

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Philosophy
of the University of Nairobi,
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This thesis has been submitted for examination with my approval as a University Supervisor.

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DEDICATION

THIS WORK IS DEDICATED TO MY
ENTHUSIASTIC COLLEAGUES IN,

AND

ARDENT STUDENTS OF, AFRICAN
PHILOSOPHY WHEREVER THEY MAY BE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and special thanks to my supervisor Prof. H. Odera Oruka. He took keen interest in the work and availed to me some very relevant literature that were not easy to come by locally. I found his criticisms and suggestions to be ⁵constructive and indeed very enlightening and valuable, without which this thesis would not have taken its present form. To him, I am greatly indebted.

I am also grateful to the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) for inviting me to take part in conducting a seminar in Andorra during the early part of 1993. During my stay there, I took the opportunity to discuss the work with some of the participants. Some of these discussions turned out to be quite useful. I also took time while there, to revise chapters two to eight. I am equally thankful to the Institute of Philosophy Consolata Seminary, for allowing me free use of their library. I found tremendous amount of useful literature there.

My appreciation is also extended to some of my colleagues for their fruitful discussions. In this regard, Prof. D.A. Masolo was particularly useful during the early stages, before he went to the United States of America for this sabbatical leave. My regret is that I have had to finish this work in his absence. I am grateful to Prof. J.M. Van Hook who during his leave at the University of Nairobi, took time to go through this work and offered ingenious suggestions. I am also thankful to my mother Rose Achieng' and brother Hesbon Odhiambo for the assistance they accorded me during the field research.

Finally, I am so very indebted to my beloved wife Beatrice Ochieng', who has always been my constant and unending source of inspiration and encouragement. She created the warm and conducive atmosphere, and provided the necessary logistics that enabled me to battle to the victorious end. In this respect, I cannot forget my junior lieutenants, the children. I owe them a lot. I cannot also forget to thank Mrs. Agnettah Odhiambo who despite her busy schedule found time to type this work.

For those many others whom I cannot thank personally, I extend my sincere gratitude.

ABSTRACT

The gist of the study revolves round the question of the nature of African philosophy. The controversy and debate over the nature of African philosophy was generated by the celebrated (though to some, stigmatised) work of Placide Tempels, **Bantu Philosophy**. The work, written in Dutch and translated into French in 1945, was not translated into English until 1959.

Before the publication of Tempels' work, Africans were in many circles (some very high indeed) considered to be a people incapable of rigorous and dialectical inquiry. The existence of African philosophy was therefore as a logical move denied. It is against this background that most Africanist scholars in philosophy conceive of Tempels' work as monumental. For such scholars the work refutes, or at least casts some doubt on, what this thesis refers to as the conventional European conception of the African mentality, that is, the conception that doubts the African's ability to engage in any rational activity.

This study has analysed and invalidated the conventional conception. It has found that the basis of the much-eulogised European philosophy is to be found in ancient Egypt, not Greece. That the cradle of western civilization is traceable to ancient Egypt. And further, that ancient Egypt was very much part of Africa and not part of Europe or Asia as some scholars contend.

This study explicates and analyses some approaches (or trends as some prefer to call it) in contemporary African philosophy. In particular, it lays emphasis on three approaches namely; ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy and specifically philosophic sagacity. Of these three, the study finds that it is the last one that offers a genuine and non-controversial approach to African philosophy.

The main thrust of the work is a comparative analysis of ancient Greek thought (Specifically the pre-Socratic thought) and African philosophic sagacity. The findings are that the two thought systems do not differ much in terms of rationality and logical incisiveness. The general conclusion of the study is therefore that, if the former is philosophical (and no one ever doubts this), then it is only logically fair and fitting for the latter to be so-considered.

This work is particularly a contribution to philosophic sagacity in Africa, and also pioneering in the comparative study of thoughts of indigenous Africans and Western thought.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of intellectual energy has been expended by scholars in the debate on African philosophy. This debate which started as early as in the 1940's has generated very provocative, interesting and important philosophical views. This work takes into account nearly all these views. Aside from formulating them, it makes a critical assessment as well.

This work identifies six approaches in the debate on African philosophy. These are: ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy and literary or artistic philosophy. However, the work limits itself to the first three approaches due to methodological reasons. Literature belonging to either of the last three approaches, can without much ado be categorized in any of the first three approaches. Chapter one is basically a brief enunciation of the problem of the thesis and a rationalisation of the research objectives, methodology, theoretical framework and justification. Thereafter the attempt has been to explicate some basic characteristics of philosophy. Chapter three discusses the conventional conception of the African mentality. This conception stipulates that the black man's culture and mind are extremely alien to reason, logic and various habits of scientific inquiry.¹ Renowned philosophers subscribe to this view. Immanuel Kant underrated the black man when he said that "this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was

stupid".² He further observes that the difference between the two races of men, the black and the white, "appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour". David Hume, for his part, held "all the other species of men to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white".³

Chapter four is a reaction to the conventional conception of the African mentality. The position here is to show that Africa is the cradle of western civilization. Martin Bernal, for example, exposes the heavy ancient Greek borrowing from Egypt (then inhabited by blacks) and how later all the Egyptian roots of Greek civilization and scholarship were discarded. Bernal is concerned with two models of Greek history: the Ancient and Aryan. The first sees Greece as essentially Europeans or Aryan and the second Levantine, on the periphery of the Egyptian and Semitic cultural influences.. Bernal adds that the 18th and 19th century attitudes saw Greece as the epitome of Europe or its pure childhood and so found it intolerable that Greece could have been a creation of colonizing Africans and Semites.⁴

Chapter five is devoted to those scholars who argued that there exist African philosophy. However, it turns out that what they refer to as African philosophy is collective-participatory thought. Ethnophilosophy is the term used to refer to this view in the debate on African philosophy. It is stigmatized as "a philosophy which, instead of presenting its own rational justification, shelters lazily behind the authority of a tradition and projects its own theses and beliefs onto that tradition".⁵

This, the critics claim, falls short of philosophy because philosophy must be "scientific" and must be a philosophy of an identifiable individual and not a philosophy of a people collectively.

Chapter six is an analysis and exposition of professional philosophy. Its conception of African philosophy stands in sharp contrast to that of ethnophilosophy. According to this school, "criticism and argument are essential characteristics of anything which is to pass as philosophy. Hence mere descriptive accounts of African thought system... would not pass as philosophy".⁶ The chapter concludes by highlighting some of the weaknesses of the school.

Chapter seven is an enunciation and evaluation of philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy. Views critical of this approach have been carefully analysed and at the end of the chapter this approach is found to be the most appropriate. It retains the Africaness in ethnophilosophy and the professionalism in professional philosophy, and emerges the two. It is the crossroad.

Chapter eight is an exposition of the ancient Greek thought. In particular the views of Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus and Parmenides have been explicated. The next chapter is an exposition of the thoughts of some African sages. This gives way to a comparison between the two thought systems.

Chapter ten is the final chapter in which some concluding remarks are made.

Notes

1. H. Odera Oruka, *Trends in contemporary African Philosophy* (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), p. 34.
2. As quoted by Richard H. Popkin, "Hume's Racism" , in *The philosophical Forum* 9 (1977), p. 218.
3. *ibid.*, p,213.
4. See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena (The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization) Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece* (New Jersey:Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.1 quoted from H. Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991), pp. 1-2.
5. Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983)p.6.

6. P. O. Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy" in *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Renford Bambrough, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 163.

CHAPTER ONE

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

this work aims to introduce and substantiate the concept of **philosophic sagacity** in African philosophy. Philosophic sagacity is generally unknown to, or at least ignored by those who champion folk philosophy, as the authentic African philosophy and also by those who take pleasure in using professional philosophy to negate folk philosophy.¹

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Placide Tempels' little book *Bantu Philosophy* (published in French in 1945) is an anchor in the history of African philosophy notwithstanding the criticisms that have been levelled against it. Prior to its publication, Africans were in many circles considered to be incapable of rigorous, sustained and systematic inquiry. Hence the concept 'African philosophy' was regarded as inconceivable, the question of its existence did not, and indeed could not, arise. Today, however, the existence of African philosophy is difficult to deny. Indeed, at this point in time African philosophy is establishing a tradition, a history. The problem centres round the question of its exact nature. On this issue six schools of thought, or simply approaches can be identified. These are: ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy and artistic or literary philosophy. For the purposes of this work, only the first three

will be considered. This should not be construed that this work underestimates the importance of the other three approaches. The reason is that the literature belonging to these schools can easily be incorporated in any one of the first three schools.²

Contributors to ethnophilosophy contend or imply that African philosophy lacks critical individual analysis. It is exercised as a collective wisdom of the people. African philosophy is taken to be quite distinct from Western or European philosophy, which is taken to be rigorous, critical and independent. Critical, abstract, independent and so-called objective thought is regarded to be foreign to Africa.

One major criticism that has been levelled against this approach is that it is ostentatious. That what it refers to as African philosophy is in some sense not philosophy. This approach cuts the picture that Africans are radically, if not diametrically, different to the Europeans in as far as mental and logical dispositions are concerned. It is against this background that professional school was born. It refutes ethnophilosophy and its implications. As Kwasi Wiredu puts it " it is worth emphasizing that it is a mistake to proceed as if folk philosophy exhausts the whole range of traditional philosophy".³

Exponents of the professional approach hold the view that whatever African philosophy is, it must be critical and individual. Despite the fact that representatives of the professional school concur on what should (or should not)

pass as philosophy, paradoxically they are in disagreement on the exact definition of African philosophy. Some believe that it should be written, whereas others hold the view that this is not necessary. Some believe that it should be done by Africans, others think that this is not appropriate.

A serious criticism on the professional approach has been that what it calls African philosophy is not African as such. The professional philosophers having been schooled in the western tradition, that is, having gone through the 'western educational system', and having studied western philosophy and hardly anything about African philosophy, have thoughts and beliefs that are coloured with western idiosyncracies. They treat African philosophy from a typical western standpoint.⁴

Philosophic sagacity is an attempt to answer to the above objection. In philosophic sagacity the position is that even in traditional Africa there are individuals who are capable of critical, coherent and independent thinking, despite the fact that they have not had the benefit of modern education. Philosophic sagacity therefore retains the basic tenets of the professional school.

Philosophic sagacity just like the other two approaches, or any other philosophical doctrine for the matter, has not been problem-free. One basic criticism that it has had to grapple with is that there is no marked distinction between it and ethnophilosophy. Lansana Keita, for example, forcefully asserts that "philosophic

sagacity ... seem to be an attempt at mere revision of the principles of ethnophilosophy".⁵

In the light of these problems regarding the nature of African philosophy, ancient Greek thought on the other hand is, without any dissenting voice, considered to be philosophical. It marks the origin and is the basis of western philosophy. This work explicates ancient Greek thought and traditional philosophic sagacity in African thought, and then makes a comparative analysis.

This work therefore approaches the problem of African philosophy from a different angle. It addresses itself to the problem by comparative analysis.

Research Objectives

In the previous section it has been shown that the exact nature of African philosophy has been a problem. The positions of the three approaches have also been briefly outlined. In the main therefore, this work investigates and analyses these three schools.

Particularly, this work elaborates and verifies the validity of the claims and presuppositions of the three schools of thought. In the first place, the work explores the claim of ethnophilosophy that African and western thought systems are distinct. Secondly, it formulates and then evaluates the general principle of the professional

school that philosophy qua philosophy is a critical and individual mental activity, and that African philosophy is no exception to this rule. Thirdly, the work makes an assessment of the position of philosophic sagacity, that in traditional African communities there are individuals who are critical thinkers despite the fact that they have not had the benefit of modern education.

Aside from verifying the validity of the above claim, the work undertakes a comparative analysis between traditional African thinking and ancient Greek thought. The basis and rationale for selecting sagacity in traditional Africa on one hand and ancient Greek thought on the other for comparison is as follows. It is generally accepted that ancient Greek thought is not only philosophy in the strict sense, but it also makes the origin and is the basis of philosophy as it is known through its development in the western world. On the other hand, in choosing sagacity in traditional Africa this work has in mind some of the criticisms that have been levelled against ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, that is, that what ethnophilosophers call African philosophy is not philosophy whereas the professional philosophers are accused of treating African philosophy from a typical western angle.

1:3 Theoretical Framework

Broadly speaking the concern of the research work revolves round the problematic nature of African philosophy. The work identifies six approaches to the problem.

However, it narrows these down to three. In other words therefore, this work operates within the framework of these three approaches. They offer the theoretical framework within which this work operates. Put differently, this work sees the views and suppositions of the three schools as hypotheses to guide it in its endeavours. The three hypotheses are therefore:

First, the claim by ethnophilosophers that there is a marked difference between (traditional) African thought and western thought. That while the latter is critical and individual, the former is communal.

Second, the basic principle of professional philosophy that philosophy as philosophy is (or should be) a critical and dialectical discourse. That therefore African thought as portrayed by ethnophilosophers is not philosophy. For the professional philosophers whatever African philosophy is or may be, it must conform with this basic requirement.

Third, the assertion by the proponents of philosophic sagacity that in traditional Africa there exist individuals who are capable of conscious critical reflection and complicated argument despite the fact that they have not gone through formal education and are therefore not trained philosophers. This school seeks to rescue professional philosophy from its critics.

In the final analysis however, after investigating and testing these hypotheses, the

work makes a comparative analysis of traditional African and ancient Greek thought systems. The objective turning out to be a disapproval of the proposition that traditional African thinking is solely based on communal consensus.

1:4 Literature Review

This work operates within the framework of the three approaches to African philosophy. These are ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy and philosophic sagacity. However, before analyzing these, background information has been offered. This include the conventional European conception of the African mentality and the African origin of civilization.

Within the conventional conception of the African mentality, the views of G. W. F. Hegel, L. Levy-Bruhl, Diedrich Westermann and J.C. Carothers amongst others have been analysed. The running theme in the views of these persons is summarised by Westermann when he says that:

It is...evident that there are differences between the mental activity of the Negro and that of the European,...A significant difference is that the Negro is more dominated by unconscious or half-conscious impulses than we are: for him emotional thinking outweighs logical thinking, and when emotion is the guide, ideas and actions may result which are not in conformity with logic.⁶

Though the views of only four scholars have been elaborately explicated in this work, the list could be endless. Thoughts of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, David

Hume⁷, Gallais, Plaques, Barbe, Williams⁸ and S.C Neill⁹ amongst others fall within the conventional conception of the African mentality.

Some scholars believed that the conventional European conception of the African mentality was misguided and racist. Notable amongst these scholars are Henry Odelela, George James, Cheikh Anta Diop, Martin Bernal and Claude Sumner. The position of the first four is that "the ancient Greek philosophy was a by-product of ancient African world-view; it came into existence by drawing ideas from the Mystery System of the Egyptians".¹⁰ The conventional conception of the African Mentality is therefore far from being correct.

The works of Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, John S. Mbiti, E A Ruch and Robin Horton fall within ethnophilosophy. B.J. Van der Walt's exposition of E.A. Ruch's view on African philosophy summarises the ethnophilosophical position. African philosophy centres round man in his social context. The individual is not conceived as the singular, personal and impenetrable entity, living in glorious isolation. The individual is meaningful by himself and makes sense only as part of totality. To be is to participate. The African is not ego-excentric, but eccentric. He is not in nature and society, existing as an individual distinct from these, but he is an integral part of nature and exists only by them. Individuality, far from being an island, is merely a knot in the web of cosmological, biological, and social relations. African philosophy is therefore not a reflective philosophy, but rather it is a lived philosophy. It does

not separate life from thought, reality from concepts, subject from object. The African is thus not capable of speculative, abstract and independent thinking.¹¹

Professional philosophers argue that ethnophilosophy implicitly re-affirms the conventional conception of the African mentality. They assert that African philosophy should be a dialectical and independent mental activity. Representatives of this approach include Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, H. Odera Oruka and Peter Bodunrin.

As noted already, one major objection of ethnophilosophy is that what it calls African philosophy is only so in the ideological or debased usage of the word. On the other hand, professional philosophy which grants the existence of African philosophy in the technical sense, apparently limits itself to modern Africa. The main task of philosophic sagacity is to grapple with the following question:

Was traditional Africa a place where no persons had the room or mind to think independently and at times even critically of the communal consensus?¹²

Ancient Greek thought, as already noted, is considered to be philosophical. This work explicates and analyses the views of Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus and Parmenides. The first three are considered as philosophers because they abandoned mythic explanations in determining the primary substance. To Thales the Primary substance was water¹³. To Anaximander it was a boundless

substance *apeiron*.¹⁴ To Anaximenes it was air.¹⁵ Heraclitus and Parmenides may be regarded as the first metaphysicians. For Heraclitus all things are in a state of flux such that "One cannot step twice into the same river".¹⁶ Parmenides on the other hand believed that motion and change are illusions.

1:5 Methodology

The thesis of this research work is basically theoretical and analytical. However, in explicating and analyzing the claims and views of the different schools of thought, both library investigation and field research have been undertaken. This therefore means that three methods have been applied. These are: (i) Library investigation. (ii) Field research. (iii) Logical and conceptual analysis.

From library investigation information has been gathered from various books journals and unpublished works such as theses, conference and seminar papers. Information gathered using this method has been useful in explicating the views that have been expressed on the subject.

On philosophic sagacity, field research was inevitable. This is because it is largely unwritten. However, this research was quite different from the one ordinarily employed. The ordinary method employs interviews and questionnaires. The interviewer usually has a set of questions which aim at unearthing some specific information. The field research of this work took the delphic approach. The

researcher (the trained philosopher) and the interlocutor (the sage) engaged themselves in a discussion; a discourse. There was no set objective of obtaining some sort of information from the sage. The aim of the discourse was to ascertain whether or not the views of the sage are philosophical, period. The sage was therefore not merely playing the role of an informant.¹⁷

In undertaking the research, one caution was taken into account. It has been argued that the end result of such an undertaking is a joint effort of both the sage and the trained philosopher, and not the sole responsibility of the sage. This criticism holds some water, for during the discussion one may frame his questions in a way that determines the answers. In Plato's works, Socrates successfully employs this method. In order to overcome or minimize this problem, one has to abstain from asking leading questions and as much as possible play a passive role. The researcher should provoke the sage and let him take the initiative in the encounter.

The position of philosophic sagacity is that traditional Africa was not innocent of dialectical and independent inquiry. In order to prove this, it seeks to identify such kind of individuals. However, given the extensive infiltration of western culture upon Africa today, it is difficult to find an African who is purely traditional. For the purpose of this work, somebody traditional is he/she who is deeply rooted in the traditions and culture of his/her people and better still, he/she should have as little western influence on him/her as possible.

On the whole, the first two methods, that is library investigation and field research, have provided necessary information regarding the different schools of thought which in turn has necessitated a clear understanding of the general problems within the thesis. With that done, the effort has been to carefully and critically reflect upon these schools of thought, pinpointing their weaknesses and strong points. Thereafter a comparative study and evaluation of traditional African and ancient Greek thought systems has been made. This has been done from the standpoint of logical and conceptual analysis.

Justification of the Research

In the final analysis this work makes a comparison between African sagacity and ancient Greek thought. Some scholars have more-or-less undertaken similar researches. Notable works in this area are those by Henry Odele and Claude Sumner.

Odele in his book *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece* is basically concerned to show that ancient Africa is the cradle of western civilization; that the basis and foundation of Greek philosophy and hence modern philosophy is to be found in Egypt (Africa).

Sumner on his part in trying to prove that the African thought is philosophical tries to trace the Greek origins of Ethiopian philosophy. His argument being;

that Greek philosophy, not only is philosophy in the strict sense, but that it is the source and paradigm of all philosophy. If therefore, I could show that one type of Ethiopian philosophy has a Greek basis, I shall be in a position to prove that one African philosophy at least is a philosophy in the sense that they accept.¹⁸

One notices that the concern of both Olela and Sumner is to show that one thought system has its basis or origin in the other. For Olela the concern is the African origin of Greek philosophy whereas for Sumner it is the Greek origin of African philosophy. However, both are concerned with correcting the view that belittled the African thought system.

This work has taken a somewhat different approach. In the main, it is not concerned with tracing and identifying the origin of one thought system in the other, as is the case with Olela's and Sumner's approaches. On the contrary, this research assumes a case where the two thought systems have not influenced one another, at least not directly. However, one may argue that this is the position of philosophic sagacity as an approach to the debate on African philosophy, and hence that there is nothing unique about the approach this study has adapted.

The above criticism has some elements of truth in as far as the question of methodology is concerned. However, despite the fact that Odera Oruka has to date

put on paper the thoughts of some traditional Kenyan sages, he has yet to make a deliberate and explicit attempt at comparing sagacious African thought and western thought, be it ancient, medieval, modern or contemporary. In Odera Oruka's works, there is a subtle assumption that African sagacity is in a way equivalent to Western philosophical thought; an assumption this study tests. The next chapter is devoted to a discussion on the nature of philosophy, for the thesis pivots round the concept.

Notes

1. H. Odera Oruka *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), P.ii.

2. Nationalist- ideological philosophy consist of texts mainly written by African politicians and statesmen. They argue that since colonialism was build on the ruins of what was supposed to be the cardinal ethical principle of traditional humanist Africa - i.e. egalitarianism - the required social and political theory should embrace the basic tenets of traditional Africa. See, for example, Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (London: Panaf Books, 1970). Leopold Senghor, *Nationalism and the African Road to Socialism* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1962). Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Hermeneutic philosophy consists of analysis of various concepts in specific African languages, the aim being to help clarify meaning and logical implications of these concepts. See, for example, Kwasi Wiredu, "African Philosophical Tradition" in *The philosophical Forum*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 - 3, Fall-Spring 1992-93. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft* (London: Ethnographica, 1986).

Literary philosophy consists of texts written by African literary intellectuals such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, Taban lo Liyong' etc.

3. Kwasi Wiredu, "African Philosophical Tradition", *The Philosophical Forum*, VOL XXIV, No, 1 - 3, Fall-Spring 1992 -93, pp.37 - 38.

4. Hermeneutic philosophy recognizes this problem. Kwasi Wiredu in his rationalisation of this approach writes: "In many parts of Africa the power of western formal education and christian indoctrination over the African mind has been so great that, as one knows from one's experience, it is only by dint of a deliberate mental effort that an educated African think, in theoretical matters, in terms of the categories of thought embedded in his own language. That effort does not seem to be a widespread phenomenon among contemporary African sophisticates - not even among those who are most prolific in nationalistic protestations. Yet, conceptual sanity, like charity, ought to begin at home". *Op.cit.*, p.40.

5. Lansana Keita, "Contemporary African Philosophy: The Search for a Method", in *Praxis International* 5:2, July, 1985, p.150.

6. Diedrich Westernmann, *The African To-day* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p.39.
7. See *Vide Supra*, pp 1 - 2
8. *Ibid.*, pp 57 - 58
9. *Ibid.*, p.59
10. Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *Great African Thinkers, Vol. 1: Cheikh Anta Diop* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), p.114.
11. See B.J. Van der Walt, "A Comparison between Bantu and Western Thought", in D.S. Georgiades ed., *Philosophy in the African Context*, collection of essays delivered at a philosophy seminar held at the University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) in July 1975, pp 103 -108.
12. H. Odera Oruka, " African Philosophy: A Brief Personal History and Current Debate", in Guttorm Floistad, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey* Vol. 5 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), p.51.
13. J.Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Adam and Charles Black,

1948), p.48.

14. G.S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.100.
15. J. Burnet, *op.cit.*, p.73.
16. S. Korner, *Fundamental Questions of Philosophy* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1979), p.253.
17. *Vide Supra.* pp. 212 - 214.
18. Claude Sumner, "The Ethiopian Philosophy of Greek Origin", *Collectanea Aethiopica*, Herausgegeben von Siegbert Uhlig Und Bairu Tafla (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1988), p. 147.

CHAPTER TWO

PHILOSOPHY WITHIN SCHOLARSHIP

All is grist to the philosopher's mill,
ethics as well as science; logic as well
as religion, history as well as art.¹

2.1 Philosophy's Unrestricted Nature

It is a Herculean task trying to give a definition of philosophy, almost paradoxically, the more one studies philosophy, the less one feels capable of offering a succinct definition. This chapter is not an attempt at engaging in that exercise of definition, but is geared towards giving an account of some of philosophy's basic and hence irreducible characteristics.

The major reason why defining philosophy is difficult has to do with its subject-matter. Philosophy being the general of all forms of human enquiry, encompasses virtually all forms of human cognition; ranging from the hard to social sciences. Philosophy is interested in anything that exists, purely on the basis of its existence. This is to mean that it takes anything for its subject-matter, be it in the area of physics, mathematics, psychology, history etc. From this point of view, C.E.M. Joad is right when he says that 'philosophy may be described as the study which is without restriction upon its subject-matter'.² Unlike philosophy, all other forms of

human enquiry are limited in terms of their scope of operation, and are therefore relatively easy to define.

