

# Trends and Critical Dialogue in African Philosophy of the 1980s

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## Review Article

*African Philosophy. The Essential Readings*

(with end-notes and a select bibliography.)

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## Introduction

Since independence, each of the earlier African colonies has had to contend with various challenges. Amongst others, these include the eradication of residues of colonial exploitation in life and society, the struggle to construct models and systems which may serve the demands, needs and interests of the African peoples and modernisation. Many of the answers to these challenges have failed for various reasons. One of the major reasons for these failures has been the discursive vacuum in which repressed knowledges attempted to simultaneously construct and develop both relevant social, economic and political systems as well as relevant discourses. It is in the interest of filling this discursive vacuum that African philosophy arose. In this review article, a brief overview of Serequeberhan's collection of essays is provided followed by a few critical observations.

## The African Philosophy Agenda

In our pan-African context, African philosophy addressed the discursive vacuum in primarily three distinct but overlapping discursive formations: Bodunrin's (1991:66) *historical explanatory approach*, Kwasi Wiredu's

(1991:86) distinction between *first and second order philosophy* and Henry Orika's (1981; 1987; 1991) identification of four distinct African philosophical trends, namely *ethnophilosophy*, *philosophic sagacity*, *national-ideological philosophy* and *professional philosophy*. In his later work he added a fifth, namely *hermeneutical-historical philosophy*. I provide a brief overview of some arguments of the critical dialogue within each of these discursive formations and then move toward two issues which are important in the development of African philosophy as well as the development of other disciplines in our pan-African situation: modernisation and African resistance to the myth of the European Civilising mission.

## **1 The Historical Explanatory Approach**

Bodunrin (1991:66) argues that since the challenges that the pre-colonial peoples in traditional Africa experienced were not sufficiently threatening, they did not seriously engage the philosophical enterprise. Moreover, the similarity of environment, worldviews, customs, social organisations and the problems that the universe posed for traditional Africans, did not provide a context of significant challenges conducive to philosophic reflection. This is also the reason why there is such a great similarity between the worldviews and cultures of traditional Africans. The situation changed dramatically with the advent of the colonial enterprise. It is true, he argues, that the colonists overpowered African traditional societies very easily. The reason for this, obviously, is that Africans had not experienced such a decisive challenge before and were totally unprepared for it. However, in time, the challenge of colonialism caused four basic responses from Africans (cf. Bodunrin 1991:66-69).

*Firstly*, the Western/Christian and Islamic descriptions of Africans as uncivilised, primitive, irrational and illogical, sparked off a response to show that this is not the case. *Secondly*, the interaction with the colonists caused Africans to start to compare themselves with other contemporary or past cultures and civilisations. In philosophical context, these comparisons caused Africans to study their own intellectual histories. *Thirdly*, the political and economic overpowering of Africans caused them to respond with national-ideologically grounded philosophies engendered in processes of political liberation and reconstruction. *Fourthly*, the experience of a severe scarcity of resources—especially in the post-colonial era of reconstruction—sparked off philosophic debates on the reconstruction of education, business, industry, agriculture, economics, etc.

## **2 First and Second Order Philosophy**

To put the philosophies that existed in the pre-colonial era and those that

came into existence during the colonial era and in the postcolonial era into perspective, we may use Kwasi Wiredu's (1991:86) distinction between first and second order philosophy. Philosophy of the first order 'is that way of viewing man [humanity] and the world which results in a world outlook in the first place'. Philosophy of the second order is 'a technical discipline in which our (i.e. the human) world outlook is subjected to systematic scrutiny by rigorous ratiocinative methods (ideally, that is)'. Compared to philosophy of the first order, second order philosophy has 'a doubly second-order character, for that on which it reflects—namely, our world outlook—is itself a reflection on the more particularistic, more episodic, judgements of ordinary, day-to-day living'.

Within this scheme, Wiredu explains, the worldviews which came into existence in the pre-colonial era as well as those which are responses to colonialism and even post-colonialism are first order philosophies. The critical, logical and rational philosophies that came into existence as a reflection and a critical engagement with these trends and their underlying worldviews, however, are second order philosophies.

### **3 Common Features of African Philosophy**

Henry Orika's (1981; 1987; 1991) distinction between the five different trends, ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, national-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy and hermeneutical-historical philosophy may provide a useful map for the development of discourses and practices in our own southern African context.

Even though each of these trends has its own history, objects of reflection and dialogue, methodologies and goals, they all share three common features.

#### **3.1 A Conscious Effort to Engage with African Realities and the Doing of Philosophy From and For the African Context**

Serequeberhan (1991a:xviii) points out that the major premise of African philosophy is that Africans must do African philosophy for themselves and 'minus foreign mediators/moderators or meddlers'. He further believes that 'African philosophy will find its own theoretical space from within African problems and concerns that are felt and lived', i.e. it must concretely engage 'the concrete and actual problems facing the peoples of Africa', e.g. 'the misery the continent is immersed in and the varied struggles', the 'armed political conflicts' which rages on 'in the midst of famine and ["natural"] calamities', the 'political insanity of the contemporary African situation', and in general, 'Africa in metamorphosis'—i.e. from its colonial past into a

modern era (cf. Serequeberhan 1991b:19,12,10). This engagement has only one aim, to set people free from all forms of slavery (cf. Fanon 1993:230f). As conscious enterprise, this approach has been in progress in the last forty years or more.

### **3.2 A Drawing on and Creative Integration of Methods, Theories and Practices Employed by both Past and Contemporary Philosophers from Africa and the Rest of the World**

Virtually all trends in African philosophy follow this approach to various degrees. This approach is not unique. It is actually the way in which all other philosophies originated throughout history. The argument is that, 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 constructive of their own.

### **3.3 A Deconstructive and Reconstructive Interaction with Africa's Colonial Past**

Lucius Outlaw (1987) and Serequeberhan (1991b:4-7) argue that since all Western philosophers including Hegel, Marx and Engels had a racist attitude towards Africans, and since all their theories and models were basically Eurocentric, their philosophies must be deconstructed before they are used by Africans.

## **4 Five Trends in African Philosophy**

### **4.1 Ethnophilosophy**

Ethnophilosophy is a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah (cf. Bodunrin 1991:85 fn 2) and popularised by Hountondji. It comprises the ethnological study of ethnic Africans. Anyanwu (1985) calls it cultural philosophy and emphasises its capacities for integration and tolerance. It follows a phenomenological method and has a documentary approach. Its aim is to collect or document, describe, interpret and disseminate African folk-lore, tales, proverbs, myths (or mythical conceptions), religious beliefs and practices, worldviews as well as the lived ritual and ceremonial practices of ethnic Africans (cf. Bodunrin 1991:74 & Wiredu 1991:90). Initially, this approach was used by colonial researchers. These researchers aimed at the description of the African 'mentality' for the benefit of the colonial politician, economist, educator or missionary who had the task of colonising, ruling, modernising, civilising or christianising the African. It is especially

Placide Tempels' book ([1945]1969) which acquired special significance (or notoriety) in this regard.

When Africans like John S. Mbiti (1988) started to participate in this approach, the use of the method as well as the knowledge which he produced, changed. Even though he still provided knowledge for the benefit of 'economics, politics, education and Christian or Muslim work' (Mbiti 1988:1), the fact that he wrote as African for the benefit of Africans made his work ideologically more acceptable. The most important function of this approach, however, is to provide an indigenous African base for tradition and practice. Its aim is to recover the African traditions which were lost or disappropriated by colonial rule.

