the *ker* (the ultimate spiritual and moral leader). This chapter also lucidly illustrates Odinga's strong conviction on the cleanliness of politics (p.25) which, in Odinga's view, ought to be approached and practised with courage, frankness and persistence (p.27).

Parts II and III comprise twelve chapters in all, three in part II and nine in part III, but all of them dealing with Odinga's views on issues as varied as the reconciliation of traditional with modern values, truth, democracy, racial quality, gender issues, morality and compromise in politics just to mention a few. These chapters are presented and written out as an unfolding, on-going discussion between Odinga and Oruka, providing the reader with a lively and captivating mode of philosophising, quite absent in many philosophy books, whilst providing a number of avenues through the labyrinth of Odinga's philosophy, the foundation of which is the upholding and proclamation of truth.

Of particular interest is Odinga's definition of truth as what the common man holds to be the case (p.103), suggesting a collective conception of truth, quite radically opposed to, say, Wiredu's doctrine of truth as opinion. Odinga's insistence on the undesirability of compromising the truth as a goal and the plausibility of compromising the means to the attainment of truth (pp.115-116) is worth noting and will no doubt keep scholars in African Philosophy busy.

Despite a number of typographical errors which slipped through the proof reader's notice (e.g. p.xiii: first sentence of the Foreword; p.xix: first word; p.12: lack of footnote for the quotation from the 'well-informed colleague' of Oruka; p.14: Nkrumah; p.14, note 14: lack of quotes on Odinga's remarks on the issue of the betrayal of the masses; third paragraph of back cover: Philosopher etc.). Oginga Odinga is a welcome and timely addition to the volume of literature in African Philosophy in general, and Sage Philosophy in particular. This book definitely whets the academic appetite and Professor Odera Oruka should be commended for a job well done on the book and a job well started on the Sage Philosophy Series. Scholars in African Philosophy must therefore meet the challenge of contributing to this Series, and one cannot but look forward to the next book in the Sage Philosophy Series.

#### BOOK REVIEW

7p!

Civilization or Barbarism by C.A. Diop. Lawrence Hill Books: New York 1991. pp.xxi+440.

Reviewed by Lansana Keita.

Civilization or Barbarism (first published in French in 1981) is the last of the works produced by the late Cheikh Anta Diop, perhaps Africa's most encyclopedic researcher and scholar of the latter half of the twentieth century. Followers of the career of Diop recall the controversy surrounding his first major work titled Nations Nègres et Culture. Ever since the publication of that text, Diop has been known to be the promoter of the following theses.

1. The Civilization of Ancient Egypt was genuinely African (as opposed to being Asiatic) and served as a diffusionist model for some of the classical civilizations of Asia Minor and Greece, the so-called cradle of Western Civilization.
2. Despite superficial differences there is indeed a cultural unity among Africa's peoples.
3. The technological and culture levels of precolonial Africa though uneven (as is the case elsewhere in the world) rivalled both Europe

and Asia in achievement at the historical point of contact between Europe and Africa.

Diop was also a sociological materialist in that he argued that the structures of human cultures were determined principally by the historical and sociological environment. On this basis one could explain the differences between European culture which Diop viewed as patriarchal in all its dimensions, and African culture which was generally matriarchal.

In Civilization or Barbarism the general Diopian theses are formulated but with more amplification than in his previous works. In fact the significance of this work stems from the fact that it is an anthropological work (the study of human history) of high quality. In the early chapters (the section titled "Paleontological Approach") Diop traces the origin of humanity in Africa and its subsequent raciation in Europe and other parts of the world. In further support of the *down the Nile* flow of Egyptian civilization Diop points out (chapter 4) that recent archaeological discoveries have demonstrated the anteriority of Nubian civilization to that of Egypt and the evolution of the latter from the former.