That the other forms of human enquiry are limited in terms of their subject matter, is a proposition whose truth-value is hardly debatable. Take physics; it deals with matter, its analysis and the laws which govern its movements. Chemistry just like physics, is concerned with matter, but at a different level of organization. It studies matter under the forms of the element, the molecule, the compound; it treats the properties of substances and their combination and reaction. Biology, on the other hand, is restricted only to matter that is animated by life. Or, put in other words, it studies living organisms which consume food and use it to repair and build up their bodies. Botany makes a further restriction on biology. It is concerned with only those living organisms which absorb water and carbon dioxide from air and mineral salts from the soil, and using chlorophyll contained in their cells transform energy from sunlight for their use. Zoology, like botany, is a limited biology. Its scope of operation is restricted to those living organisms which take in proteins and transform it into the tissues of their own bodies, which sustains and helps them reproduce their kind. In a few words, zoology is concerned with animal life. The human enquiries of anthropology, psychology and sociology yet make further restrictions on zoology. They take for their subject-matter those organisms which possess animal life, in particular human life though from different perspectives and levels.

So far one may get the impression that only the sciences are restricted. This would not be correct. Similar restrictions apply to other areas as well. History, for example, takes for its subject matter the study of the past of mankind upon the earth, with the aim of understanding his present situation so as to predict or influence his future. Music, as a form of human enquiry, is restricted to the study of creation and reproduction of sounds. Theology, deals with the systematic formulation of religious beliefs. Here questions of interest revolve round the nature and purpose of God.

From the explication above, though only some human enquiries have been shown to be restricted in their contents, the same could be done with the other fields of study with the exception of philosophy. From the instances given above, it is apparent that the various form of human enquiries are defined in terms of their restricted subject-matter. Philosophy being unrestricted cannot be so-defined.

2.2 The Role of Philosophy in Human Enquiry

Besides philosophy, given the restricted nature of other human enquiries, each operates within its limited sphere, and comes up with its own sets of results. Strictly speaking, it is not the business of any one of the sciences, for example, to co-ordinate its results with those reached by others, with a view of coming up with the whole. Each is concerned with its parts, not the whole. C.E.M. Joad has a fitting analogy that illustrates the point.

It is as if each science were entrusted with the cultivation of a separate set of trees, but it was nobody's business to concern himself with the wood. Inevitably, no scientist sees the wood; he is too pre-occupied with his allotted trees.³

It is at this juncture that philosophy comes in. The philosopher is concerned with the wood as a whole. What this means is that the philosopher collects the results of the sciences, though not with a primary aim of questioning them. His aim is to assess them; their meaning and significance, in the light of the whole. To use another analogy the philosopher,

is like a commander sitting in his tent some distance away from the battle in continuous receipt of reports from his generals who are in the thickest of the fight, from which he must try to piece together a picture of the battle as a whole. He, if anybody, is in a position to tell how it is going and what the outcome is likely to be.⁴

It is useful to illustrate the analogies above. The physicist's result suggest that the only things that exist are bits of matter that move about in space governed by certain laws. On the other hand, the biologist's report talks about life aside from matter. These two sets of results may not seem plausible to other people. They may see some discrepancy between the results. It is at this point that the philosopher's role becomes significant. He enters the stage in order to assess or reconcile the two sets of results. He would pose and grapple with such questions as: Does it not follow that there are at least two different principles in the universe, that of life and of death? If there are, how do they interact?

The important point that should be noted is that, such questions would not be of much concern and interest either to the physicist, as a physicist, or to the pure biologist. At any rate, neither of them, given that they are specialised in their respective areas of study and hence cocooned in them, are competent to offer adequate answers to the questions or objective responses to such questions.

The report from the psychologist brings in a new dimension to the problem. He talks of the mind or consciousness. How does this thing 'mind' fit in the scheme? Is it simple a particular form of life, of a higher level perhaps, but nonetheless having the same origin as that of an amoeba, or is it the expression or creation of the mind of a superhuman personality? Or is it, perhaps, just a mode of the brain's functioning, or a by-product of the brain? It is with these and several other questions that the philosopher confronts the scientist's reports.

The sciences are not the only sources of information for the philosopher. History, as an example, equally well serves as the philosopher's source of information. Man, for instance, is born, he grows up, marries, encounters problems, grows old and at the end of all these he dies. In other words, he has a history. Humanity in general has a history; the recording of humanity's adventures and tribulations, successes and failures on earth. Regarding history the following questions may be asked: Is history merely a succession of chance happenings, civilizations rising and crumbling without any pattern or reason, or does it bear witness to the working of a law, even

perhaps to the fulfilment of a plan? Such are the questions within the sphere of history that interests the philosopher. They are questions,

about the essential nature of history and as such are philosophical questions. For a historian to answer such questions competently, he must be some kind of a philosopher - a philosopher of history.⁵

Back to the human person, one may ask: What is his true and essential nature?

What is it, as an example, that distinguishes him from other animals or from computers or robots? Is it because human beings have minds or soul? But, what are minds and soul? Three views, amongst others, have been offered to this last question. These can be qualified as the religious, scientific and psychological views.

The religious view has it that a mind or soul is a spiritual being lodged in a physical body and directs it in life. But the soul is essentially different from the physical body and is capable of existing apart from it after death.

Since the body is thus regarded as secondary and inessential, this view amounts to saying that the true person, the real 'you' or 'I', is a spiritual non-material being of this kind.⁶

According to the scientific view, the idea of the soul is at best a religious myth without much rational foundation. To talk about a person's mind is just a way of indicating certain abilities, states and activities of that person. To say, for example, that Onyango is in two minds means that he is undecided. Other animals also have minds though not well developed. What punctuates human beings from other animals is the complexity of their abilities and behaviour. Otherwise they are just physical organisms of a particular kind that have evolved from simpler ones.

The psychological view defines mind in terms of consciousness. It is man's "awareness, particularly of themselves as individuals, their experiences, emotions and thought".⁷ These are special attributes of the human brain. And when the brain 'dies' these attributes also cease. In this view, mind is uniquely human.

These three views are contraries, or at least they contain suppositions that are not congruous. As a result one is left pondering which one of the views is correct. It is then at this point that philosophy is handy. It is the philosopher who is called upon to resolve the issue. The religious man, the scientist and the psychologist cannot adequately grapple with and resolve the problem. Each one of them, being grounded in his respective field of human enquiry is obliged or bound to be biased in favour of his discipline. Indeed, he can only address himself to the problem through his discipline and to expect him to do otherwise would be demanding too much from him, unless he is some sort of a philosopher. As already stated, they see the parts and not the whole. It is the philosopher, because of his interest in the whole, who is in the position of carefully analyzing the differing views and assessing them objectively.

Religious studies is also limited in terms of its sphere of operation. Religion addresses itself to some specific questions. Questions such as: Is there a God? What is he like? Is there a divine purpose in the world? Is the world created and founded by some supreme being or is it just a fortuitous concourse of atoms, something that just is, or happened by chance? Indeed, many religions offer answers to these

questions, but unfortunately (or is it fortunately?) their answers rely on revelation or on the authority of some persons.

These are important and fundamental questions...Such that we cannot answer them satisfactorily by limiting ourselves only to what a non-philosopher theologian may say. Neither can we answer them only by appeal to the Bible or Quran. The best way to answer them or try to answer them is to appeal to human reason - to philosophy...⁸

Another well-known problem which exhibits the unbounded nature of philosophy is that of free-will. This problem has consistently been of interest to philosophers right from the ancient Greek times to the present. Ordinarily, most of us, or better still nearly all of us, believe that we are free to choose between alternative course of action. And indeed, some great thinkers have argued that man is a free being. The choice may be limited by disease or imprisonment or lack of money, but nevertheless the range of choice is still fairly wide. Even if we obey the law or some authority we feel we could have done otherwise.

The conviction of freedom expressed above seems to clash with some facts from various human enquiries. Some people, for example, as it may have already been indicated think that physical science shows that everything is subject to strict physical laws. The position and movement of all the atoms within the universe, including those that make up our brains and bodies, are determined by physical laws so that free choice of action is an illusion. Yet others have argued that fate or destiny governs our actions, or that God has fore-knowledge of them. If God knows all that we do (including those what we have not done), how can we choose to do

otherwise?⁹ Again, others argue that our make up is the product of hereditary and the milieu, and that our decisions and choices are not really free as such because they are governed by our genes and by the influences which mould us in childhood¹⁰ One notices that these responses to the question of free-will are cocooned in various human enquiries. A philosopher qua philosopher will not be so limited. He will analyze and assess the various responses and arrive at a conclusion from a purely rational and objective angle. Indeed, philosophical questions are such that, for answers they pervade into other human enquiries.

From what has been said about philosophy, one may want to relegate it into the periphery in as far as scholarship is concerned. He may contend that serious scholarship can only be of parts (that is, be limited and specialized), not of the whole. That in scholarship one must be a master of some trade, but not a jack of all but a master of none. The proponent of such an argument may assert that most views of the whole are mere religious dogmas or trivial metaphysical speculations.

The position expressed above is not correct. Whereas it is true that understanding of the parts is fundamental in facilitating and necessitating the understanding of the whole; the whole is equally fundamental. The assertion being made can be paraphrased as follows: The parts are a means to understanding the whole, but it is not sensible to talk of means, period, for to talk of means necessarily implies an end, in this case towards a whole. Hence, even in serious scholarship, despite the fact

that the study of parts is important, the whole should not (and indeed cannot) be lost sight of.

The analogy being expressed above can be stated in yet another way. It can be argued that the means (parts) is only meaningful in relation to the end (whole). The means in itself is not an end, it only makes sense in view of the end. If it can be used to attain the end then it is indeed useful, if not then it ceases to be useful; indeed it ceases to be a means (to that end). This therefore means that the end is quite fundamental, for it is what the means is projected towards and is thus what gives the means a basis. Hence, to advance the position that serious scholarship can only be of parts, whereas views of the whole are mere dogmas or trivial metaphysical speculations is not appropriate. At any rate, studies of the parts could be as speculative and dogmatic as studies of the whole, and similarly studies of the whole could be of interest to serious scholarship as much as studies of the parts. In short therefore, there is no discrepancy or contradiction in relating the whole to serious scholarship and the parts to dogmas or metaphysical speculations.

Generally the main concern in this section has been to show that philosophy is unbound in terms of its subject-matter, the aim now is to explicate some of the characteristics of philosophical problems.

Some Characteristics of Philosophical Problems

Philosophical problems may be said to include the following characteristics:

- (i) They are broad
- (ii) They are general
- (iii) Are such that they cannot be solved empirically
- (iv) Involve appealing to pure reason..

These four characteristics are going to be explicated upon one by one. It should however be noted that they overlap and in some cases the dividing line is very thin and subtle.

- (i) In the very first place, the vast nature of philosophy's subject-matter, is reflected in philosophical problems. Philosophical problems discuss broad questions whose considerations involve many different issues that cut across boundary lines that divide other human enquiries.

To discuss the perennial philosophical mind/body questions, for example, one might have to bring in some parts of neurology (what happens in the brain), electronic (computers and their achievements), psychology (experimental study of human behaviour) or theology (for certain doctrines about the soul). Of course, only

a few parts will be involved from each and most of the time will be directed to clarifying concepts like 'mind' and 'persons', and to examining the various theories that have been put forward.

One consequence of this fact that philosophical problems are broad and that all sorts of evidence may be relevant, is that the more one knows about other human enquiries, the better one is likely to progress in philosophy. Indeed, history of philosophy shows that most of the great philosophers were well-grounded in other human enquiries,

... the pre-socratic philosophers were primarily cosmologists... Plato, among much else, was a mathematician; Aristotle the father of logic, was also an aesthetician, a political theorist, a constitutional historian, and a very eminent biologist. Kant was a physicist in his own right, and his *Critique of Pure Reason* was primarily attempt to provide a foundation of Newtonian physics. Even Hegel, however unscientific in his methods, believed that he could incorporate the natural sciences in his all-embracing system.¹¹

- (ii) Secondly philosophical problems are general in yet another way, in that they are concerned with principles and issues at a relatively high level of abstraction. They are, for example, not concerned with asking what the real nature of Onyango or Kamau is, but with the nature of man in general, not about Karanja's or Hamisi's mind but about the human mind, not about whether Ochieng' should visit his sick mother or pay his debts, but about duties and obligations as such.

With this goes impartiality and objectivity i.e. philosophy is no respecter of persons and condemns special pleading or any pretence that principles you would expect others to accept do not apply in your particular case.¹²

Given this second characteristic one may wonder what the difference is between philosophical problems and scientific ones. One way in which philosophical problems differ from scientific ones lies in the greater generality of the former. Philosophical problems are not, however, a matter of their attempting to give more general description of the world, but rather their being concerned with certain very general problems; problems that are not limited to any branch of scientific enquiry.¹³

(ii) Another characteristic of philosophical problems is that they cannot be solved by empirical, or if you like scientific methods, i.e. by observation and experiment. This fact, along with the wide scope earlier mentioned, is what distinguishes philosophical problems from scientific ones. The psychologist, for example, can observe a person's behaviour or devise experiments to discover on what factors judgement of distance depends; but the philosopher cannot learn from mere observation whether the mind is a spiritual entity; or design experiments to decide whether we have free-will: observables such as behaviour stay the same whichever theory is correct.

On the same note, a social scientist may conduct some kind of poll and find that say 60% of the population think that abortion should be abolished, but counting heads does not in any obvious way have direct bearing on the wrongness or rightness of abortion. Thus although there is some overlap in problems within philosophy and science, they differ in that philosophy has little chance of empirical investigation.

Philosophy relies heavily, if not wholly, on the method of analytic and logical examination.

(iv) The other feature of philosophical problems is that they involve asking questions and seeking answers in a somewhat special way: they involve appealing to pure human reason. It may be said that every man absorbs from his society certain ideas (philosophies)¹⁴; but that does not mean that every man is himself therefore a philosopher. For only a small minority possess the critical and reflective attitude that is necessary in thinking properly called philosophical. So essential is this, that philosophy has sometimes been defined in terms of critical and reflective thinking; it is a subject where the exercise of human reason is at its highest level".¹⁵

However, on this fourth characteristic one has to be a bit cautious. Too much emphasis should not be laid on it, since it could be misleading. By itself, it does not indicate the distinctive character of the problems with which philosophical thinking is concerned.

The craftsman, the industrialist, the housewife, the lawyer also think reflectively, at least on occasions - in fact, all men do - and yet they are not necessarily philosophers ¹⁶

Philosophic thinking differs from ordinary thinking in one fundamental way which it shares with the thought of the pure scientist. It employs concepts and abstractions, and in terms of these formulates principles and laws. This is what is ordinarily

meant when philosophy (and pure sciences) are called 'theoretical' pursuits: they are interested in formulating theories of a wide range of applicability. The ordinary man does not often especially concern himself with such abstractions. The industrialist is not necessarily an economist, the lawyer not necessarily a legal philosopher, the political theorist not necessarily a political philosopher.

The industrialist, the lawyer and the political theorist are interested primarily in specific objectives, and in concepts and principles only in so far as those apply to a given situation. The philosopher (and the pure scientist), on the other hand, are interested primarily in concepts and principles, and only secondarily in their application. Whatever particular concepts and principles they are interested in, may be very intimately bound up with the activities and problems of their society. In ordinary reflective thinking, men think in terms of achieving this or that, winning this or that. The philosopher (and the scientist), however, are interested not in particular situations but in the general concepts by means of which such situations can be understood and dealt with. Plato clearly expresses this view in his famous book *The Republic*.¹⁷

However this abstractness and generality of concepts and principles, which philosophic thinking shares with that of the scientist, may also serve to distinguish the two types of thought. The concepts of each of the pure sciences relate to different specific fields of enquiry. Those of astronomy are concerned with stellar phenomena, those of biology with the phenomena of life, those of sociology with the

phenomena of social groups. The concepts of philosophy are not limited in this way. As already explicated in the first two characteristics, they are broader and more general than those of the special sciences. They apply to a wider range of phenomena.

2.4 Philosophy and Logic

Given the generality and vastness of philosophy, it became both desirable and necessary that lines of demarcation be drawn within it, giving rise to several divisions or branches, each of which deal with specific problems and issues. Some of these branches are: epistemology, ethics, logic, metaphysics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of law, philosophy of science, philosophy of art, philosophy of religion and philosophy of social sciences. The first four are however considered to be the main branches.

In this section, the attempt is to show that logic or more accurately formal logic which has a lot in common with mathematics plays a fundamental role in philosophy and indeed in any form of human enquiry, and as a result should occupy a special position in philosophy.

From the characteristics of philosophical problems elucidated in the previous section, it follows that philosophy and science share a lot in common. They are both general in terms of their being concerned with principles and issue at a relatively high level of abstraction (second characteristic), and they also involve critical and

reflective thinking (fourth characteristic). It is because of these similarities that some individuals loosely refer to philosophy as some sort of a science; a social science. However, the two essentially differ with regard to the third characteristic. Science is such that its truths are empirically verifiable and in most cases predictions can be made based upon such truths. History of science ascertains this fact. Philosophical problems, on the other hand, are such that they cannot be solved by empirical means. Philosophical truths are therefore not essentially verifiable empirically and are such that predictions cannot be based upon them.¹⁸

Within science there is a certain human enquiry which everybody agrees belongs to its domain, but rather curiously, the propositions and theories involved in this human enquiry are such that they are not falsifiable or verifiable by observation.

This human enquiry is pure mathematics. Mathematics is termed a science purely on the basis that its propositions and theories are subject to a recognised method of proof and they are necessarily universal by nature, despite the fact that its standard procedures and methods for deciding whether its theories and propositions are true or false hinges on pure reason. This therefore means that mathematics in as far as its method of verifications goes is a unique science, a special science.

When one goes back to the branches of philosophy, one notices that the procedures and methods that are found in mathematics, are also found in philosophy. As already indicated above, problems and issues within philosophy are such that they are not verifiable empirically. Such problems are majorly resolved on the basis of

reason. Problems within epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of law, social and political philosophy etc. are such that they are ultimately resolved on the basis of human reason. Within formal logic as well, empirical matters are relegated to the background and human reason occupies the centre stage. However, unlike the other branches, in formal logic human reason is at its highest. Indeed, formal logic is nothing other than an explication of principles underlying human thought and as a result the determination of the relation of truth or falsity of propositions within it, is done on the basis of pure reason. Formal logic therefore occupies a special position within philosophy. A good philosopher must be well-grounded in logic.

From the above, it follows that formal logic is to philosophy as mathematics is to science. In fact, formal logic is so very close to mathematics that it is in some ways hardly possible to draw a line between them.¹⁹ Some thinkers have in fact argued that because of the similarities in their method and procedure, formal logic should be detached from philosophy and be placed in the same slot as mathematics within the domain of science. A.J. Ayer, for example, asserts that:

Formal logic is not the first science to grow up under the wing of philosophy and then emancipate itself. This had happened to physics by the seventeenth century, to biology by the nineteenth century; more recently psychology has made its bid for independence.²⁰

This position is apparently controversial and would seem obnoxious if not out of the blue to most scholars, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. That formal logic,

which is generally regarded to be one of the integral branches of philosophy, should no longer be so-regarded is contentious.

Ayer's assertion that formal logic has emancipated itself from philosophy or that it should be detached from philosophy recognizes the fact that formal logic is fundamentally different from the other branches in terms of its procedures and methods, but to argue that it should be detached from philosophy, is not prudent and would lead to confusion as to the nature of philosophy in general. Formal logic plays a very fundamental and important role within philosophy, a role that is inescapable. Philosophers do indeed make use of formal logic in their arguments; sometimes they are able to take advantage of the economy and precision of symbolic logic. They employ logic and logical symbolisms on their premises and propositions on which they reason so as to clarify them. Logic therefore, is an essential tool for philosophers and scholars in general, and there are no good grounds to tear it away from philosophy. By analogy, in a family, one of the members may be of exceptional rational capacity, but that fact should not be used to negate his membership. If anything his exceptional mental power should be utilized for the benefit and betterment of the family.

Having given an account of philosophy, the next chapter is devoted to an exposition of the conventional European conception of the African mentality. This conception holds that the African mind is not capable of philosophizing; that logic, the epitome of philosophy, is foreign to it and that an exercise in logic easily tires the African

mind.²¹ The essence of this chapter was to come to grips with this activity which the African is said to be unable to engage in.

Notes

1. C.E.M. Joad, *Philosophy*. (Kent: Hodder and Stroughton, 1977), p.22
 2. *ibid.*
 3. *ibid.*, p.18.
 4. *ibid.*
 5. H. Odera Oruka, "Philosophy and Other Disciplines", in H. Odera Oruka, (editor), *Thought and Practice: The Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya*, (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, Vol. 1 No. 1, 1974), p.28.
 6. R.J. Hirst, (editor), *An outline for the Intending Student*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p.6.
 7. *ibid.*, p.7.
 8. H. Odera Oruka, *op.cit.*, p.31.
 9. See Harold H. Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, (New York: America Book Company, 1953), pp.175 - 178.
 10. See H. Odera Oruka, *Punishment and Terrorism in Africa*, (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1986), pp. 14 - 17.
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11. A.J. Ayer, *Metaphysics and Common Sense* (London: Macmillan, 1973, pp. 2 - 3.

12. R.J. Hirst, (editor), *op.cit.* p.9.

13. See A.J. Ayer, *op.cit.*, p.87.

14. Here the two words, i.e. 'ideas' and 'philosophy' are being used interchangeably. However, there is a sense in which the two are different. Unless an idea has been rationalized, it remains a mere idea; not a philosophy. This distinction will be discussed further in a subsequent chapter.

15. H. Odera Oruka, "Philosophy and Other Disciplines", *op.cit.*, p.27.

16. J.H. Randall Jr., *Philosophy: An Introduction*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1971), p.3.

17. See Plato, *The Republic*, translated with an introduction by Desmond lee, (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), pp.267-280.

18. Predictions are such that they are often about propositions or occurrences that are not known to be true, at least at the time the prediction is being made. The confirmation of a prediction often takes place in the future, that is, well after the prediction has been made. This confirmation often takes place on the basis of

experience. The predictans (the basis upon which the prediction is made) cannot be a *a priori* necessary truths, but a *posteriori* and contingent truths.

19. Until the early 1980s students at the University of Nairobi taking philosophy in their first year of study had to choose two out of three courses. Logic was one of the three courses offered. Of the three, Logic used to have the least number of enrolled students. Quite a good number of these students thought that Logic favoured those well-grounded in mathematics and since most of them were not, they avoided it.

20. A.J. Ayer, *op.cit.*, p.82.

21. By conventional European conception of the African mentality is meant that it is a general agreement by implicit consent of the majority of Europeans that Africans are mentally inferior. However, one should recognise the fact that some Europeans do not share the view.

CHAPTER THREE

CONVENTIONAL CONCEPTION OF THE AFRICAN MENTALITY

...Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it - that is in its northern part - belong to the Asiatic or European World...Egypt does not belong to the African Spirit.¹

In chapter two, it was shown that, notwithstanding the difficulty involved in defining philosophy, it is a human activity or enterprise that involves critical and systematic thinking; it is where human reason is at its highest rung. Until recently, in the history of philosophy, the African was seen as someone who was not capable of this mode of inquiry.² More accurately, before the first publication of Placide Tempels' pioneering work in the area of African philosophy, entitled *La Philosophie Bantoue* in 1945 (later translated in English, *Bantu Philosophy*), the African was in many circles considered to be someone who was not in a position of engaging in any form of rigorous, dialectical and individual inquiry. By the same token, the existence of African philosophy was denied. The phrase 'African Philosophy' was hence construed as constituting a contradiction of terms; a self-contradiction. The two terms 'African' and 'philosophy' were regarded as mutually exclusive. Anything African could not be philosophical and conversely, anything philosophical could not be African. In this chapter an exploration and explication is

going to be made on the arguments of some of the individuals who championed for the above position. In the main, the views that are going to be looked at are those of G.W.F. Hegel, L. Levy-Bruhl and Diedrich Westermann. The views of these three are representative enough for the school, though the list is much longer.