With reference to Hegel and Herodotus, Onyewuenyi (1991:30-33) points out that the foundations of Greek philosophy on which Western civilisation is built, has its roots in Africa. Referring to archaeology, he states that 'Africa is ... today accepted by many scientists as the cradle of the human species'. Moreover, many significant African scholars like the theologians St. Augustine, Origen, Cyril, Tertulian, the ancient philosophers Herodotus, Socrates, Hypocrates, Anaxagoras, Plato and Aristotle and the fifteenth century historian Leo Africanus either were from African origin or acquired their training in Africa. The reason why these facts have been hidden in the last two hundred years 'from both black and white' is obviously because of Western philosophy's attempt to legitimise its own (colonial) thinking and practices at the expense of 'encounter'. His argument here, is that Western philosophy did not interact with Africa and give Africa the credit it deserves, because Western philosophy itself developed into 'an academic and dehumanised philosophy .... divorced from life' (Onyewuenyi 1991:35). Even though he does not say it explicitly, we may infer that one of the main tasks of African philosophy—and one in which he participates through his ethnophilosophical project—is to rehumanise philosophy.

In the post-colonial and post-Apartheid era, this approach serves to describe the mythical/religious conceptions, worldviews as well as the lived ritual and ceremonial practices of ethnic Africans for the purpose of restoring African tradition. Since much valuable information can be found in the work of colonial researchers, their works may be used productively. Onyewuenyi (1991:29) bases his whole endeavour on Possoz's (in Tempels 1969:14) introductory remark to Tempels' book in which he concedes that:

Up to the present, ethnographers have denied all abstract thought to tribal peoples. The civilized Christian European was exalted, the savage and pagan man was denigrated. Out of this concept a theory of colonisation was born which now threatens to fail .... a true estimate of indigenous peoples can now take the place of the misunderstanding and fanaticism of the ethnology of the past and the former attitude of aversion entertained with regard to them.

Writing as an African for Africans from within Africa, Onyewuenyi's project is radically different from the colonial enterprise. However, since Tempels has uncovered important information with regard to ethnophilosophy, Onyewuenyi (1991:40f,43f,39) quotes with approval Tempels' views on African metaphysics, epistemology, ethical theory and the description of African ethnophilosophy as

a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man [humanity] and of the things which surround him [it], of existence, life, death and the life beyond.

These may just form part of historical knowledge. Alternatively, it may be used for the development of African metaphysics.

African metaphysics or ontology comprises a description of African ancestor worship, animism, totemism, magic and the notions of 'existence-in-relation' or 'being as dynamic' as determined by the hierarchised functions of 'force' or the 'Great Force'. 'Muntu', the 'force endowed with intelligence', a force which has control over irrational creatures known as 'bintu', constitutes the force which is responsible for the 'intimate ontological relationship' between Africans. There is no conception of the individual which can function as a 'unique individual'—as in Western society—divorced from this ontological relationship (cf. Onyewuenyi 1991:40f). 'True wisdom' or African epistemology 'lies in ontological knowledge; it is the intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction' (cf. Tempels 1969:73 & Onyewuenyi 1991:41).

Further, African epistemology distinguishes between practical and habitual knowledge. Practical knowledge involves the 'cleverness or slyness' that one needs to deal with 'the contingent aspects of forces'. Habitual knowledge 'is active knowledge of the nature of forces, their relationship' and is reserved for those who are initiated into this body of knowledge as practitioners. In the hierarchy of knowledge, 'the ancestors have more wisdom, followed by the elders, dead or living' (Onyewuenyi 1991:42,41).

Grounded in the belief that the Great Force or 'God' has 'all-seeing eyes' which 'scan the total area of human behaviour and personal relationships', the distinction between 'good and evil are objective and of universal validity' (Onyewuenyi 1991:43). Since—epistemologically speaking—a human being exists only in terms of his/her intimate ontological relationship with the greater whole of life as it is determined by force, all human action must be synchronised with 'Muntu' and its agents, the ancestors, initiated practitioners and the elders. In the African context, these three fields of philosophic encounter find their legitimacy in their ontologically inseparable mutual influence of, dependence on and interaction

with one another (cf. Onyewuenyi 1991:44). In this scheme, a person 'attains growth and recognition' in accordance with his/her fulfilling of 'a function for the overall well-being of the community' (Onyewuenyi 1991:45).

Serequeberhan (1991b:18f) points out that the criticism of ethnophilosophy has been three-fold.

Firstly, since philosophy concerns 'logically argued thoughts of individuals' (Bodunrin 1991:62) or the 'critical self-reflection of a culture engaged in by specific individuals in that culture' (Serequeberhan 1991b:18), ethnophilosophy or African cultural philosophy makes a mistake when it equates philosophy and the worldviews and/or religious conceptions of ethnic peoples. In his criticism of ethnophilosophy, Oruka (1991:47f) says:

Ethnophilosophy ... requires a communal consensus. It identifies with the totality of customs and common beliefs of a people. It is a folk philosophy. It forms a sharp contrast with philosophy developed by reason and logic. It is also, as thought, impersonal: it is not identified with any particular individual(s). It is the philosophy of everybody; it is understood and accepted by everyone. It is at best a form of religion. But it would in other cases function perfectly like a taboo and superstition.

Wiredu (1991:88), again, criticises Mbiti's (1988:2) definition of African philosophy as 'the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life'. Just to make explicit what is implicit in life—i.e. religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the society concerned — cannot qualify as philosophy. Such an approach remains 'a semi-anthropological paraphrase of African traditional beliefs' (Wiredu 1991:88).

Apart from his appreciation of ethnophilosophy's generation of 'a quite distinctive philosophical literature', Hountondji (1991:119,112f,119,124) criticises Tempels and other ethnophilosophers for viewing 'Bantu philosophy' as something 'experienced but not thought', for being 'profoundly conservative [in] nature' and attempting to look 'for philosophy in a place where it could never be found—in the collective unconscious of African peoples'. For him, African philosophy is not something to be discovered, something which is already given, something which has to reproduce 'a pre-existing thought'. He calls such an approach an 'African pseudo-philosophy', a 'fiction' and 'vulgar' because it conceives of African philosophy as

an unthinking, spontaneous, collective system of thought, common to all Africans or at least to all members severally, past, present and future (Hountondji 1991:111f,114,117).

Secondly, politically, ethnophilosophy remains part of 'the European colonialist discourse aimed at disarming and subjugating the African' (Serequeberhan 1991b:18f). In his evaluation of *African* ethnophilosophy, Hountondji (1991:121f) draws distinctions between Europeans writing about Africa for an European audience and whose writings belong to 'European scientific literature' and Africans writing in the same field but whose audience is African. Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, for example, is 'written chiefly for the African public and aimed at making it aware of its new cultural identity' even though it 'partakes of the ethnological conception that there can be such a thing as a collective philosophy' (Hountondji 1991:121). More generally speaking, the works of Africans writing about Western philosophy but for an African audience, can also be viewed as African philosophy. The same view is expressed when addressing the question of Africans writing on universal philosophical topics. Hountondji's (1991:123) expanding of the understanding of African philosophy in terms of a geographical rather than a content definition, then, produces two results. On the one hand, it opens the way to see it as 'a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world'; on the other, it brings about a 'demythologizing' of the notion that Africa is a mythological entity, thereby freeing 'our faculty for theorizing from all the intellectual impediments and prejudices which have so far prevented it [African philosophy] from getting off the ground' (Hountondji 1991:123).

