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To the memory of Cheikh Anta Diop and Alexis Kagame, departed leaders of Contemporary African Philosophy, and of our lamented colleagues John Arthur, Peter Bodunrin, Didier Kaphagawani, Benjamin Oguah, Henry Odera Oruka, and John Olu Sodipo.
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Preface

This volume is intended to be a comprehensive anthology of essays on the history of African philosophy, ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary, and on all the main branches of the discipline, including logic, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and politics. The chapters are nearly all new. They have been written in such a way as to be reflective, enlightening, and useful to both students and scholars. Methodological concerns as manifested in contemporary controversies among African philosophers on the proper relations between the traditional and the modern in their discipline have been addressed. But pride of place belongs to substantive issues of philosophy as these have occupied the African mind in communal conceptions and individualized cogitations.

Accordingly, this text will not only serve as a companion to a main text in a course in African philosophy; it can also serve as the principal text at the graduate as well as the undergraduate level. The reader will therefore find ample bibliographies appended to most chapters. But this is not their only rationale. The discipline itself, of contemporary African philosophy, is in a phase of intense postcolonial reconstruction, which manifests itself in print in many different ways. The availability of relevant literature must therefore be a welcome aid to the curious. But even to the incurious outside of Africa, who are still often frankly taken by surprise by the mention of African philosophy, such notification of availability might well occasion the beginning of curiosity. Teachers newly embarked upon courses in African philosophy will also be empowered by the same circumstance. They will find that the Introduction to this volume was designed with their basic needs, though not only that, in mind.

It is a pleasure to specify my own helpers. My thanks go first to Professors Abraham, Irele, and Menkiti for their help as advisory editors. Thanks go next to all the contributors for their contributions. The call of the *Companion* often diverted them from pressing pursuits. Last, but most lasting of all, my thanks go to Barry Hallen for helping me with this work in every conceivable way from conception to completion. His lengthy survey of contemporary Anglophone philosophy (see chapter 6), which, more than any of the entries, gives this work the stamp of a *companion*, is only a sign of the lengths to which he has gone to bring help to me in various ways. To be sure, without him, that survey would most likely have taken a committee of at least five scholars.
PREFACE

In a class of its own is my indebtedness to Blackwell’s technical staff. Without the initiative of Steve Smith, Blackwell’s philosophy editor, in concert with inputs from Professor Tommy Lott, the project would never have started. And without the combination of patience and purposefulness on the part of his colleagues at Blackwell, Beth Remmes, Nirit Simon, and Sarah Dancy, it would never have been completed. The completion was also facilitated by the extraordinary collegiality of Professor Lewis Gordon through whom I had access to the facilities of the Department of Africana Studies when I was Visiting Scholar at Brown University in the summer of 2002.

Kwasi Wiredu
Introduction: African Philosophy in Our Time

KWASI WIREDU

The Postcolonial Situation

A principal driving force in postcolonial African philosophy has been a quest for self-definition. It was therefore quite appropriate that Masolo entitled his history of contemporary African philosophy, the first full-length history of the discipline in English, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. This search is part of a general postcolonial soul-searching in Africa. Because the colonialists and related personnel perceived African culture as inferior in at least some important respects, colonialism included a systematic program of de-Africanization. The most unmistakable example, perhaps, of this pattern of activity was in the sphere of religion, where mighty efforts were made by the missionaries to save African souls perceived to be caught up in the darkness of “paganism.” But, at least, it did seem to them that Africans had something somewhat similar to religion, and some of them actually wrote books on African religion and even, in some cases, mentioned that subject in their university teaching.

The position was markedly different as regards African philosophy. Philosophy departments tended not to develop the impression that there was any such thing. I graduated from the University of Ghana in 1958 after at least five years of undergraduate study. In all those years I was not once exposed to the concept of African philosophy. J. B. Danquah’s *The Akan Doctrine of God*, subtitled *A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics*, had been published in 1945. Yet for all the information that was made available at the Department of Philosophy, that would have remained a secret to me if I hadn’t made acquaintance with it in my own private reading in secondary school. I do not now remember what else in the literature relevant to African philosophy I knew by the time of graduation (1958) either by the grace of God or by the play of accident, except for the bare title of Radin’s *Primitive Man as Philosopher*. However, when I ran across or stumbled over it, the word “primitive” in the title put me off, and I stayed away from its pages until a long time after graduation.

I do not say these things with the slightest intention of casting aspersions on my teachers. They were hired to teach my schoolmates and me Western philosophy, and they did that well. I remember them with the fondest feelings, not only because
they gave us good mental training, but also because they were good men. In any case, at the time in question, although there was a lot to research, there was little to teach. The reason for bringing up these things is that they give some idea of the kind of academic and pedagogic situation that faced the first wave of post-independence African teachers of philosophy. Ghana won independence from Britain in 1957. Independence for other African countries followed in rapid succession. In 1960 alone, 16 African countries became independent. Thus by the mid-1960s there were significant numbers of post-independence African academics in various universities throughout Africa. African Studies became a very visible feature of university life in Africa, now with the participation of Africans in leadership positions. Certain African disciplines made immediate progress, as, for example, African history and also African literature, in which there were early manifestations of creative genius.

In African philosophy the situation was somewhat more imponderable. Unlike the disciplines just mentioned, African philosophy was usually non-existent in university departments of philosophy. If the post-independence African philosophers did not start with an absolute *tabula rasa*, it was because some relevant materials were available in the departments of anthropology and in those concerned with the study of religions. We may note examples like Evans-Pritchard (1937); Forde (1954); Herskovits (1938); Rattray (1923); and Smith (1950). African philosophers are beholden to these authors among others for a certain amount of preliminary data. But due to no fault of these authors, the works in question have tended to foster models of exposition in African philosophy that have been the source of considerable controversy. The troublesome features of these models were the following.

First, they were narrative and interpretative but, as a rule, not evaluative except indirectly. Their main aim was to explain, largely to foreigners, how Africans lived by their *ideas*. Their philosophical relevance was due to the fact that some of these were fundamental ideas regarding such topics as God, mind, time, causality, destiny, freedom, and the good. In the field of religion, the evaluative element in these accounts of African thought, which were generally (though not universally) written by Christian authors, consisted in the presumption, carried by immanent implication rather than explicit assertion, that if an African idea proved to be irreducibly incompatible with a Christian one, it was due for correction in the interests of salvation. In anthropology, indications as to where validity or truth might lie often came in the form of explanations of how given African modes of thought deviated from those of the researchers concerned. Nevertheless, as far as their basic intent was concerned, the texts were intended to be informative rather than speculative. Investigations into the validity or soundness of the ideas were no intrinsic part of the objectives of the researches.

Second, the accounts in question attributed ideas to whole African peoples, sometimes even to the entire African race. Information was, of course, collected from individual "informants." But interest lay in the beliefs of the communities to which the individuals belonged and not in the thinking of the individual "informants." The case of Griaule’s *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* (1965), in which exposure was given to a named individual of an African society, is an (apparent) exception that proves the rule. Wittingly or unwittingly, the impression seems to have been...
created of unanimity of belief among African peoples. Underlying this whole situation was the fact that the African ideas under study in the present context usually existed in an oral rather than a written tradition of thought. The best way of gaining information about those ideas seemed to be by interviewing living repositories of African world views and also piecing together information embedded in proverbs, folktales, funeral dirges, ethical maxims, and the like.

When, by the force of historical circumstances, African teachers of African philosophy found themselves relying on works of the kind just described, that reliance soon bred, in many instances, unmistakable affinities of approach. Thus, in the hands of some African philosophers, African philosophy was becoming hard to distinguish from a sort of informal anthropology. An important difference between the resulting literature and its preccolonial antecedents was that the African philosophers concerned wrote in a nationalistic spirit that brooked no nonsense about the possibility of philosophical error within African traditional thinking. The ground of dismay in the minds of other African philosophers with this development consisted in the conviction that philosophy is not just a narrative, but also an evaluative enterprise, the latter being an essential aspect of the discipline. On this view, philosophers should not content themselves with just informing others of the ideas entertained by their communities; they should also concern themselves with figuring out, for their own enlightenment and, perhaps, that of others, what in them is true, if any, and what is false, if any. Sometimes associated with this conviction has been the opinion that philosophizing is such an individualized activity that it is not plausible to suppose that whole cultures could have a common philosophy. There has also been the suggestion that without writing you don’t really have philosophy, for the discipline must go hand in hand with science, and without writing you do not have science.

Paulin Hountondji

The person in whose writings all these reservations about the anthropology-like approach in African philosophy have been united, which for convenience we may call traditionalist, is the French-speaking African philosopher Paulin Hountondji. Among Francophone African philosophers, he is the one who has had the most impact on philosophical discussions in the world of Anglophone African philosophy. The best-known presentation of his views is in his *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1996). He has, along with some Francophone African philosophers, used the word “ethnophilosophy” as a kind of negative characterization of what I have called here the traditionalist approach to African philosophy. The controversy that Hountondji’s critique of ethnophilosophy has precipitated has constituted quite a large part of the concerns of contemporary African philosophy. That controversy may be studied in quite a few books. I mention the following almost at random: Appiah (1989: ch. 8); Appiah (1992: ch. 5); Gbadegesin (1991: ch. 1); Gyekye (1987: chs. 1–3); also see the preface to the revised edition; Kwame (1995: Introduction, chs. 1, 2, and 5); Makinde (1988: chs. 1–3); Masolo (1994: chs. 2, 3, and 7); Mosley (1995); Oladipo (1992); Oruka (1990a); Serequeberhan (1991);
In this controversy, Hountondji’s dialectical resilience has been much on display. But he has not been averse to revision. In his contribution to the present volume (see chapter 44), he adds extension to revision by demonstrating how the scope of his critique of ethnophilosophy may be extended to comprehend the need to marshal our indigenous resources of knowledge as a basis of scientific development.

Since I myself am often grouped together with Hountondji as belonging to the anti-ethnophilosophy school, I might take the opportunity both to acknowledge the basic correctness of the classification and to point out, however, that my own reservations about the traditionalist approach are more limited than Hountondji’s. I have no objection, in principle, to attributing a philosophy to a whole people, at certain levels of generality. Nor, although I am all for a scientific orientation in philosophy, do I define philosophy in such close intimacy with science as Hountondji does. My main unhappiness with the traditionalist approach derives from its insufficiently critical stance. Just as there was an element of implied evaluation in the accounts of African thought offered by the anthropologists and specialists in religion, there is an evaluation implicit in traditionalist accounts. The difference is only that whereas in the former case, particularly, where the authors concerned were Western scholars, the evaluations tended, by and large, to be negative, in the latter they have uniformly tended to be positive. In itself, that is no problem. But there are, among traditionalists, as hinted above, clear indications of impatience with any suggestion, on the part of an African philosopher, that philosophical fallibility might possibly be encountered in the thought of our ancestors or that there might be some aspect of an African culture that could be less than ideal from a philosophical point of view.

Traditionalists have tended, furthermore, to restrict the concerns of modern African philosophy to issues having some connection with traditional African thought and culture. But the modern world presents intellectual challenges which may not all admit of such a derivation, and to abstain from involvement with them on the grounds of a non-African origination is unlikely to prove a blessing to Africa in the modern world. Should it occur to anyone to liberalize the restriction by requiring, not that everything in modern African philosophy must have a connection with traditional Africa but only that it should bear some relevance to Africa, it can be shown that the new restriction is vacuous, for what makes Africa modern must include her ability to domesticate any useful modern resources of knowledge and reflection not already to hand. This is, of course, without prejudice to the need for a proper sense of African priorities. On any judicious reckoning, such priorities will include a careful study of African traditional thought. Thus one can be both sympathetic to traditional (not necessarily traditionalist) thinking and sensitive to the imperatives of modern existence. (See A. G. A. Bello’s forthright discussion of methodological controversies in African philosophy in this volume, chapter 18.)

Indeed, what to do with modern issues and resources of philosophical thinking not directly originating from Africa is one of the two main topics around which the controversy on the question of African philosophy has revolved, explicitly or implicitly. The other topic is, of course, what to do with our inheritance of traditional philosophy. Among Africans, there has not, contrary to copious appearances, been
any question as to whether there is any such thing as African philosophy, but rather how best African philosophy may be done. The question whether African philosophy exists, taken simpliciter, has always, in my opinion, been an absurd question. Any group of bipeds that are barely rational will have to have some general conceptions about such things as, for example, what is meant by saying that a person is virtuous or the opposite. It would be an extreme step indeed to deny to the traditional African mind any tendency of a philosophical kind. Certainly, Hountondji does not take that step. He concedes at least that “we Africans can probably today recover philosophical fragments from our oral literature” (1996: 106). On the other hand, if we do not include in our philosophical program, in addition to the study of our traditional philosophy, the investigation of modern issues not dictated by traditionalist prepossessions, then the question whether there is a modern tradition of African philosophy would continue to have at least a prima facie relevance.

The Study of African Traditional Philosophy

But let us reflect for a moment on the study of African traditional philosophy. As already noted, there is a conflict between the traditionalist and the anti-ethnophilosophical approach, in regard, for example, to the need for a critical evaluation. But there is a prior question as to how the traditional thought-contents are to be discovered. One historic claim to such discovery was Father Placide Tempels’s Bantu Philosophy (1959). Tempels was a Belgian missionary belonging to the Catholic faith, who ministered unto the Baluba of present-day Zaire (see Barry Hallen’s survey of contemporary Anglophone African philosophy in this volume, chapter 6). Tempels formed the impression, which in the circles in which he moved was quite revolutionary, that those African peoples actually had a coherent philosophy and that it governed their day-to-day living. Not, of course, that he thought much of the validity of the Bantu philosophy. “No doubt,” he remarked, “anyone can show the error of their reasoning, but it must none the less be admitted that their notions are based on reason” (p. 77). He wrote the book to prove this revolutionary point and to equip fellow missionaries with an insight into the thinking of the Bantu accurate enough to facilitate their conversion to the truths of the Christian message.

Tempels’s book, which was actually published in the present English translation by a group of African intellectuals in Paris, was received with considerable enthusiasm among some African scholars and others of the generation of Senghor. Senghor was the first post-independence President of the West African State of Senegal, a man of many parts, who was responsible for elaborating the philosophy of Negritude to which we shall return below. That philosophy fell into disrepute, however, among Francophone African philosophers roughly of the generation of Hountondji, such as Marcien Towa and Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, and has been one of the principal objects of attack in the critique of ethnophilosophy. Another principal target of anti-ethnophilosophy has been Alexis Kagame’s linguistic studies of Bantu thought.

In connection with Kagame, whose principal works, as far as I know, have not been translated into English, an extremely important question arises, namely, to
what extent do the characteristics of a natural language give any indications as to the philosophical thinking of the people who speak it? Kagame (see chapter 16 by Liboire Kagabo in this volume) thought that the Bantu languages were fairly revealing in this respect, and he has been criticized quite considerably on this count. But the constraints of language on philosophical thinking are notorious in the Western tradition. Witness, for example, Bertrand Russell’s animadversion with respect to the metaphysical notion of substance that “A great book can be written showing the influence of syntax on philosophy; in such a book the author could trace the influence of the subject-predicate structure of sentences upon European thought, more particularly, in this matter of substance” (1946: 225). Another book could be devoted to the influence of the superabundance of abstract nouns on European philosophies. Whatever the truth in this matter, it is plain that, although language may not necessarily lead to the discovery of truths about reality, it can lead to the discovery of some truths about the thought of an individual or a group about reality. Language is, in fact, an essential resource in the discovery of the philosophy embedded in an oral tradition not just in a lexicographical, but also in a deep conceptual sense. It goes without saying, of course, that caution is necessary in any recourse to language in this matter. Attention to the language issue is evident in the following pieces of writing in African philosophy: Bello (1990); Gyekye (1987: ch. 11); Masolo (1994); Sogolo (1992: ch. 1, sect. 3); and Wiredu (1996a: chs. 7 and 8). In this volume, considerations of language assume an evident importance in A. G. A. Bello’s “Some Methodological Controversies in African Philosophy” (chapter 18), Victor Ocaya’s “Logic in the Acholi Language” (chapter 20), and Barry Hallen’s “Yoruba Moral Epistemology” (chapter 21).

To return to Senghor, his Negritude is, of course, a philosophy of black identity. Senghor argued that black people had a particular way of knowing, determined by their psychophysiology, which may be described as knowing by participation. In contrast to Western ways of knowing, which, he said, analyzes the object, breaking it into pieces, so to speak, African cognition proceeded by embracing the object. He actually once said approvingly, in a lecture in Nigeria in the 1960s, that this cognitive procedure “con-fused” objects rather than breaking them down: which raised anxieties among some African intellectuals that this came a little too close to making non-hyphenated confusion a congenital trait of the African psyche. To the Francophone critics of ethnophilosophy, indeed, the mere postulating of a peculiarly African mentality was obnoxious enough.

It is an interesting fact that keenness on the critique of ethnophilosophy has not been as much in evidence among Anglophone African philosophers as among their Francophone counterparts. (On philosophical thought in Francophone Africa generally, see Abiola Irele’s (1995) magisterial survey. Among Anglophone African philosophers, the study of communal African philosophies has not evoked any concerted outcry, and works such as Abraham (1962), Danquah (1944) or Idowu (1962) remain highly esteemed, and rightly so. If Mbiti (1990) has been greeted with considerable criticism, it has been mainly because of certain specific things, such as its claim that Africans cannot conceive of a future extending beyond two years, to which we will return below. In fact, the study of traditional communal philosophies is a time-honored branch of African philosophy, with antecedents in
the work of such historic thinkers as Edward Blyden, Africanus Horton, and Mensah Sarbah. These thinkers are discussed briefly by Pieter Boele van Hensbroek in the present volume in “Some Nineteenth-Century African Political Thinkers” (chapter 4) and at more length in his book Political Discourses in African Thought 1860 to the Present (1999). More recent works of high standing in the tradition of Abraham, Danquah, and Idowu are Gbadegesin (1991) and Gyekye (1987).

A notable fact about the books by Abraham, Danquah, Idowu, Gbadegesin, and Gyekye is that they undertake detailed and in-depth exposition, analysis, and interpretation of the traditional philosophies of specific African peoples of whose languages the authors have at least a first-hand knowledge. Also they eschew unrestrained generalizations about the traditional philosophies of the entire continent. In one chapter, indeed, Gyekye ventures some continental generalizations, but he is at pains to tender his evidence (1987: ch. 12).

The peak of such methodological circumspection is reached in Hallen and Sodipo (1997). In this work Hallen and his late co-author Sodipo study, among other things, the epistemological thought of the Yoruba of Nigeria in close collegial collaboration with traditional specialists in Yoruba medicine, language, and culture. Their inferences and interpretations are based on copious quotations from the discourse of the traditional thinkers in question, who remain unnamed at their own express request. The significance of the methodology of the two authors goes beyond mere circumspection. It is a definite departure from the old procedure – which elicited data from “informants,” veritable informational servants – about African traditional thought. In the present method, traditional thinkers are brought into the enterprise of expounding and elucidating the traditional thought of an African people as authorities commanding respect in their own right. Hallen’s “Yoruba Moral Epistemology” (chapter 21 in this volume) and, on a greater scale, his The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture (2000) are continuing fruits of that program of meticulous research.

One of the most remarkable results of the investigation under discussion is the finding that Yoruba discourse lays down more stringent conditions for knowledge (or more strictly, what corresponds to knowledge in the Yoruba language) than is apparent in English or, generally, Anglo-American speech. In English-speaking philosophy it seems to be generally accepted that somebody may be said to know something, provided that she believes it, and it is true, and the belief is justified in some appropriate way. By the way, the need for not just a justification, but also one of an appropriate type, was pressed upon the attention of contemporary Anglo-American epistemologists by Edmund Gettier, in a three-page article entitled “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (1963). The control that those three pages have exercised on recent epistemology has been, to say the least, tremendous.

On the showing of Hallen and Sodipo and their traditional Yoruba colleagues, a further condition would seem to be indicated, namely, that the prospective knower must have an eye-witness acquaintance with what is claimed to be known. This difference in English and Yoruba discourse about knowledge does not seem to be a matter that can be reconciled by mere verbal readjustments; it reflects different valuations of cognitive data. Interestingly, the language of the Akans (of Ghana) does not seem to carry any eye-witness imperative in its concept of knowledge:
which must reinforce the need for caution in the generalized attribution of philosophical persuasions to the entirety of the African race.

A project in some ways akin to that of Hallen and Sodipo, but quite distinct, was pursued by Henry Odera Oruka (of treasured memory) in Kenya. In his research into what he called “sage philosophy,” he sought out individuals among traditional Kenyans who were reputed for wisdom and noted for their independence from foreign influences, and held (and recorded) long question-and-answer sessions with them. In these encounters the sages expressed their views about various topics, such as the existence and nature of God, freedom, justice, equality, and so on. Oruka (1990b) published translations of these discussions together with the names and even pictures of the sages concerned.

Already, this marks a difference between Oruka’s project and that of Hallen and Sodipo. But a deeper difference is that Oruka’s traditional collaborators, especially those among them that he called philosophic sages, expressed their own personal views and were sometimes quite critical of the communal thought of their society. For example, some of them avowed atheism, contrary to the widespread impression that traditional Africans are universally religious. Oruka’s work in this area confirms a belief which the present writer, for one, has entertained right from the beginning, that among our traditional peoples there are original philosophers from whom we may have something to learn. The work on “sage philosophy” was not the only contribution that Oruka, who died prematurely in 1996, made to contemporary African philosophy; but for that in particular we are all eternally indebted to him. (For further discussion of the sage philosophy project, see Kibujjo M. Kalumba, “Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance, and Future,” chapter 19 in this volume.)

A point, which is obvious once you think about it, but which is easily overlooked, is that African traditional philosophy is not coextensive with African communal philosophy, for traditional thought, as is apparent from the immediately preceding remarks, has an individualized component. Moreover, a communal philosophy is, in any case, a kind of historical précis of the excogitations of individual philosophic thinkers, usually, though not invariably, of unknown identity. Some of these would, inevitably, have had views that did not conform to previously received notions.

There are, for example, in some of the deliverances of Akan talking drums some cosmological paradoxes, which, in my opinion, suggest pantheistic views quite at variance with the commonplace theism of Akan communal thinking (see Wiredu 1996a: 119–21). Looked at in this way the study of traditional philosophy becomes more multifaceted than hitherto.

Mbiti and Time in Africa

Controversy is one of the marks of vitality in philosophy. In contemporary African philosophy controversy has tended to be more about traditional African philosophy itself than in it. Among the issues that have invoked discussions of the latter category, pride of place belongs to the debate about the question of “the African conception of time.” This circumstance is thanks to Mbiti’s treatment of the subject