The Philosophy of History

In the debate on African philosophy, Hegel's views regarding Africa may very well be considered to underlie the starting point of the school that denies philosophy to Africa. In his book, *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel basically addresses himself to questions which are about the essential nature of history. He is primarily concerned with such questions as: Is history merely the recording of past events which happen by chance, or do these events have a rationale and hence projected towards a definite goal? In answering the above questions, Hegel postulates that events and activities of man are projected towards a goal. This goal according to him is freedom, and the basis and driving force of these events and activities is reason. For Hegel reason is both the substance and form of all aspects of human life, be it natural, spiritual, moral or otherwise. As a form, reason is the driving force of all events in the universe and consequently it is the substance of the universe. If one removes reason from the universe then the universe ceases to be. Hegel is very assertive on this point and states in no unclear terms that:

Reason...is Substance as well as Infinite Power: its own Infinite Material underlying all the natural and spiritual life which it originates, as also the

Infinite Form - that which sets this material in motion. On the other hand, Reason is the **Substance** of the universe; viz. that by which and in which all reality has its being and subsistence.³

It therefore follows that reason governs the world, since in any case it is its substance and has infinite power that sets all things in motion. Indeed, events, activities and things within the universe are governed by some unchangeable laws, and these laws follow a regular pattern. In other words, there is consistency and coherence between these laws and the events, activities and things within the universe. These laws are therefore laws of reason, because in-built in reason is consistency and coherence. The movement of the solar system or those of molecules for example, take place according to the unchangeable laws, and they do not just happen by chance. If at all these movements happened by chance, then this would imply that the laws governing them are changeable and would not be consistent to the events of necessity. Therefore, implied in the unchangeable laws is reason. When one looks at the events, activities and things in the inverse, one notices coherence and consistency; a regular pattern. This is because they happen according to unchangeable laws; laws of reason. As a result therefore: "Nature is an embodiment of reason; that it is unchangeably subordinate to universal laws"⁴: "Reason governs and has governed the world"⁵. Because reason is the driving force of events, the inquiry into the essential destiny of reason is identical with the question: What is the ultimate design of the world? For the purpose of his analysis, Hegel goes on to divide Africa into three broad categories.

One is that which lies south of the desert - Africa proper - the upland almost

entirely unknown to us with narrow coast traits along the sea; the second is that to the north of the desert - European Africa (if we may so call it) - a coast land; the third is the river region of the Nile, the only valley - land of Africa, and which is in connection with Asia.⁶

Hegel goes on to argue that Africa proper is as radically different from European Africa and the river region of the Nile, as it is from the rest of the world. According to the great German philosopher, the distinguishing characteristic of Africa proper is its innocence as far as reason is concerned. It is an undeveloped region without any civilization, largely because of its geographical position and peculiar climatic conditions. The inhabitants of this region are isolated geographically and for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world - shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself - the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is developed in the dark mantle of night. Its isolated character originates; not merely on its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition. The triangle which it forms is on two sides so constituted for the most part, as to have very narrow coast tract, habitable only in a few isolated parts. The second portion of Africa, its northern part (European Africa), lies on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic; is a magnificent territory. This part of Africa according to Hegel, was to be - must be attached to Europe. The third portion, the river district of the Nile - Egypt; because of its connection with Asia was adopted to become a might centre of independent civilization, and therefore is as isolated and singular in Africa as Africa itself appears in relation to the other parts of the world.⁷

Africa paper, argues Hegel, is still tied down to the subjective level. What Hegel means is that the African is essentially projected towards himself and can thus not perceive objects as distinct from himself. This, argues Hegel, is because the African has no reason. Rationality is a relational attribute involving the subject and object. It is an outward process, from the subject to the object, with the aim of comprehending the universal, and ultimately the absolute. Because the African has no reason, he has no knowledge of things outside himself; he has no knowledge of God, for example. As a result the African has no reverence and morality. In his own words, Hegel says that:

In Negro life the characteristic point is that consciousness has not yet attained the realization of any substantial objective existence in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realises his own being...so that knowledge of an absolute Being, an other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro...exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality... there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.⁸

Because the African has no reason and is anchored at the subjective level, he has no regard for a higher Being, indeed he cannot conceptualize it. He therefore, does not have a religion. He instead believes in sorcery and magic, for in these man is at the centre, everything else revolves round him. Religion, according to Hegel's analysis, begins with the consciousness that there is something higher than man. But in sorcery, there is no idea of God, of a moral faith.

Sorcery, exhibits man as the highest power regarding him as alone occupying a position of command over the power of Nature. We have here therefore nothing to do with a spiritual adoration of God, nor with an empire of Right.⁹

According to Hegel, though the African is conscious, his consciousness is as a matter of necessity dependent upon nature. The African, for example, is conscious of natural phenomena such as storm, rain, cessation of the rainy period, and so on. Indeed, he needs the beneficial influence of some of the natural phenomena. The crucial point for Hegel, however, is that the African's consciousness of such natural phenomena does not conduct or lead him to the consciousness of a Higher power. It is him who commands these elements, and this is what magic is all about. Hegel goes on to argue that because the African has neither an idea of a God nor a code of morals, his undervaluing of Humanity reaches an incredible degree of intensity. Tyranny, for the African, is regarded as no wrong, and cannibalism is looked upon as customary and proper.

...the devouring of human flesh is altogether consonant with the general principles of the African race; to sensual Negro, human flesh is but an object of sense - mere flesh. At the death of a king hundreds are killed and eaten; prisoners are butchered and their flesh sold in markets; the victor is accustomed to eat the hearts of his slain foe.¹⁰

Hegel concludes the introduction of his book *The philosophy of History*, by stating in no equivocal terms that he is not going to include Africa in his analysis of the philosophy of history, because it is a *tabula rassa* as far as reason is concerned, and

as a result lacks a history. And indeed beyond the introduction of his book, Africa disappears from the scene for it has no role to play in the subject-matter of the book.

What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented only as on the threshold of the World's History.¹¹

For the renown German philosopher therefore, Africa was a land of childhood where no serious thought ever took place. A region where philosophy and history had no space. This Hegelian view later found a disciple in the person of Lucien Levy-Bruhl. However, Levy-Bruhl in his analysis of the African mentality is periphrastic. Whereas Hegel depicts the African as a brute; as someone who is illogical and uncultured, Levy-Bruhl grants that the African thinks, though in a peculiar pre-logical manner. On the face of it, the Levy-Bruhlian position as H. Odera Oruka observes, "leaves the hope that this culture might one day evolve into a scientific and reason-oriented culture".¹² The next section is devoted to an exposition of the views of Levy-Bruhl.

The Primitive Mentality

For Levy-Bruhl, the African mind is pre-logical and not conceptual, and because of this, the African mind can, with a lot of ease, accommodate a contradiction. The African mind can entertain several propositions which the European mind would straight away reject as absurd. The African mentality expresses no confusion over contradictory propositions. In his own words, he asserts that "the primitive

mentality is less sensitive than ours to contradiction; it does not expressly accept it, but tolerates it etc."¹³

When Levy-Bruhl asserts that the primitive mentality is not conceptual like the Europeans, he does not mean that the African mind cannot form concepts; an assertion the Hegelian position would easily accommodate. Rather, Levy-Bruhl means that the African mind does not make the same use as the European mind does of discursive reason. He emphasizes that;

The Africans are not familiar with its (concept's) operation: the slightest abstract reasoning tires them and becomes for them immediately harassing. Why? Because they do not have at their disposal the indispensable logical material which makes these operations simple and reasoning easy: they lack the hierarchies of concepts which allow the subsuming of some things under others, and by operating on the concepts to obtain without great difficulty results which are valid for objects.¹⁴

Levy-Bruhl then gives quite a number of examples to illustrate his point. An exposition will be made on just one such example; the example of the Trumai.

According to the Bororo, the Trumai spend the night at the bottom of the river. Impossible, says K. Von den Steinen: men cannot sleep at the bottom of the water. They are not fish. This reasoning does not convince the Bororo at all though it seems irrefutable to the Europeans. For the European the reasoning involved is simple. The Trumai are men. Men submerged for some minutes are asphyxiated and die. Therefore either the Trumai are men and so it is untrue that they spend the nights in

the water - or, if the fact is right (that they spend their nights in water), then they are not men. It is a simple statement of a disjunction in the exclusive (strong) sense; both cannot be true. It is therefore, as a matter of logical move, necessary to choose between the two.

Levy-Bruhl goes on to say that there is no doubt that the Trumai are men. Therefore they do not and cannot survive in the water: this is a necessary and logical consequence. Levy-Bruhl's position is that if the Bororo do not grasp this, and if, when it is put before their eyes, they still remain unconvinced, must it not be concluded that their minds do not have the same logical exigencies as the European's?

The reason why the Bororo escape the dilemma is because their thought is not conceptual. Without doubt, they well know that an immersed man drowns and is not long in dying from asphyxia. None of them imagines that he would be able to sleep at the bottom of the river, and indeed would not risk it. But according to them, the case of the Trumai is different. They spend the nights in the water; it is therefore necessary to conclude simply that, on this particular aspect, they are not similar to the Bororo and that they enjoy the faculty or privilege of staying underwater without difficulty.

Levy-Bruhl goes on to argue that the fundamental reason why the Bororo do not see the contradiction, is because they do not have a clear concept of man. The concept of

man to which it is understood that he breathes with his lungs and as a result is asphyxiated in water. If the Trumai were men so defined, and if nevertheless it were asserted at the same time that they spend the nights in the water, it would be unacceptable from the logical point of view. But the Bororo do not see this. They do not have the abstract idea of man with properties which necessarily and essentially belong to all the beings denoted by this term. For them the Trumai can therefore very well be men from every other point of view and different only in so far as it is possible for them to breathe in water like fish.¹⁵

Levy-Bruhl further observes that this mental habit of the African hinders him deducing from concepts what is necessarily included in them. At the same time, it also obstructs him from making inductions of the scientific fashion. The same causes always produce the same effects, and given the effects it is always possible to go back to their causes. The African mentality also, in some sense, bases its techniques on this regular order which controls the phenomena of nature, and in this sense it is somehow making inductions which experience confirms. But, nevertheless at the same time it allows exceptions to occur and it would never have the idea of denying reality in the name of an inviolable determinism.

So much on the Levy-Bruhlian primitive mentality, the next section treats the views of yet another thinker who belongs to the same school of thought though his views have not been given much datum in the conventional European conception of the African mentality. The views being referred to are those of Diedrich Westermann.

The African Today

Diedrich Westermann in his book *The African Today* which was first published in 1934 and reprinted without much alteration in 1969, just like Hegel and Levy-Bruhl believed that the African mentality was fairly distinct. That it has peculiar qualities which punctuates it from the European mentality. According to him:

It is... evident that there are differences between the mental activity of the Negro and that of the European,... A significant difference is that the Negro is more dominated by unconscious or half-conscious impulses than we are; for him emotional thinking outweighs logical thinking, and when emotion is the guide, ideas and actions may result which are not in conformity with logic.¹⁶

According to Westermann, because the Negro's mental activity is dominated by emotional thinking, his (Negro's) interest in a question is seldom lasting, and his power of thought is easily fatigued. It is difficult for him to follow an argument of any length, or to think out a problem for himself with all its implications. He loves to phrase ideas superficially side by side without a logical connection, or to connect them with each other according to their external features. This lack of critical thinking and logical coherence makes it easy to understand why he does not always feel contradictions as such. In his religious creed two mutually exclusive conceptions may exist side by side. Because of the African's emotional mode of thought, for a long time to come he will be weak in independent, critical and productive thought.¹⁷

After portraying the Negro's frame of mind, Westermann concludes that it follows that the Negro has but a few gifts for works which aim at a distant goal and requires tenacity, independence and foresight. He has never succeeded in larger undertakings, which need plans for a far future and wider view of casting on a large scale; he works from day to day without clearly picturing the consequences.

The Negro is therefore not a good merchant. There are indeed traders enough in Africa, and individual peoples like the Hausa, Mandingo, and Swahili do business on a considerable scale. These, however, are principally tribes which have a long time culturally, or by reason of a mixture of race, lived under foreign influences.¹⁸

The world view of the African is characterized by its unity and completeness. No sharply defined aspects exist by themselves; wish and reality, the possible and impossible, knowledge and belief, thought and poetry, secular and religious life are interwoven and fundamentally one. Things which the Europeans distinguish as separate are for the African identical in their essence. It is thus difficult to study one single feature of the African life in isolation. Because their world view is cohesive, one inevitably passes from one region into the other without noticing it; a correct understanding can only be obtained by surveying the life as a whole.¹⁹

Westermann, however cautions that it should not be construed that the Negro is incapable of making distinctions, especially on matters concerning life, death, harm and good. However, these are not differences in essence, but in accidents.

Vestiges of such a complex attitude are extant among ourselves. When in our fairy-tales animals and trees talk. With us, however, this fairy-world is real at most in childhood and vanishes later. The Negro, even as an adult, can relate in all sincerity how in the dawn of morning a hyena turned into a woman before his eyes, and it is quite natural for him to beg forgiveness of a tree by making sacrifice before felling it...²⁰

This oneness of vision, even prevents the Negro from distinguishing between the material and the spiritual. The soul is matter sublimated - breath, a shadow, a flame. It is thus possible for the magician or priest to capture the soul of a sick man which has escaped and is sitting on the roof of the house or on a neighbouring tree, and having captured it to restore it to the human body. Processes are regarded as things or beings: illness is, for example, a stone, or a piece of wood which must be removed from the body, or a being that is wandering about in the body. If a Negro dream of a far away country, then in his sleep he has really been there, even though he was visibly sleeping on a mat the whole night long, for there are men who can leave their bodies, as a snake its skin.²¹

As form and character are identified, so are the whole and the parts. The whole has characteristics of the part and the part those of the whole.

If I have a part, then I have essentially the whole; and what I do to a part, I have likewise done to the whole. If I carry the tooth of a leopard on my body, then I have command over some of the power of the leopard. Anything I do to the nails and hair, cut from an enemy I have done to him.²²

That then is the mental attitude of the African according to Westermann. In

parenthesis it is worth briefly explicating some similar views of recent thinkers. This is meant to show that the conventional conception of the African mentality is upheld in certain circles even today.

In his book, *The Mind of Man in Africa*, J.C. Carothers notes with regret that in recent years, scholars generally describe the conventional African mentality with reservations, despite its truth.²³ "These descriptions are by no means false. They represent a fact of the truth and, as such, must be recorded".²⁴ He then goes on to describe these views. He begins by quoting at length from the works of two French neuropsychiatrists, Gallais and Plaques. "The two with particular reference to the population of the French colonies of Central and West Africa had the following to say:

The best known trait of the normal psychology of the Africans are, above all, the importance of physical needs (nutrition, sexuality); and a liveliness of the emotions which is counter-balanced by their poor duration. Sensations and movements comprise the chief part of his existence. Intellectual life, evocation of the past, and projects for the future preoccupy him but little. Separated from these regulating influences, he lives essentially in the present (in this sense like a child), and his conduct submit to influences and impulses of the passing moment and thus appears explosive and chaotic.²⁵

Another French writer from whom Carothers quotes is Barbe. He summarizes the African mentality as follows:-

In the field of intelligence, an inaptitude for that which appears to be its essential function: co-ordinating the parts of a whole, perceiving abstract relations particularly mathematical.²⁶

Williams writing about Africans of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), stated that:

Compared with the white races he seems to lack initiative and constructive ideas, although he may be a shrewd judge of the attainment of others...Power of observation is astonishingly defective...They seem to be incapable of sustained effort...An African has little imagination and little humility. His self-esteem is often ludicrous...The qualities most in need of education are imagination and judgement.²⁷

In conclusion, Carothers in his own words summarizes these attributes of the African as follows:

The African is conventional; highly dependent on physical and emotional stimulation; lack in foresight, tenacity, judgement and humility; inapt for sound abstraction and for logic; given to fantasy and fabrication, and, in general, as unstable, impulsive, unreliable, irresponsible and living in the present without reflection or ambition, or regard for the rights of the people outside his own circle.²⁸

The founder Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Nairobi, the late S.C. Neill also subscribed to the conventional conception of the African mentality. Once in 1971 on being told that the logic class was small because students believed that logic was a difficult subject, he responded that:

The belief is well-founded and I completely agree with the students. I do not think that logic is really a subject for the African mind. We in the West are familiar with it right from the days of Aristotle. The African mind, I believe, is intuitive, not logical.²⁹

Given Neill's views regarding the African mind, it was however ironical that he

entrusted the logic class to an African who was then just a junior temporary member of the teaching staff.

That then is the position of some scholars regarding the African mind. As already indicated in the introduction of this chapter, this exposition is representative enough of the school, though the list is endless. The position explicated in this chapter is what is referred to (in this work) as the conventional European conception of the African mentality. By way of conclusion a careful examination of this conception is going to be made.

The African Mind: Concluding Remarks

As a philosopher, Hegel's greatness and influence cannot be doubted or underestimated. Possibly, it is because of this that most scholars have not had the courage and audacity to offer critiques on his views regarding Africa.

Even P.J. Houtondji claims that Hegel is irrefutable, and others such as H. Odera Oruka, K. Wiredu and P.O. Bodunrin (among the best known African philosophers) do not make any reply to Hegel's racism on a theoretical level. They are at best just quoting the relevant sentences and turning away with a fully justified moral detest, but this is not enough for critical and rational philosophers which they are known to be.³⁰

Hegel's argument is that Africa proper, is primitive, without a history and philosophy, because of amongst other factors its geographical condition and tropical nature, which therefore makes it habitable only in a few isolated parts. A glance at

the vegetation, population, temperature and rainfall maps of Africa of early this century clearly indicates that the great German philosopher was misguided in his views regarding the geographical conditions and population distribution of Africa.

The population of Africa south of the Sahara is fairly distributed, with an average of about 100 persons per square mile. Regions with populations of below 5 persons per square mile are the desert and semi-desert areas of some parts of Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya; the Kalahari desert of Southern Africa; the forest regions of the Congo and Zaire. These regions put together only constitute a small part of Africa south of the Sahara. Therefore, when Hegel asserts that the geographical nature of Africa proper makes it habitable only in a few isolated parts, it is not clear what he really means, or more specifically that assertion is manifestly false. For Africa south of the Sahara (which in Hegelian terminology is Africa proper) is evenly inhabited.

Further, contrary to Hegel's assertion, it is the geographical condition and tropical nature of Africa that makes it habitable. Little wonder when climatic conditions of other parts of the world become unbearable the inhabitants of such regions come to Africa, where the climate is generally hospitable throughout the year. The issues raised above are pointers to Hegel's ignorance (or is it arrogance?) on geographical matters concerning Africa. Given the falsity of the assertion and the fact that it is the basis (premise) of Hegel's view regarding the African's mental disposition, it logically follows that his argument cannot be sound.

One of the few scholars to have written a critique on the Hegelian view of Africa, Christian M. Neugebauer, argues that Hegel's source of information regarding Africa was twofold. The first one was ignorance and the second missionary reports which were in any case not properly qualified. Hegel therefore, builds his views about Africa upon ignorance and unqualified missionary reports.³¹ This, to say the least is an undesirable state of affairs if not tragic; more so, given Hegel's intellectual and philosophical calibre.

Hegel's view on ancient Egypt, that it was influenced by Asia and as a result isolated from Africa proper is no longer tenable. Several scholars have written well researched and lengthy theses that disprove the position. They have argued that the ancient Egyptian tradition had its foundation in the south-Ethiopia, Sudan, and other African societies. And in turn, it was ancient Egypt that influenced western civilization contrary to Hegel's thesis.³²

Neugebauer in his critique of Hegel's "Vorlesungen Über die philosophie der Geschichte", notes a logical contradiction in the work. He observes that on one hand Hegel argues that ancient Egypt has nothing in common with the "African Spirit"; "Egypten wird im Obergang des Menschengestes Von osten nach Western betrachtet werden, aber es ist nicht dem afrikanischen Geiste zugehörig". On the other hand, however, Hegel holds that the religion and state system of Egypt contain "African elements" and partly belong to the "African Spirit"; "Wir haben hier das

afrikanische Element zu gleich mit der orientalischen Gediegenheit an das mittellandische Meer versetzt."³³

Another contradiction in Hegel's work, *The Philosophy of History*, involves his analysis of the role of reason in history on one hand, and his denial of reason to Africans on the other. In his exposition, Hegel underscores the function of reason in Nature and history to the extent that, for him, reason and nature are inseparable. "Nature is an embodiment of Reason". It is discernible in terms of reason and ultimately reducible to it (reason). However, in his exposition he does not deny Nature to the African. Given Hegel's analysis of the inseparable relationship between Nature and reason, it defeats logic for him to assume that Africans have the former but not the latter.

From the arguments given above, it is safe to argue that Hegel begins his analysis of Africa with some firmly preconceived ideas. Hegel following very faithfully the footsteps of scholars and writers of his time had preconceived notion that Africa was devoid of rationality, a dark continent, a land of childhood. That Africa was such, seems to him to be a truism. And this explains his careless and inadequate manner in which he goes about to explain it; for a truism is such that one does not need to offer rigorous reasons to prove it. At the same time, because of Hegel's apparent enthusiasm to relegate Africa from the threshold of world history, he basically ignores or does not bother to evaluate any evidence that runs counter to his objective.

Levy-Bruhl's position regarding the African mentality can also be shown to be inadequate from a purely conceptual and analytic angle. His argument that the African mind is pre-logical and not conceptual, and that therefore it can accommodate a contradiction, when subjected to conceptual analysis fails the rigorous test of logic. Even if it is granted that the Bororo, believe that the Trumai spend the night at the bottom of the river and that they (the Trumai) are men, it does not necessarily follow that they believe a contradiction. Indeed, a close and careful analysis of Bruhl's exposition reveals this fact, though he seems not to be aware of it.

In Bruhl's analysis, it is clear that the Bororo believe that the Trumai are men, not fish. At the same time, they believe that the Trumai spend their nights in the riverbeds. Indeed this appears strange. However, Bruhl; for the sake of sanity, should have researched more deeply in the Bororo concept of a person, especially in relation to the Trumai. Had he done so, he would have found out that to the Bororo, the Trumai possess an additional attribute, which therefore makes it possible for them to spend nights in water. However, such an additional attribute need not necessarily exclude the Trumai from the general class of men nor does it distort the Bororo concept of man. It could only be that the Trumai belong to a "special" category of the class of men. It is therefore not an overt contradiction as such to assert that the Trumai are men and they spend their nights in water. An examination of some views in the history of philosophy testifies to this point, as is going to be shown below.

Within metaphysics the definition and explication of the concept of identity has been problematic. It has raised several controversies. However, this thesis will limit itself to one such controversy. A controversy which will assist in showing that Levy-Bruhl's assertion that the African is pre-logical is unwarranted.

Identity is really the harmony of one thing with itself. This harmony must exist both intrinsically and extrinsically in the being to be called real identity. However, no two or more things may exist with similarities both in terms of form and content, hence no two or more things may be identical in this sense. This is referred to as absolute identity. This would therefore mean that things cannot be identical. Nevertheless, people ordinarily talk of two or more things being identical. Usually, what they mean is that the things have some common properties. This is what the scholastics called relative identity. Relative identity may relate to essence or accident, hence relative identity is divided into essential and accidental identity. Essential identity is the real harmony of several things in their essence while accidental identity is the harmony of several things in their accidental. Essential identity is further divided in terms of genus and species, hence generic identity and specific identity, respectively. Thus, man and dog have a generic identity, they both belong to the animal genus, whereas Onyango and Otieno have specific identity in that they belong to the human species.

In metaphysics there has been a debate as to whether given two individual beings

belonging to the same species the essence in both of them will be exactly the same or differ in the same. According to Levy-Bruhl it seems impossible for two or more beings belonging to the same species to have different essences. This is precisely why he finds it contradictory for the Trumai to belong to the species of man and at the same time spend their nights in water; whereas other beings within the same species do not and cannot sleep under water. Spending nights under water is essentially not a human attribute and therefore anything belonging to the human species must possess that essence (of not spending nights under water).

Other scholars and philosophers have held the contrary view. To such individuals it is possible for two things to belong to the same species but differ in essence. Leibniz and Duns Scotus are amongst such scholars. J.M. Nyasani captures the gist of Leibniz's argument by asserting that :

Leibniz...comes out strongly against this view that two separate beings may exactly be identical in essence. This position is perfectly consistent with his doctrine of monadology according to which no two monads can be exactly alike as they have no windows through which anything can enter in or go out.³⁵

On the basis of this counter-position it follows therefore, that the Trumai could very well belong to the human species yet differ in essence from other beings who belong to the same species.

No one of fame is known to have criticized and characterized Leibniz as pre-logical on the basis of his views expressed above: Therefore, why should the Bororo be

denied logic? One may ask. If anything Leibniz's view and argument exhibits a high degree of logic and metaphysics. It would have been very useful indeed for Levy-Bruhl to have tried to unearth the logic behind the Bororo metaphysics, or alternatively to unearth the metaphysics behind the Bororo logic. The fact that he did not attempt either of these can easily be explained by the fact that he entered the field and started his analysis with a mind already set.