For Hountondji (1991:113), ethnophilosophy's prime mistake is, therefore, in still writing 'with the white world in mind' and writing for a foreign [Western] public. Where African ethnophilosophers do interact with Western scholars, they continuously reduce their own writing to that of a

'folklorism', a sort of collective cultural exhibitionism which compels the 'Third World' intellectual to 'defend and illustrate' the peculiarities of his tradition for the benefit of a Western public'

which merely 'encourages the worst kind of cultural particularism' (Hountondji 1991:124). Even though it challenges the colonialist perception that Africans are 'completely sterile in intellectual and moral-spiritual productions' by giving recognition to the humanity of the colonised, it remains a body of knowledge comprising 'a static African culture and civilisation predating the colonial conquest'. Oruka (1991:47) argues that this approach still leaves the door open to continue the Western anthropological description of Africans as primitive, pre-logical, pre-scientific, pre-literate and savage. Bodunrin (1991:75) argues that many of the generalisations about Africans are false—e.g. Mbiti's claim that Africans have no conception of time or more particularly, the future. Wiredu



(1991:89) states that these generalisations find 'little ... empirical warrant'. Even though the collectivity of a people's thought most probably does exist and can be studied, the generalisations made about Africans usually lead to misrepresentation and misinformation.

Thirdly, ethnophilosophy does not meet the basic requirement that African philosophers use as guideline for their work—critical (i.e. logical and rational) engagement with current African realities. Since ethnophilosophers never 'questioned the nature and theoretical status of their own analyses', their research cannot count as 'scientific' (Hountondji 1991:119). Ethnophilosophy 'shelters lazily behind the authority of a tradition and projects its own theses and beliefs on to that tradition', describes an 'implicit, unexpressed worldview, which never existed anywhere but in the anthropologist's imagination' and is therefore unable to present 'its own rational justification' (Hountondji 1991:120). For Bodunrin (1991:77), the problem is that

ethnophilosophers usually fall in love so much with the thought system they seek to expound that they become dogmatic in the veneration of the culture to which the thought system belongs .... They do not raise philosophical issues about the system .... The African philosopher cannot deliberately ignore the study of the traditional belief system of his [her] people. Philosophical problems arise out of real life situations .... however, the philosopher's approach to this study must be one of criticism ....

Bodunrin (1991:78) continues to say that 'criticism' here does not refer to 'negative appraisal'. On the contrary, it refers to

rational, impartial and articulate appraisal whether positive or negative. To be ['critical'] of received ideas is accordingly not the same as rejecting them: it consists rather in seriously asking oneself whether the ideas in question should be reformed, modified or conserved, and in applying one's entire intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer (Bodunrin 1991:78).

Cataloguing writings in the field of such African pseudophilosophy, Hountondji (1991:115) points out that all these ethnophilosophical writers were either 'churchmen' or 'lay writers' aiming to map a 'black metaphysic'.

The clergy's main concern was 'to find a psychological and cultural basis for rooting the Christian message in the African's mind without betraying either' (Hountondji 1991:115). Saying that such an approach may be 'an eminently legitimate concern, up to a point', he criticises these authors, because they

conceive of philosophy on the model of religion, as a permanent, stable system of beliefs, unaffected by evolution, impervious to time and history, ever identical to itself (Hountondji 1991:115).

Other African philosophers are similarly criticised for attempting to uncover

a solid bedrock which might provide a foundation of certitudes ... a system of beliefs .... the identity which was denied by the colonizer (Hountondji 1991:116).

Common to these approaches, is 'the myth of primitive unanimity', that in primitive societies, 'everybody always agrees with everybody else' and 'the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum' (Hountondji 1991:117,116). Such suppositions do not allow for 'individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief' (Hountondji 1991:117). Since ethnology or cultural anthropology is usually used (together with sociology) to perpetuate such erroneous beliefs about African societies, Hountondji (1991:117) criticises the whole ethnophilosophical paradigm because it treats the difference between 'so-called "primitive" societies and developed ones' in terms of

a difference in *nature* (and not merely in the *evolutionary stage* attained, with regard to particular types of achievement) [and] of a difference in *quality* (not merely in quantity or *scale*).

It is further criticised as

a science without an object ... accountable to nothing, a discourse that has no referent, so that its falsity can never be demonstrated (Hountondji 1991:118f).

Ethnophilosophers continue to 'make use of African traditions and oral literature and project on to them their own philosophical beliefs'. As such, it is an 'indeterminate discourse with no object' and therefore merely has an 'ideological function' (Hountondji 1991:111). In addition, since it functions as a hierarchised and 'inegalitarian metaphilosophy', ethnophilosophy, by definition, shuts out 'dialogue and confrontation'. Its impact, therefore, is nothing else than

a reduction [of difference and 'individual analytic activity'] to silence, a denial, masquerading as the revival of an earlier philosophy' (Hountondji 1991:121; cf. also Owomoyela 1991:164f<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief but comprehensive overview of Professional philosophers's critique of traditional approaches in African philosophy, see Owomoyela (1991:156-186). He successively treats Ethnophilosophy, African cultures, recidivism, African Studies, the notions of intuitiveness, unanimity and anonymity in Ethnophilosophy, traditional African cultures, illiteracy, science and the articulation of Africanist and African Studies.

It is clear from this overview of the criticism of ethnophilosophy that philosophers engaged in the other four approaches would find it difficult to regard ethnophilosophy as a second order (critical-rational) philosophy.

## 4.2 Philosophic Sagacity

Philosophic sagacity concerns itself with the oral or non-literate critical wisdom traditions and practices of Africa. This approach critically engages the critical activities of indigenous African wise men or sages. These sages inhabit a 'critical space within their cultural milieu' and are 'capable of critical and dialectical inquiry' (cf. Bodunrin 1991:64). Since these sages critically interact with established African traditions and the cultures of their respective ethnic groups and societies, their critical reflection on life constitutes a wealth of information which is useful for philosophical reflection. The main objective of this approach is to 'dialogically extract the philosophical wisdom embodied in these sages' (cf. Serequeberhan 1991b:19).

Henry Orika attempts to do this in a culture-neutral universalistic way. He goes beyond ethnophilosophy in so far as he acknowledges that African wisdom comprises both 'philosophic, rational discourse as well as personalised philosophical activity' (Oruka 1991:49), and beyond cultural philosophy in so far as philosophic sagacity, for him, works with the oral traditions of individuals who are both sages and thinkers. He therefore does not work with sages who are merely functionaries or 'midwives' of a particular culture, i.e. the ones who ensure the continuation of the ideas and beliefs a people hold about itself and nature or the *mythos* of that culture. They merely reiterate and condone the cultural prejudices of a culture and therefore remain a 'first order system' (cf. Oruka 1991:52,54f). The sages he works with are individuals who are capable of 'reflective reevaluation of the culture philosophy' or 'rationally recommending ideas offering alternatives to the commonly accepted opinions and practices'—i.e. they function in terms of a 'second order system' (cf. Oruka 1991:52,51,55). Therefore, philosophic sagacity is 'a critical reflection' or 'critical rebellion' against culture philosophy. While culture philosophy 'glorifies the communal conformity, philosophic sagacity is sceptical of communal consensus, and it employs reason to assess it' (Oruka 1991:53).

Oruka also criticises Bodunrin and Hountondji who hold that professional philosophy must be a systematic and written philosophy (cf. Hountondji 1991:120) and states that his ultimate aim is to uncover an 'authentic African philosophy' which is 'uncontaminated' by Western colonialism (Oruka 1991:58,49).

However, this is not possible. The reason being that the questions that the philosopher asks when s/he dialogically interacts with the sage as well as

the ordering and systematising of the information that one acquires from the sage will always be determined by the philosopher's knowledge of or even education in a Western or colonial environment (Serequeberhan 1991b:20). Moreover, Oruka's aim to study African sagacity in a culture-neutral way, is basically paradoxical (cf. Serequeberhan 1991a:xx).

### 4.3 National-ideological Philosophy

National-ideological philosophy studies the whole corpus of writings—whether in the form of pamphlets, manifestos or political works—by participants in the African liberation struggles. It spans the spectrum from the diverse forms of national liberation literature to the writings of more prominent leaders like Nkrumah, Toure, Nyerere, Senghor, Diop, Césaire, and Cabral<sup>2</sup>.

National-ideological philosophy 'evolve[s] a new' and 'unique political theory based on traditional African socialism and familyhood' (Bodunrin 1991:64). Its object of study is the 'differing politico-philosophical conceptions that articulate the emancipatory possibilities opened up by the African anticolonial struggle' (Serequeberhan 1991b:20). Since this literature did not only represent resistance, defiance, disengagement, opposition and protest but also provided basics for constructive and reconstructive activities aimed at the functioning of a liberated society, it is extremely useful in the project of the deconstruction and reconstruction of political theory and practice in Africa. Post-colonial freedom must be accompanied by 'a true mental liberation and a return, whenever possible and desirable, to genuine and authentic traditional humanism' (Bodunrin 1991:64). This is methodologically informed by the historicity of the African situation as well as the reflection on, identification of and putting into practice of liberatory strategies. Serequeberhan (1991:xxi) summarises the practices of these philosophers saying they

critically engage the critique of ethnophilosophy and in so doing, emphasize, in differing ways, the importance of a serious and concrete engagement with the traditional, historical, and contemporary situation of the continent.

Even though Serequeberhan does not provide a critique of this approach, I believe that one can at least state that one major pitfall is that one can become so caught up in the critical consciousness of this philosophy that one forgets to productively and responsibly engage the demands for a reconstructive thinking and practice for a liberated society. Bodunrin (1991:69) argues that the backward-looking approach present in some national-ideological philosophers is counter productive. He states that 'the

<sup>2</sup> See Nkrumah (1961; 1962; 1970; 1971; 1973; 1978; 1985), Toure (1973; 1979; 1980), Nyerere (1967; 1968; 1973; 1974a; 1974b; 1994), Senghor (1962; 1971), Diop (1962; 1974; 1986; 1989), Césaire (1972) and Cabral (1974; 1979).

past the political philosophers seek to recapture cannot be recaptured' (Bodunrin 1991:69). He also argues—against Nkrumah and Nyerere—that the traditional way of life in Africa cannot be the point of departure. Bodunrin's (1991:69-71) reasons being, firstly, that one will not be able to return to a pre-colonial traditional lifestyle in which there is no Christian nor Islamic influence; secondly, that traditional African societies were not as complex as modern African societies; thirdly, since there is 'no country whose traditional ideology could cope with the demands of the modern world', this principle also applies to the African situation. Traditional African society will therefore not be able to contend with modern problems posed by the breaking up of traditional communities, money-economies, urbanisation, industrialisation, etc. The upshot of this argument is that the contribution of African philosophy to reconstruction will never be 'entirely divorced from foreign influence'. This is then also an argument against Oruka's (1991:49) criticism that professional philosophy provides an avenue for the legitimisation of Western techniques in African philosophy.

#### 4.4 Professional Philosophy

Professional philosophy is a school of thought which is represented by Peter O. Bodunrin, Paulin J. Hountondji, Odera H. Oruka and Kwasi Wiredu. Serequeberhan (1991b:21) summarises their position when he says that except for Oruka who also participates in philosophic sagacity, 'they share the view that a philosophical tradition in Africa is only presently—in their joint efforts—beginning to develop'. The professional philosophers emphasise that they are all trained philosophers (cf. Bodunrin 1991:84) and therefore reject both the African ethnophilosophical and traditional wisdom approaches which hold that the practice of philosophy is not only the prerogative of the trained philosopher. Their main criticism of ethnophilosophy and philosophic sagacity, however, is that these approaches are not philosophic approaches because 'mere descriptive accounts of African thought systems or the thought systems of any other society would not pass as philosophy' (Bodunrin 1991:65). Moreover, ethnophilosophy remains caught up in a mere description of what is 'spontaneous, implicit, and collective', whereas philosophy must be explicit, methodical, and rational (cf. Hountondji 1991:123; Wiredu 1991:61,91; Keita 1991:153,157; Towa 1991:194).

Pointing out that far from producing a unanimous agreement about African philosophy, ethnophilosophical research has instead produced 'a rich harvest of not only diverse but also sometimes frankly contradictory works'. Here, Hountondji (1991:118) pre-empt the use of such results for advancing the continued importance of ethnophilosophy as producing the same results as other sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry, mathematics, linguistics, psycho-

analysis, sociology). He points out that ethnophilosophy does not succeed in producing evidence of a 'supposed unanimity of a human community'. Moreover, the other sciences are not 'stagnant' but rather

always progressive, never final or absolute but indicative of an *error*, of the *falsity* of a hypothesis or thesis, which is bound to emerge from a rational investigation of the object itself.

These sciences are also not embarrassed by contradiction. It rather prompts re-investigation, further experimentation and the seeking of other modes of verification (cf. Hountondji 1991:118). Professional philosophers pursue such a 'scientific' approach in their work. Consequently, they regard their philosophical approach as professional because it uses techniques commonly used by philosophy in the West and other parts of the world—i.e. universally—and it aims to make a contribution to universal philosophical discourse. Bodunrin (1991:76) legitimates the universal approach in African philosophy by stating that the quest to understand more about the universe is a universal quest.

Arguing that African philosophy, should—as all other philosophies of the world—as philosophy, be understood in terms of its universality, Hountondji (1991:112) states that

this universality must be preserved—not because philosophy must necessarily develop the same themes or even ask the same questions from one country or continent to another, but because these differences of *content* are meaningful precisely and only as differences of *content*, which, as such, refer back to the essential unity of a single discipline, of a single style of inquiry.

His main argument is that the African philosopher must 'retrieve' and 'apply' African philosophical thought 'not to the fiction of a collective system of thought, but to a set of philosophical discourses and texts' (Hountondji 1991:112). The result of such an approach is that Africans will be liberated from the trap of merely attempting to 'exalt their own cultural particularities' or asserting their own 'uniqueness by conforming to the current stereotypes of one's own society and civilization' (Hountondji 1991:125). Hountondji (1991:125) comments on universality in African research:

Universality becomes accessible only when interlocutors are set free from the need to assert themselves in the face of others; and the best way to achieve this in Africa today is to organize internal discussion and exchange among all the scientists in the continent, within each discipline and—why not?—between one discipline and another, so as to create in our societies a scientific tradition worthy of the name.

Moreover, many disciplines have certain assumptions which are discipline-specific, irrespective of the context in which the discipline is practised. Two such assumptions about research in general is that 'the kind of answers expected depends both on the kind of questions posed and on the method of enquiry' and that 'if a problem is philosophical it must have a universal relevance to all men' [and women] (Bodunrin 1991:76,78). Bodunrin (1991:64) summarises this position by saying that the professional philosophers require that

Philosophy ... must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects that receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation in society within which the philosophers operate.

In addition, the influence of writing on Africa provides an avenue to 'pin down ideas and to crystallise them in our minds. It makes the ideas of one day available for later use' (Bodunrin 1991:82). Relating the developing of science to literacy, Hountondji (1991:99; cf. also Wiredu 1984:151) says:

The first precondition for a history of philosophy, the first precondition for philosophy as history, is ... the existence of science as an organized material practice reflected in discourse. But one must go even further: the chief requirement of science itself is writing. It is difficult to imagine a scientific civilization that is not based on writing, difficult to imagine a scientific tradition in a society in which knowledge can be transmitted orally.

As 'a literature produced by Africans' (Hountondji 1991:120), African philosophy intends to meet these criteria. It develops philosophy as it

results from individual, intellectual engagement with the universe of experience, is pluralistic, and is subject to an "irreducible polysemy of discourse" (cf. Owomoyela 1991:158; Hountondji 1983:179).

It is not authoritarian and does not aspire 'to confer a wisdom that is eternal, intangible, a closed system sprung from the depths of time and admitting of no discussion' as ethnophilosophy and traditional cultures do. It should rather be

a debate, a 'pluralistic discourse, in which different interlocutors question one another within a generation or from one generation to another' (cf. Owomoyela 1991:159; Hountondji 1983:83f).

Professional philosophy is only African in so far as it has an African 'orientation' (Wiredu 1991), it serves as a 'geographic' designation (Houn-

tondji 1991) or it contributes to the scientific development of education in Africa (Keita 1991). The relationship between the African orientation and its universal design is expressed by Bodunrin's (1991:64f) description of the professional philosophers' perception of African philosophy as

the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics or history of philosophy. It is desirable that the works be set in some African context, but it is not necessary that they be so.

Wiredu (1991:93) defends the possibility that a non-African may also participate in African philosophy. He says that there is a possibility that 'the work of an alien might come to have an organic relationship with the philosophical tradition of a given people and thus become an integral part of it'. Towards the end of his argument, Wiredu (1991:106) goes even further. He pleads for a modern or modernising African philosophy and expresses his hope that such a philosophy would become 'a living tradition'. As far as the development of a tradition of modern philosophy is concerned, he states,

There are a number of ways in which this can be done .... We can adopt the option of simply collecting, interpreting, and retelling those of our traditional proverbs, maxims, conceptions, folktales, etc., that bear on the fundamental issues of human existence. I consider this to be a reactionary option in the straightforward sense that it is backward looking and will keep Africa behind; it will not enable us to achieve a fundamental understanding of the world in which we currently live in order to try to change it in desirable directions, and it will make us easy prey to those peoples who have mastered the arts and techniques of modern thinking. In other words, such an approach to African philosophy would be a hindrance to modernization in Africa. Nevertheless, were we to embrace this option universally, the result would be entitled to be called ['African philosophy'].

As far as the constructing of African philosophy as living tradition is concerned, he states,

Philosophy is culture relative in many ways, particularly with regard to language. To ignore our own culture and betake ourselves exclusively to the promptings of that of the West in our philosophical thinking would be a manifestation of nothing but a deeply ingrained colonial mentality. Still, the result of such an uncritical Westernism, if it were to seize our continent long enough, would equally qualify to be called 'African philosophy'. For a body of thought to be legitimately associated with a given race, people, region, or nation, it is sufficient that it should be, or should become, a living tradition therein. It is indifferent whether it is home brewed or borrowed wholly or partially from other peoples. Since we are ... still trying to develop a tradition of modern philosophy, our most important task is not to describe, but to construct and reconstruct.



Even though it might seem as if Wiredu takes the argument too far, his main point underlying the argument is clear. The African philosophy which is to be developed should both empower the African people(s) in the process of modernization as well as form the living tradition in which the African people(s) live—in other words, it should not be an alienating philosophy, but contribute to the healing of the people and the continent.

A strong emphasis is that they regard philosophy in Africa as the ‘[“hand-maid”] of science’ and the main task of professional philosophy as the participation in the ‘(uncritical) modernization’ of Africa.

The fact that Serequeberhan puts ‘uncritical’ (above) in brackets, probably implies Oruka’s (1991:48) criticism that professional philosophy does not have an appropriate subject matter—it merely lives off the criticism of ethnophilosophy—that it lacks a history and that it is not self-critical. I believe that the modernism-modernization debate is an appropriate subject to be addressed. Modernism was a critical movement in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century which criticised the meaninglessness of the industrialised, technocratised and ‘new world’ philosophies of colonial politics. This debate and the methodologies it employed might be used to open up new subjects and methodologies for professional philosophy. Modernization implies the industrialisation, scientific development and economic advancement of African countries. Since the world has learnt dearly that uncontrolled industrialisation can have devastating effects on nature, animal and human biological life as well as culture, such a scientific project cannot be embarked upon without the necessary precautions. Professional philosophy can make an invaluable contribution to science and industry by studying modernization in history, the era of colonialism and other parts of the world and then providing the pool of knowledge in terms of which informed decisions can be made and practices developed in and for the modernization project in Africa. Wiredu (1991:105) argues that a critical African philosophy as a tradition is in a process of development, and that it must be ‘nursed’. Oruka (1991:49) also criticises the approach because it provides an avenue for the legitimisation of Western techniques in African philosophy too—i.e. together with national-ideological philosophy.

Bodunrin (1991:83) objects to the latter criticism by referring to ‘British philosophy’. His argument is that just as ‘Greek philosophy’ depended on ‘Egyptian philosophy’ for its development, ‘British philosophy’ on ‘German philosophy’, and ‘American philosophy’ on ‘British philosophy’ African philosophy must also be developed on the basis of other philosophic traditions. With regard to the ‘intellectual history’ of humanity, he quotes Wiredu (1978:7,11f) with approval and states that it,

[is a series of mutual borrowings and adaptations among races, nations, tribes, and even smaller sub-groups]. And [the work of a philosopher is part of a given

tradition if and only if it is either produced within the context of that tradition or taken up and used in it].

In other words, African philosophy as a 'national' philosophy will also borrow from other philosophies to generate its own. This may be done for the purpose of changing Africa (cf. Bodunrin 1991:84).

## **4.5 Hermeneutical-historical Philosophy**

As an exploratory attempt, Okolo (1991:204-210) advances a few tentative thoughts on the importance of hermeneutics for African philosophy. Similar to Husserl's (1970) recognition that hermeneutics arises in situations of crisis, Okolo (1991:201) believes that the same is true for the development of an African hermeneutics. Examples from European history are the 'crisis of self-identity in German romanticism', the 'crisis of Europe confronted by a technicized world', the crisis of 'the forgetting of Being' (Heidegger) and the crisis of 'a loss of language' (Ricoeur). Similarly, the rise of hermeneutics in Africa can be located in the

generalized identity crisis [in Africa which is] 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 1991:201).