Most of the reviewers of this text tend to focus extensively on the *Egyptian question* but the book has much more to offer than that. In the section titled "Laws Governing the Evolution of Societies" Diop offers up his own theories on the evolution of human society from early clanic organization to more advanced structures. Of much interest in this section is Diop's claim that the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) rather than being descriptive of Asian structures "born as result of the great hydraulic works described by Marx and Engels" [p.129] is best applicable to the pharonic Egyptian state. A rather original observation that Diop makes concerning the AMP is that on account of the large state structures that made it possible, social revolutions were nigh impossible. On the other hand revolutions occurred with more frequency and ease in the Greek city states on account of their small size and individualist ethic. Perhaps the most

radical observation that Diop makes concerning the AMP is that it served as a state model for the Greek empire founded by Alexander and for the Roman Empire. In fact the implication of Diop's thesis on the AMP of the pharonic type is that it served as the historical prototype of what is now called *the state*. The key point made here is that the world's first state was of African origin.

In the area of strict sociological analysis Diop's analysis fashions formal statements out of impressionistic observations. These formal statements are interesting in the sense that they are very rarely made (if at all) by scholars of European background. Consider his laws of Percentage, Assimilability, Distance and Phenotype. Though based on strict impressions the validity of their claims can hardly be doubted. The essential point of Diop's formulations on interethnic relations is that the greater the phenotypical (embracing all empirically observable differentiations, i.e. language, dress, physiognomy, a.s.o.) distance between groups that share the same environment the greater the likelihood of social conflict. Thus while migrant Europeans in France, say, would eventually be assimilated into French culture this would not be the case for migrant Africans in France, who despite having adopted the cultural accoutrements of the host culture would continue in perpetuity to be viewed as alien.

There is also the question of cultural identity which Diop explores with specific reference to Africa's peoples. The claim is made that cultural identity is a function of three factors: historical, linguistic and psychological. Each of these factors Diop discusses with verve answering the orthodox but negative analysis of Eurocentric scholarship. He points out, for example, that the linguistic diversity of Africa is not in any way qualitatively different from that of Europe with its three hundred and sixty languages and dialects. Consider too Diop's claim that the *Blacks of the diaspora* properly belong to the family of African peoples despite the fact that linguistic bonds must have been broken. Diop writes that in this instance the "historic bond remains stronger than ever, perpetuated by memory just as the cultural heritage

of Africa, which is evident in the three Americas, attests to the continuity of cultural customs" [p. 219].

Equally impressive too is Diop's observations on Africa's contributions to the sciences and philosophy. He points out that the knowledge of the Egyptians in the sciences (including mathematics) was much more than rudimentarily empirical. Diop effectively demolishes the view that the Greeks were the innovators of genuine mathematics and science by pointing out the impressive achievements of the Egyptians in the areas of geometry (including trigonometry), medicine, astronomy, and engineering. The key point implied in this analysis is that the foundations of the technical and theoretical sciences, which Europe had long claimed as its unique patrimony, are more accurately attributable to the African civilization of ancient Egypt.

In the case of philosophy Diop examines Africa's contribution to philosophy in "Does an African Philosophy Exist?". In this chapter Diop examines Ancient Egyptian cosmology and philosophy, and its influences on classical Greek thought. He also points to similarities between the metaphysics of the Dogon and Ancient Egyptian thought. Again with reference to the *Bantu Philosophy* explicated by Placide Tempels (*La Philosophie Bantoue*), Diop draws common points of expression between traditional African vitalist beliefs and those of Ancient Egypt. As he puts it, "African philosophy cannot develop except on the original terrain of the history of African thought. Otherwise, there is the risk that it will never be" [p.324].

There is indeed no doubt that the traditional cosmogonies and thought systems of Africa are very complex in formulation and constitute a veritable mine of theories for students of traditional African thought systems. Of course this brings us to the question of the role that African philosophical thought should play in contemporary Africa. Unlike the empirical sciences which, no doubt, have an extremely important role to play in the development of contemporary Africa, there is the question as to the role of philosophy in today's Africa. The major problem of Africa today is that of economic and

technological underdevelopment; and one can point in this regard to nations in which the transformation from technological underdevelopment to modernism apparently took place without any undue emphasis on philosophical thought. Is it rather that philosophical thought belongs specifically to a particular stage in human intellectual history and has already been superseded by science and its technological applications?

One might consider the cases of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, as nations in which rapid technological development took place without any period of intense philosophical analysis. In fact the importance of philosophy in the career of a civilization could be justifiably questioned when one considers that the combined philosophical output of France and Britain, say, greatly outstrips that of Japan yet the technological and economic output of the latter easily outstrips those of the former. But it would be a mistake to infer that modern Japanese civilization is without philosophical foundations. Modern Japanese civilization is thoroughly imbued with the practical philosophies of traditional Shintoism and Buddhism - each with an ethic exquisitely geared towards the welfare of the community as opposed to that of the individual. It is for this reason that Westerners often decry what they perceive as a lack of individualism among the Japanese and other Asians. Yet the ethical principle of regard for the other was developed to its highest expression by none other than the European philosopher Immanuel Kant. Yet European social practice both at home and abroad has never won high marks for ethically correct conduct as was formulated by Kant and others. It seems, therefore, that despite a surfeit of philosophical literature in Europe this was not proven to be an advantage over other nations of more traditional and practical philosophies that have rivalled and even surpassed the West in technological developments.

This brings us to the central question concerning Civilization or Barbarism and contemporary Africa. Despite its great natural resources Africa and its peoples (including overseas Africans) are viewed as inhabiting the least developed, poorest and least productive areas of

the globe. Africa's problems, in short, are regarded as being at a critical level. What is the significance then of Civilization or Barbarism in this context, given its emphasis on an African civilization now defunct for at least two thousand years? There are two answers here.

1. European cultural imperialism against the African has been so categorical and pervasive that it has denied only the African (of all cultural groups) the experience of having produced civilization. The physical penalties paid by the African for all this, were a harsh slavery followed by a brutal colonialism; and now the aftermath is an economically draconian neocolonialism.

2. Diop's Civilization or Barbarism and his other works are attempts to refute the ideologies that seek to justify the exploitation and oppression of Africa's peoples - whether continental or overseas.

Underlying Diop's thesis is an unswerving commitment to the idea that Africa's precolonial structures must necessarily play a role in the economic and technological transformation of Africa. The implicit conclusion is that Africa can and must modernize only by examining its precolonial institutions for the purpose of salvaging those which could be workable in a modern technological environment. Of course others have made this argument before, but Diop's thesis is special in that it is argued for from a cultural Pan Africanist viewpoint based on the premise that there is a general African culture constituting many African cultures. It is this Pan Africanist outlook that also allows Diop to argue the importance of the intellectual achievements of pharonic Egypt for a modernizing Africa.

The key point here is that the basic form of modern architecture, mathematics, science and technology are to be found in the African historical past thus making it not necessary for those who are involved in Africa's modernization to be at a psychological disadvantage when experimenting with forms of modern technology within African society itself. The implicit message is that Europe's ascendancy in modern forms of technology, science, political theory, a.s.o. is a mere historical contingency. By way of the Ancient Egyptians, Nubians, and



others, there is an African kernel in most of modern science and technology.

The importance of Diop's African paradigm derives from the fact that those individuals who are involved in Africa's modernizing programs are perhaps among the world's most pathologically alienated groups. The superstructures operative in contemporary Africa including the contours of the African state, official languages, legal systems, economic, sociological and political structures, all imposed by the colonialists, are now maintained by elements of Africa's comprador classes. The traditional structures are treated as secondary institutions rather than being analyzed for the determination of modernization possibilities.

Yet one continues to witness the excessive faith in the European world on the part of Africa's modernizing sectors, despite the relentless cultural and economic attacks emanating from the former. Consider the financial trickery the European world resorts to as it imposes nonconvertibility, devaluation and other destructive ultimatums on Africa's currencies and financial structures. Consider too the zero sum game played by Europe as it seeks to purchase Africa's raw materials at prices that, from a logical point of view, could never repay loans granted ostensibly for industrial and agricultural purposes. The result of this has been the increasingly harsh dictates emanating from Eurocentric institutions such as the I.M.F. and the World Bank.

Some would argue that Africa's cultural and economic problems stem from the fact that the technological gap between precolonial African society and modern industrial society is too great to allow a smooth transition from the one to the other. This argument is indeed suspect since Diop has pointed out that there are elements of African technology in modern technology, and there are modern societies whose recent premodern structures are similar to those of precolonial Africa. One might consider again the traditional structures of Japanese society which stress community and social values over those of the individual. The Japanese have not been Christianized and their

traditional Shintoism and Buddhism are founded on the principle of devotion to ancestors - much like the generic African cosmology. Yet despite qualitatively similar bases contemporary Japanese and African cultures are very different. The Japanese have been able to successfully graft on to the relevant portions of their culture structures of modern technology which in many instances have surpassed the achievements of the West. Some authors even point to Japanese civilization as futuristic. On the other hand contemporary African society is marked by a very evident social malaise caused ultimately by a profound psychological alienation.

In this context the significance of Civilization or Barbarism derives from the following:

- (a) its vigorous theoretical challenge against the current official versions of precolonial African history and culture
- (b) its strong arguments in favour of the relevance of Africa's intellectual and cultural past to its economic and technological development
- (c) its implicit exhortation to Africa's intellectuals to seek to establish new paradigms more instrumentally relevant to contemporary Africa.

In sum, the theoretical meaning of Civilization or Barbarism is its potential praxis. This praxis would entail a cultural revolution as a necessary pre-condition for economic and technological development. This cultural revolution founded on the principle of Africa's cultural unity would be the basis for larger and more effective political and economic groupings. Details of this are in Diop's earlier writings.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

Nagl-Docekal, H. and Wimmer, F.M. (ed.) Postkoloniales Philosophieren: Afrika, R. Oldenbourg Verlag: Vienna/Munich 1992.

Reviewed by M. Ramose

Apart from the "introduction" the book consists of ten essays written by African philosophers. It is then crowned by an excellent and extensive bibliography on African philosophy prepared by Christian Neugebauer. True to its title, post-colonial philosophy in Africa, the book contains essays in the languages of the former colonial rulers of Africa, namely, English, French and German. Of course, in this context one could say that essays in Spanish and Portuguese are missing.

Although written from different perspectives, all the articles nevertheless touch either directly or indirectly upon one or more of the following themes: (1) the meaning of philosophy as an academic discipline in Africa: (2) in what manner and to what extent may philosophy as an academic discipline address itself to and be committed to providing workable solutions to the problems facing the indigenous African people in particular? (3) the argument that the perennial problems of philosophy are universal must justify its claim to universality especially on epistemological grounds. This leads to the related theme of by what right may anyone claim exclusive competence to define and impose the meaning of philosophy on others? In this connection I personally regret that Outlaw's thorough essay, *African 'Philosophy': Deconstructive and reconstructive challenges* has not been included in this book. However, it is salutary to note that the book in which this article is contained is included in the bibliography of the book under review. See, Floistad, G., African Philosophy, (p. 220 and 229). A somewhat novel theme - which is theme four (4) - in African philosophy is included, namely, the woman's question. It is significant that the essay writer is a woman, Sister Marie-Paul Eboh. One may note in parenthesis that this important event has not led to

the same consequences in the male world of African philosophy as it is the case in the United Kingdom following the Church of England decision to ordain women priests. (5) the idea of the oneness of the human family and the world permeates almost every essay. Here it is important to bear in mind that oneness is to be distinguished from unity.

Themes (1) and (2) constitute the subject-matter of the article by Bodunrin, *Philosophy in Africa - The Challenge of Relevance and Commitment*. Bodunrin argues that these themes are the concerns of Franco- and Anglophone philosophy alike. This point is reaffirmed by Tshitambal'a Mulang Irung, *Pourquoi cette fidélité excessive de la philosophie Nègro-Africaine contemporaine à la philosophie occidentale?*, who argues that even the languages in which the indigenous Africans philosophise today are the languages of the former colonial rulers. For Irung this state of affairs is traceable to colonialism, neo-colonialism as well as the training in the West to which future indigenous African philosophers are subjected. In this way Irung leads into theme (3). Nkrumah's reflections on this point are particularly pertinent. Wiredu's essay, *On defining African Philosophy*, belongs to this theme. It should be read in conjunction with Oluwole's essay *The Africanness of a Philosophy*. The central question that Oluwole addresses and seeks to answer is the following: what makes literary pieces from African philosophy authentically and culturally African? It would seem that by literary pieces Oluwole means "Literary works as oral traditions, proverbs, folklore and other tales all bear its trade marks, even though these do not express identical beliefs about every aspect of human life and experience." (p. 120) No doubt this understanding of "literary works/pieces" is contestable. The inquiry into what is authentically and culturally African philosophy would seem to be a search to identify and delimit the distinctive feature or features which characterise the philosophy as such. If this is so, then it is difficult to appreciate the meaning of the thesis that: "The phrase

'African philosophy' does not introduce any novelty into the philosophical discourse." (p. 106)

"In search of an answer to the question posed, Oluwole gives a brief overview of what other philosophers such as Senghor, Hountondji and Wiredu have said with regard to the question on hand. Concerning Wiredu, it is argued that: "Intuition and emotion, contrary to Senghor, Anyanwu, and even Wiredu, are not the African alternatives to logic, reason and science." (p. 117) Following upon this brief critique, Oluwole concludes that humanism is both constitutive and distinctive of a historically and culturally authentic African philosophy. "The Africanness I here identify as humanism is therefore not a philosophy. It is neither a world view nor a philosophical stance on the level of metaphysics or epistemology. It is the definition of a literary mission, the common (unwritten) ambition of literary men and women within specific African societies. Humanism identifies the goal which such a group wishes to attain through thought. It sets their patterns and defines their style, methodology, and terms of expression. It is objective, rational, and positive but not purely descriptive. It is neither fictitious, mysterious, nor necessarily religious. It is a legitimate choice of a literary mission." (p. 119-120) A critical analysis of this passage is beyond the scope of the present review but it is undoubtedly desirable. It would seem that the "legitimate choice of a literary mission" forms the basis for the theme of the oneness of the human family and the world. (p. 122) I propose to focus slightly on this theme by presenting the essay of Sister Marie-Paul Eboh.

Eboh's essay is entitled, *The Woman Question: African and Western Perspectives*. The essay is true to its title in that it does compare African and Western perspectives on the woman question. This comparison reveals that the African and the Western women, and indeed, women globally, have and in some respects still continue to suffer the same "indignities". Women therefore have to wage a struggle to remove whatever continues to oppress them including the elimination of the "indignities". But the comparison also shows that

while women might suffer similar oppression and "indignities" their condition as African and Western women is by no means identical. Accordingly, the African woman would prefer the appellation, *womanist* to feminist. There are basic philosophical and historical reasons for such preference and these make the African woman quite different from her Western counterpart. In turn these reasons inspire and guide the African womanist in her struggle for freedom. Thus unlike her Western feminist sister, the African womanist avoids "bitterness in their confrontation and relationship with men. They do not negate men, rather they accomodate them; men are central to their lives not merely as husbands but also as sons and brothers and their continuous presence is assured. This does not mean that they cannot do without men or stand on their own. ... African womanism is characterized by female bonding or solidarity and it surprisingly enlists male support. It is not apprehensive of wifehood and motherhood." (p. 211) In a rather gentle manner, Eboh touches on the theme of the oneness of the human family - the family constituted by women and men of Africa - as well as the family under construction if and when African womanism and Western feminism can feed upon and edify each other.

The articles by Masolo, *History and the Modernization of African Philosophy*, Okolo, *Philosophy in Africa: Present and Future*, Konate, *Aktualität der philosophie in Afrika* belong to theme (2). But Bejawi's essay, *A critical analysis of the philosophical status of Yoruba Ifa literary corpus*, is evidently *sui generis*.

Pastkoloniales Philosophieren: Afrika is a valuable collection of articles, which should be present in libraries, also outside The German language domain.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**George B.M. Carew** has studied in Sierra Leone and the USA, and taught philosophy at different universities in several countries. He has published numerous articles. Forthcoming is his article "Traditional African Experience and Science" in Philosophies in Africa: Ancient, Indigenous, Greek, Christian, Islamic, and Judaic, Paruiz Morewedge (ed.). He held several diplomatic and political positions, and is currently visiting professor at the philosophy Department of the University of Connecticut and is also Senior Fellow at the African American Institute of the same university.

**Jacques Depelchin** is currently Research Associate at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A.

**Marie Pauline Eboh** is working at the Institute of Foundation Studies of the Rivers University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She is winner of the Jacobson Philosophy Essay Competition and her essay "The Woman Question: African and Western Perspectives" was published in the book Postkoloniales Philosophieren: Afrika, H. Nagl (ed.) ✓

**Emmanuel Eze** has studied in Nigeria and Zaire. He is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Bucknell University (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.) earned his doctorate at Fordham University while teaching there and at Iona College. His special interests include Rationality, Hermeneutics and African Philosophy.

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**Jay M. Van Hook** received his Ph.D. from Columbia University, New York U.S.A. and is currently professor of Philosophy at Northwestern College, Orange City U.S.A. He is co-editor of

the book Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays and currently working on an anthology of traditional and cōtemporāry African philosophy.

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✓ **Lansana Keita** was professor at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone. He has published extensively and his last book is titled Science, Rationality and Neoclassical Economics, University of Delaware Press.

**Henry Odera Oruka** is professor of Philosophy at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. A reknown African philosopher and author of many articles in, among others, *Second Order*, *Praxis International*, *East African Journal of Philosophy* and *Quest*. His latest books are Sage Philosophy, The Philosophy of Liberty and Oginga Odinga.

**Mogobo B. Ramose** is from South Africa and lecturing at the Katholieke Universiteit Brabant, Tilburg, The Netherlands. He was teaching before at the University of Zimbabwe, and the Center for Research into the Foundations of Law, Catholic University of Leuven, Leuven Belgium. He has published many articles, among others, "Self-Determination in Decolonisation" in Issues of Self-Determination, Twining, W. (ed.), Aberdeen University Press, 1991.



## CONFERENCES

### Vienna

The *Institut für Philosophie* of the *Universität Wien* and the UNESCO Austria are announcing the conference Postkoloniales Philosophieren: Afrika.

October 23 - 26 at the *Universität Wien*.

There will be invited lectures by a number of prominent African and non-African scholars.

Inquiries:

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### Rotterdam

The Dutch-Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy and the Faculty of Philosophy of the *Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam* are announcing a symposium on Philosophy and Democracy in Intercultural Perspective.

October 29 - 30 at the *Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam*.

Invited lectures from a number of African and non-African philosophers; a.o. H.A.F. Oosterling (Rotterdam); (sr. M.G. Kente, E. Wamba-dia-Wamba (Dar-es-Salam); K. Gyekye (Accra); Y. Konaté (Abidjan); S. Diallo, M. Diallo (Dakar).

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### Binghamton

The annual conference Ethics, Politics and Society in African Philosophy will take place this year from 29th - 31st October at Binghamton University. It will be combined with the 12 annual conference of the SSIPS/SAGP on Multicultural Dimensions of Ancient, Medieval & Social Philosophy.

Deadline for abstracts in August 15th.

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## PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST

### Philosophy, Literature and the African Novel

Olusegun Oladipo, 21 p. Ibadan, 1993

This is the first issue of a monograph series *Dialogue in African Philosophy*, edited by the author.

### The Idea of African Philosophy: a critical study of major Orientations in contemporary African philosophy

Olusegun Oladipo, Ibadan, Molecular Publishers, 1992

Oladipo argues that the genuine problem of African philosophy is not that of defining the discipline in relation to Africa, neither is it the problem of orientation, but rather the problem of how to make the philosophical discourse relevant to the situation of the African man.

The book is a collection of four essays.

### G.A. Rauche - Selected Philosophical Papers

edited and introduced by Tobias J.G. Louw, 580 p. Fort Hare University Press, 1992.

### Afrikanische Philosophie - Mythos und Realität

Paulin J. Hountondji. Translation: Chr. Neugebauer and F. Wimmer. Edited by G-R Hoffmann. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1993

This is the German version of the book Sur la philosophie africaine - critique de la ethnophilosophie. Included is also an essay by Hoffmann and Neugebauer on the question "Ethnophilosophy = Africa Philosophy?".

Texte zur Afrikanischen Philosophie

selected and introduced by Gerd-Rüdiger Hoffmann. Berlin: Cornelis Verlag, 1993. The booklet is no. 30 of the series Philosophie - Beiträge zur Unterrichtspraxis Jürgen Hengelbrock (ed.)

The booklet aims at facilitating the teaching of aspects of African Philosophy in secondary schools in Germany. The primary texts cover the following theme's: Legends about the creation of man; folk sages and sagacity; history and historiography - the griots of Western Africa; about death; the tradition of African Philosophy; ethnophilosophy and its critics; 'tradition' and 'traditionalism' in African Philosophy; definition and tasks of African philosophy. All text are presented with comments about the authors and about the historical and cultural context.

**REPORT**

**Report on the African Philosophy sessions at the 1992 SSIPS/SAGP conference in New York**

By David Chioni Moore, Programme in Literature and Theory, Duke University, USA.

From October 23rd to 25th 1992, in the congenial setting of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University in New York City, some fifty or more Africanists and scholars of African philosophy gathered for a series of panels and discussions on matters at once African and philosophical. What follows is a brief report on those stimulating sessions.

The conference as a whole, which was sponsored by Binghamton University SUNY, was in fact much broader in scope than African philosophy as its amazingly long full title will indicate: "The eleventh annual Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science / Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Conference on Ethics, Aes-

thetics and Ontology in Antiquity and in the Greek, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Sikh and African Philosophy: the Multicultural Intellectual Traditions in Africa, Greece and the Middle East"; with again "Ethics, Politics & Society in African Philosophy" as the title of the African philosophy section. Though most of the 350 or so participants tended to stay with the concurrent sessions in their own particular fields of interest, the general spirit of the meeting set an attractively multicultural cast to the weekend's events.

Nearly thirty Africanist papers were heard in eight panels. As has been the case for some time now "African Philosophy" proved itself in practice to be much broader and more "cultural" in its scope than the brand of philosophy termed "Anglo-American" and dominant in U.S. departments of philosophy. Few of the participants seemed to have any objection to this breadth.

In separate presentations, Silvia Federici of Hofstra University, Tsenay Serequeberhan of Hampshire College, and Nigel Gibson of Columbia University discussed the enduring importance of Frantz Fanon's political philosophy, engaging the perennial Fanonesque issues of violence, the self, and the status of Fanon as a critic of and/or participant in European philosophy.

In a subsequent panel on ethics, Emmanuel Eze of Fordham University discussed the attractions of definitions of "truth" derived from the Ifa tradition, for an African philosophy. Howard University's Segun Gbadegesin examined the ethical dimensions of the complex question of polygamy, and Jups Kluyskens of the Leiden Institute of Cultural and Social Studies, the Netherlands, discussed the massive discourse on 'Africa' which occurs in the international development and aid communities; this in particular was a necessary reminder that not all of the (Western) 'knowledge' about Africa exists in the academy, and that non-academic knowledge is enormously influential.

A subsequent session gathered contributions on the nature of African philosophy itself. In assessing the nineteenth century African thinkers E.W. Blyden and J.A.B. Horton, Pieter Boele van Hensbroek of Groningen University, the Netherlands lent an important historical

dimension to an authenticity question of no small importance today: the case of "non-Western" thinkers situated in "Western" traditions (one needs only think of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, or V.Y. Mudimbe), how do questions of subject position, hybridity, perspective and displacement figure in their philosophical programmes? David Chioni Moore followed with a paper on "African Philosophy vs. Philosophy of Africa". Moore asserted, first, that African philosophy does indeed exist and that that needs not be debated inside the community, and second, that one of the crucial, enduring, but recently neglected tasks of African philosophy is to debate the nature of a doubtful unitary "Africa" itself, particularly in the light of non-essentialist or constructivist philosophies. Abisi Sharakiya proceeded with a nuanced survey of modern African political thought.

The next day's panels diversified geographically. Lez Edmond of Saint John's university discussed the relevance of Malcolm X's thoughts for current social dilemmas; Toni King of Binghamton explored African-American female bonding relations; Darryl Thomas, also Binghamton, reviewed the role of the great African-American intellectual, singer, athlete, and activist Paul Robeson in the struggle against global apartheid; and R. Nai'm AbdurRafi of SUNY/Oneonta engaged the struggles of African-African Muslims in U.S. prisons. Later, Binghamton's David McBride examined religious institutions of the African diaspora in the West, and Millersville's Leroy Hopkins explored the thought of the German African(ist)s Leo Africanus and Wilhelm Anton Amo.

In more purely African papers, Townson State's John Murungi discussed the dialectic between African politics and the African self, Connecticut's George Munda Carew critically evaluated Mbiti's ontology, and Simphiwe Hlatshwayo of SUNY Oneonta reviewed the role of multiculturalism in South African education. Finally, shifting the focus to matters of art and literature, Binghamton's Peter Thuynsma discussed metaphor in African literature, Binghamton's Gertrude James was truly cross-cultural in her Caribbean perspective on Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Louise Bourgault of Northern Michigan

talked about the ethical and aesthetic struggles embodied in Hausa drama.

All panels featured substantial question-and-answer periods which were very lively. The participants included roughly equal portions of three more or less distinct groups: white American and European Africanists; actually African scholars of philosophy, and Afrocentric African-American intellectuals from the New York-area academic community, most of whom participated in the discussions rather than read papers. Many of those in the formed two groups had not previously directly encountered intellectuals in the latter group. With the well known views of the Afrocentric participants on the table (Africa the pure, the good, the beautiful, the mother of all culture, the antithesis of the cold, rational, and calculating West), conflicts on numerous issues arose. In some cases the American Afrocentrics looked to the actually African participants for confirmation of certain 'Africa' views, such confirmation was not readily forthcoming. As A. Appiah has argued in recent publications, Afrocentrism's "negative critique" - that Africa's history and culture have been criminally repressed in most of Western history - is in little doubt. U.S. Afrocentrism's "positive" programme - that Black Africa is possessed of some unitary essence, and that essence is at the root of the great aspects of by turns Egyptian, Ancient Greek, and then Western culture - is a proposition of much greater uncertainty.

Still, it must be said, that thanks to the goodwill of all participants - the sense that in the larger political picture all were on the same side of the same fight - and thanks to the mental agility and deft diplomacy of the chairman Abisi Sharakiya, the pot, as it were, kept boiling without quite boiling over during the course of the panels. The conference's location at the southwest edge of Harlem played no small role in this unusual (and too-rare) grouping of minds.

A highlight of the general conference was the plenary session "African Philosophy and Praxis" with Eskia Mphahlele, Ali Mazrui, Locksley Edmonson and the Kenyan writer M.M. Githae Mugo.

This attractive annual conference, soon in its twelfth year, is generally held in either New York City or in Binghamton in the mid-autumn. Inquiries should be directed to Prof. Abisi M. Sharakiya, Department of Philosophy, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY 13902-6000, USA.

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