To deny that a people have concepts, is to imply that they cannot have a discourse. Communication presupposes that the parties involved have clear concepts upon which they concur. If the Bororo, for example, did not have a clear concept of man, then how would they distinguish a man from a fish? How would they be able to determine that some particular thing is a fish and not a man? They must have some attributes that constitute the concept of man and others that constitute the concept of fish. The Trumai, the Bororo must have believed, over and above possessing the attributes which made them belong to the class of men, possessed some other additional attribute(s). It is most probable that the Bororo conceived the Trumai as such; and not the way Levy-Bruhl wants, so as to manifest a contradiction.

Beside Hegel, the views of the scholars that have been looked at do not specify whether they are making reference to Africa as a whole or just a part of it. In their expositions they talk of Africans in general without giving illustrations that can be tied down to a particular region of Africa. In the absence of this, one can only take it that they are talking of Africa in general. However, if that is the case, then their

views must be rejected. Ancient Egypt and parts of northern Africa are well known for the roles they played in ancient civilization. In the history of civilization, ancient Egypt is a key player. This also explains why Hegel cunningly tries to exclude it from Africa, lest it contradicts his thesis that Africa is unphilosophical.

However, even if these scholars (besides Hegel) were referring to Africa south of the Sahara, their positions are not sufficiently rationally supported. The criticism that has been levelled against Hegel that his analysis was unfair because of ignorance or inadequate information on his part, equally well apply to the views of these scholars. With the exception of Levy-Bruhl, the other scholars do not offer examples, illustrations or data to support their claims. It is therefore fairly difficult to disprove (or prove) their positions on empirical grounds. This may have been a deliberate though strategic move on their part.

Those then are some of the reactions to the conventional conception of the African mentality. The conventional conception is laden with racist overtones and the scholars are undoubtedly under the influence of western mental bondage. And as G.Hilliard warns,

...the person who is in mental bondage will be 'self-contained'. Not only will the person fail to challenge beliefs and patterns of thought which control him, he will defend and protect these beliefs and patterns of thought virtually with his last dying effort.³⁶

In the next chapter, focus will be on the views of those scholars who offered counter-

positions to the conventional European and racist view of the African. In particular, it will be an explication and appraisal of the views of Henry Olela, George G.M. James and Claude Sumner.

Notes

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p.99.

2. Two modes of inquiry may be distinguished namely, logical and emotional. The former is largely critical and individual whereas the latter is intuitive and communal. The mode of inquiry denied to the African is the logical one.

3. G.W.F. Hegel, *op.cit*, p.9.

4. *ibid.*, p.12.

5. *ibid.*, p.14.

6. *ibid.*, p.91.

7. See *ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

8. *ibid.*, p.93

9. *ibid.*, pp.93 -94.

10. *ibid.*, p.95.

11. *ibid.*, p.99.

12. H. Odera Oruka, "Philosophic Sagacity in African Philosophy", in H. Odera Oruka, ed., *Sage Philosophy*, (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991), p. 45.

13. L. Levy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p.126.

14. *ibid.*, p.127.

15. See *ibid.*, pp.8-10.

16. Diedrich Westermann, *The African To-Day*, (London: Oxford University press, 1934), p.39.

17. See *ibid.*, p. 42.

18. *ibid.*, p.43

19. See *ibid.*, pp.178-179

20. *ibid.*, p.181

21. See Diedrich Westermann, *The African To-Day and Tomorrow*, (London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1969), p.85

22. *ibid.*

23. Dr. John Colin Carothers lived a considerable part of his life practising general medicine in Kenya. He later took up psychiatry and was assigned as specialist psychiatrist in charge of Mathare Mental Hospital in Nairobi.

24. J.C. Carother, *The Mind of Man in Africa*, London: Tom Stacey, 1972, p.93.

25. *ibid.*, p.94.

26. *ibid.*, p.95.

27. *ibid.*

28. *ibid.*, p.96.

29. H. Odera Oruka, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), p.127.
30. Christian M. Neugebauer, "The Racism of Hegel and Kant", in H. Odera Oruka, ed., *Sage Philosophy*, (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991), p.247.
31. See *ibid.*, pp.249 -250.
32. See for example H. Olela, *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece*, (Georgia: The Black Heritage Corporation, 1981). This book is however discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.
33. Christian M. Neugebauer, *op.cit.*, pp 250 - 251.
34. G.W.F. Hegel, *op.cit.*, p.12
35. J.M. Nyasani, *A Treatise on General Metaphysics*, (Koln: Walter Kleikamp, 1974), p.35.
36. George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy*, (San Francisco: Julian Richardson Associates, 1988), Introduction to reprint edition.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFRICAN ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION: MYTH OR REALITY?

...Africa is not only the birth-place of man-today an accepted supposition based on the work of archaeologists. We are taking a step further and saying that Africa holds the secrets to a proper understanding of the genesis of Greek philosophy, and, hence, of modern philosophy.¹

In the previous chapter, an exposition and analysis of the conventional and traditional view of the African mind was made. The view depicts the African mind in a derogative and provocative manner. It came as no surprise therefore, that some scholars (mainly Africans) armed themselves against the view. They offered counter-arguments, in an attempt to prove that the view was misguided and wrong, and that it had no rational foundation. The approaches and reactions to this view are various.

However, this chapter is restricted to the views of those scholars who in rehabilitating the African mind showed that there is a fundamental connection or relationship between the ancient Greek or Western mode of thought and the ancient African mode. That the two modes of thought have, from ancient times, borrowed or stolen from one another to such a magnitude that they cannot differ qualitatively. More accurately these scholars aimed at showing that one thought system is the

basis of the other, and hence the difference between the two cannot be so great as to warrant one being termed as primitive or pre-logical and the other not.

Scholars within this approach can be grouped in two clusters. On the one hand, are those who argue that in reality the African mind played a fundamental role in western thought and civilization; that the basis of western thought is traceable in ancient Africa. They argue that if histories of philosophy and of civilization are studied objectively then it becomes apparent that the so-called western philosophy and the much glorified western civilization have their roots in ancient Egypt. On the other hand, are those who were concerned with tracing the Greek roots and foundations of African thought. These scholars set themselves to show that some ancient African thoughts are traceable in the ancient Greek thought system. Their argument being that if ancient Greek thought was philosophical then the same should be said of ancient African thought.

In short therefore, whereas the first group of scholars are concerned with the African Origins of Greek philosophy and civilization, the second is concerned with the Greek origins of African thought. Either way, however, the conclusion is unanimous; that the African mind and thought is philosophical. Representatives of the first school, whose views this work is going to look at are Henry Olela and George G.M. James, whereas from the second school Claude Sumner's views will be representative enough.

From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece

In his book, *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece*, Henry Olela argues for and shows that the foundation of Greek and hence modern western philosophy, is traceable in Africa. Better stated, the gist of his book is that ancient Egypt is the cradle of western civilisation. This position, he points out, would make some philosophers, theologians and scholars in general feel rather uneasy. Such scholars would take that proposition to be silly, stupid and cheeky; and at the very best straightforwardly false. This is because in texts of high philosophical and theological input and calibre, the reader is told and often reminded that philosophy began with the ancient Greek thinkers. "This belief has been so deeply rooted in the minds of academicians that it is difficult and almost embarrassing to question its validity"². Hence the American scholar Robert S. Brumbaugh, for example, in the introduction of his book *The Philosophers of Greece* innocently writes that:

This story of Greek thought traces the building up of a "capital of ideas" that we have been living on ever since. Though it may seem surprising, it is true that the ideas of matter, mechanical, causality, mathematics, form, and the self, all had to be discovered and were by the early Greek philosophers. These ideas, and others like them, have become so much a part of our way of looking at the world today that we can hardly think without them...For this reason, this is our own story, which helps us to understand our world and ourselves.³

H. Olela in his well documented work, refutes the claim that ancient Greece was the cradle of philosophical thinking. He argues that long before the Greeks, the Africans

and Babylonians had elaborate educational systems and had preoccupied themselves with speculation about their respective world-views. These African educational systems, Orelia contends, formed the basis of the Greek educational system and philosophical thought. Orelia then proceeds to give an account of a particular African educational system, the ancient Egyptian system. He writes that the ancient Egyptian educational system was made up of seven stages. This education system is also referred to as the African Mystery System. During the first stage, which is known as *pastorphoros*, the student is taught matters of physical sciences, such as medicine and physiology. Successful students proceed to the second stage known as *neocoros*. Here they devote themselves to the study of geometry and architecture. This study was to enable the students to appreciate the secrets of the construction of the pyramids and obelisks. During the third stage - *melanophoros*, the student takes up the study of death and immortality of the soul or the mystery of Osiris, he also learns the science of hieroglyphics. At the fourth level - *Kistophorus*, the student is taught law and learning of law implies dealing with politics, economics and other social relations pointing towards the concept of justice.

The fifth level - *balahate*, demands of the student the knowledge of natural science - chemistry. This introduces him into the nature of elements. From here the student goes on to the sixth stage - *astronomos*; where instruction into astronomy is undertaken. The seventh and final stage - *propheta*, enables the student to become a prophet, a priest, almost god-like. It is at this stage that the student is introduced to all secrets of the Mystery.⁴

Plato, usually considered to be the greatest western philosopher to have lived, was disgusted by the violence and corruption of Athenian political life, and was sickened especially by the execution in 399 B.C. of his friend and teacher, Socrates. Plato believed that the ills in the society would never cease unless the educational system he propounded was implemented or, as it is commonly put, until philosophers became rulers or rulers philosophers. An examination of the educational system that Plato propounded reveals some compatibility with the African Mystery System. In Plato's educational system, during the early stages up to about the age of 18 years, the students were to be taught reading and writing, physical education, and the study of literary works. They were also to learn a bit of arithmetic and geometry. This corresponds to the first three stages of the African Mystery System. Between the ages of twenty and thirty, they were to be taught arithmetic, plane and solid geometry, astronomy and harmonics. Between the ages of thirty and thirty-five, they learnt dialectics; then followed fifteen years practical experience in subordinate offices, after which those who passed all these test qualifies as philosophers. Plato's philosophers and the Mystery System's prophets are very similar. They are portrayed as blessed and god-like.⁵

Besides the elaborate educational system, the initiates of the Mysteries were required to maintain some cardinal virtues. These were fortitude, temperance, wisdom and justice. Fortitude taught the initiates not to submit to fear or pain. Temperance is

the ability to maintain judgement weighed on fair grounds and to maintain mean and avoidance of excess.

Wisdom is pure intelligence and attained only when one passes through all the stages of education. Justice according to the Africans of antiquity was identified with the god Maat. Justice calls for a correct attitude-it is the state of one's soul.

In *The Republic*, Plato also identifies the very four cardinal virtues in the state and the individual. The essence of wisdom is good counsel and deliberation, and it resides in the rulers. Courage (fortitude) is the preservation under any circumstances of a right opinion. One who is courageous is he who can hold to the right opinion even when undergoing fear, pain, suffering or pleasure. Courage is then the virtue of the soldiers.

Temperance is a general recognition that people have different talents and the ability to accept this state of affairs. Temperance or self-control is therefore some sort of harmony be it at societal or individual level. Justice consists of the achievement, the maintenance and functioning in daily life of the other three virtues. Clearly, Plato's conception of justice, that it is really the condition of existence of all other virtues, is consistent with the ancient Egyptian view.⁶

Plato's contact with Africa, or better still, his trips to Africa played a significant role in his mental development. Plato himself acknowledges this, though surprisingly

most philosophers do not mention his visits to Egypt. Even the known Plato scholar, Robert S. Brumbaugh fails to acknowledge Plato's Egyptian visits in his several works. Yet in his own words, as quoted from *Plato in Sicily*, Plato acknowledges the wisdom of the African priests and having learnt from them many conceptions which he later used in his writings. Here follows a lengthy quotation in this regard.

It was always in my mind to return to politics. As a pupil of Socrates I had intended to become a statesman rather than a philosopher. The methods of conduct which I learned from him were simply to be applied to public affairs. But it was, as you know, the restored democracy which condemned Socrates. With his death, my political aspirations finally evaporated. I saw that any type of revolution would lead to the destruction of more life and property, and I had not wished to overthrow my country's ancient laws. From this point onwards I dreamed of a republic built on philosophy for application to living constitutions. I began first in desperation to search for that philosophy in the hospitality of Megara which generously received me and my fellow disciples after his death. There at the age of twenty-eight I assuaged my ravaged mind in the unconquerable Unity of Parmenides, which our host Euclides identified with Good, but I saw no way to reconcile that Unity with this tormented and beautiful world of appearances. I knew that would require a lifetime of endeavour, and was determined to prepare myself by absorption in the cosmology of the east. Our equivocal political relations with Persia however, made it impossible for me to lay my problems before the Magi and the Babylonian astronomers. After serving in the new wars, I did study after serving in Egypt, hampered by an illness which at least brought me the knowledge and kindness of her priests, who taught me something of the divine basis of her society, and its relations to the heavenly circuits.⁷

One can therefore safely conclude that it is Plato's visit to Egypt and hence Egyptian influence that is reflected in his educational system and views on the just society which must be ruled by kings who are philosophers or philosophers who are kings. More weight is added to the latter point in that, in *The Statesman* Plato states that in Egypt no one could become a king unless he belonged to the priestly caste, and if a

man of some other caste succeeded in forcing his way to the throne, he would have to be made a priest by special ordination.

Regarding the pre-Socratic thinkers and philosophers, Olela's thoroughly undertaken research indicates that their thoughts must be viewed as appendices to the Egyptian (and Babylonian) thought. He then goes on to support that assertion by analyzing the lives and views of pre-Socratic thinkers and philosophers. The gists of his analyses can be summarised in the following way.

Homer, in his suggestion of an answer to the question: what is the world made of? Had Egyptian influence.⁸ Thales in answering the same question, shared in the Egyptian experience.⁹ Anaximander, a student of Thales, was directly under the influence of the African world-view which his teacher brought to Greece from Africa.¹⁰ Anaximenes and Heraclitus both derived the basis of their philosophical speculation from a world-view already formulated in Africa.¹¹ Pythagoras' association with Thales and stay in Africa for a total of thirty four years had a tremendous impact on his social, psychological and philosophical outlook.¹² Xenophanes and Anaxagoras both wrote and founded their schools after visiting Egypt.¹³

In the areas of arithmetic and geometry, Olela argues that there are some propositions that have wrongly been attributed to Thales, Pythagoras and Euclid. One of the ancient Egyptian texts that has survived to the present is the Rhind

Mathematical Papyrus. Henry Rhind secured the rights to this work around 1858, but it later became the property of the British Museum upon Rhind's death. The Rhind Papyrus, it is believed, was probably composed in Thebes by an Egyptian whose name appeared on the text as A'hmose. It is likely that he composed the text about 1650 B.C. However, it is believed that copies from the original version was made about 1800 B.C. The Papyrus contains eight sections of arithmetic problems dealing with about forty problems. The solutions to these problems exhibit the Egyptian intellectual vision in arithmetic. In the area of geometry, their remarkable knowledge enable them to calculate the height of pyramid as well as the distance of a ship in the ocean from a given point on land. Olela then laments the fact that despite this, in the history of philosophy these two discoveries have been falsely attributed to Thales.

As was seen in chapter three, G.W.F. Hegel also recognised the high level of thought and civilisation in ancient Egypt. However, he excluded the region from Africa, for him it was Asiatic. Ancient Egypt was as different from Africa proper as Africa proper was to the rest of the world. It is on this point that Olela finds Hegel's view fallacious. According to Olela, the ancient Egyptian tradition and civilisation was influenced by that of South-Ethiopia and Sudan, not Asia. At the end of his book, Olela's emphatic conclusion is that:

...the ancient Greek Philosophy was a by-product of the ancient African world-view; it came into existence by drawing ideas from the Mystery System of the Egyptians...that the Egyptian tradition had its foundation from the traditions of the South-Ethiopia, Sudan, and other African

societies...that the origin of Mesopotamian world-view (Babylonians and Summerians) was partly African. This position also dispels the misassumption that the African (Egyptian) civilisation had its basis in Asia - that was the Hegelian fallacy which uncritical minds never forsake.¹⁴

Stolen Legacy

George James in his book **Stolen Legacy**, like Orla argues that the origin of western civilization and intellectualism is found in Africa. He contends that for centuries the world has been misled about the origin and source of the arts and sciences; that for centuries Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have been falsely idolised as models of intellectual greatness; and that for centuries the African continent has been called the dark continent, because Europe coveted the honour of transmitting to the world, the arts and sciences.

The questions raised in the **Stolen Legacy** are simple and straightforward that one wonders why they had not been asked there before. The questions are: who were the Greek Scholars? Where did they go to school? What did they learn at school? How old was the subject matter which they learned? Who were their teachers? How did what they learned fit with the contemporary Greek world view? How were they received at home when they completed their education? How were they regarded by their teachers?

Asa G. Hilliard contends that no sincere answers to the questions can leave intact the

notion of the "immaculate conception of western civilisation."¹⁵ He further postulates that in answering these questions without any prejudice, the Egyptian-African origin of much of Greek and other European civilisations cannot be denied.

George James' first argument in rejecting the proposition that philosophy started in ancient Greece, is in line with the English adage that 'still water runs deep'. He argues that the so-called period of Greek philosophy (640-322 B.C.) was an era of bedevilment; a period characterised with both internal as well as external wars. It was therefore a period which was not conducive to philosophical enterprise, a period when the waters in Greece were not still hence they could not run deep into the ground. More accurately, George James' argument is that the so-called Greek philosophers of that period were concerned with the study of nature (they were more of cosmologists), yet they lived in a period of civil strife and war. This is contradictory. If anything their thoughts at that time should have been projected on either how to win the wars or stop them, but not on how and when the universe came into being. Kwame Nkrumah in his *Consciencism* affirms this point.

...philosophy always arose from a social milieu, and a social contention is always present in it either explicitly or implicitly. Social milieu affects the content of philosophy, and the content of philosophy seeks to affect social milieu, either by confirming it or by opposing it.¹⁶

In his own words, George James writes.

The period of Greek philosophy (Thales to Aristotle) was a period of internal wars among the city states themselves and external wars with their common enemy, the Persians. The Greeks were victims of perpetual internal strife and perpetual fear of annihilation by their common enemy. They had no time which they devoted to the study of nature, for this required the riches

and wealth of leisure classes: but they were too poor to engage in such a pursuit. This is one of the reasons why the Greek philosophers were so few and why the Greeks were unacquainted with philosophy¹⁷.

It follows therefore, that the few Greek philosophers must have had some external influences. George James then goes on to rationalise as to why the Greeks rejected and persecuted philosophers. His reason is that their rejection and persecution of philosophers, was due to the fact that philosophy came from outside; it had a foreign source and as a result contained strange ideas which they were unacquainted with and did not understand and hence could not appreciate. This prejudice led to the policy of persecution. Hence Anaxagoras was indicted and escaped from prison and fled Iona in exile. Socrates was executed. Plato fled Megara to the rescue of Euclid. Aristotle was indicted and escaped into exile¹⁸. "This policy of the Greeks would be meaningless, if it did not indicate that philosophy was alien to Greek mentality"¹⁹

When one reads through the history of ancient Greek philosophy, one notices absence or doubt of some essential information concerning the early life and training of the Greek philosophers, right from the pre-Socratics through to Aristotle. In as far as the dates and places of birth and even some dates of death are concerned, the readers are treated to absence of or doubtful information. An inquisitive mind is left wondering who these people were and from what source they got their education. More to the point, one would expect that a man who rises to the fame of Thales, Plato, Socrates etc., would be well-known by people of his community. George

James therefore concludes that it is doubtful if the Greek thinkers were the true authors of the works and theories attributed to them. James rightly thinks that one would naturally expect that a man who rose to the position of a teacher amongst relatives, friends and associates, would be well-known, not only by them, but by the whole community. He writes:

This is unbelievable, and yet it is a fact that the history of Greek philosophy has presented to the world a number of men whose lives it knows little or nothing about; but expects the world to accept them as the true authors of the doctrines which are alleged to be theirs²⁰.

Socrates is known to have been one of the few philosophers who never expressed their thoughts and views on paper. The reason why he did not, and could not have written anything, "was because he belonged to the Mystery System which required that their members only acquired knowledge and initiation through secrecy"²¹. One cannot have privacy and preserve secrecy if he wrote things down for public consumption.²².

Further, on Socrates, James asserts that because Socrates belonged to the Egyptian Mystery System, thoughts and views attributed to him definitely have an African basis, if not wholly African. The doctrine of self-knowledge, for example, which for centuries has been attributed to Socrates is known to have originated from the Egyptian Temples, on the outside which the words "Man know Thyself" were written. James emphasises that generally Socrates taught nothing new as such,

..his doctrines are eclectic containing elements from Anaxagoras,

Democritus, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Pythagoras, are traced to the teachings of the Egyptian Mystery System²³.

On Aristotle, James argues that his intellectual development was influenced by Egypt in two ways, one indirectly and the other directly.

Aristotle is known to have upset Platonic doctrines. This however, is not a strange phenomenon when a teacher and a critical student form a serious intellectual relationship²⁴. Being a member of Plato's academy for about twenty years, one can safely assume that Aristotle owed much of his knowledge to his teacher. Since Plato's mental development was largely influenced by Egyptian thought, so was Aristotle's by extension.

On the direct influence, it is on paper that when Alexander the great conquered Egypt, he made the Egyptian library at Alexandria available to the Greeks for research. Aristotle who happened to be a close friend of Alexander was a key beneficiary of this conquest. The library was taken over by Aristotle's school and converted into a research centre and university for the education of the Greeks.

Aristotle, together with his students Theophrastus and Eudemus not only took full advantage and did research at the Alexandrine library, but must have helped themselves to some books. This enabled them to follow each other so closely in their production of scientific works, which were either a portion of the war booty taken from the library or compilations from them. No sooner did Aristotle produce his

Metaphysics, than Theophratus followed him by publishing eighteen books on the doctrines of the physicists. Similarly, after Theophratus had published his doctrines of the physicists, Eudemus produced separate histories of Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and also Theology²⁵.

James' message in the book is clear. It is that the Greeks have been falsely idolised as models of intellectual excellence, whereas quite to the contrary it is Africa (Egypt) that deserves the credit. What has all along been paraded as western philosophy is nothing other than a stolen legacy from Egypt. Another great Egyptologist, the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop also expresses more-or-less the same position, **Mutatis Mutanda**²⁶.

So forceful and analytic are C.A. Diop's works that it is only fair to give a summary of his thoughts, despite their concurrence with those of Orléans and James. In his book **Negro Nations and Culture: From Negro-Egyptian Antiquity to Cultural Problems of Black Africa Today**, Diop developed the conviction that to avoid a deformed African personality one must be conversant with the full range of one's ancestral past, not to establish pride, but as the basis for constructing a modern civilisation in the post-colonial and neo-colonial era. His book established the following thesis:

That Egypt was the node and the centre of a vast web linking the strands of Africa's main cultures and languages; that the light that crystallised at the centre of this early world had been energised by the cultural electricity streaming from the heartland of Africa; that the creators of classical Egyptian

civilisation, therefore were not the brown Mediterranean Caucasoids invented by Sergi, nor the equally mythical Hamites, nor Asiatic nomads and invaders, but indigenous black-skinned, woolly-haired Africans; that Greece, the mother of the best in European civilisation, was once a child who suckled at the breast of Ethiopia, which itself evolved from the complex interior womb of the African motherland.²⁷

However, before moving on to Claude Sumner's views, two points in James' thesis need close attention. Whereas it is true that a period of war and poverty may not be conducive to philosophising, it is however not a deductive truth. In other words, even if that proposition is true followed by another true proposition that ancient Greece was bedevilled by war and poverty, it does not follow deductively (necessarily) that therefore (all) ancient Greeks could not philosophise. It is still possible no matter how remote, that a few ancient Greeks were philosophers despite the truth of the two propositions. In some cases, the harsh conditions of one's milieu could activate and catalyse one's mind towards finding solutions to the problems that have bedevilled his society. One could engage in such an exercise conceptually and critically. Alternatively, one could simply be indifferent to the immediate problems of his situation, and project his mind towards some issues which may generally not seem immediate. This is not a logical impossibility. This however, does not mean or even imply that James' thesis on this issue is false. It is true, though inductively. This is to mean that if the two propositions are true then James' conclusion; that there could hardly be philosophers of Greek origin, has a high probability of being true.

The second point is that, James asserts that Thales and Socrates did not write

anything because they were members of the African Mystery System, the underlying tenet being that members of the Mystery did not write. Indeed, one cannot have privacy and preserve secrecy if he writes things down for public consumption. Olela also makes the same assertion.²⁸

However, in their analyses one gets the (intended) message that other ancient Greek philosophers, pre-Socratics and Socratics alike, were either also members of the Mystery or were closely associated with it, yet one is left wondering why unlike Thales and Socrates, they put 'their' thoughts on paper. James and Olela should have explained or at least attempted to explain why this was the case.

The Ethiopian Philosophy of Greek Origin

Claude Sumnerⁿ, the illustrious Canadian born philosopher who has lived a considerable part of his life in Ethiopia and has to his credit written a lot on Ethiopian philosophy, unlike Olela and James, is not concerned with the African origin of Greek philosophy, but with the African (Ethiopian) philosophy of Greek Origin. In his article, "The Ethiopian philosophy of Greek Origin", he starts with the proposition that professional African philosophers (and to him these are Africans who have been trained in western philosophy) agree that Greek philosophy is "not only philosophy in the strict sense, but that it is the source and paradigm of all philosophy".²⁹ His next move there from is to show that one type of Ethiopian philosophy was rooted in and had Greek basis. This, Sumner believed, proved that

African philosophy (at least one type of Ethiopian philosophy) is philosophy in the strict sense.³⁰

In making an analysis of Sumner's view one point needs to be underscored. This dissertation will limit itself to *The Book of the Philosophers*. This however, is not to belittle or undervalue his other work, namely *The Life and Maxims of Skendes*. At any rate the conclusion drawn from *The Book of the Philosophers* applies equally to *The Life and Maxims of Skendes*.

Sumner argues for and shows that *The Book of the Philosophers* written in Ethiopian language (Ge'ez) is just but a translation of a text earlier written in Greek language. He argues that it was translated into Ge'ez from Arabic by Abba Mikael between 1510 and 1522. The Arabic text had been written by Hunain ibn Ishaq (born 809 A.D.). The Arabic text in turn was based on a Greek original which was lost. Sumner argues that the lost original was Greek, basing the force of this argument on the following three considerations.

First, that Hunain ibn Ishaq was versed in four languages namely, Persian, Greek, Arabic and Syriac. In 826 A.D., according to his autobiography, he made his first translation from Greek to Syriac, and later into Arabic.

Secondly, that by far the greatest number of philosophers referred to in *The Book of the Philosophers* have Greek names. These are in their English forms; Alexander,

Aristotle, Democritus, Diogenes, Galen, Heraclitus, Hermes, Hippocrates, Plato, Porphyry, Ptolemy, Pythagoras, Sextus, Simonides, Socrates, Themistius. Sumner however observes that even if in the Ethiopic text certain sections have been attributed to authors different from the original ones, the Greek origin of the great majority of names still remains.

Lastly, Sumner argues that in *The Book of the Philosophers* the influence of Greek philosophy is evident. As in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtue is presented as a mean between two extremes. Strength is a thing of value, but its defect, fear, and its excess, foolhardiness, are vices. Avarice is a vice through deficiency, prodigality is a vice through excess, frugality is the golden mean. This can be tabulated as follows:-

Deficiency	Mean	Excess
Vice	Virtue	Vice
Fear	Strength	Foolhardiness
Avarice	Frugality	Prodigality

Besides showing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* influence in *The Book of the Philosophers*, Sumner goes on to portray the pre-Socratic, Socratic and Platonic

influences in the book. For example, Socrates' dictum of "O man know yourself" is reflected in the book and so is Plato's distinction of body and soul as not forming a singly substantial being, but are always in opposition.³¹ Sumner also parades four parallel texts in Greek, Arabic and Ethiopic. One of the text is;

Greek text

I grow old learning much (Solon 18a).

Arabic text

And he used to say that one should never stop learning. (Sihab ad-Din Abu'l-Futuh Jahja As-Suhrawardi 101b, 46a).

Ethiopic text

This (the development of conscience) cannot be without everyday diligence. Conscience and thinking are developed with the help of the owners of the hearts and of knowledgeable people who have aged in learning. (MFT 66a: 16-21).³²

Sumner notes that the Greek extracts are short, the Arabic translations a bit longer and the Ethiopic translations much longer. He observes that this is because;

We are not only dealing with a translation, but with an adaptation, which is expanding as we move further away from the original Greek, the Arabic spreading out the Greek, and the Ethiopic enlarging on already distended Arabic.³³

Sumner's conclusion is clear. If Ethiopic philosophy has its origins in Greek philosophy, and the two are closely related such that the former is nothing but a translation of the latter then, if the latter is philosophical in the strict sense it follows logically that the former is also philosophical in the same sense.

The African Origin of Civilisation: Concluding Remarks

An exposition has been made on some of the views that shows that Greek thought is just but an appendage of African thought. In other words, that ancient Greek thought consist of foot-notes to ancient Egyptian thought. At the same time, the view that some type of African philosophy is rooted in Greek thought is also explicated. In both the cases, the final verdict is the same; that African thought is philosophical.

Olela's and James' works are commendable in that their mode of analysis and exposition leave no doubts as to the ancient Egyptian influence upon ancient Greece. The works are well researched and the historical data given quite plausible, despite the two criticisms offered earlier.³⁴ The facts and arguments are clearly and systematically presented that the reader cannot fail to see, or appreciate the

significant influence that Africa had upon Greek and indeed western philosophical enterprise. Because of the lucidity and relative strength of logic of their argument, the reader is left wondering why other historians of philosophy and some philosophers of history apparently ignored Africa from the scene of philosophy. Indeed, a glance at the table of contents of most texts of history of philosophy, show that the authors begin their analysis with the ancient Greek thought, in particular the thoughts of the pre-Socratics.

One possible reason why Africa was left in the back-stage by some scholars could be attributed to ignorance on their part of the historical facts disapproving their position. Of course, one should not expect one's views to be influenced by facts of which he is not aware of. But at the same time, one's views should not be praised because of ignorance of contrary evidence. Ignorance of counter-evidence on their part could be due to the fact that all along the African was derogated and trodden upon in virtually all aspects of cognitive activities and sectors of life, religion inclusive. Their minds were therefore closed. With this one-sided, biased and racist attitude already in-built in them, these historians of philosophy saw no need, indeed they could not see any need, of going beyond ancient Greece.

In their endeavour of tracing the origins of thought systems and their influences upon one another, they did not, since at any rate they could, see how African thought could be relevant to the study of history of philosophy. They therefore stopped at ancient Greece in their analyses, or rather they started their analyses from

ancient Greece. This however, is at the very best an undesirable state of affairs and at worst a paradigm case of irrationality and racism, and C.A. Diop correctly warns that "racism and good scholarship, are completely incompatible, since racism leads unto faulty ideas..."³⁵

At a speculative level, one may start with the proposition that there was hardly any difference between ancient African (Egyptian) and ancient Greek thoughts. So, what is claimed that the ancient Greeks "imported" from Africa was not new; or alternatively that the ancient Greeks could not have stolen the ancient Egyptian legacy for one cannot steal a legacy which one already has. Historians of philosophy in their analyses of western philosophy, thus traced its roots within the West, in ancient Greece. Since they were analyzing western philosophy, they saw no need of mentioning ancient Africa, at any rate by so doing they would not be adding anything new in their analyses.

Though the above mode of reasoning contain a grain of truth it is on the whole anti-scholarship. It is reasonable to say that history of philosophy is largely concerned with the development of ideas; that it is an analysis seeking to show how one thought system influenced and hence gave rise to another, in a sequence. Because of the sequence, it follows therefore, that two or more identical thought systems would in the main not be of much interest to history of philosophy but may be to cultural anthropology. However, despite what has been said, it should be underscored that it is morally unfair and intellectually dishonest to ignore a thought system on that

account. At least it should be acknowledged, or given some data in the analysis even if as a footnote.

Another reason that may be advanced as to why Egyptian thought system did not find a place in the history of philosophy could be as follows. It is evident that philosophy as an intellectual enterprise was fairly elitist in Egypt. It has already been observed that the African Mystery System was such that it was only at the last stage that the student was introduced to all secrets of the Mysteries. As a member of the secret system he acquired knowledge and initiation through secrecy. The Greek educational system, on the other hand, was fairly public. Socrates, for example, taught and discussed freely in market places. Philosophical books were readily available to the populace and as a result with time philosophy thrived there, with the consequence that the origin of philosophy became identifiable with Greece rather than Africa, to an extent that philosophy connoted the west. History of philosophy was thus seen as a misnomer of history of western philosophy.

There is something to be said about Sumner's methodology of proving the existence of African philosophy. He does so by tracing its Greek basis. One of his arguments that **The book of the philosophers** is philosophical on the basis that it is a Greek translation is open to criticism. If anything, this line of thought can be used to advance the position that the African peoples left on their own are not philosophical; the only parts of their thoughts that qualify as philosophy are those translated from Greek. Sumner's argument is therefore counter-productive. Another awkward

consequence of Sumner's methodology is the implication that if, for example, Hobbes' *Leviathan* is translated into kiswahili, then that translation automatically becomes a type of African philosophy. This methodology does not seem to be a satisfying way of proving that a given people are philosophical. The mere fact that a philosophical piece of work has been translated into a language say x, does not mean that therefore the people who speak language x are philosophical nor does it mean that the translation constitutes part of x is philosophy.³⁶

The approach taken by Olela and James is a better way of logically demanding that ancient African (Egyptian) thought system should be given datum and be included in the history of philosophy. However, the works of these two scholars are not sufficient in proving that the African in general is philosophical in his thought. In other words, these works disprove the Bruhlian *Primitive Mentality* and Westermann's *The African to-day* only mid-way, in the sense that they only prove that Africans of antiquity were philosophical. About the contemporary African or the African of today the works are not useful. It is because of this weakness that a certain group of scholars decided to address themselves to the very question of the existence of African philosophy, but from a different angle. Their views are therefore a follow-up of Olela's and James' positions. Notable amongst these scholars are Placide Tempels, John S. Mbiti, Robin Horton, E.A. Ruch, Alexis

Kagame, Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and H. Odera Oruka. The next chapter is devoted to the views of the first four scholars. The views of the rest will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Notes

1. H. Olela, *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece*, (Georgia: The Black Heritage Corporation, 1981), p.38.
2. *ibid.*, p.44.
3. R.S. Brumbaugh, *The Philosophers of Greece*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p.1.
4. See H. Olela, *op.cit.*, pp. 78-79.
5. See Plato, *The Republic*, translated with an introduction by Desmond lee, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985), pp 326-355.
6. See *ibid.*, pp. 196-222.
7. G.R. Levy, *Plato in Sicily*, (London: Faber and Faber), pp. 25-26.
8. H. Olela, *op.cit.*, pp. 110-115.
9. *ibid.*, p.117.
10. *ibid.*,p. 124.
11. *ibid.*,pp.133-136.
12. *ibid.*, p.146.
13. *ibid.*, p.103.
14. *ibid.*, p.244. Also see Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *Great African Thinkers*, Vol. 1: Cheikh Anta Diop, (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), p.114.

15. See the introduction of George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy*, (San Francisco: Julian Richardson Associates, 1988).

16. Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonisation*, (London: Panaf Books Ltd., 1969), p.56.

17. George G.M. James, *op.cit.*, pp.163-164.

18. It has already been shown that the views of Anaxagoras and Plato were propounded after their visits to Egypt. It will be shown shortly that the foundation of the thoughts of Socrates and Aristotle are also Egyptian.

19. George G.M. James, *op.cit.*, p.164.

20. *ibid.*, pp 11-12.

21. H. Olela, *op.cit.*, p.104

22. Thales did not leave behind any writing which can be verified as his doctrines, this, it is argued, is because he was also a member of the Mystery System of the ancient Egyptians. See H. Olela, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

23. George G.M. James, *op.cit.* p.92. Also See H. Olela, *op.cit.*, p.189.

24. Parmenides reacted towards his teacher Pythagoras in a similar manner.

25. George G.M. James, *op.cit.*, p.17.

26. See Ivan van Sertima, *op.cit.*, pp 230-237.

27. *ibid.*, p.8.

28. See H. Olela, *op.cit.*, p.104

29. Claude Sumner, "The Ethiopian philosophy of Greek Origin", *collectanea Aethiopia*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1988), p.146.

30. However, this is only true of C. Sumner's works like "The Book of Philosopher" and "The Life and Maxims of Skendes". In his works "The Treatise of Zara Yaeqob" and "The Treatise of Walda Heywat" which are in his second volume of **Ethiopian Philosophy**, he has shown Ethiopian philosophy without any Greek or Arabic or Italian origin.

31. See Claude Sumner, "The Ethiopian Philosophy of Greek Origin", *op.cit.*, pp.149-152.

32. *ibid.*, p. 156.

33. *ibid.*, pp.159-160

34. *vide supra*, pp.86-87

35. Ivan van Sertima, *op.cit.*, pp.23-24. It should be noted that Diop wrote a doctorate thesis in which he argued that Greece, the mother of European civilisation, was once a child who suckled on the breast of Egypt. The examiners at the University of Paris, rejected the thesis labelling it unfounded. Meanwhile he went on and had it published entitled **Negro Nation and Cultures** in 1955. However, he was granted the degree after 10 years in 1959.

36. Sumner must have realised the weakness of this approach and that is why in his second volume of **Ethiopian Philosophy**, he now shows Ethiopian philosophy without any Greek origin.

CHAPTER FIVE

ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

African philosophy centres around the man in his social context. The individual is not conceived as the singular, personal and impenetrable entity, living in glorious isolation. The individual is meaningless by himself and makes sense only as part of the totality. To be is to participate.¹

In the previous chapter it was noted that, whereas Henry Olela and George James in their works disproved the conventional European conception of the African mentality, they fell short of sufficiently proving that the African mind is philosophical. Their works are basically expositions geared towards showing that ancient Africa is the cradle of philosophical enterprise and civilisation. And that therefore the western world which had all along been praised for laying the foundations of these phenomena, had been wrongly eulogised.

In essence therefore Olela and James were squarely concerned with proving that it was ancient Africa rather than Greece which should be credited for initiating civilisation and philosophical thinking. They argue that ancient Greek philosophy had its origin in ancient Africa, or better still that ancient Greek philosophy was a stolen legacy from ancient Africa. Olela and James were thus, concerned with the question of the origins of philosophy and civilisation. The gist of their argument being that ancient Africa deserves a place, a principal and salient position in the history of philosophy. As to whether there exists philosophy is modern and

contemporary Africa, their works are silent. In other words, they do not address themselves to the question of whether or not the modern or contemporary African is capable of philosophising.

It is possible for one to accept the thesis of both Olela and James yet argue that in the contemporary world African philosophy is non-existent. The conventional western conception of African mentality denies philosophy not only to the African of antiquity, but to Africans in general. Olela's and James' position don't therefore entirely rebut the conventional conception. It is at this point that works of scholars such as Placide Tempels, John S. Mbiti, Robin Horton and E.A. Ruch amongst others are *prima facie* handy in fulfilling this deficiency. Their works seek to show that traditional African societies, whether in the ancient, modern or contemporary times, are not places that are innocent of philosophy.

The argument above can be paraphrased as follows. Though the works of Olela and James play a significant role on the debate on the existence (or non-existence) of African philosophy, when it comes to modern Africa, they leave room for one to deny African philosophy. It is against this background that the works of scholars in this chapter can be studied more meaningfully and fruitfully. They assert that Africa is not a place devoid of philosophy.

Bantu Philosophy

In a way, Placide Tempels may be referred to as the founder of a serious debate on African philosophy. "The honour of having brought the first piece of literature concerning 'Bantu (or African) philosophy' into academic philosophical discussion is attributed to Father Placide Tempels".²

Tempels' widely read book *Bantu Philosophy*, "marks the starting point of the debate about the nature of African philosophy. In his little book, he 'discovered' the existence of 'African philosophy'."³ He is accredited to being the first scholar to have published a work which negates the conventional European conception of the African mentality.⁴ Prior to the publication of his book in 1945, no scholar is known to have produced a work opposed to the conventional European conception.

More importantly, Tempels not only negated the conventional European conception, but he is also the first person to document African philosophy. After him, several African and Africanist scholars engaged in the same activity of recording African philosophy and building upon his ideas. Today this has turned into a school of thought or approach within the study of African philosophy. Tempels' book is therefore a pioneer work in the study of African philosophy.

In this book, Tempels describes what he thinks is Bantu or African philosophy. He contends that to deny ontology and logic (and therefore philosophy) to the African

or any group of primitive people is an unrealistic and untenable position. Tempels believes that empirical evidence points to the existence of metaphysics and ontology in Bantu culture.

To declare on a *a priori* grounds that primitive peoples have no ideas on the nature of beings that they have no logic, is simply to turn one's back on reality.⁵

Tempels was a Belgian missionary, whose task was to preach the word of God amongst the Luba people of Zaire (then Belgian Congo) and to evangelise them. Tempels' main concern, which apparently led him to undertake a study of the Baluba, was the fact that African *evolues*⁶ and those who had accepted the Christian way of life often reverted or backslid to their traditions whenever they encountered problems. Tempels was astonished that even an *evolue* who spent several years amongst whites readapted himself easily within a few months to the community life of his place of origin and soon became reabsorbed in it. The African Christians returned to their traditional ways of behaviour whenever they were overtaken by moral lassitude, danger or suffering. After his research and study of the Luba people, Tempels arrived at the conclusion that the Baluba reverted to their traditional way of life because their forefathers had left them practical solutions of the great problem of humanity; the problem of life and death, of salvation or destruction. In his own words Tempels writes:

The persistence of these attitudes through centuries of simultaneous evolution can only be satisfactorily explained by the presence of a corpus of logically co-ordinated intellectual concepts, a 'Lore'. Behaviour can be neither universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of things which surround him, of existence, of life, death and of the life beyond.⁷

For Tempels therefore, African philosophy is made up of the basic principles that underlie the African behaviour, belief and customs. These principles are fundamental in that they govern the Africans in their day-to-day lives. In his book Tempels describes these basic principles which according to him revolves round the concept of vital force. Bantu behaviour, Bantu ontology, Bantu wisdom, Bantu psychology, Bantu ethics and restoration of life are all centred upon the vital force.

Bantu behaviour and practices are centred in a single value, the value of vital force. Bantu actions are all explainable in terms of vital force. The purpose of their actions and practices "is to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity"⁸. According to the Bantu, God himself is he who possess Force in himself. He is also the source of the Force of every creature. All beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable or inanimate. Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man. Every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, a diminution of

vital force. "Vital force is the reality which, though invisible, is supreme in man. Man can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures"⁹.

On Bantu ontology, Tempels asserts that for the Bantu 'being' and 'force' are logically equivalent, such that when a Bantu talks of 'being' he is at the same time talking of 'force' and the vice versa. This argues Tempels is unlike the European conception where the notion of 'being' is separable from its attribute 'force'.

'Force' in his (Bantu's) thought is a necessary element in 'being', and the concept 'force' is inseparable from the definition of 'being'. There is no idea among Bantu of 'being' divorced from the idea of 'force'. Without the element 'force', 'being' cannot be conceived¹⁰.

All force can be strengthened or enfeebled. That is to say all being can become stronger or weaker. Tempels goes on to assert that those who think that, according to the Bantu, one being can entirely annihilate another, to the point that the ceases to exist, conceive a false idea. Doubtless one force that is greater than another can paralyse it, diminish it, or even cause its operation totally to cease, but for all that the force does not cease to exist. Existence which comes from God cannot be taken from a creature by any created force.

For the Bantu there is interaction of being, that is to say, of force with force. This interaction of beings has been denoted by the word 'magic'.

To the Bantu, wisdom is also explained in terms of forces. Bantu wisdom is the

intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction. God, for example, is the Sage *par excellence*, who knows every being, who comprehends the nature and the quality of the energy of each.

On Bantu psychology or their philosophical ideas on the subject of Man, the notion of vital force is inevitable. The Bantu sees in man the living force. Man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings. He dominates plants, animals and minerals. These lower beings exist, by Divine decree, only for the assistance of the higher created being, man.

Life belongs to God. It is he who summons it into being, strengthens and preserves it. His great and holy gift to men is the gift of life. Other creatures which, according to Bantu ideas, are of lower or higher vital force, exist in the divine plan only to maintain and cherish the vital gift made to man. Therefore any act that preserves or strengthens man's vital force is good. But,

...conversely...Every act, every detail of behaviour, every attitude and every human custom which militates against vital force or against the increase of the hierarchy of the *muntu* is bad. The destruction of life is a conspiracy against the Divine Plan: and the *muntu* knows that such destruction is, above all else, ontological sacrilege: that it is for that reason immoral and therefore unjust.¹¹

It is important to note that though Tempels argues that the Bantu have a logical system of thought i.e. a philosophy, he at the same time categorically affirms that the Bantu mode of thought is radically different from the western thought process. So

fundamental is the difference that it is impossible for the African to comprehend the basic laws of science such as the principal of the uniformity of nature. Here Tempels will be quoted at length.

They have a different conception of the relationship between men, of causality and responsibility. What we regard as the illogical lucubrations of 'gloomy Niggers', what we condemn as greed exploitation of the weak, are for them, and become an ontological necessity. If thereafter we wish to convince Africans of the absurdity of their sizing up of the facts by making them see how this man came to fall sick and of what he died, that is to say by showing them physical causes of death or of illness, we are wasting our time. It would be in vain even to give them a course in microbiology to make them see with their own eyes, or even to discover for themselves through microscope and by chemical reactions what the 'causes' of the death was. Even then we should have decided only the physiological or chemical problems connected with it. The true and underlying cause, the metaphysical cause, would none the less remain for them in their terms of thought, their traditional wisdom.¹²

Tempels also believed that the Bantu is not conscious of this philosophy and indeed incapable of expressing it systematically. The Bantu are not in a position of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. Tempels therefore believed that it was the Europeans' duty,

to proceed to such a systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognise themselves in our words.¹³

Though Tempels has been given credit for being one of the first person to assert and argue for the existence of African philosophy and describing the same, a careful examination of his book reveals that his view on the African thought system is not different from the conventional European one. The conventional conception, as

explicated in chapter three, holds that the African reasons in a peculiar way.¹⁴ In essence this is what Tempels is also asserting, only that unlike Hegel, Levy-Bruhl and Westermann, he is being euphemistic, by terming the African thought system as being philosophical.

As already emphasized, Tempels' book **Bantu Philosophy** occupies a special position in the debate regarding the existence and nature of African philosophy. This is because ever since its first publication a lot has been written regarding the question of African philosophy, and common to all these literature is that they have their starting points in **Bantu Philosophy**. Even almost fifty years after its publication, scholars are still making reference to it. In recent times, one such scholar is the Africanist thinker Christian Neugebauer. He is critical of Tempels' work from two angles. First, he argues that Tempels' work is contradictory, that is, that the subject matter of Tempels' work exhibit some contradiction. Secondly, he is critical of the methodology and rationale of Tempels' work. This section will be limited to his first criticism. His second criticism will be analyzed at the end of the chapter.

In revealing the contradictory aspect of Tempels' work, Neugebauer rightly asserts that Tempels is concerned with the question: "Why does not the African change? How is it that the pagan, the uncivilised, is stable, while the évolu  , the christian, is not?" Tempels' answer is that it is:

Because the pagan founds his life upon the traditional groundwork of his theodicy and his ontology which include his whole mental life in their preview and supply him with a complete solution to the problem of living... the *evolué*, and often the christian, has never effected a reconciliation between his new way of life and his former native philosophy, which remains intact just below the surface (of his behaviour...)¹⁵

This means that the pagan, the Bantu, holds a static ontology, which, as Neugebauer rightly points out, guarantees the pagan a metaphysical sheet-anchor independent of any given social conditions. Conversely, the alleged Bantu ontology determines the social conditions which are dependent of the former. Yet on a later page Tempels asserts that: "We hold a static conception of 'being', they a dynamic".¹⁶ The contradiction is manifest, the Bantu hold a dynamic as well as a static conception of being.

Viewed from a different angle, Tempels' concern is to show that the Bantu and European conceptions of being are different. However, he goes to say that for the Bantu "force is being and being is force". Tempels asserts that "...the notion of force takes for them the place of the notion of being in our philosophy".¹⁷ Now, if this is the case it becomes difficult to explain how different these notions of being are. Neugebauer goes on to doubt Tempels, knowledge of the history of European philosophy.

As is well known Cicero, the Roman, stated already the dictum: 'force = being' such that the bombastic announcement of the uniqueness of Bantu philosophy is a futile and shallow gesture.¹⁸

African Religions and Philosophy

Some critics of Tempels have often belittled his work on the basis that African philosophy should be described and expounded upon by an African, by someone who shares deeply in the experience, beliefs, customs, cultures and languages of the African people. Such critics would therefore place John S. Mbiti's views on a higher rung over those of Tempels', *ceteris paribus*.

Mbiti believed that religion and philosophy, in traditional Africa, are interrelated. If one wants to understand the philosophy of traditional Africans then he must study their religion as well. Therefore in his widely read book *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti portrays African philosophy only after an analysis of African religions. "A study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through work and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind".¹⁹

Mbiti goes on to argue that the African is notoriously religious, contrary to what the European missionaries thought. The African carries his religion wherever he goes, be it to a beer-party, to a shamba, or on a journey. Mbiti arrives at this position, by arguing that according to the Africans to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. A person, Mbiti believes, cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his

foundation, his context of security, his kinship and the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.²⁰

Mbiti believed that central and crucial in understanding African religions and philosophy is the traditional concept of time.

The traditional concept of time is intimately bound up with the entire life of the people, and our understanding of it may help to pave way for understanding the thinkings, attitude and actions of the people. It is against this background that I shall attempt to introduce and examine their religious systems and philosophy.²¹

Mbiti's African conception of time is fairly interesting, and it is what has generated a lot of discussion and debate in Mbiti's works. According to Mbiti, for the traditional African,

...time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of 'No-time'.²²

Therefore, as far as Mbiti is concerned, the traditional African concept of time is a two-dimensional phenomenon; with a long past (*zamani*), a present (*sasa*) and virtually no future. To the African the important element in the concept of time, is the past (or *tene*).²³

Tene period is technically an extension of **mituki**, but in the 'backward' direction. Both of these overlap: and when something disappears from **mituki** period, it enters the **tene** dimension of Time. Before anything has been absorbed into the **tene** period, it must go through the **mituki**

dimension. *Tene* becomes the final store house, the point beyond which a phenomenon cannot go, the ultimate destiny of all things that maybe caught up in the rhythm of motion.²⁴

Because *tene* is the dimension into which all phenomena sink, History in African conception according to Mbiti, is a movement from *mituki* dimension, from the now period to the *tene* period. Mbiti's findings concerning African peoples' understanding of Time and History, are based on analysis of myths and language. On myths Mbiti states that "there are no myths about future, as far as I have been able to gather from all available sources that record African myths and stories".²⁵ This according to Mbiti is because the future dimension of time has not been formulated and assimilated into the mythology of African thinking and conception of the universe.

On language, Mbiti reckons that African verb tenses which refer to the future cover up to six months, or at most two years.

In the East African languages in which I have carried out research and tested my findings, there are no concrete words or expressions to convey the idea of a distant future...people have little or no active interest in events that lie in the future beyond, at most two years from now; and the languages concerned lack words by which such events can be conceived or expressed.²⁶

Mbiti then goes on to show the irrelevance of the christian eschatology as taught to African peoples by some missionaries, because of their different conception of time.

The important element in African conception of time is the past or *tene*,...and the importance of *tene* is opposed to the importance fixed on the 'future' in eschatological thinking and hopes.²⁷

The African eschatological concepts are not 'eschatological' in the strict sense, since they are directed towards the 'end' of the opposite direction; the 'end' which has been rather than will be in the context of two dimensional concept of time and history. The eschatological teachings and hopes of the christians thus are not meaningful to the Africans. That is given the eschatological and futuristic aspect of the Holy Bible and granted the two dimensional aspects of African conception of time, the teachings of the church do not make sense and are meaningless, if not absurd, to the African mental disposition. So much as far as the formulation of Mbiti's African conception of time goes. The question to ask is: How true is this conception or, to what extent is it meaningful?

Though there may be some elements of truth in Mbiti's African conception of time, it should nevertheless not be taken to be the gospel truth. Whereas it is true that several African languages do not have **one** word for the future, this does not necessarily mean that they did not have a clear conception of the future. All that it means is that the future was not of much concern to them. It is logically permissible for a community that is not so much bothered about the future not to have a word for it. Not bothering about the future and not having a future are not logically equivalent. Indeed, there are several individuals who lead their lives as if there is no future but this does not mean that such individuals do not have a future dimension of time.

In all fairness, traditional African communities were fairly peaceful and complacent. Activities and phenomena that were to take place in the future, such as naming of a child, marriage, burial and other initiation rites were such that they took place in accordance with the customs and traditions. Traditional Africans were thus not really worried about such activities. If and when time came when they were to be performed traditions took care. At a definitional level it is difficult to imagine a community without a future conception of time. It is an essential definition of a community that the people constituting it have common values and aspirations, which in turn necessarily brings in the future conception. Mbiti's African conception of time can therefore, only be understood as implying that the future was not much of a pre-occupation for the African, and no more.

Mbiti's African conception of time has been criticised by other scholar from different standpoints. Some have accused Mbiti of generalising (or is it over-generalising?), the concept of time for traditional Africa as a whole. When one reads Mbiti's works, it is apparent that he researched largely only among the Kamba and Kikuyu peoples of Kenya, yet he went ahead and made a sweeping claim covering Africa in its entirety. Mbiti's generalisation aside, some if not most Kamba and Kikuyu peoples find Mbiti's idea difficult to digest.

At another level, one cannot help entertaining the idea that even before Mbiti went in the field to carry out his research, he was so much preoccupied with showing the

irrelevance of christian eschatology to the African, that he was looking for supporting evidence at any cost. This means that he had pre-conceived ideas and thus during his research he just 'forced' things to fit this ontology. This, however, is a criticism which can be levelled against other scholars as well. And the consequence of this, as G. Carew rightfully points out in his paper, gives such "outcome not only a borrowed significance but also, on at least some points, a clearly erroneous view".²⁸

In conclusion, it should be noted that according to Mbiti, African philosophy is to be analyzed and understood by observing the Africans in their chores; by sharing in their everyday experience and by studying their language. Implicit in Mbiti's works is that African philosophy is unusual. When the concept 'philosophy' is attributed to the African, there is a shift in its meaning; a meaning not ordinarily attributed to western philosophy.

Modes of Thought

Both Tempels and Mbiti were churchmen. Father Placide Tempels was a Franciscan Belgian missionary whereas Reverend John S. Mbiti was a church minister. Both of them were largely concerned with the mission of evangelisation; they wanted to understand the African so as to fulfil this mission successfully. However, whether they succeeded or not is a matter which is not immediately relevant to this work. Unlike these two scholars, Robin Horton was not concerned with the evangelisation mission. His focus was simply on one central question:

Is there a basic difference in modes of thought (both in content and, more especially, in logic and formulation) as between Western and non-Western societies? (or as between 'traditional' and 'modern', 'pre-scientific' and 'science-oriented', literate and non-literate, industrial and non-industrial, 'developed' and developing' etc.etc.?) Or following on from this basic question - is there perhaps no significant difference that can be pointed in this context?²⁹

According to Horton there is a basic fundamental difference between African traditional thought and Western science. Following Karl Poppers's distinction of closed and open societies, Horton contends that African traditional thought belongs to the former whereas Western thought belongs to the latter. Horton argues that traditional African societies, in as far as rationality was concerned, they were closed; there were no alternatives to established bodies of thought. In Western societies, on the other hand, there were and are always alternatives even to established tenets. They are such that they are open to and can accommodate alternative theories. The truths are not imperishable.

...in traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures such an awareness is highly developed. It is this difference we refer to when we say that traditional cultures are 'closed' and scientifically oriented cultures 'open'.³⁰

According to Horton, that is the basic and fundamental difference between non-Western and Western societies; between pre-scientific and scientific societies; between developing and developed societies; or simply between African traditional and European societies.

Horton's distinction of the key property of the two societies cannot go unchallenged. Some modern and literate men experience great difficulty in conceiving an alternative to their own favoured world-view, and conversely many members of traditional, pre-scientific societies do possess the capacity of multiple alternative vision.

Horton's view can also be criticised at another level. If Horton's view on African traditional thought is correct then as Ernest Gellner observed, it would follow that in traditional societies "there can be no syncretism, no doctrinal pluralism, no deep treason, no dramatic conversion or doctrinal oscillation, no holding of alternative belief-systems up one's sleeve, ready for the opportune moment of betrayal".³¹ However, this implication is false. Horton was probably aware of this and that explains his selective reproduction of E.E. Evans-Pritchard's quotations. He, for example, omits quoting a crucial sentence in which Evans-Pritchard says that the Zande are capable of alternatives.

Nevertheless, Zande beliefs are not absolutely set but are variable and fluctuating to allow for different situations and to permit empirical observations and even doubts.³²

Earlier in his text, when referring to the ordinary, non-royal Zande, Evans-Pritchard writes,

...they adapt themselves without undue difficulty to new conditions of life and are always ready to copy the behaviour of those they regard as their

superiors in cultures and to borrow new modes of dress, new weapons and utensils, new words, and even new ideas and habits...³³

This means that the criterion of a 'developed sense of alternatives' does not therefore, in fact, help separate the traditional from the modern mode of thought. Horton's distinction of the two modes of thought should therefore be rejected.

5.4 Towards a Theory of African knowledge

E.A. Ruch intended to entitle his paper "Towards an African Theory of Knowledge" but then realised that the title would be a misnomer, or perhaps even a non-sense. This was because, according to him, one outstanding feature in African knowledge is that it is not reflective but lived.

Anything theoretical is un-African; there is no such thing as a typically African theory about anything, least of all about knowledge. Even 'African philosophy' is a way of life, rather than a speculative and discursive system.³⁴

Ruch argues that the African feels himself integrated in and part of nature and, in particular, part of his social group. The African has not, like the Western man, separated himself from the world and from his fellow-men, as an individual subject apart from the judge of an objective world. He is part of this world, immersed in it both actively and passively. Whatever one of his fellow-men does will affect him.

"Like a molecule subjected to Brownian movement he is dominated by the multiple and unfathomable forces into which he is plunged".³⁵

Unlike the Western man, the African does not consider himself to be at the centre of the universe upon which everything else revolves. Solipsism would be considered not only as false, but as downright meaningless. Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum' or Berkeley's 'To be is to be perceived' are theories that would not find room in traditional Africa. In one of the analogies that he used to express the African cognitive outlook of reality, Ruch asserts that:

It would not come to an African's mind to question this immersion with a sea of uncontrollable forces, let alone rebel against the loss of personal freedom which it involves. He does not feel these forces as a threat, but rather as a beneficial protection and the life-spring of whatever he is or does. He does not feel himself like a swimmer in a hostile and foreign sea; he is part of this sea, he participates in it as it participates in him.³⁶

Because the African is immersed in the world and not separated from it by the Western subject-object dichotomy, the African's knowledge will not be cerebral and abstractive, but rather emotive and active. To know is not to look down on the world from the height of intellectual ivory towers, not to dominate and control the forces of the world, but to share vitally and emotionally in this world.

The African's knowledge is not critical and reflective. The individual is not the judge of truth. To know is not to acquire and to possess the truth for its own sake, as a satisfaction of a private and personal curiosity. To know is to use knowledge and to transmit it, as handed down by tradition. Knowledge is not something to be

discovered and invented. It is all there, in the life of the tribe, to be shared and participated in.

The African is less interested in the pure and abstract truth of a statement, than in the relevance of this truth within the closely knit socio-cultural world in which he lives. Truth has no value in itself and for itself. This imposes immediately a fundamental selection on the type of problems with which he will concern himself. Whether, for example, space and time are "entia rationis cum fundamento in re" or whether the curvature of space is positive or negative, are questions, which do not permit emotional involvement, and he wants to be emotionally involved. Non-emotional knowledge is inhuman knowledge.³⁷

The African will use knowledge of a discursive type but only as a tool, wherever it is necessary either for solving some practical problem or for passing "European style" examinations. But such knowledge will be nothing more than a tool within a much wider human context. The African hunter or fisherman will use a considerable amount of ingenuity and know-how in fashioning his weapons and traps. But he will not concern himself with devising the ultimate trap and weapon, the weapon to end all weapons, i.e., a theoretically possible weapon which he know will never be built or used.

Ruch goes on to argue that even though the African hunter or fisherman may have used rational and discursive knowledge in building the trap, the result or failure of

the hunt or of the fishing will be attributed to the failure on the part of the hunter to observe one of the multiple and often complex taboos or rituals.

Ruch's thesis is built upon the proposition that the African does not isolate himself from the other; that the subject-object dichotomy is alien to him. If this proposition can be shown to be false, then it would cast some doubts on Ruch's thesis that African knowledge is not cerebral, abstractive and reflective. At this juncture, it is opportune to ponder the question of if it is really true that the African does not distinguish between the subject and object.

The assertion that the traditional African mind does not distinguish between the subject and object is in all fairness absurd. It is true that in traditional African societies the relationship between the subject and object was fairly a close one. An individual was part and parcel of the society. His neighbours', problems were his and vice versa. The Society was knitted together and was seen as a large family; an extended family. And as Julius Nyerere amongst others, observed, African traditional societies were cohesive and as a result individuals felt socially and economically secure.³⁸

The fact that African traditional societies were well knitted does not mean or even imply that the Africans did not distinguish between the subject and object. On the contrary, one may wish to argue that, they recognised the dichotomy, and their aim was to bridge the gap. In other words, they not only recognised but also realised the

dangers of individualism, and their socialistic and communalistic life-style was a solution to the problem of dichotomization.

To deny that a given group of people do not distinguish between the subject and the object is to deny that they are human beings. Rationality is an integral aspect of humanity and indeed, the classical definition of a human being is that it is a rational animal. Rationality is a relational attributed between the subject and the object, and therefore all beings that are human cannot be denied rationality. In other words, it means that all human beings are rational and by implication therefore, since Africans are human beings they are rational, and consequently do distinguish between the subject and the object. Ruch's thesis cannot be sound because it is built upon a false premise that the African cannot distinguish the subject from the object.

35 Ethnophilosophy: Concluding Remarks

This chapter has basically been an analysis of the position that grants that contemporary Africa is not philosophy-free; that Africa is not a *tabula rasa* as far as philosophy is concerned. In reaction to the conventional European conception of the African mentality, it asserts the existence of African philosophy and as a follow-up of Olela's and James' views, it postulates that African philosophy exists beyond ancient Egyptian thought system.

However, in recent times some scholars, mainly trained professional African philosophers, have been critical of the view expressed above. In principles, they

unanimously agree that there exist African philosophy, but they are in disagreement with the analyses of Tempels, Mbiti, Horton, Ruch and the like, as to what African philosophy is. The running thread in the views of these scholars, as this exposition has shown, is that African philosophy lacks critical individual analysis. In other words, African philosophy is a lived communal philosophy; a *weltanschauung*, and is therefore not identifiable with any individual in particular. It is at best exercised as a collective wisdom of the people, in which every individual of the society participates in. African philosophy is taken to be quite distinct from Western or European philosophy, which is taken to be rigorous, critical and individual. Critical, abstract, independent and so-called objective thought is therefore foreign to Africa.

One major criticism which has been levelled against this view, is that though it apparently seems to have rehabilitated the African from the conventional European conception that the African mind is pre-logical and therefore pre-philosophical, it actually affirms that position, i.e., it also denies philosophy, to the African. What this school terms as African philosophy is, in a way, not philosophy. The methodology this school uses resembles the kind that is normally used in cultural anthropology (which is also known as ethnology) in-order to get to the underlying and basic principles of reality and behaviour of the African, which it then describes in philosophical language. The end-product is therefore neither ethnology nor philosophy, but ethno-philosophy.³⁹

Lately one of the best criticisms offered to the school of thought expounded above, is

that of Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba. He argues that in Africa, as else where in the world, the question of philosophy is necessarily linked to the formation and development of intellectuals as a social stratum. Intellectuals, as a social category, emerged as a result of the separation of manual labour from intellectual labour in society. Historically, he argues, that human society has moved, in relation to its social division of labour, from a solid unity of manual and intellectual labour to a separation of intellectual work and manual labour. This separation gave birth to a social stratum of intellectual 'producers' whose magnitude keeps growing, diversifying and becoming more and more complex. Within this growth, diversity and complexity of the social stratum of intellectual 'producers' emerged a class of intellectual 'producers' called philosophers. Wamba-dia-Wamba hence asserts that:

Philosophy-doing, as a relatively autonomous social activity, emerged as a historical outcome of that separation. In pre-class divided communities, where intellectual work was not fundamentally separated from manual labour, philosophy as a social activity did not exist. This does not mean, however, that people were not thinking. But, most likely they were not thinking systematically about thinking.⁴⁰

Thereafter, Wamba-dia-Wamba insists that the emergence of African philosophy as a specific way of philosophising, must be traced to the colonial and neo-colonial forms of separation between intellectual work and manual labour in Africa. In colonial and neo-colonial Africa, the colonialists had to invoke this separation so that they could use the intellectual works to perpetuate and safeguard the colonial ideology. The intellectual workers were to be used as "African ideological askaris (watch dogs) of colonialism".⁴¹

The colonialist found the missionaries and the ethnologists very useful not only as ideological askaris of their dominant regimes in dominated societies of Africa, but as the militant propagandists of dominant ideas towards the masses. They played a central role in the domination of the African people. And because of their role, what they said about Africa was not necessarily correct. The missionary, for example, discovered how pagan and sinful Africans were and thus how thirsty for salvation they were. The ethnologist, on the other hand, discovered how static, primitive, a-historical the Africans' ways of life were and implied that these needed to be dynamised. However, even if what they said about Africa was correct, it should be rejected on the grounds that it was a philosophy that was projected towards the domination of the African people.

...ethnophilosophy i.e. a philosophy of and for the dominated Africa. It does not matter whether or not actual ways of thinking of some real Africans fit in this way of viewing things. The fact is that this specificity is discovered; theorized in the face of a humanity that dominates it and requires it to be so dominated.⁴²

Wamba-dia-Wamba goes on to argue that just like ethnophilosophy, an analyses of the etymology of the term Africa is a "search for a difference requiring to be dominated". The term Africa came from the Greek *aphrike* meaning **not cold** from the Latin *Aprica* meaning sunny; and *Afriga* meaning **land of the Afrigs**, the Roman term for the peoples living in the southern part of the Roman empire. It was a European attempt at grasping an un-European difference. European philosophy has been theorising this difference - not a positive other, but as a target, a colonisable

target. A philosophy of Africa viewed from the point of view of its difference from Europe is a philosophy of peripheralisation.⁴³

Another scholar who has been critical and hostile to the ethnophilosophical approach to African philosophy is Christian Neugebauer. He believes that, in the final analysis, this approach is a kind of racism; a racism not very different from that of Hegel.

Neugebauer's article "Hegel and Kant: A Refutation of their Racism" is unique in the history and debate on African philosophy. It is unique in that it is one of the very few works that offer a theoretical discussion and refutation of Hegelian view regarding the conventional European conception of the African mentality, despite the fact that Hegel's view is well - known in the discourse of academic philosophy in Africa.⁴⁴ Neugebauer argues that the ethnophilosophical approach to African philosophy, just like the Hegelian view, is racist and should therefore be rejected.

Following closely in the footsteps of Wamba-dia-Wamba, Neugebauer asserts that the conventional ethnophilosophical approach to African philosophy was a prejudiced view initiated and propounded by the Europeans. The African philosophers who later joined the band-wagon were merely helping in preparing African racist attitudes. In other words, the African philosophers of the ethnophilosophical school are helping to build up, or at least prepare the ideological conditions, via nationalism, for racism. What is meant here is that the

ethnophilosophical approaches have resulted into such elaborate constitutions as 'Akan philosophy', 'Yoruba philosophy' etc., whereby 'philosophy' is just a euphemistic expression for nationalism of the various ethnic groups. This has a consequence that the scope of operation of the various philosophies is limited to their respective ethnic groups. The philosophies are thus trapped within their respective ethnic domains, and this in turn leads to chauvinism. Ethnophilosophy is therefore a trap; a 'mental trap which the African philosopher must disentangle himself from, lest it interferes with his mental production.'⁴⁵

Neugebauer praises the role of Negritude, African Personality, Panafricanism etc., in their struggle against colonialism. Today, however, he believes that they have outlived their usefulness. 'The material and ideological conditions have changed and these approaches, just like the ethnophilosophical approach, could act as a hindrance to the African philosopher. Neugebauer's rejection of ethnophilosophy and those philosophers who subscribe to this approach is emphatic:

...these philosophers who are pursuing an ethnophilosophical approach are, consciously or not, preparing the field for national chauvinism. And chauvinism has, in the past history of mankind, always been to the benefit and profit of the propertied bourgeoisie, in the last resort, however, this kind of chauvinism leads, under economic pressure, eventually to racism.'⁴⁶

It is against this background that the views that are going to be analysed in the next chapter emerged. They refute ethno-philosophy and its implications.

Notes

1. B.J. Van der Walt, "A Comparison Between Bantu and Western Thought", *Philosophy in the African Context*, ed.D.S. Georgiades (Johannesburg: collection of essays delivered at a philosophy seminar at the University of Witwatersrand, July 1975), p.108.

2. Dismas A. Masolo, *Half a Century of Philosophy*, forthcoming, p.52.

3. F. Ochieng-Odhiambo's forward to H. Odera Oruka's *Trends in Contemporary African philosophy* (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), p.iv.

4. Though in the debate on the existence of African philosophy, Tempels is credited for being the first scholar to assert its existence, in this work we have analyzed the views of H. Olela, G. James and C. Sumⁿer first. We have done so purely on the basis of the manner in which we want to present the logical development of the debate. However, Tempels' book is prior in time to those of Olela, James and Sumⁿer.

5. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine 1969), p.22.

6. This term signifies those who have passed out of the traditional ways of life and thought of their own ethnic group and have taken over those of the West.

7. Placide Tempels, *op.cit.*, p.19.

8. *ibid.*, pp 44-45.

9. *ibid.*, p.49.

10. *ibid.*, pp.50-51.

11. *ibid.*, p.121.

12. *ibid.*, p.30.
 13. *ibid.*, p.36.
 14. *vide supra*, pp. 46-59.
 15. Placide Tempels, *op.cit.*, p.26.
 16. *ibid.*, p.51.
 17. *ibid.*, p.52.
 18. Christian Neugebauer, "Ethnophilosophy in the Philosophical Discourse in Africa: A Critical Note", *Quest*, vol IV, No. 1, June 1990, p.51.
 19. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.1.
 20. *ibid.*, p.2.
 21. *ibid.*, p.28.
 22. *ibid.*, p.1.
 23. Tene is a Kikamba word equivalent to the Kiswahili word *zamani*, whereas *mituki* is equivalent to *sasa*.
 24. John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament and African Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.28.
 25. *ibid.*
 26. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, *op.cit.*, pp. 17-19.
 27. D.A. Masolo, *History of African Philosophy* (Rome: unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Gregorian University, 1979), p.70.
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28. G. Carew, *Philosophical Implications of John Mbiti's African Ontology*, unpublished paper, p.2.

29. R. Horton and R. Finnegan, eds., *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies* (London: Faber and faber, 1973), p.11.

30. R. Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science II", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. Xxxviii, No. 2, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, April 1967), p.155.

31. Ernest Gellner, "The Savage and the Modern Mind", *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*, op.cit., p.166.

32. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 195.

33. *ibid.*, p. 13.

34. E.A. Ruch, "Towards a Theory of African Knowledge", *Philosophy in the African Context*, op.cit., p.1.

35. *ibid.*, p.2.

36. *ibid.*

37. See *ibid.*, p.7.

38. See J.K. Nyerere, "Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism" *Ujamaa: Essays On Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 1-12.

39. See F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo's forward to H. Odera Oruka's *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, op.cit., pp.iv-v.

40. Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, "Philosophy and African Intellectuals: Mimesis of Western Classicism, Ethnophilosophical Romanticism or African Self-Mastery?", *Quest*, vol.v No. 1 June 1991, p.8.

41. *ibid.*, p.9.

42. *ibid.*, p.10.

43. See *ibid.*

44. *Vide Supra*, p.60.

45. See Christian Neugebauer, "Ehnophilosophy in the philosophical Discourse in Africa: A Critical Note", *Quest*, Vol. IV, No. 1, June 1990, pp. 43-64.

46. Christian Neugebauer, "Hegel and Kant: A Refutation of their Racism", *Quest*, Vol. V, No.1, June 1991, p.65.

CHAPTER SIX

PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY

The trend, negative to ethno-philosophy,... is the professional approach. It is a critical, sometimes technical approach. Most of it urges that African philosophy should not be confused with African religion or ethnography. Philosophy, it is contented, is an argument, not a recitation of myths and taboos.¹

Ethnophilosophy and Professional Philosophy

In the preceding chapter, an analysis of the views of some of those scholars who argued that there exist African philosophy was made. However, in the current debate on the existence and nature of African philosophy, those scholars are referred to as ethnophilosophers. This is because what they qualify as African philosophy is, strictly speaking, not philosophy. The methodology they use resembles the kind that is originally used in cultural anthropology (which is also called ethnology) in order to get to the underlying and basic principles of reality and behaviour of the African, which they then describe in philosophical language. The end-product is therefore a conjunction of the ethnological method and philosophical language, hence ethno-philosophy. As Paulin Hountondji puts it, they are "ethnological works with philosophical pretensions, or more simply,... works of "ethnophilosophy".²

At this point a cautionary remark ought to be made. Those scholars and thinkers who are termed as being ethnophilosophers are so referred to essentially because of

their stand regarding the nature of African philosophy. It has nothing to do with their mental dispositions and rational capacities. Hence, Placide Tempels, Robin Horton, amongst others, are ethnophilosophers for the simple reason that they approach the subject of African philosophy from an ethnological angle. It does not mean nor even imply that their thinking capacities and thoughts are less philosophical. Indeed, some ethnophilosophers are thinkers of high philosophical calibre.

The ethnophilosophers use the term "philosophy" in the ideological sense and hence "whatever comes out from their views as 'philosophy' can be philosophy only in the 'debased sense of the term'".³ Today therefore, some philosophers,

argue for the extinction, in usage of the word 'ethnophilosophy' because they claim, it has outlived its time... and is simply a constitution of both schemes of conduct and schemes of thought (not a philosophy).⁴

The scholars who are against the ethnophilosophical approach to African philosophy, are mainly professionally trained philosophers and they assert that African philosophy should be seen from the professional and academic angle. It should be individual and must be engrained with argument and criticism since at any rate "philosophy as a theoretical discipline is devoted to detailed and complicated argument".⁵ Peter Bodunrin summarises it as follows:

Philosophy is a conscious creation: One cannot be said to have a philosophy in the strict sense of the word until one has consciously reflected on one's beliefs.⁶

Some notable representatives of the professional approach to African philosophy are Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, H. Odera Oruka and Peter Bodunrin. Though they concur that African philosophy should be critical, discursive and independent they hold interesting and some incompatible views when the question boils down to its exact nature. The attempt now is to explicate and analyze some of the views within the professional approach. In particular the analysis will revolve round the works of Paulin Hountondji and Kwasi Wiredu.

It is useful to mention that representatives of the professional approach are often referred to as professional philosophers. This, just as in the case of ethnophilosophers, has nothing to do with their individual rational capacities. It does not mean that they are more philosophical^{than} the ethnophilosophers. It simply means that they hold the position that whatever African philosophy is, it must satisfy the criteria of professional philosophy, that is, it must involve critical independent reflection.⁷

6.2 African Philosophy: Myth and Reality

In his pioneer book in professional African philosophy **African Philosophy: Myth and Reality**, the illustrious philosopher from Benin does not bother himself as to whether African philosophy exists or not, that is, he does not ask whether it is a myth or a reality. He grants its existence, that is, that it is a reality. However, at the

same time, Hountondji's efforts are channelled towards explaining why some scholars (ethnophilosophers) conceived 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, of such-and-such an African ethnic group.⁸

In other words, besides Hountondji's concern of explaining what African philosophy is (in the professional sense), he at the same time attempts to account for why African philosophy is paraded merely as a collective thought system, with this having the implication that it does not exist (in the professional sense); that it is a myth. Hountondji explains that this is so because words change their meanings miraculously as soon as they pass from the Western to the African context. This is what happens to the word 'philosophy' when it is applied to Africa. It is supposed to designate no longer the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective world-view, an implicit, spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere to.

This means that there are double standards; the term 'philosophy' is equivocal. When it is prefixed with 'African' it means something different from when it is prefixed with 'Western'. This, according to Hountondji, is an undesirable state of affairs, for it means that African philosophy is distinct from Western philosophy, with the implication that Africans are not critical thinkers. To Hountondji that is a false proposition. There exist African philosophy even when the word is used in the

'Western terminology'⁹. Hountondji then goes on to describe what he thinks African philosophy is.

According to Hountondji African philosophy is "a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves"¹⁰. This definition as will be seen below is as famous as it is controversial. It has three basic features, namely.

(a) That African philosophy consists of texts.

(b) That the texts are written by Africans.

© That the texts are described as philosophical by the authors themselves.

These three features will be analyzed one by one, beginning with the first. Hountondji underscores the fact that for a thought or view to consist African philosophy, it must be written. For Hountondji therefore, writing is a prerequisite for philosophy in general and hence African philosophy in particular. This feature as controversial and strange as it may be, Hountondji does not mince his words and he will be quoted at length. He asserts that:

There may...have been African philosophers without an African philosophy, although the converse...is strictly impossible. Thousands of Socrateses could never have given birth to Greek Philosophy, however talented they might have been in dialectics. So, thousands of philosophers

without written works could never have given birth to an African philosophy. Socrates was able to enter theoretical history of Greece because his disciples or fellow citizens took the time and trouble to write down his thoughts, to discuss sometimes to criticise and often to distort them. Similarly, we Africans can probably today recover philosophical fragments from an oral literature, but we must bear in mind that so far as authentic philosophy goes, everything begins at the precise moment of transcription, when the memory can rid itself of cumbersome knowledge now entrusted to papyrus and so free itself for the critical activity which is the beginning of philosophy, in the only acceptable sense of the word.¹¹

This Hountondjian view, to say the least, places too much value on literacy as far as philosophy is concerned. It is undoubtedly true that literacy plays an important and indeed a vital role in the development and propagation of philosophy, but it is not a necessary requirement. For a thought or view to qualify as philosophy, it is not necessary that it be put in black and white. In other words, it is not part of the definition of philosophy that a thought be written. Today, for example, we are able to read and philosophise over Plato's philosophy, thanks to the art of writing. However, the crucial point is that even if Plato's thoughts had not been put down in writing, this would not have made his thoughts non-philosophical or any less philosophical. Though of course, proving that Plato was a philosopher in the sense that his thoughts were philosophical would be difficult under the circumstances. But then that is another problem altogether; a problem of proof and not of necessary requirement of philosophy. The only necessary condition is that critical, evaluative and coherent thought be engaged in by individual thinkers, period. Hountondji's over-emphasis on writing as a condition for philosophy is therefore not very appropriate. Writing could be a sufficient condition for proving the existence of a philosophy, but it is definitely not a necessary condition.

Two other professional African philosophers, Peter Bodunrin and H. Odera Oruka, both concur with the view that writing is not a precondition for philosophy, though the latter thinks that the former waters down this point. Bodunrin asserts that:

Writing helps us to pin down ideas and to crystallize them in our minds. It makes the ideas of one day available to succeeding generations with the least distortion... surely, writing is not a prerequisite for philosophy but I do doubt whether philosophy can progress adequately without writing . Had others not written down the sayings of Socrates, the pre-socratics and Buddha, we would not regard them as philosophers, for their thoughts would have been lost in the mythological world of proverbs and pithy sayings.¹² (Emphasis ours)

Odera Oruka on his part argues that:

To exist as a philosopher it is not necessary that one's thoughts must progress or be available to the future generation. Sufficient for the existence of a philosopher is that one's contemporaries recognize ones' philosophical ability and practice. How many of the contemporary African philosophers will have their ideas known beyond their death? Many of us shall have our works buried unrecognized within the myriad of the many kinds of literature that are being produced in the field. Yet the fact would not in itself deny the point that authors of such works existed as philosophers. Lack of knowledge about one's or a people's philosophy is not a proof of the non-existence of such a philosophy.¹³

Hountondji should be told (or is it reminded?) that he is recognized as an African of great intellectual ability and acumen, not so much because he has put down his thoughts on paper, but essentially because his thoughts are recognized as such. The fact that he has written down some of his thoughts is incidental to the philosophical aspect of his thought.

Kwasi Wiredu in his paper "African Philosophical Tradition", expresses a similar view. He believes that African traditional thought inspite of belonging to the oral tradition is philosophical and logically acute and as a result" ...conceptual absurdities in the Critique of pure Reason... would be promptly laughed out of court among any group of abstractly inclined Akan elders..."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Wiredu observes that "the lack of writing is a definite handicap in the preservation and enhancement of a philosophical tradition".¹⁵

Hountondji's second feature of his definition of African philosophy, is that the texts be written by Africans. By this Hountondji means that African philosophy must be defined in terms of the geographical origins of the authors, and not the contents of what they write. In his own words, he writes:

The Africanness of our philosophy will not necessarily reside in its themes but will depend above all on the geographical origin of those who produce it and...the best European Africanists remain Europeans, even (and above all) if they invent a Bantu 'philosophy', whereas the African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating and transcending it, are producing authentic African work.¹⁶

And at a later page he argues that African philosophy include all the research into Western philosophy carried out by Africans.

This broadening of the horizon implies no contradiction: just as the writings of Western anthropologists on African societies belong to Western Scientific literature, so the philosophical writings of Africans on the history of Western thought are an integral part of African philosophical literature. So,

obviously African philosophical works concerning problems that are not specially related to African experience should also be included. In this sense, the articles by the Ghanaian J.E. Wiredu on Kant...are an integral part of African philosophy as are analyses of the concept of freedom or the notion of free will by the Kenyan Henry Odera or the Nigerian D.E. Idoniboye.¹⁷

Bodunrin shares the same view, he argues that African philosophy is,

...the philosophy done by Africans 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.¹⁸

The Hountondjian and Bodunrinian position excludes Tempels' **Bantu Philosophy** as a work belonging to African philosophy, precisely because Tempels was not an African. However, it includes the works of the Ashanti born scholar Anton-Wilhelm Amo, who was brought up, studied and taught in German universities during the first half of the eighteenth century. The fact that Amo's works are not specifically related to the African experience would not be relevant.¹⁹

Some professional African philosophers find Hountondji's view unpalatable. They do not see any rational basis as to why African philosophy should be restricted to the Africans. The Malawian scholar Kaphagawani, for example, contends that:

The works of some non-African philosophers working or who worked at some point in time, in Africa should...qualify as African professional philosophy. For example, Francis Gillies (1980) and Gordon Hunnings (1972, 1975).²⁰

Kaphagawani's response to Hountondji is meritorious. There is no justification to the proposition that African philosophy is or can be a product of native Africans

only. A foreigner who has lived in Africa for quite some time, may develop some interest in problems that arise from his 'African' experience and milieu, and consequently may write a philosophical treatise which can rightly be termed African.

Given what has been said above, the analyses of Nyerere's works by D.A. Masolo (*Some Aspects of African Philosophy Today*) and G.A. Bennaars (*The Education of Man*) are works in African philosophy. It would be erroneously simplistic to grant that Masolo's work belongs to African philosophy and disqualify Bennaars', on the grounds that Bennaars is not of African origin whereas Masolo is.²¹ With the same breath, it should be asserted that Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, were it not for its strong anthropological undercurrent, would fittingly be a work in African philosophy. The fact that Tempels was a Belgian is not immediately relevant to the question of whether his work belong to African philosophy or not. In other words, the fact that Tempels was a Belgian is not what should disqualify his work, the yardstick for disqualification should be looked for else where. Credit can be given to Odera Oruka's cautionary remarks that:

We have no good ground to think that African philosophy need to be unique to the Africans. Neither is Western philosophy unique to the West. African philosophy should be defined in a simple sense, i.e., in a sense in which it does not mean that only Africans are and can be capable of a philosophy of this kind.²²

Upto this point Hountondji's definition of African philosophy raises a problem on the 'African' part of the term 'African philosophy'. The problem could be phrased as follows: What makes a philosophical piece of work African? Is it the fact that the author is an African no matter the subject matter? Or is it that the subject matter must address itself to a problem (or issue) within or immediately relevant to Africa, irrespective of whether the author is an African or not? According to Hountondji, it is the fact the author is African.

Hountondji's position would serve very appropriately in defining an African philosopher, but not African philosophy contrary to his thesis. It is the answer in-built in the second disjunctive question that would serve well in defining African philosophy. According to this second disjunctive question, African philosophy is not a peculiarity of Africans, and similarly Western philosophy is not a monopoly of the West. An African philosopher could be an expert in Western philosophy and conversely, a Western philosopher could meaningfully and productively engage in African philosophy. There is nothing exclusive about these combinations. Hence, Wiredu and Odera Oruka are African philosophers but their articles on Kant and on free will, respectively, could well be scholarly exercise in Western Philosophy. Similarly, Francis Gillies and Gordon Hunnings are non-African philosophers who are well grounded in African philosophy.

Hountondji's third feature of the definition, that the texts be described as philosophical by the authors themselves is simplistically erroneous and can be shown to contradict some of his views. In the first chapter of his book Hountondji spends a great deal of time trying to show that Tempels' and Kagame's works do not belong to African philosophy precisely because they are not philosophical.²³ This rigorous analysis by Hountondji in showing the non-philosophical nature of Tempels' and Kagame's works implies that he (Hountondji) believes that a work is not simply philosophical because the author describes it as such. Another party could very well act as a referee in determining whether some author's work is philosophical or not. As far as the works of Tempels and Kagame are concerned, Hountondji assigns himself this role. This is an inconsistency in Hountondji's thesis.

As an example, according to Hountondji:

Kagame's work is so exceptionally interesting precisely because of his extraordinary knowledge of the traditions, language and oral literature of Rwanda. But the point is that this literature—at least as it is presented by Kagame is not philosophical.²⁴

This has an implication that as far as Hountondji is concerned, Kagame's work is not a text in African philosophy because it is not philosophical, regardless of whether Kagame describes it as being so or not. In fact, in his book, Hountondji portrays what he thinks are the universal characteristics of philosophy. Kagame's work

according to Hountondji does not qualify as African philosophy because it does not meet these requirements. It is therefore not clear what Hountondji intended by emphasizing on this feature of his definition.

However, despite the problems involved in Hountondji's definition of African philosophy, one thing is unproblematic; that African philosophy should be critical and individual. For anything to pass as philosophy proper it must involve rigorous, sustained and independent thought. It is now timely to look at the views of another professional African philosopher. This is the renowned Ghanaian scholar, Kwasi Wiredu.

43 Truth as Opinion

In his book *Philosophy and an African Culture* Wiredu, just like Hountondji, stresses the distinction between African philosophy as folk thought preserved in oral tradition and African philosophy as critical, individual reflection, using modern logical and conceptual techniques. He further emphasises the importance of not using the term "African philosophy" to mean just African traditional folk thought. However, unlike Hountondji, Wiredu does not reject the use of African philosophy as folk thought preserved in oral traditions.

Wiredu argues that traditional African culture and hence traditional African

philosophy was wanting in critical and logical analyses, and experimental procedures and that it is this aspect which is largely responsible for the weaknesses of traditional technology, warfare, architecture, medicine etc. Wiredu, however, observes that within the traditional set up such a bent of mind and activity was in order given the unsophisticated nature of traditional mode of life that encouraged that unanalytical cast of mind. Today, given the sophisticated mode of life, this bent of mind is retrograde, indeed it is tragic. It must change and become logical, mathematical, analytical and scientific, in order to cope with the modern mode of life. Hence modern African philosophy must be different from traditional African philosophy. As a result any philosopher who insists, or exhibits a bent of mind that traditional African philosophy is the only African philosophy, is mistaken. Knowledge, and indeed philosophy, is a child of circumstances. As the circumstances change so must philosophy. Those who insist on traditional African philosophy are, as D.A. Masolo puts it,

...doing disservice to Africa in trying to pretend that that philosophy is still able to cope with the new and modern problems and issues facing Africa today as brought in with the encroaching modernization. And because this encroachment requires new methods of investigation and analysis, which must be diversified due to the complexity of the situation, it will also be more individualising, more universal and more ramifying, as opposed to the old African traditional characteristics of collective ethnocentric exclusivity and absolutism.²⁵

Notwithstanding his non-rejection of the use of African philosophy as folk philosophy, Wiredu identifies three things that afflict any society. These are

anachronism, authoritarianism and superstition. In particular the first two, Wiredu asserts, have afflicted African societies by enhancing the communal folk thought at the expense of modern African philosophy. Wiredu uses the word anachronistic to mean anything that outlasts its suitability and authoritarianism to mean,

any human arrangement...that entails any person being made to do or suffer something against his will, or if it leads to any person being hindered in the development of his own will.²⁶

The traditional African society, Wiredu writes,

was deeply authoritarian. Our social arrangements were shot through and through with the principle of unquestioning obedience to superiors, which often meant elders. Hardly any premium was placed on curiosity in those of tender age, or independence of thought in those of more considerable years. Our traditional culture is famous for an abundance of proverbs - those concentrations of practical wisdom which have a marvellous power when quoted at the right moment to clinch a point of argument or reinforce a moral reflection. But it is rare to come across ones which extol the virtues of originality and independence of thought.²⁷

In the traditional milieu, culture was not taken to be authoritarian. It is in the urban areas, where the style of life is changing, that it is increasingly being felt to be authoritarian. It is therefore an anachronism which should be done away with.

L.S. Senghor is well-known for having asserted that the traditional African mode of thought is intuitive, and essentially unanalytic and unscientific. Wiredu holds the same view, but his disagreement with Senghor is that, the latter celebrated the fact.

According to Wiredu this is unfortunate, since it is a limitation and hence something not to be proud of. This is another anachronism afflicting African societies.

Philosophy as a theoretical discipline devoted to detailed and complicated argument is thus a welcomed instrument to be used in doing away with anachronism. Wiredu devotes the second half of his book **Philosophy and an African Culture** to tackling philosophical issues in the manner in which he thinks African philosophizing should proceed. He resorts to doing African philosophy as distinct from talking about it. Important in this section of his work, is his epistemological theory of truth. That there is nothing called truth as distinct from opinion.

In everyday experience we perceive things as having certain properties which they do not, in fact, have. This discrepancy is explainable in terms of the position and/or state of the viewer, physiological and psychological. This therefore means that there is a distinction between things as they **really** are and as they **appear** to us. This is a common sense conception of experience of which no one would deny. However, on the other end of the scale, there is another theory that contradicts this common sense conception. It is the theory to the effect that we cannot know something as it is in itself. Any claim to know something as it is in itself, according to this theory, amounts to knowledge of that thing as it appears to the observer in some specific 'subjective' state. It is because of this apparent conflict in the two views, that the British philosopher George Berkeley found a solution in his famous principle of esse

est *percipi*, 'to exist' is the same as 'to be perceived'. Wiredu finds this Berkeleyan solution palatable and with a slight modification makes it to read 'to be true is to be opined'.

One may object to Wiredu's equation of truth and opinion. Truth it could be argued is categorically different from opinion. One's opinion may change, indeed opinion changes, but truth does not change. If a proposition is true, it is true in itself. This is the objective theory of truth.

Wiredu however, argues that:

If truth is categorically different from opinion, then truth is, as a matter of logical principle, unknowable. Any given claim to truth is merely an opinion advanced from some specific point of view, and categorically distinct from truth. Hence knowledge of truth as distinct from opinion is a self-contradictory notion.²⁸

Wiredu therefore concludes that,

...it is an essential fact about opinion that an opinion is necessarily a thought advanced from some specific point of view. Hence, in the case of truth as in our case of 'Reality', we must recognise the cognitive element of point of view as intrinsic to the concept of truth. Truth, then, is necessarily joined to point of view, or better, truth is a view from some point; and there are as many truths as there are points of view.²⁹

Another important view in Wiredu's book which is coherent with his theme of 'truth

as opinion', is his theory of 'To be is to be known'. Wiredu argues that when one is pointing to a table and asserts that 'this table exists'. The proposition is tautological to an extent of being redundant. Similarly, if one was to point to a table and assert that 'This table does not exist', there would be something inappropriate about the proposition. Wiredu contends that the problem with the two proposition is that 'existence' is taken to be an attribute, whereas in actuality it is a relation between a term and an object. He further argues that questions of existence start with a term, not with an object, unlike other propositions that have attributes, for example, "John is handsome'. This proposition starts with the object 'John', such that in the absence of the object then the proposition is meaningless. In logic propositions can, broadly speaking, be interpreted in two distinct ways; hypothetically and existentially.

Propositions about the existence of something are to be understood hypothetically whereas propositions in which attributes are designated to objects are to be understood existentially. Scholars have mistakenly treated questions of existence in the same way as those designating attributes. In other words they confuse the two interpretations of propositions. This, as Wiredu rightly points out was the confusion embedded in St. Anselm's and Descartes' ontological argument for existence of God. For any given term 'x', 'x exists' means 'it is asserted that x has a reference' and hence 'To be (exist) is to be known'. One cannot claim that a term 'x' refers to some entity while disclaiming all knowledge about the entity in question.

Wiredu's views, especially those regarding truth as opinion have met strong resistance from scholars, amongst them being his colleague in philosophy and long-time friend, H. Odera Oruka. Odera Oruka argues that Wiredu's view that truth is nothing but opinion, implies that "there can be nothing true outside the whims and beliefs of the individual, no matter how wicked and stupid".³⁰ Secondly, he argues that: "If Wiredu's thesis is valid or correct, then it is impossible for anyone to maintain simultaneously contradictory propositions".³¹ But since from everyday experience it is perfectly possible for a person to hold a conjunctive belief that is contradictory, Wiredu's thesis must be wrong. Thirdly, Odera Oruka criticises Wiredu's view using the following line of thought. "We are used to contrasting truth with falsehood. And it is never disputed that truth and falsehood are opposites. Wiredu's thesis implies that truth and belief are identical or that the following formula is sound: p is true = p is believed."³² Here Odera Oruka means that according to Wiredu truth and falsehood are identical, and so are truth and belief. But since experience contradicts this position, Wiredu's principle of truth as opinion must be false.

In defence of opinion', Wiredu rebukes Odera Oruka for ignoring or at least down-playing the emphatic role of 'point of view' in his (Wiredu's) analysis of truth as opinion. Unperturbed, Wiredu goes ahead and reasserts his thesis. In this work, it is not the intention to analyse and assess Odera Oruka's arguments and Wiredu's

defence. The thesis will be contented with simply bringing to light a logical consequence of Wiredu's thesis.

Assuming that Wiredu's thesis is correct, it would greatly diminish the role of an argument and philosophy as a discipline in general. The epistemological difference between an argument and an explanation, is that the former arises from a conflicting situation. Since an argument purports (claims, intends) to establish the truth of the conclusion, it follows that the conclusion must be something that is not known to be (or accepted as) true prior to the argument being presented, at least by those persons to whom the argument is directed. For if one already accepts a certain proposition as true, it is logically impossible for another party to get him accept that position, just as, for example, if your shoes are already tied, it is impossible for us to get you to tie them; one cannot establish some position as true (i.e. prove to someone that it is true) if that person already accepts it as true.

Hence, the possibility of an argument would not arise unless at least two people hold divergent views on a particular subject. Or better still, the person to whom the argument is directed should be 'in the dark' regarding the truth of the conclusion. Now, if Wiredu's celebrated contention that truth is nothing but opinion is correct and given his strong attachment to the idea of point of view, then there would be little point, if any at all, in even trying to convince another party that one's position is correct. For there would be no way that the other party would see things from a

point of view other than his own. If Wiredu's thesis is right then an argument would merely play an informative role, that is, informing the other party why one holds the position, period. The crucial role of an argument, of convincing the other party in an attempt to get him accept one's position becomes superfluous. This therefore means that there is something wanting in Wiredu's thesis. For this is an aspect of an argument of which its role cannot be thrown overboard or diminished. In all sincerity and honesty, one may argue that even Wiredu himself recognises this function of an argument, no wonder he presents and defends his theory with a lot of logical force. The main aim of his presenting the arguments for and in defence of 'truth as opinion' is not merely informative but more importantly, to convince the readers, so that they appreciate, if not see, his point of view and hopefully agree to it.

Lastly, an analysis of Wiredu's work without mentioning the gist of his third chapter entitled "How not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought" would not be fair. Wiredu as earlier indicated distinguishes between two aspects of philosophy, one unscientific and unwritten, whereas the other is scientific and written. He contends that this distinction can be made to both the worlds: Western and African. In Africa, it is the unscientific and unwritten philosophy which is predominant, while in the West, it is the scientific and written that is predominant. Wiredu argues that those who compare Western philosophy with traditional African

philosophies, as indeed the ethnophilosophers have been doing, have made a mistake.

African traditional thought should...only be compared with Western folk thought...African folk thought may be compared with Western philosophy only in the same spirit in which Western folk thought may be compared also with Western philosophy, that is, only in order to find out the marks which distinguish folk thought in general from individualized philosophizing. Those concerned to compare African philosophy with Western philosophy will have to look at the philosophy that Africans are producing today.³³

Professional African Philosophy: Concluding Remarks

The professional African philosophers hold the view that whatever African philosophy is, it must be critical and individual. For them, for anything to pass as philosophy proper it must involve rigorous, sustained and independent thought. As already noted, despite the fact that representatives of the professional school generally concur on the above, they are in disagreement when it comes to the exact definition of African philosophy. That problem aside, another issue has been raised against professional philosophy in general. It has been argued that what this school call African philosophy is not purely African. The reason being that the professional philosophers having basically studied Western philosophy and hardly anything about African philosophy treat African philosophy from a typical Western standpoint: They employ Western logic and principles to criticise or create what they like to call African philosophy.³⁴ The end-result of what the professional philosophers qualify as African philosophy is a scholarly exercise rooted in the

West, not Africa. It is therefore not appropriate to call it African philosophy. At this juncture no attempts will be made to assess the viability of the criticism. This will be done in the concluding chapter.

Another problem related to professional African philosophy is as follows. As already noted, one major objection of ethnophilosophy is that what it calls African philosophy is only so in the ideological or debased usage of the word. On the other hand, professional philosophy which grants the existence of African philosophy in the technical sense, apparently limits itself to modern Africa, as if traditional Africa was incapable of technical philosophy. In other words, the implication created by the professional philosophers is that traditional Africa is a place incapable of having a philosophy. They limit philosophy to modern Africa.

It is within such a background that another school of thought emerges. This is the school of philosophic sagacity, today popularly known as sage-philosophy. In philosophic sagacity, the position is that even in traditional Africa there are individuals who are capable of critical, coherent and independent thinking. Philosophic sagacity therefore retains the basic tenets of the professional school. However, unlike the professional school, it is an exposition of the wisdoms and

beliefs of the individuals who have not been schooled in the formal educational system. The view of this school of thought will be the theme of the next chapter.

Notes

H. Odera Oruka, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), pp. 26-27.

Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983), p.34.

H. Odera Oruka, "African Philosophy: A Brief Personal History and Current Debate", *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, Vol. 5, ed Guttorm Floistad (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), p. 49.

D.N. Kaphagawani, "The Philosophical Significance of Bantu Nomenclature", *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, Vol 5 *ibid.*, p. 130.

Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.34.

Peter Bodunrin, "Which Kind of Philosophy for Africa", *Philosophy in the Present Situation of Africa*, ed. Alwin Deimer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1978), p. 15.

I am compelled to make this clarification as a result of my teaching experience of African philosophy and discussions with some of my colleagues at the Department. There is a tendency to think that ethnophilosophers are not (professional)

philosophers, or rather, that ethnophilosophers are less philosophical than professional philosophers. This thought is misguided.

Pauline Hountondji, *op.cit.*, 55-56.

Hountondji is in fact hostile towards the usage of the term 'philosophy' as when it is prefixed with the term 'African'. This according to him, is a wrong usage of the word.

ibid., p.33.

ibid., p.106.

Peter Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy" *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* Vol. 56, ed., Renford Bambrough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981),p.177.

H. Odera Oruka, "Sagacity in African Philosophy", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol XIII, No.4, December, 1983, p.391.

Kwasi Wiredu, "African Philosophical Tradition ", *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol.XXIV, No 1-3, Fall-Spring 1992-93, p.36.

ibid.

Paulin Hountondji, *op.cit.*, pp.53-54.

ibid., p.65.

18. Peter Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy", *op.cit.*, p.162.

19. Amo is said to have been born in Guinea in 1703. The reasons why he left for Europe are not clear. Three possibilities have been offered: (1) he was kidnapped by sea pirates who took him to Europe; (2) he was bought as a slave and taken to Europe; (3) he was sent to Europe in order to train as a preacher in the Dutch Reformed Church. Amo arrived in Amsterdam in 1707. In 1727 he joined the University of Halle to read law. In 1729 he defended his 'inaugural dissertation' on "The rights of Africans in Europe". In 1730 he registered at the University of Wittenberg. There he studied medicine and psychology, and defended his second dissertation, *De humane mentis apatheia*, in April 1734. Meanwhile, on 10th October 1730, Amo received the degree of 'Master of Philosophy and Liberal Arts'. In 1736 Amo was back at Halle as a lecturer. While in Halle, 1738, he wrote and published his *Tractatus de arte Sobrie et accurate philosophandi*, a work on logic and the psychology of knowledge.

In the early 1730s Amo gave lectures at the University of Wittenberg. Earlier, he gave lectures on philosophy at the University of Jena. By 1753 he had returned to his native land in the Gold Coast. The date of his death is not known, but some scholars believe that he died soon after returning to Africa, possibly of boredom and estrangement.

N.D. Kaphagawani, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

21. See D.A. Masolo, *Some Aspects of African Philosophy Today* (Rome: Italian Institute of African Studies, 1981) Also, see G.A. Bennaars, *The Education of Man*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis on J.K. Nyerere (Nairobi: Kenyatta University, 1983/4).

22. H. Odera Oruka, "African Philosophy: A Brief Personal History and Current Debate", *op.cit.*, p.69.

23. See Paulin Hountondji, *op.cit.*, pp. 34-44

24. *ibid.*, p.43.

25. D.A. Masolo, *Half a Century of Philosophy* (forthcoming)

26. Kwasi Wiredu, *op.cit.*, p.2.

27. *ibid.*, p.4.

28. *ibid.*, p.115.

29. *ibid.*

30. H. Odera Oruka, "Truth and Belief" *Universities: An Inter-Faculty Journal* Vol.5, No. 1 (Legon: University of Ghana, November 1975) p. 182.

31. *ibid.*

32. *ibid.*, pp.179-180.

33. Kwasi Wiredu, *op.cit.*, p.48.

34. See H. Odera Oruka, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, *op.cit.*, p.19.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY

Findings in Kenya show that there are two main divisions of sage philosophy. One is that of the sage whose thought, though well informed and educative, fails to go beyond the celebrated folk-wisdom. Such a sage may not have the ability or inclination to apply his own independent critical objection to folk beliefs. He is, therefore, a folk sage in contrast to the second type of sage, the philosophic sage. The former is a master of popular wisdom while the latter is an expert in didactic wisdom¹.

In 1974 H. Odera Orika, in reaction to the views that had been propounded regarding the nature of African philosophy, started a research project in Kenya entitled "Thoughts of Traditional Kenyan Sages". The objective of this research was to identify individuals of traditional Kenya who are wise in the philosophic (didactic) sense, and thereafter write their thoughts on paper, as proof of the existence of genuine African philosophy in the proper and technical sense of the word. Today the product of this research project is termed "Philosophic Sagacity", and is one of the approaches to the debate on African philosophy.

Within the debate, two approaches to African philosophy have already been explicated and analyzed, namely ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy. On ethnophilosophy, it has been shown that it is today generally rejected by many on the grounds that it portrays African philosophy as distinct from Western philosophy

in a pejorative manner. African philosophy is seen as collective and lacking the basic characteristics ordinarily attributed to Western philosophy. Upon careful scrutiny, it becomes apparent that this approach is not different from the Levy-Bruhlian and Hegelian positions. The end-result is therefore not philosophy in the proper sense. Consequently, though Tempels and his henchmen seemed to have rehabilitated the African from the Levy-Bruhlian and Hegelian school, they too actually denied philosophy to the African.

Professional philosophy negates the position of ethnophilosophy. For this school, there exist African philosophy in the strict and technical usage of the term. As already noted, some critics argue that what this school qualifies as African philosophy is not African as such. The professional African philosophers having been schooled in the Western tradition are influenced by it when treating African philosophy. And consequently the end-result is not African, but a scholarly exercise in Western philosophy by Africans.

Sage Philosophy

Sagacity consists of thoughts having or showing insight and good judgement. It is therefore thoughts of persons acknowledged as wise by their respective communities. In another sense sagacity is a body of basic principles and tenets that

underlie and justify the beliefs, customs and practices of a given culture. The second definition implies the first, since it is the thoughts and beliefs of persons acknowledged as wise by their respective communities that in essence constitute the basis of that community's culture. It is important to note that sagacity and sage philosophy are synonyms, sage philosophy is defined as consisting,

...of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between **popular wisdom** (well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and **didactic wisdom** (an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community). While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set up and popular wisdom.²

It is important for one to notice that sage philosophy can therefore be split into two, popular or folk sagacity and philosophic sagacity. The latter is an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community, while the former are well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths. This distinction is significant, because some scholars have mistakenly equated sage philosophy with philosophic sagacity. While it is true that all instances of philosophic sagacity belong to sage philosophy, not every instance of sage philosophy would qualify as philosophic sagacity. When one reads Anthony Oseghare's works, this confusion is apparent. On several occasions he talks of sage philosophy when he actually means philosophic sagacity. See his works, **The Relevance of Sagacious Reasoning in African Philosophy** (Nairobi. Unpublished

Ph.D thesis, University of Nairobi, 1985) and "Sage Philosophy: A new Orientation", in H. Odera Oruka (ed) *Sage Philosophy*, (Nairobi. Acts Press, 1991), pp 237-246.

This work is largely concerned with philosophic sagacity. It is the approach that can meaningfully rebut, and satisfactorily answer questions and criticisms that have been levelled against the approaches of ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy. Folk sagacity is a mere restatement of ethnophilosophy.

72 Philosophic Sagacity

In philosophic sagacity the position is that, even in traditional Africa there are individuals who are capable of critical, coherent and independent thinking. Philosophic sagacity therefore retains the basic principles of professional philosophy. However, unlike the professional school, philosophic sagacity is an exposition of the beliefs and wisdoms of individuals who have not been 'spoiled' by the Western educational system.

The main task of philosophic sagacity is to grapple with the following question:

Was traditional Africa a place where no persons had the room or mind to think independently and at times even critically of the communal consensus³?

As already noted, representatives of the professional school are “generally suspected of smuggling Western techniques into African philosophy”⁴, because most of them went through the Western educational system and indeed studied western philosophy. As a result what they qualify as African philosophy is not authentically African, so the argument goes. Therefore, philosophic sagacity unlike the professional school “is the only trend that...can give an all acceptable decisive blow to the position of ethnophilosophy”⁵

Philosophic sagacity is an expression of the view that among the various African communities, exist individuals who despite the fact that they have not had the benefit of modern education are nevertheless,

Critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgement by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus.⁶

Within philosophic sagacity the distinction between a mere (folk) sage and a philosophic sage is quite significant. A sage is a person who is well versed in the wisdoms and traditions of his community, and has the capability of narrating them very faithfully to the minutest detail. A philosophic sage, on the other hand is one who has gone beyond mere sagacity. As a sage he is versed in the beliefs and

wisdoms of his people, but as a philosopher he is rationally critical and opt for or recommend only those aspects of the beliefs and wisdoms which satisfy his rational scrutiny⁷.

Lately the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, has recognised the distinction between a folk sage and a philosophic sage, though he uses different terms. He asserts that there are two types of exponents of traditional philosophy. There are the traditionalist reporters of the communal philosophy, and there are the indigenous thinkers of philosophic originality. Wiredu goes to decry the fact that some scholars have proceeded as if folk philosophy exhausts the whole range of traditional philosophy, ignoring the thought of the indigenous individual thinkers in traditional society.⁸

Philosophic sagacity, as in the case with most philosophical doctrines and issues had to be subjected to the philosopher's sieve. Some critical remarks and observations have been levelled against it. It is worth making an analyses and assessment of some of the criticisms.

Keita's Objections

Before analyzing Lansana Keita's objections to philosophic sagacity, the thesis will quickly address itself to a claim among some professional African philosophers that authentic African philosophy must be scientific and written. This claim explicitly judges philosophic sagacity as being on the off-side as far as African philosophy is concerned, since it is largely unwritten. As already observed in the previous chapter, Hountondji, for example, states that texts written by Africans and qualified by them as philosophical are what constitutes African philosophy. Put in another way, African philosophy is "the whole texts or body of literature written by Africans and qualified by them as philosophical".⁹ For Hountondji writing is a prerequisite for philosophy. This therefore disqualifies philosophic sagacity as constituting African philosophy. As it has already been argued, Hountondji places too much value on the role of literacy as far as philosophy is concerned, or alternatively, his view unfairly narrows down the definition of philosophy.¹⁰ Because of Hountondji's underconception (or is it over-conception?) of philosophy, his view does not and cannot be used to detach philosophic sagacity from African philosophy. Recently, Lansana Keita has come up with criticisms on philosophic sagacity. His first criticisms is that the whole idea of philosophic sagacity is more-or-less tantamount to a self contradiction. He argues that:

The thesis that philosophic sagacity has a stronger claim than professional philosophy or nationalist-ideological philosophy to helping in the development of a genuine African philosophy, on the basis that the latter are

'generally suspected of smuggling western techniques into African philosophy', is surely open to criticism.¹¹

He rightly states that these techniques would include among other things, the practice of formulating ideas by means of writing. He goes on to argue that proof for existence of philosophic sagacity would readily be achieved by writing and electronic tape recording, this is also correct. Keita's conclusion is that, this would be inconsistent; such a proof would automatically be a disproof. What Keita means is that writing and electronic tape recording, are the very issues that are downplayed in philosophic sagacity, and hence to prove philosophic sagacity using them amounts to a contradiction.

Careful thought, however, shows that Keita's conclusion is not warranted. Within philosophic sagacity the distinction between the philosophic sage and his interviewer (the interlocutor) is fundamental. It is often the philosophic sage who lacks the skill of writing and/or has not put down his thoughts on paper. Their thoughts are usually rooted in the culture of their people. The interlocutor, on the other hand, is often a trained philosopher, one who is not only capable of philosophising, but capable of reading and writing as well. It is the interlocutor who writes down the thoughts of the philosophic sage and that material is readily used to prove philosophic sagacity. The interlocutor in this particular respect plays the role of a journalist.

The crucial point in philosophic sagacity is that it is the philosophic sage (and not the interlocutor) who should have as little Western influence as possible so as to push to the periphery any suspicion that he may be smuggling Western techniques into African philosophy. So, the person of interest is the philosophic sage not his interlocutor. The interlocutor could be more Western than the Westerners, but that would be of no relevance.

Hence the fact that one proves philosophic sagacity by presenting the thoughts of the philosophic sages on paper is not within any rational limits irrational, or by any consistent standards inconsistent. On the contrary, it is irrational to argue, as Keita does, that it is inconsistent to prove that an individual's thought is philosophical by presenting the individual's thoughts on paper, just because the individual himself did not put them on paper.

Keita's conclusion would only make sense under the following condition. If the philosophic sages themselves were the ones who made the claim that the art of writing and electronic tape recording were foreign to philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy, yet they (the philosophic sages) went on to prove philosophic sagacity by such means. But as it were, this is not the case, even in the slightest instance. Keita's first criticism on philosophic sagacity should therefore be rejected on purely logical grounds.

Keita's second criticism is that, the view that philosophic sagacity differs from ethnophilosophy "on the grounds that philosophic sagacity entails critical and personal thought, while ethnophilosophy does not, cannot be sustained".¹² He asserts that any belief system must have had an individual thinker or a group of individual thinkers who formulated it before it was generally accepted. This argument is fairly logical, and indeed it is difficult to conceive how any philosopher could think otherwise. Keita's error lies in his using this naked fact to equate philosophic sagacity with ethnophilosophy.

It can be argued that this fact in itself does not blur the essential distinction between philosophic sagacity and ethnophilosophy. The positions of the two schools should be seen and analyzed within the contemporary situation of philosophy in Africa. In other words, the views regarding the two schools of thought arose from the question of the nature of African philosophy and are therefore positions within the current debate on African philosophy. An ethnophilosopher, for example, would cling to the view that even in contemporary traditional Africa, every member of the community accepts without critical analysis the beliefs and customs of his community. He may grant that when the community was 'emerging', there probably must have been a few individuals who formulated the basic tenets, but then the critical point is that, that act of philosophising took place in the long past, it was done in ancient times. Infact this is the stand taken by the late well-known Rwandese ethnophilosopher Alexis Kagame.¹³

Philosophic sagacity, contrary to ethnophilosophy, claims that even in contemporary traditional Africa, there are individuals who are capable of critical and personal thought. Philosophic sagacity however, does not merely stop at that claim, it identifies such individuals. Therefore, whereas philosophic sagacity explicitly asserts and seeks to prove the existence of critical and personal philosophy in traditional Africa, in ethnophilosophy this can at best only be insinuated.

Bodunrin and the Question of Philosophic Sagacity

P.O. Bodunrin in his article "The Question of African Philosophy" argues that there are two ways of approaching the investigation of philosophic sagacity. One is the procedure used by Barry Hallen, an American philosopher at the University of Ife.

He is investigating the Yoruba concept of a person. Certain persons who are reputed for their knowledge of Yoruba thought and religion are identified. The philosopher, tape-recorder in hand, visits them and attempts to get into real dialogue with them on the Yoruba concept of a person. The answers obtained are as diverse in their details as the persons interviewed, but essential characteristics emerge. These essential similarities or common features are then written up by the trained philosopher to get the Yoruba concept of a person.¹⁴

The other method is the one largely initiated by Odera Oruka and popularised by some of his colleagues and graduates students at the University of Nairobi.

It consists of recording the philosophy of individual Kenyans...uninfluenced by modern education. It is not pretended that they are recording the common thought of, say, the Kenyan Luo tribe. The purpose seems to be to find out the critical thinking of some native Kenyans, and thereby established that there are native Africans capable of doing rigorous philosophy.¹⁵

Bodunrin then goes on to offer three criticisms. The criticisms are as follows:

1. The product of the dialogue between the trained philosopher and the sage is a joint effort of both, and not the sole responsibility of the sage.
2. That the views that result from the dialogue between the two " would not be philosophically interesting, not any more interesting than the works of ethnographers".¹⁶
3. That the method employed in philosophic sagacity of "going out quite literally into the market place"¹⁷ to interview the sages is quite different from what Socrates and his contemporaries did in the Athenian Agora. That the Athenian Agora was not a market place as such, but the speakers' corner, the conference centre and the seminar auditorium. Those who went in the Agora for intellectual discussions were well-educated persons, thoroughly familiar with the written and oral traditions of their people. There search, unlike philosophic sagacity, was not for Athenian conception of justice, piety etc., but was a critical analysis of traditional cultural beliefs¹⁸

Before discussing Bodunrin's criticisms, it should be asserted that Bodunrin's conception of philosophic sagacity includes some features that are foreign to it. A careful observation of what Bodunrin says about philosophic sagacity reveals some element of misunderstanding on his part. One of his two approaches, specifically the first approach, of investigating philosophic sagacity is not appropriate. The result of the first approach or the Barry Hallen approach is folk sagacity, not

philosophic sagacity. The purpose of this approach, as Bodunrin explains, is to come up with a *Weltanschauung* of the Yoruba regarding the concept of a person. The principal interest in this approach is not the philosophical aspect of what an individual wise Yoruba thinks about the concept, but what the Yoruba as a community think about the concept. This is obviously not what philosophic sagacity as a trend in African philosophy as formulated by Odera Oruka's is all about. Yet Bodunrin claims to be discussing Odera Oruka's four trends in African philosophy. It is the second method that rightfully constitutes an investigation into philosophic sagacity.

Bodunrin's first criticism properly applies to the Odera Orukan approach, it cannot meaningfully apply to the Barry Hallen approach. For in the latter approach the concern is to come up with a communal philosophy whereas in the former, the interest is focused on the Sage's thoughts. In philosophic sagacity, Bodunrin's criticism should not be taken lightly, for it holds some water. During the interview, the interviewer may frame his questions in such a way that they determine the answers. In Plato's works, Socrates successfully employs this method. In order to overcome or minimise this problem, one has to abstain from asking leading questions, and as much as possible play a passive role in the dialogue. The interviewer should provoke the sage and then let him take the initiative in the encounter. D.A. Masolo acknowledges this criticism and cautions that:

While this kind of interview remains a typically philosophical dialogue able to bring out the individual thoughts of the sages interviewed, we need to take caution about the dangers involved, for it is not always a successful outcome.¹⁹

Bodunrin's second criticism shifts from Odera Oruka's approach to Barry Hallen's approach. In other words, the criticism is justified only in the light of the Barry Hallen approach and not the Odera Oruka approach. As it has already been observed the Hallen approach leads to a communal collective philosophy; it is geared towards an ethnophilosophy. In all honesty and fairness, this approach to African philosophy is not different from the activities and goals of ethnophilosophers. When it comes to Odera Oruka's approach, this criticism must be put on the shelf for it fails to recognise the distinction between ethnophilosophy and philosophic sagacity. This distinction had earlier been made in the thesis.²⁰

The third criticism is also unfair, for it assumes that the sages interviewed are hand-picked. As a result Bodunrin argues that the equation of these sages with the interlocutors in the Athenian Agora is not justified. The Athenian Agora, Bodunrin asserts, was a conference centre or a seminar auditorium and that the interlocutors were well-educated unlike the sages. In the first place it is worth mentioning that this equation is Bodunrin's own. We do not remember reading any literature by Odera Oruka or any proponent of philosophic sagacity in which a comparison is made or implied between the Agora interlocutors and philosophic sages, in terms of

their formal education. On the contrary, in philosophic sagacity research project much interest is on those sages who have not gone through the formal or Western education Systems. If at all the approach of philosophic sagacity is interested in comparing the two, then the interest lies in their reasoning capacity, not education. So in discussing the issue of philosophic sagacity, or more generally sage philosophy, the issue of formalised education must be bracketed.

Another point that should be clarified is that the philosophic sages are not merely hand-picked in the market place. A careful and methodological procedure is used to identify the philosophic sages. Even in Barry Hallen's case, it is obvious that the sages are not picked at random. Hallen's interviewees are Yoruba **onisegun** which constitute masters of medicine, herbalists, nature doctors etc. Bodunrin's criticisms of philosophic sagacity therefore by and large rests upon far-fetched premises.

Masolo On Philosophic Sagacity

There are some scholars who in principle accept the basic tenets of philosophic sagacity. However, when it comes to the thoughts of sages who have so far been identified, they dismiss them as not being philosophic. One such scholar is the young energetic Kenyan philosopher, D.A. Masolo. Masolo has been critical of the thoughts of the philosophic sages as written down by Odera Oruka. In particular,

he mentions Paul Mbuya's thought 'On Equality of Sexes' in comparison to that of Ogotemmel. Odera Oruka uses the thoughts of the two sages to illustrate the difference between philosophic sagacity and mere sagacity, Odera Oruka says:

For Ogotemmel, woman's difference from man is taken as a cure and punishment from God. And it is clear that such ideas are no more than a recitation of the communal myths of the tribe.²¹

On Mbuya, Odera Oruka says that he (Mbuya) knows, as Ogotemmel does, what his community thinks about women. But nevertheless goes beyond this communal view and makes his own rational assessment about women. He argues that:

A man has the physical capacity to run faster than a woman. But on the other hand a woman has the physical capacity to undergo the pains of carrying and bearing a baby which a man lacks. So we cannot correctly say one is superior or inferior to the other...In truth the two sexes are naturally equal or balanced.²²

Odera Oruka contends that this sort of argument is independent of the communal chorus of the general Luo belief about women. Masolo contests Odera Oruka's contention. He argues that Mbuya's statement is common sense. He further asserts that:

The question which one feels should be asked here is, therefore, whether or not for any statement or opinion to be philosophical all that is needed is for it to be clever or non-mediocre. Mbuya's statement on women is by no means stupid or mediocre. It is an intelligent statement of a man who observes and notices events and facts around him, probably with some alertness and acumen which the majority of the people in his community lack. Such individuals are, of course, rare...But we should not call these people philosophers.²³

It should be observed that Masolo is not diminishing the value of philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy, and neither is he doubting whether Mbuya was a philosopher. Masolo's criticism is cautionary rather than negative. His position is that generally the sample offered by Odera Oruka does not (adequately) prove philosophic sagacity. In particular, his quarrel is that the sample attributed to Mbuya does not prove that he (Mbuya) is philosophic.²⁴

Masolo believes that philosophy in the professional sense must involve great elaboration and technical sophistication since philosophy is where human reason is at its highest level. A philosopher, therefore operates at a theoretical level. A wise or clever person may also operate at this level. However, 'the philosopher in his more theoretical moments operates at a more rarefied level...his cogitations will be more abstract'.²⁵

In spite of this unique feature of philosophy, its role in determining a philosophic discourse should not be over-emphasised. A set of statements (or reasoning) may be enthymematically presented and as a result be less abstract. But when their full logical range are uncoiled, no one would doubt the philosophic element in them. However, the important point is that even at the enthymematic level, the set of

statements would still be philosophical, though it may not be immediately obvious to some.

This therefore means that in some cases if the thoughts of a philosophic sage is not well and clearly developed, then it may appear non-philosophical to some individuals. This therefore calls for caution on the part of the interviewer. He should always make an effort to sufficiently provoke the interviewee and also follow some of the answers with incisive questions so that the interviewee may offer finer details of his arguments.

One point needs to be made clear regarding Masolo's and Wiredu's conceptions of the abstractness of philosophy. The idea that philosophy must always operate at a higher rarefied level and with deep abstractions is not always true. Descartes, one of the greatest founders of modern western philosophy, writes very simply and like an ordinary common sense thinker. Philosophy can in many ways be expressed very simply and with no metaphysical mysteries. