

# The Challenge of African Philosophy: A Reply to Mabogo More

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## 1. Introduction

This article is a reply to Mabogo More's (1996:109-129) paper, 'African Philosophy Revisited', in which he argued that the Western 'valorisation' of 'reason' as the foundational act of Western philosophy and philosophical enquiry in general, covertly denies the existence of African philosophy. For the sake of clarity I set out below, my perspective on the questionable claim to superiority of Western rationality. I argue that a cut and paste description of Europe's denial of the existence or possibility of African philosophy serves well to confront the colonialist prejudice in all its formations and guises but does not do African philosophy any further good. In other words, I hold that More's account of Western denials of African philosophy neither advances debate on issues in African philosophy nor does it illumine the nature of African philosophy itself. As More's paper challenges the positions of Shutte (1993) and Rauche (1996), I reassess the contributions of these two South African teachers of philosophy and in so doing, reaffirm the merit which I consider their work justly deserves.

## 2. The Context of the Reply

I identify with More's strong feelings against what is commonly regarded as the Western underestimation of the African's capacity for dialectical and ratiocinative thought. In fact More's article neglected to mention Levy-Bruhl, who argued that the mentality of so-called primitive people was radically different to that of Western logic. Levy-Bruhl (in Honderich 1995:482) described 'primitive mentality' as 'mystical', meaning that it is dominated by feeling, whereas scientific experience is largely cognitive. Levy-Bruhl became celebrated for the findings he extrapolated from his ethnographic studies, that the 'pre-logical thought' of primitive peoples is dictated largely by the ethos of participation (non-distancing) rather than the law of non-contradiction. In this way, Levy-Bruhl embodies the worst expression of racism

against African people since Joseph Conrad's main but monstrous character of Kurtz as depicted in his *Heart of Darkness*.

The issue of language was not explicitly raised in More's paper, yet it is nevertheless relevant to place it on record to strengthen his powerful opposition to the obsessive ethnocentrism of Western ethnographers. In this regard, Hountondji well points out that ethnographic prejudice against Africans was underpinned by the spurious thesis, attributed to Levy-Bruhl, that African languages are rooted in a 'concrete' rather than an abstract orientation. He extrapolated this idea of a language with a concrete orientation from the example of the Yoruba language which expresses 'nineteen' as 'twenty minus one' (after the one-to-one method of counting concrete items such as cows, one by one). But he conveniently overlooked that Latin too, expresses 'nineteen' and 'eighteen' in exactly the same way on a one-to-one basis as *undeviginti* and *duodeviginti* respectively. Yet, as Hountondji (1997:24) quickly quips, no one ever dares call Latin a 'primitive' language. (Levy-Bruhls die hard. Without going into a peroration, some may recall du Toit's paper, presented at a Southern African Philosophical Society meeting, on the Zulu language as 'A Natural Language without a Philosophical and Scientific vocabulary'—n.d. unpublished).

To philosophers such as Hountondji (1993), the expressions and conclusions contained in some ethnographical reports reflect the worst denigration of peoples of African stock. Hoffman (in Odera 1994:194) also points out that in its ethnocentrism European rationality has had no other ambition than to search for a 'totally different world' in traditional Africa. Hence for More, and a host of similarly affected African thinkers, this writer included, such unpalatable estimations of Africans are like blocks that must doubtless be cleared before the undertaking of an African philosophy can begin. Levy-Bruhl, was of course, not a philosopher but an anthropologist or ethnographer interested not in the commonalities that bind human beings together as one human race but in people's differences and idiosyncrasies. Thus, he dwelled on the contingent features of culture and race in order to weave his theory of the lack of reason among Africans, (reason being regarded, as More rightly states, as the bed-rock of philosophical reflection). Such utterances acted as theoretical underpinnings for the historical period of colonialism during its phase of unchecked advance into Africa. This advance was programmatically and strategically intensified against Africans by specifically categorising them as non-European peoples. In this manner colonialism suppressed African people to the point of objectifying African existence. Even though Levy-Bruhl later abandoned his theory (of the *mentalite primitive*), history probably will not easily forget him. He admitted in his last two years that his prejudice had misdirected him to locate mystical participation exclusively in certain cultures while in fact such participation is a universal human phenomenon (Levy-Bruhl in Honderich 1995).

As an African, I can sympathise with the emotional and psychological provocation such remarks (made under the auspices of science and 'reason') bear on the self-understanding and pride of the African intellectual. But one should sound a caveat here. Philosophy is a conceptual activity. As such the philosopher hardly ever makes a statement without entangling himself in a thicket. Such appears to be the case with More's paper. He decries Western sceptical assessment of the African capacity for rational judgement. Yet at the same time, More unwittingly absolutises Western rationality too. He adopts and engages a specifically Western model for critiquing Western denials of African philosophy. In the process, he loses the opportunity of indicating that which is essentially African in African philosophy and which can challenge 'valorised' Western rationality. He falls into the same prison house Hountondji (1983) and Bodunrin (1980) remain trapped in, namely the positivistic epistemological paradigms which often fail to develop bridgeheads with other traditions.

More's discussion of the Western valorisation of reason invokes the philosophy of *negritude*, which emerged as a counterweight to the western devaluation of African societies, which Western outsiders perceived as organised around emotional values. The strict separation of the knower and the object of knowledge, which remains a telling feature of occidental philosophy, sometimes poses a dilemma for an African philosopher trained in the epistemological ideologies taught in Western institutions. Although he has to internalise these ideologies, the African philosopher nevertheless cannot help feeling a sense of discontinuity or dissonance with his own personal experience. It was in this context of dissonance that Senghor unwittingly 'denied' rationality (analysis, system and logic) to the African mind by undermining the distinction between subject and object. He wrote that:

In dark Africa, people always dance because they feel, and they always dance someone or something. Now to dance is to discover and to re-create, to identify oneself with the forces of life, to lead a fuller life, and in short, to be. It is, at any rate, the highest form of knowledge .... The reason of classical Europe is analytic through utilization, the reason of the African Negro, intuitive through participation (Senghor in Solomon & Higgins 1995:255).

Conradie (in Burr 1980:392) explains the law of participation as

a direct spontaneous experience of the world, a life-surge and self-abandonment which effect a mystical sympathy with the universe. For this reason Senghor can state 'emotion is African as reason is Hellenic'.

By juxtaposing the Hellenic and the African, Senghor is not 'othering' the African but only underlining the inability of the Western discursive method of

reasoning to grasp the totality of reality in its width and depth, and the fact that only intuitive reason is capable of an understanding that goes beyond appearance (Senghor in Burr 1980:393). Senghor is supported by Anyanwu (in Ruch & Anyanwu 1981:89):

The African culture did not assume that reality could be subordinated to human reason alone. Imagination, intuitive experience and feelings are also modes of knowing. This is why the deepest expression of African cultural reality has been through art, music, folksong and myths rather than logical analysis.

With these remarks, Anyanwu and Senghor join the legion of thinkers who reject the Western monopoly on rationality. To appreciate what Senghor and Anyanwu are doing, the reader must understand where these writers come from. Having been trained in Western philosophy, they are convinced that not all principles of Western rationality can handle the totality of human experience without making Western rationality appear hegemonic. Dissatisfied with Western methods, Senghor and Anyanwu thus challenge the exclusivity of Western rationality precisely because it tends to undermine those pyramids of value and meaning which are not mediated through or do not neatly fit the singular Western prescription of doing philosophy.

Constructions of meaning in an African context easily become overlooked by Western thinkers because they ignore the fact that at various stages of existence human beings undergo various experiences. Some experiences are of a religious or subjective nature while others, by contrast, are of an objective and more public nature. The fact that the former cannot be predicated by verifiable means, does not mean that philosophy must sweep them aside. This consideration gave rise, during the early stages of this century, to the appearance of phenomenology, which led to the growth of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy, the forerunner of post-modern philosophy at the closing stage of the century. The challenge of African philosophy, is to adopt these latter-day methods and to adapt them to the peculiarly African situation. Conversely, African philosophy too can play a restorative and invigorating function in relation to Western philosophy. To strengthen my argument I shall illustrate these two positions.

To illustrate the *first position*, I must begin by stating that an African philosopher can harness a Western method in the service of African philosophy only by placing the African world-view at the centre of his theorising. Some philosophers would argue that the conceptual framework most suitable for African philosophy is the vitalist rather than the objectivist framework (Maurier in Wright 1979:11). The vitalist framework of African philosophy, with its focus on the priority of life, thrusts us right into those issues which led Senghor to reject the objectivist stance. To

ground a vitalist orientation in African philosophy, the African philosopher can derive much benefit from the views of Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. I mention these three European thinkers because of the implications of their phenomenological, existential philosophies for an African philosophy.

To move philosophy away from the concerns of theoretical science, Husserl (1954) developed the concept of the life-world or *Lebenswelt*. His concept of the life-world sought to demonstrate that the essential historicity of our consciousness can best be understood from the perspectives of the preconceptions which derive from our given traditions, social milieu and experience. If one considers for a moment the notion 'preconception', it means that which is not thought or not yet available to cogitation. Thus we discover that this concept shows that some Western thinkers have for a time grappled with the limitations of reason!

Heidegger subsequently reworked Husserl's preconceptual structure of the life-world as fundamentally pre-theoretical and pre-critical. By positing that *Dasein* is essentially in-the-world and cannot be detached from it, Heidegger's mode of philosophising resonates with Senghor's notion of 'participation'. The lived or experienced world is given, disclosed or revealed to humanity not by scientific knowledge but by pre-scientific experiences. But Heidegger goes further. He posits that things or entities in the world are not primarily objects of theoretical cognition but are tools that are ready to be used (*Zuhanden*) rather than studied or observed. Space does not allow us to tease out the full implications of Heidegger's notions for African philosophy, but they are enormous. Much of traditional philosophy in Africa is communal rather than individualistic. It should be clear from the above thumb-nail account of Husserl and Heidegger that any reflection which mediates between the extremes of Western (individualistic) rationality and the African (communal) experience must come to terms with philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger.

Since much of African philosophy is cultural, an African philosopher cannot afford to ignore hermeneutics as a method of cultural penetration and understanding. I have noted that African philosophy is communal in juxtaposition to the critical and dialectical disputations of a single individual. I concede that this is the sense in which Rauche (1996) sees the value of hermeneutics for African philosophy. In this regard Hountondji's (1983) statement that:

Without any doubt, the problem of African 'philosophy' refers us back to the problem of hermeneutics,

is particularly relevant.

As Okere rightly maintains, the philosophical justification for ethnophilosophy (as an African cultural philosophy) can be found within the framework of a Western hermeneutic methodology. He defends the close relationship

between culture and philosophy. By using the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer, he systematically grounds modern African philosophy on Gadamer's twin concepts of prejudice and the hermeneutic circle (Okere 1983). To avoid unwittingly extolling the virtues of western rationality, More would do well to consider the gains African philosophies could achieve from a dialogue with the philosophers of the West such as Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, who have turned away from a singular preoccupation with Western 'rationality'.

To illustrate my *second point*, one can state the contrast between Western and African thought on the level of dialogue with reference to existentialism. It is a trite point that the mainspring of Western existentialism was to grapple with the problem of alienation. By contrast the problem of alienation is secondary for African philosophy because African people normally gravitate towards each other. Precisely at this juncture, because alienation is transcended in African society, the African communitarian and solidaritarian ethos could provide a counterweight, from a philosophical point of view, to the alienation reflected in Western existentialism. Thus the African communal experience, its insistence on the relationships and bonds between individuals, could open up trajectories of thought that can engage and thus invigorate Western philosophy. The African philosopher could even employ traditional Western rubrics of epistemology, ethics and metaphysics to open up these trajectories based on the African solidaritarian ethos.

Although More's (1996:110-119) challenge to the statements of some ethnocentric Western philosophers is understandable, his protest about the aberrations of Western rationality misses the benefits which the two traditions of philosophy could provide for one another. His catalogue of ethnocentric expressions, inferences and veiled accusations of lack of rationality (More 1996:119-125) is counterproductive for the progress of African philosophy in dialogue with other traditions of philosophy. Such cataloguing can only lead to a forgetfulness of critical sources of African philosophy such as that of the ethos of sociality mentioned already. For a moment the reader may consider that the systematic dehumanisation and extermination of millions of people during the first and second world wars has had minimal influence on French and German philosophy. Similarly the African philosopher's discourse may take its point of departure from reflection on the cumulative abuse of the Africans during the long dark decades of colonialism. Yet to be philosophy proper, in the critical and metaphilosophical sense, the anticolonial discourse must go beyond itself.

As can be gathered from the aforesaid remarks, the overlaboring of the denials of Western rationality conceals a self-contradictory overevaluation of the virtues of Western rationality. Such an unwitting stance seems to turn a blind eye to the internal problematics of 'Western philosophy' which accepts functionalistic methods (e.g. the analytical method) as exclusive instruments.

More denounces questions such as 'What is African philosophy?'; 'Does African philosophy exist?'; 'Is there such a thing as African philosophy?' (More 1996:119), as sceptical questions. I would suggest that these questions, far from denying African philosophy, wittingly or unwittingly, constitute for African philosophy its most special and intellectual appeal. This special appeal is borne out by the copious critical and vigorously analytical essays which have come in the wake of current discussions and debates on African philosophy. Indeed, any person who wants to understand the nature of the debates on African philosophy has to come to terms with the painstaking critical issues raised in terms of these searching questions. Deviating from More's position, I would say that these questions are removed in time and attitude from Tempels' *Philosophie Bantoe*. They are more in the tradition of interrogating the imperatives of the logic of intellectual scrutiny and independence than the descriptive mode of Tempel's ethnographic detail. The questions, in the style of Maurier, Wright and others (Wright 1979) are analytic through and through and prove that questions conceived and predicated on 'alien' assumptions and paradigms can also equally nourish the project of self-criticism and self-analysis in African philosophy.

More (1996:120) further refers to the neglect of African philosophy in most South African universities. I would agree with him but only to a certain extent. I would guess that in relation to the rest of Africa, South African philosophers are at least one to two decades behind, at least as far as the intensity of debates, published research and symposia devoted exclusively to an all-African philosophy agenda is concerned. It is not that there have been no stirrings on the subject. Papers on African philosophy have been presented at proceedings of the Philosophical Society for a considerable time. The sheer fact that More (1996:120n5) acknowledges the existence of a growing number of philosophy articles in a journal produced in Africa and exclusively devoted to a philosophical agenda is proof that South African philosophers are slowly waking up from their slumber. Thus the absence of a full-scale devotion to African philosophy should not be put down to a conscious and deliberate desire to exclude African philosophy *per se*. In any given tradition of philosophy, the themes that receive priority and the methods thinkers adopt or deploy are dictated by the biases of a people's culture and their existential situation and experience (Bodunrin 1981; Levy 1974). What More decries, however, is the overpreoccupation with a particularistic conception of philosophy. As Mudimbe (1988) observes, in Africa the themes and methods that receive attention invariably reflect preferences that presuppose non-African epistemological values and criteria. Thus Conradie (in Burr 1980:409) observes that South African universities are largely preoccupied with either the synthetic or analytic approaches, options which indicate stern devotion to either the European method of hermeneutic synthesis or the Anglo-American analytical tradition.

I am in agreement with More (1996) about the overly Eurocentric content of philosophy given in our lecture rooms and I would add that the same applies to the humanities as they are taught in our nation's established universities. I have mentioned elsewhere that the curricula of Historically Disadvantaged Universities do not reflect the widely dispersed world-views of the great majority of our population (Ndaba 1996). Thus, More (1996:120n5) is perfectly correct in his view that African philosophy is largely ignored at universities except a few isolated black (disadvantaged) ones. However, having decided so unhesitatingly in favour of the inclusion of African philosophy in the universities, I find his studied cold treatment of the philosophical contribution of Shutte and Rauche somewhat disquieting and self-contradictory (More 1996:120-122). In my view, Shutte (1993) successfully challenges or reverses the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemology, particularly in the context of our somewhat misplaced 'first world' focus. But, to leave Shutte and Rauche for the moment, it is clear that the picture of the neglect of African philosophy in our universities needs more objective restatement.

The situation is not as bad as More claims because the position he rightly decries is in fact fast changing. What he should crusade for is its improvement. For example Anthony Appiah's work *In My Father's House* (1993) is a prescribed set-work in the department of philosophy at the University of Natal. In 1994 the late Henry Odera Oruka, the Kenyan founder of sage philosophy, spent three weeks teaching at the University of Cape Town. As a consequence of that visit to UCT, Oruka was invited to visit the Universities of Durban-Westville and Zululand with the graceful co-operation of UCT. In the same year the University of South Africa hosted Prof. Godwill Sogolo of Nigeria. It was refreshing to realise what great progress can be made when institutions co-operate. Prof. Sogolo flew to Durban at the invitation of Durban-Westville and Zululand universities, where More (UDW) and myself (UZ) teach philosophy. Shutte's book *Philosophy for Africa* (1993), controversial though it may be, mentions the author's involvement with African philosophy in the context of teaching and research in African philosophy at UCT.

As More also indicates, the philosophy courses taught at our universities need to interrogate all the issues considered pertinent to the survival of our newly hatched democracy. In this respect, from a philosophical stand-point, the values and world-views of the majority of our black people can hardly be overemphasised. In the light of the foregoing remarks, the appearance of essays such as those of Shutte (1993), Rauche (1996) and More (1996), which could come to bear on the issues of our day should be welcomed. Hence, More must be commended for broaching the subject of an African oriented philosophy syllabus in our universities. However, prioritising African philosophy would, of necessity, force decisions of a serious and complicated methodological and substantive nature. This route in turn would no doubt present an opportunity for other thinkers to criticise those choices and



decisions as 'veiled attempts' to undermine Western philosophy. In this regard, I see Shutte and Rauche as two South African philosophers who have taken a bold and critical approach to African philosophy in the southern African context. Shutte, in particular, takes up the cudgels on behalf of traditional African philosophy, where some African philosophers castigate it because it dwells upon the descriptive details of African culture. More importantly, professional African philosophers reject it because they labour under a dominant and fixed Western over-evaluation of reason and its analytic method. Shutte questions the dominance of the analytical method. It is the writer's view that the analytical paradigm overlooks the notion that analytical philosophy is itself simply adopted from a specific approach in so-called 'Western philosophy'. Hence More (1996:121) also correctly points out that there is no universal agreement about the meaning of Western rationality. In fact, it could be argued, following his observation, that the concepts of 'rationality', 'philosophy', or 'reason' in Western philosophy, have assumed differing forms throughout the history of Western ideas. This concern, as More raises it, is shared equally by other writers. For instance Appiah (1992:85) also points out that the European philosophical tradition, which has castigated African reason, has failed to move beyond the notoriously contradictory and competing answers given to the question of the content and function of what should pass as philosophy. Hence I pose the question that those who support analytical philosophy ignore that it too often runs at loggerheads with the more traditional European-continental concept of 'world-view philosophies' such as vitalism, existentialism and others which sound closer to the pulse of African philosophy than the detractors of traditional African philosophy would like to admit.

Rorty (1979) argues that the above-mentioned strands in Western philosophy are a reaction against the pervasive view of (Western) philosophy, which reduces philosophy to epistemology, or as Rorty puts it, which regards philosophy as the *murror of nature*. Gadamer (in Sprung 1900) also shows that the main reason behind Heidegger's hermeneutical philosophy was the latter's desire to shift Western philosophy away from its individual prejudice that only analytical statement can yield critical judgement. According to Gadamer, Heidegger demonstrates that the over-preoccupation with exactly how statements represent the external world is not a substitute for coherent judgement and experience. Gadamer (in Sprung 1987:49) writes:

Heidegger, as is well known, saw in Plato's doctrine of forms, the first step in the transformation of truth from unconcealedness to the appropriateness and correctness of statements.

As an African, More laments that certain Western philosophers tend to exclude the African from Western 'rationality'. He points out the aporia of Western

rationality, as revealed in its lack of 'unanimity' about the meaning of the concept 'philosophy'. The writer is not the first to point out the controversial nature of the self-understanding of Western philosophy. In a text on African philosophy, Maurier (in Wright 1979:11) similarly expresses the limitations of Western 'reason'. He states that:

Western philosophy is polarized by the problem of knowledge, the problem of universals, the problem of immediate awareness, the problem of empiricism, the problem of philosophical critique, and, recently, the question of phenomenology. We do not believe that this sort of problem seriously exercises African thinking. The problem of living, of life, is far more important than the problem of knowledge.

It seems therefore, that to overlament the 'veiled' attempts to deny reason to African philosophy glosses over the limitations of the very reason More and Maurier address above. I would support the view that a preoccupation with contesting Western 'denials' of African philosophy squanders African energies instead of dealing with issues capable of taking African philosophy forward. I am not defending any particular notion of an African philosophy. At a general level, African philosophy must just be philosophy pure and simple. To use Maurier's (in Wright 1979) formulation:

Philosophy should also be critical in the Kantian sense of the term: philosophy should question itself about the proper value of its rational procedure and on the epistemological or gnostic validity of its results.

My aim is not to wage a counter-argument against the recommendations of More. It is rather to deepen the rationality debate from an African perspective. Given the priorities in African life, given African history, I conclude that no method in an African philosophy would be free-floating and thus beyond controversy. Western philosophy, likewise, together with its methods, is not a-historical. Thus it must be assessed in the context of the time and environment in which it developed.

It bears mention that some philosophers, such as the French thinkers, Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, execute their philosophies in distinct personal orientations and styles which belie the claim of an exclusive hegemony for Western rationality. Ricoeur moves the debate about the mediation of meaning away from the exclusively rationalistic and scientific methodologies. He takes his point of departure from a special kind of language, namely symbolic language, the language of myth (Ricoeur 1960). Hence, I maintain that the interpretation of these symbols, embedded in mythological language, could serve as a convenient starting point for a

dialogue between ethnophilosophy and Western philosophy. In a similar manner Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy challenges the tendency of contemporary scientific and philosophic thought to valorise autonomous thought derived under experimental conditions. It seeks to undermine philosophy's traditional conception that the subject constitutes the world as an object of knowledge. In insisting that consciousness must be seen first from the point of view of bodily being, he argues that man's access to the world is through his body and as such is anterior to methodic or rational analysis (Merleau-Ponty 1962). A purposive orientation in an African philosophical perspective indicates that these two orientations of French thought, can be, and should be, in dialogue with African philosophy. The point I am making is that the African philosopher cannot afford to ignore a dialogue which could deconstruct the hegemony of rationality which More precisely challenges. Conradie (1980:396) restates More's objections against the valorisation of reason more succinctly:

... it may be added that the interpretation of Western philosophy to which Africans object is nothing new. It has been stated most strongly in the twentieth century by Europeans themselves. Moreover—and this is a point of immense importance—Western philosophy has given birth to a type of philosophizing which is no longer specifically Western but global in the true sense of the term. It is here that we must look for contact with African philosophy and for its inevitable role.

I believe, as I have presently explained, that Conradie's view is consistent with the orientations of Shutte (1993) and Rauche (1996). It is a view, too, which I think is not opposed to the Afrocentric foundations of understanding I earlier canvassed. In relation to the contributions of Shutte and Rauche, the overall sweep of More's article seems to fail to tease out the implications posed by the hegemony of Western philosophy for the debate *in* and *for* African philosophy.

More's restatement of Western denials of African philosophy keeps the historical consciousness of European ethnocentrism alive but does not discharge the challenge of communicating a distinct orientation in African philosophy. Enunciated denials of African philosophy fall short of coming to bear on the pressing challenge of philosophy in the light of the conditions of life today. By way of constructive engagement with More, one can give copious examples that throw sufficient light on themes in African philosophy which can join issue with burning discussions in Western philosophy. An example that is naturally inscribed in the African psyche is the African's ready solidaritarian coexistence with the environment. But More places a stricture against the weaving of African traditional philosophy with the Western philosophical methodology. His position closes off the possibility of contact between

these traditions. I question his perspective because it is counterproductive and stands at the opposite pole of the strategy which Rauche and Shutte represent. Hence More's position ossifies at the threshold where an African philosophy could begin to challenge Western 'denials' of African philosophy, as his paper rightly points out too.

At this juncture, it may be appropriate to address two issues which loom clearly in More's criticism of Shutte's book. The first issue is less substantive and will be discharged quickly: it revolves around the semantic preference for the preposition 'for' in Shutte's considered title 'Philosophy for Africa' rather than More's preferred title 'African Philosophy'. To concede to More, Shutte opened himself to attack by his usage of the preposition 'for', rather than the adjective 'African'. However, I consider the choice of preposition or adjective a question of style rather than a barometer of content. Shutte's controversial title is a classical example of a book that is rejected on the basis of its cover. What better counter-example than Western philosophy which for want of a better adjective is as misleading as the nomenclature 'British philosophy'. To whimper over titles of philosophy is to ignore the fact that philosophy arises out of particular historical and human contexts. To place titles before content delays the discussion of pressing issues, first, of the discipline of philosophy in Africa, and second, of the crisis of existence and habitation in Africa. In less direct words, however, Shutte wants philosophy to bear on social issues, especially those in the southern African context. Certainly, a philosophy *for* Africa sounds more amenable for application to social problems such as access to health care and provision of housing than the title 'African Philosophy', which suggests an activity of abstraction and word splitting. By overlamenting the 'denial' of Western rationality, I suspect that More's argument forces him to take a position that unwittingly reifies the very hegemony of Western rationality which post-modernity and African philosophy in essence interrogate. How would he classify his own article, bearing in mind that it is written by an African who is trained in the USA and who expresses himself in thought and language forms which are borrowed from Western culture?

The second issue in More's account is not so obvious. It harks back to the controversy between professional African philosophy and ethnophilosophy. The controversy boils down to a distinction between philosophy in the narrowly defined technicist analytical sense and philosophy in the broadly defined, loose or vulgar sense. Shutte's book neatly mediates a course between these two warring meanings of philosophy. If Shutte were truly guilty of the denial More charges him with, he would not be writing as he does. It may merit the space to quote Shutte (1993:16) in extenso:

If philosophy is defined by its method—rigorous, analytical, critical let us say—then professional philosophy in universities becomes the centre of

interest. If it is defined by its content—theories of the nature of the universe, of the mind, of death, as well as theories of society and morality—then traditional African thought has a great deal to offer that is of philosophical interest.

There is a common but facile reasoning that a writer, especially of non-African stock, who extols the virtues of traditional African philosophy or ethnophilosophy, is guilty of the type of 'denials' of rationality to Africans, such as More stridently criticises Shutte of. This line of reasoning arises in part, I suppose, from a failure to peel off the good and correct from the bad and unacceptable in the notion of ethnophilosophy.

### **3. Three Positive Meanings of Traditional African Philosophy**

I suspect that More's critique of the concept of 'traditional' as used by both Shutte and Rauche is unfortunately attributable to this failure to deconstruct ethnophilosophy. Hence More is locked in the discarded ethnographical notion of 'tradition', which is not the sense intended by the two writers. Leaving aside the pejorative construction of 'traditional philosophy' as used by ethnophilosophers such as Tempels, Ka Game and Mbiti, the notion of 'traditional African philosophy' still encapsulates three positive meanings. To avoid confusing 'traditional African philosophy' with 'ethnophilosophy' it might be useful to unpack three relevant meanings indicated in Gbadegesin's (1991) essay.

#### **3.1. Traditional Philosophy as African Indigenous Thought**

Gbadegesin distinguishes three positive senses of the meaning of traditional African philosophy. I suggest that these three senses are the meanings intended by Shutte and Rauche. The first meaning pinpoints a conception of African philosophy grounded in traditional African thought before the Western influences began to distort the African mind-set. It refers to the philosophical thought of traditional Africa harvested from traditional African world-views, myths, proverbs and a variety of other cultural expressions. Gbadegesin (1991:1) describes this body of traditional African philosophy as 'the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas'.

The motive force of this understanding of African philosophy is that there were philosophers in traditional Africa and that a tradition of philosophizing in Africa did not suddenly emerge with colonialism. As can be seen, this meaning of traditional African philosophy is distinctly different from ethnophilosophy. I think that, having translated Shutte's and Rauche's use of 'traditional philosophy' as 'ethnophilosophy', More runs the risk of closing off the value of 'traditional' philosophies, although such philosophies might prove instructive in our present one-sided technological culture.

### **3.2. Traditional African Philosophy as Applied Reflection and Analysis of African Conceptual Systems**

A second meaning of traditional African philosophy refers to the reflections and analyses of traditional conceptual systems embedded in world-views and social life. Some noted nationalist philosopher-politicians such as Nyerere, Nkrumah and Kaunda have employed ideas or themes from traditional Africa to ground programmes of economic, social and political reconstruction in their respective countries. Wiredu (1995:17) points out that:

With rare exceptions they argued for forms of socialism based on first principles deriving from traditional African communalism. The African provenance of their philosophies was clearest in the 'Ujaama' (Familyhood) socialism of Nyerere of Tanzania and the 'Zambian humanism' of Kaunda, who both steered studiously clear of foreign ideological admixtures.

Although these thinkers intended these utopian theories to realise solidaritarian social orders, the failure of these theories in practice does not mean that in themselves they are philosophically worthless.

### **3.3. Traditional African Philosophy as Presupposed by Culture**

Gbadegesin enumerates a third meaning of the notion of traditional African philosophy. It bridges the gap between the two meanings mentioned above. It acknowledges the impossibility of pure precolonial thought but accepts that there is a sense of traditional African philosophy as interpreted by professional African philosophers today (Gbadegesin 1991:1).

As a result of this third meaning of traditional African philosophy there have in recent years been several scholarly studies of traditional African philosophy. Gyekye's *Akan Conceptual Scheme* (1987) is one example, and in its wake came Wiredu's *African Philosophical Tradition : A Case Study of the Akan* (1992). There are undoubtedly many similar studies which attempt to inaugurate a 'critical and reconstructive' debate based on the oral philosophy of a given African community. Given Africa's increased communication links with the outside world through trade and satellite connections, it can be accepted that many western philosophers will join the fray and plug into the intercultural debate. As can be seen, African philosophers have found no problem with these attempts. Okere (cited earlier) is a good example.

The reason why I have gone into this detailed peroration is that More's implicit understanding of the notion of 'traditional philosophy' as 'ethnophilosophy' was central to his dismissal of Shutte and Rauche. Yet, I see these two writer's as attempting to plug into African traditional philosophy in one, two or all of the three positive senses, in order to set in motion a dialogue with African traditional

philosophy, on the level of complementarity and resonance, not contrast and difference. In fact, they could well be said to be engaged in reversing what Mudimbe (1988:x) describes as the onslaught of 'theories and methods whose constraints, rules and systems of operation suppose a non-African epistemological locus'.

In the West, the epistemology of rationality is legitimated in writing. Rationality and literacy are two sides of the same coin (Wininger in Oruka 1994: 199). This point is relevant in relation to the sceptical arguments against ethnophilosophy, for not all traditional philosophy is reduced to writing. What I am arguing, in agreement with More, is that laying down writing as a prescriptive condition for philosophicness reduces to a disguised hegemony. In other words we have to widen the notion of literacy beyond the point at which Western, Eurocentric, professorite ideology presently locks it. Shutte and Rauche's strategy takes seriously an African tradition of doing philosophy.

To concede a point to More, Shutte does write in a manner that vacillates between the broader acceptable meaning of traditional African philosophy and the narrow and unpopular ethnophilosophical meaning of traditional African thought. He has not made this distinction clear. However he has definitely never stated that a philosophy for Africa can be constituted purely from ethnophilosophy. Shutte uses the concept of ethnophilosophy interchangeably with traditional philosophy to embrace the three positive meanings of traditional African philosophy. The reason behind this seeming ambiguity is that for some writers such as Wininger (in Oruka 1994:198) '... philosophies which are indigenous and have grown up in pre-colonial Africa are now called ethno-philosophies'.

I see nothing sinister or patronising in this innocent use of the word *ethnophilosophy*. Of decisive value in Shutte's book are his clear indications that ethnophilosophy (in the positive sense) or traditional African philosophy, shorn of foreign admixtures and accretions, can contribute to previously intractable or neglected philosophical problems, not only in theory but also in practice.

Shutte's orientation in geographic and historical perspective is recommended by Serequeberhan (1991:37) too. He writes that contemporary African philosophy should bring in tow traditional African world-views, not in order to satisfy an abstract intellectual debate but to engage these world-views in the service of the concrete problems presently plaguing African people. He advises that not all aspects of contemporary African philosophy need to follow the Western paradigm of analyticity and deductiveness. Some part of African philosophy should be primarily practical and thus contribute to the reconceptualisation of an authentic African social order.

More sees fit to censure Rauche for a chapter written not by Rauche himself but by a Master's student of Rauche. The chapter is entitled 'Hermeneutical Philosophy and African Thought: Objectivity and Subjectivity in African Thought'. Had More resourced the full copy of this master's dissertation (instead of relying on

the promoter's subjective evaluation), he would have been saved the risk of extrapolating or wondering 'exactly how much of the work is an imposition or reflection of the supervisor' (More 1996:124).

But the following salient points may be of help. First, the title of the student's dissertation is: *The Relationship Between Subjectivity and Objectivity in the Sciences with Special Reference to the Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Ndaba 1993).

Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy emphasises the mediative function of culture, history and tradition in understanding. Following Gadamer, the main argument of the dissertation was that, although it is common to contrast understanding, *Verstehen*, and explanation, *Erklären*, even the natural scientist deceives himself if he believes that he can grasp his object a-historically. Gadamer's thesis in hermeneutical perspective is that whether in the human sciences, i.e. *Geisteswissenschaften*, or the natural sciences, *Naturwissenschaften*, the methodological canons we devise to grasp such an object, are historically conditioned. Although Gadamer does not write in the context of an intercultural communication with other philosophies, a dialogue between his notions of tradition, participation, knowledge, a fusion of horizons, etc., and similar themes in African philosophy, readily suggested itself.

The offending chapter in the dissertation, which More refers to, is premised on the realisation that Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to knowledge lends itself adequately to a comparison with African philosophy. Basic to the inclusion of this chapter is the assumption that genuinely African concepts and themes intrinsic to traditional African philosophy are adequate to penetrate the philosophic discourse of the West, and in the process to make the West understand the African situation from the African philosopher's own first-hand description of the African situation. I readily admit that More (1996:125) finds fault with this approach because he writes that:

To claim that African philosophy can be woven from a synthesis between western philosophical methodology and African 'traditional' thought is to privilege the Western model over and above the African model.

Okere, cited earlier, did precisely that. It is not clear to me how and in what manner the importation of a hermeneutic methodology 'privileges' European philosophy over African philosophy. If More is convinced that this is the case, the matter presents a crucial and vital point for further debate and clarification as philosophy is not just a game for intellectuals alone but is a matter of practical import for everybody. Hence the ongoing debate is crucial for life in general because traditions are not monads, separate in and of themselves. In short, were the dialogue between the Western and the African philosophies put on hold or embargoed, both traditions of philosophy would be the poorer. Hence, a philosophy of Africa



hermetically insulated from the rest of the world would serve no real purpose. Smit (1996) writes appositely that all philosophy is a synthesis (a creative integration) of what has come before by way of methods, theories and practices:

This approach is not unique. It is virtually the way in which all other philosophies originated throughout history .... given the focus of philosophy on Africa, African philosophers should also draw on philosophical systems and debates developed in other places and other times in the creative construction of their own (Smit 1996:133).

This creative interdependence should point the way for African philosophy to co-exist with other traditions of philosophy by using any relevant method of philosophy available. In the absence of a thoroughly African philosophy, sifted, systematised and circulated (in written form) by the Africans themselves, first for the education of their children and then for their own enlightenment, Africans must continue to select grudgingly what there is to gain from Western rationality simply for the reason that the West produces better and more effective cures against disease, faster and better means of air and land travel, better and better cost effective computers—the super modern tools for storing mind-staggering data. Because the West seized upon the opportunities presented by science and technology, it has a cutting edge over us. It invented and perfected technology. We should trust it to deliver it. When circumstances presented opportunities for Africans to go and study in Europe, Canada and America, it would have been spurious reasoning to say that studying abroad privileges European theories, philosophies and humanities over African one's. If ever there was a time for intellectual honesty this is the time for the African to acknowledge his blind spots. Doing so does not detract from his greatness in areas where he can be great too. Herein, as I see it, lies the challenge of African philosophy now. The realisation of this challenge lies in the future.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this reply, I began by placing More's critical analysis of the objectification of Western rationality in a perspective that clearly shows the unmistakable common ground I share with him with respect to the hegemony of Western 'reason'. I presented the context of my reply in a way that demonstrates that the Western 'valorization' of reason has not just irked African philosophers alone but has been a concern of European thinkers too. My main argument in critical perspective, as against More's central line of reasoning, points out the danger, in *African Philosophy*, of failing to move *beyond* a critique of the hegemony of Western rationality. In contrast with African philosophers, those thinkers of the West, such as

Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, who think and write philosophy beyond the critiquing of traditional Western rationality, succeed, in my estimation, to move Western philosophy to a type of philosophizing that has become global. Because it has become global it has forged lines of communication with African philosophy. I argued that African philosophy in general, but especially traditional African philosophy, can and should contribute to the global debate on equal terms as a speaking, living, vibrant tradition. To effect dialogue between African and Western philosophy on the basis of mutual equality and recognition, we may conclude that contemporary African philosophers must debunk the notion of a 'traditional' African philosophy in its narrowly understood limited sense as a museum piece.

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