Focusing the argument on the notions of 'Tradition' and 'Destiny', 'the object, subject, the horizon, and the limits of interpretation' Okolo (1991:202) advances three propositions which may function as 'a general theory of hermeneutics':

1. Any theory of reading presupposes a theory of the text and vice versa.
2. Any reading (interpreting) presupposes some kind of 'retake'.
3. Any reading and any retaking involves a decision that starts from the reading and retaking subject's vision of the world.

From all this, what seems to be revealed is that all interpretation presupposes a tradition, and that tradition as such is always interpreted. Even more, all interpretation appears to be supported by a certain idea of destiny .... Interpretation is the space where tradition and an idea of destiny are deployed or unfolded.

Answering the question, 'what is tradition?', one can say that it is fundamentally an 'action of delivery and of transmission' 'from generation to generation' (Okolo 1991:202).

Following the young Hegel, Okolo (1991:203) describes the notion of 'destiny' in terms of the related complexes of liberty, reason and fatality. It is

primarily from the idea that destiny emerges out of the interplay of the 'rational' and the 'irrational' that Hegel developed his 'dialectics of life and of history'. The irrational, finite and particular passions of people are in tension with the infinite and the necessary and it is the tensions thus created which 'are the means through which the universal spirit realizes itself'. Destiny then emerges as 'effective reality' in the continuous 'history and judgment of the world', i.e. on a more general level, in the productive tensions between the given and the future, tradition and the various interpretations of a people and an individual.

In the discussion of the three propositions of a general hermeneutics, Okolo demarcates three spheres where a new tradition can be developed through an African hermeneutics.

#### **4.5.1 The Interaction between a Theory of Reading and a Theory of the Text**

Stating that the text to be studied (or read) is that of 'African tradition' 'as a whole' or 'the text as a fact of tradition', Okolo (1991:204) says, following Gadamer, that the theory of the text should not be limited to that of a written text or to the text as work (Ricoeur).

The written word, the work in itself, has nothing to say if it is not provoked, instigated, and recreated by tradition. It is the process of tradition-in-becoming [*devenir tradition*] that makes a text or a work autonomous from its author and from its initial destination; this same process of tradition-in-becoming extracts the text or work out of its quotidian ambient and offers it a propitious space from within which it can open up and create new worlds.

In the transmission of tradition, transmission takes place through the enchainment of interpretations and reinterpretations. The study of the enchainment of interpretations can take the form of a backward moving study illuminating both theory and practice as it impacted on each interpretation. Okolo (1991:205) identifies an important 'methodological consequence: A true hermeneutical practice must be one that can also be enunciated as theory'. Important in such an endeavour is to remain within the limits set by the resources provided by tradition and to devise a theory related to the resources. On this point, Okolo (1991:205) criticises ethnophilosophy for not limiting its study to its resources and states that a 'hermeneutical critique of ethnophilosophy remains to be undertaken'.

#### **4.5.2 The Interaction between Reading and 'Retaking'**

Stating that 'appropriation is that which results from any reading', Okolo (1991:205) defines such a 'retake' as the 'recreation, the actualization, of

what is being read' and states that it is therefore 'never innocent'. Generally speaking, appropriation can for example take place as 'juridical, religious, philosophical, ideological and scientific actualizations'. It is here important that African hermeneutists clearly describe in what sense they practice a 'retake' of tradition. With this prescription, Okolo (1991:205) criticises ethnophilosophy for its 'confusion and vagueness' and thereby its 'dubious epistemological status' by not delimiting the fields in which appropriation of tradition takes place.

Pointing out that appropriation is never innocent, Okolo (1991:206) argues that each reading always 'selects, at the moment of reading, susceptible aspects that enable it to be realized'. For Okolo (1991:206), it is the task of the hermeneutist to clearly 'define the problematic of the retake' and what such a retake 'projects and delimits [in] the role of creation in the reading'. In the field of philosophical hermeneutics, Heidegger's 'retake' of Being and Ricoeur's of *cogito* serve as examples of hermeneutics's 'retake' of elements in the ontological problematics of the Occidental philosophical tradition. Okolo (1991:206) consequently points out that the basic problematic with which African hermeneutics is faced is that the 'contours [of an African hermeneutical retake] are defined elsewhere than in the African tradition itself', e.g. in a Christianity which has always been rooted in Occidental philosophy. This has to be changed so that 'the African tradition itself' provides its own hermeneuticity.

In the process of having the African tradition positing its own hermeneutic, Okolo (1991:206) calls for 'the restoration of the past' in line with an authentic retake of tradition in African context but also with a delimiting of that which does not belong. Commenting on how it must be done, Okolo (1991:206f) states:

We should not only restore the monuments of the tradition but also the philosophies and orientations that occurred in our traditional past. The history of ideas is one of the conditions for an African philosophical hermeneutics. African hermeneutics, left to itself, must die as a hermeneutics if it is not sustained by a science of history applied to ideas—a science that will supply African hermeneutics with a subject matter, a problematic, and its own proper course.

Since much of African tradition still belongs to the oral tradition, its transcription and study will have to form a central element in hermeneutic restoration.

Together with restoration, African hermeneutics has as task, the study of the enchainment of appropriations, i.e. the study of 'structure relations from "front to back" and [to] define internally the process of the tradition and of interpretation'. This will bring about the continuous

retroactive renewal of 'cultural memory' by new discoveries. Okolo (1991:207) states:

Our past, by continually modifying itself through our discoveries, invites us to new appropriations; these appropriations lead us toward a better grasp of our identity.

#### 4.5.3 The Determining of Appropriation by the Reading and Retaking Subject's Vision of the World

Focusing attention on the notion, 'vision of the world', Okolo (1991:207) identifies three of its 'essential aspects':

a *descriptive aspect* by which the vision of the world presents an image of the world, an existential situation; a *justificatory aspect* by which it reflects on and renders an account of what it is and what it has been; and a *projective aspect* through which it sketches the future of an individual or of a people (e.a.).

Since these 'aspects' locate 'hermeneutical developments' within 'a vision of the world', Okolo (1991:207) argues that it is

expressed and summarized in the idea of destiny, in which it deploys the spiritual economy of an individual or of a people between the past and the future.

A 'vision of the world' therefore *unleashes, guides and projects* the hermeneutical process. Okolo (1991:207f) uses Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur (and how they depend on Hegel) as examples to show how this worked within European hermeneutics. It was destiny with its ingrained 'vision of the world' as conceived in European hermeneutics which

culminate[d] in a very precise mission .... Europe is called on if not to dominate, at least in some way to civilize, to liberate, to save, and to spiritualize other peoples. To do this, it has to preserve all the spiritual weight that characterizes it. The retaking efforts that European hermeneutists deploy aim at preserving Europe from spiritual destruction and, with Europe, the entire world (Okolo 1991:208).

Turning to the challenge of practising hermeneutics in Africa, Okolo (1991:208) says:

We will have to, no doubt, explode the idea of destiny and recharge it anew starting from our hermeneutical situation. This hermeneutical situation is that of the formerly colonized, the oppressed, that of the underdeveloped, struggling for more justice and equality. From this point of view, the validity of an interpretation is tied to the validity of a struggle—of its justice and of its justness. Here, we

affirm the methodological preeminence of praxis on hermeneutics, praxis understood in the sense of an action tending toward the qualitative transformation of life. We do not share the opinion of those who think that praxis delivers a deadly blow to hermeneutics<sup>2</sup>. We affirm rather that, in a given situation, it is praxis that assigns to hermeneutics its place and its development. Praxis unleashes the hermeneutical process and gives it an orientation. Hermeneutics, in turn, offers praxis a cultural self-identity necessary for ideological combat.

Concluding the argument, Okolo (1991:209) says that reflection on destiny and tradition has the one task of allowing the object, methods as well as the results of hermeneutics to arise from tradition itself. Moreover, when one attempts to theorise interpretation and tradition, one finds that these are already

interior to the ways and means that tradition itself secretes and utilizes [interpretation] for its own preservation, renewal, and perpetuation (Okolo 1991:209).

Hermeneutical-historical philosophy engages and reflects on the concrete politico-historical actuality of the present African situation and its future possibilities. This is done by a 'historically and hermeneutically sensitive dialogue' with African national liberation writings and African literature (cf. Serequeberhan 1991b:21), the 'tradition' and 'destiny' of Africa (Okolo 1991:202) as well as (modern) African philosophy as discipline (cf. Owomoyela 1991 & Towa 1991). As is evident from this overview of Okolo's arguments, the study of tradition and destiny do not only form the subject matter or the objects of critical enquiry, but also engage the development of methodologies which are employed in the hermeneutical engagement with African realities.

## **5 African Philosophy and Modernisation**

The main problem concerning modernisation facing Africa today according to Lansana Keita (1991:151) is that of

adapting modern techniques and modes of knowing to societies being transformed from those in which the most important factors of production were human beings themselves, to those in which the machine constitutes the major factor of production.

It is in providing a basis for processes of modernisation in Africa that Keita sees the prime importance of African philosophy's focus on the developing of 'a method'. Such 'method' is developed not for mere 'theoretical analysis,

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is made against the import of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach.

but also for practical application'. The importance of African philosophy in this context is to engage in 'the debate concerning solutions to the social and technological problems faced by societies undergoing social transformation' (Keita 1991:153).

Posing the pragmatic question about philosophy: 'what function can philosophy serve?', he argues that

theoreticians of philosophy in an African context must attempt to construct a modern African philosophy with the notion that its formulation would be geared toward helping in the development of a modern African civilization. Any analysis of the contemporary world demonstrates that the more successful civilizations are those which are the most technologically advanced (Keita 1991:145,147).

Using Western philosophy as model and implicitly criticising ethnophilosophy, he argues that African philosophers must learn from Western philosophy that 'philosophy as a whole is in reality a construction, a device which served and serves practical social needs' (Keita 1991:145), that it functions as an instrument 'shaping the ideological and technological outlook of [a] particular civilization', and that it requires

a self-conscious effort on the part of [African] thinkers to utilize the most complex products of human thought to fashion a self-interested civilization (Keita 1991:146).

As sources of inspiration, ... [Western philosophers] primarily drew on 'the sophisticated literate thought of ancient Greek thinkers whose ideas were borrowed, then analyzed for the needs of that civilization' and not on indigenous thought systems such as those of the Gauls, Vandals, Celts, Normans, Visigots, Vikings. In this process, Western philosophy developed the West's modern science on the basis of rationalism and empiricism on the one hand and the increasing application of 'the theory of modern scientific methodology ... to all modes of human experience' (Keita 1991:147).

Commenting on the complex processes of modernisation *in general*, Keita (1991:147) argues that it requires the articulation of nature itself, 'knowledge of the workings of nature', 'the applications of different forms of technology to this world' as well as 'the relevant value judgments and cultural assumptions necessary for the maintenance of the society in question'. Important in this process, is that societies draw their value judgments from 'knowledge of the natural world' and then apply such knowledge to the various forms of technology (Keita 1991:147).

Concerning modernisation *in Africa*, Keita (1991:147) sees the task of philosophers to similarly

impart knowledge of the natural and social world and ... assist in the constant discussion of the optimal set of value judgments and cultural assumptions that social individuals must make to take the fullest advantage of the sum of scientific knowledge available.

Pointing out that current Western philosophy is mostly concerned with the history of ideas and that the social and political sciences have taken over the function of providing solutions to technological and social problems, Keita (1991:148) proposes that African philosophers not follow a similar route. They must rather fully engage in the facilitation of the articulation of values and scientific knowledge and not leave it to the various disciplines individually. On the contrary, disciplines must be questioned concerning the values informing their practices, e.g. values dating from the colonial period in the sciences must be analysed and changed.

Furthermore, Keita (1991:148) argues that since

it is the methodology of research of a given discipline that determines the orientation of research in that discipline and the kinds of solutions to problems ultimately proposed,

African philosophers must focus their philosophical activity on 'theoretical analysis of issues and ideas of practical concern' which must include 'the analysis of the methodology and content of the social sciences (i.e. history, economics, anthropology, political science, etc.)'. Theoretical analysis must then encompass as many relations and disciplines as possible and not remain focused reductively on one particular discipline. As such, it can contribute to the development of scientific research in Africa on a broad front, which in turn simultaneously would stimulate economic and technological development. Similar to Western philosophy's development through attempting to meet 'material and psychological needs' of European society, African philosophy must direct its 'structure and orientation of knowledge' on African society. Scholars in the various disciplines should also be equipped with philosophical tools enabling them to theoretically analyse the function and impact of their disciplines in African societies and realities (Keita 1991:150).

Sensing that many of his proposals may be construed as containing an implicit critique of ethnophilosophy and philosophical sagacity, Keita (1991:151) argues that 'traditional African thought systems' have an important role to play in the modernisation of Africa. He states:

I believe that intellectual effort in the African context should be strongly geared to the training of personnel in modern techniques of natural and social scientific inquiry, appropriate for application in the ongoing transformation [through



processes of modernisation] of society. Clearly, those beliefs and theoretical ideas characterizing traditional African thought systems which are proven vital for contemporary development should be nurtured and incorporated into the social philosophies and technical orientation of modern Africa (Keita 1991:151).

This would provide a new focus for traditional African thought, moving it from attempts to prove that 'Africans knew how to think consistently before colonial times' or that 'African world-views were not inherently irrational' to constructive engagement with the modernisation of African society. It is only in this context that Keita (1991:153) sees the importance of traditional African thought. Keita (1991:152) recognises that central to the transformation of Africa into 'the age of modern technology' would be the engaging with 'important ideological debates and ... transformations of social orders and accompanying modes of thought' (Keita 1991:151f). And it is here where African philosophy can be of much 'practical importance'. This is in distinction to Western philosophy which has become 'essentially an intellectual ode to Western civilization' (Keita 1991:152). Summarising his views on the task of philosophy in the African context, Keita (1991:153) says that it should be

a dynamic philosophy in the vanguard of each of the research disciplines, committed to the formulation of new or modified concepts and modes of knowing appropriate for social and technological development.

More radical than Keita, Hountondji and Wiredu gives an even more appreciative role to science in Africa. For Wiredu (1980:32), science is the 'crucial factor in the transition from the traditional to the modern world'. Concerning modernisation, he says:

Modernisation is the application of the results of modern science for the improvement of the conditions of human life. It is only the more visible side of development; it is the side that is more associated with the use of advanced technology and novel techniques in various areas of life such as agriculture, health, education and recreation.

The underlying argument with which Towa (1991:187-200) and Hountondji (1983:176) attempt to persuade Africans in favour of modernisation in Africa, is that it is precisely the dearth of the development of science in Africa which led to the defeat of Africans by the colonists. Wiredu (1980:61) similarly argues that

the African, who asks himself why it came about that everywhere on this continent other peoples were able so easily to put his people in bondage, is bound

to realize that the trouble lies not in our biology but in certain aspects of our culture .... the lack of a developed scientific method.

And criticising philosophers attempting a return to original roots in African society, Bodunrin (1991:70) says:

A way of life which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious. Any reconstruction of our past must examine features of our thought system and our society that made this possible (see also Owomoyela 1991:162f).

It is in the context of these and many more arguments, that Towa (1991:194) points out that if African philosophy aspires to be counted as philosophy, it must meet the general and universal requirements of the discipline:

Philosophy is the thought of the essential, the methodical and critical examination of that which, in the theoretical order or in the practical order, has or should have for humanity a supreme importance.

## **6 African Resistance and the Myth of the European Civilising Mission**

Viewing imperialism as 'the highest stage of development of capitalist social formations', Wamba-Dia-Wamba (1991:211) indicates that the most important challenges facing Africa, are to be played out in the space of conflict between

the imperialist forces of domination that aim at the repeated defeat of the African resistance at all levels; and, ... antiimperialist forces militating in favor of the strengthening, and the victory, of the African resistance up to complete national liberation.

This space, however, is not clearly defined. On some issues, Africans formed alliances against imperialism, e.g. where imperialism denies or negates 'African cultural identity, African personality, Africanity, African way of life, communalism, etc.'. Through movements like pan-Africanism, negritude, African philosophy, ideology, religious syncretic movements, the return to ancestral sources/values, African civilization, socialism, theology, etc., Africans have formed such alliances. However, on issues like imperialist stances against Communism, some support was generated from within Africa (Wamba-Dia-Wamba 1991:211).

Despite such instances, it is precisely African resistance which unmasked the 'mystifications of the European *civilising mission* which was based on a radical denial (negation and destruction) of African cultures'. The

importance of such resistance becomes clear when Father Placide Tempels' book is put in ideological perspective and when the works of resistance of the various prominent African authors are studied.

Wamba-Dia-Wamba (1991:212f) shows that despite many of his statements which reflect his respect for African culture, his main strategy was to uncover some elements of African culture in order to provide points of contact in terms of which the natives could be civilized for the benefit of the Belgians and in the interest of 'making colonization more effective'. For Tempels, the strategy was 'to find a way of breaking, from within the cultures of the natives, their cultural resistance to the *civilizing mission*' and to bring Africans to reject any hope of finding a future history arising from their own tradition (Wamba-Dia-Wamba 1991:212f).

Providing an overview of responses of some important African authors, Wamba-Dia-Wamba (1991:213f) shows that from Nkrumah to Cabral, from Eboussi Boulaga to Towa, from Cheikh Anta Diop to Theophile Obenga, it was precisely through activities of resistance and the anti-colonial struggle that progressive victories were won. The untangling of these resistances is, however a complex process. It brings with it the problematic relations between master and slave, the freeing of the slave, the recognition of the African peoples, and more (see Wamba-Dia-Wamba (1991:212-231). The problem of ideological co-option was always a possibility, even for those who attempted to confront colonialism from within the colonial enterprise. Many people and movements who followed this strategy, in the end had to resort to processes of re-Africanisation.

## 7 The Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenge

The deconstructive and reconstructive project forms part of the historical process of 're-Africanization' (cf. Cabral 1969:76). Since the educational, political, juridical, economic (including the Marxist notion of the 'universal class struggle') and cultural institutions in Africa are still implicated by the European cultural codes, principles and attitudes inscribed in them, African philosophy has to unmask these Eurocentric residues and replace them with more efficient African ones. Serequeberhan (1991a:xix; 1991b:22) argues that if this is not done, Africa will remain part of the colonial enterprise, i.e. it will still be exploited for economic, educational, political, social, cultural, and other purposes. This will keep it subjected to Western political and intellectual domination. The current demise of Europe's colonial and neo-colonial hegemony provides the perfect opportunity to engage in this project.

## Critical Observations

It stands to reason that a compilation of essays such as Serequeberhan's is

not extensive, nor aimed at providing an in-depth portrayal of philosophical debates during the 1980s. Rather, it comprises brief condensed, programmatic and introductory sketches focusing on African philosophical developments and dialogues in the 1980s—condensed, because the essays attempt to draw together some of the main arguments and debates; programmatic, because they wish to map certain co-ordinates which may be used for further debate; introductory, because a few essays attempt to break new ground in the field of African philosophy. The strength of this selection is its focus: Africa.

It is evident that Serequeberhan resisted the temptation to include essays which merely ride the wave of philosophising about Africa in the terms and jargon of poststructuralist, postmodernist, or postcolonial protagonists aimed at an international readership. Even though much in these movements have great relevance for Africa, for being able to function as vehicles for the representation of African complexities, their virtual absence indicates the desire not to philosophise within the confines of many of these discourses which, despite their theories, are still contaminated by Western practices. *African Philosophy* is, therefore, interventionist and focused on Africa as part of a strategic essentialism, dearly needed in academia in Africa and especially in South Africa.

This said, however, does not mean that such strategic essentialism is unproblematic. Some scholars would define it in terms of *race*, meaning that only black Africans can truly qualify as philosophers from within Africa; others may expand this to include other *diaspora races* similarly exploited by colonial and apartheid domination in Africa; others may define it in terms of *culture*, meaning that only people brought up in, belonging to or thoroughly socialised into (an) African culture would qualify; others, still, may define it in terms of *class* and still others, in terms of *gender*.

While each of such essentialising choices and their resultant discourses would importantly and necessarily contribute to critical discourse within the field of African philosophy, I do find Hountondji's proposal to essentialise African philosophy in terms of *geography*, suggestive. Even though one may generalise and say that according to its principles and practices, all colonial powers are the same, and that all forms of oppression experienced by Africans have been or are similar, the option for an essentialising geographical approach will provide the possibility of focusing the developing of philosophical discourse not only on Africa. More particularly, it will also provide the opportunity to address the diversity of traditions, practices and discourses of resistance and/or reconstruction as well as the multiple complexities posed by the challenge of modernisation in the many African regions. Moreover, this option also brings with it the displacement of *time* as it was manifest in logocentric Western patriarchal

philosophy and focuses instead on *space*. Spatial articulation is not necessarily contaminated by the West's history. Rather, it paves the way to philosophise in terms of Africa's own multiple complexities, thereby displacing practices of articulation from the contested discourses of 'Enlightenment rationality', the myth of the 'civilising' of the 'savage' and the myth of developing the 'non- or underdeveloped' according to some form of Western 'standard'. Furthermore, spatial articulation facilitates articulation in terms of Africa's own complexities, not as a 'before' and 'after', but as advancement of the quality of life in different regions. Such articulation will move the tracing and construction of discourses, practices, structures and systems from the 'in between' to the 'in amongst'.

Six critical areas remain: these concern arguments focusing on rationality and methodology (for the purposes of both analysis and construction), the philosophical engaging with the use and abuse of power/politics/knowledge, the developing of rhetoric, the identification of the developing African philosophy as literature, the use of the notion of deconstruction by African philosophers as well as the absence in this compilation of essays of philosophising 'the African woman'. Among others, such themes form our current agenda in the 1990s.

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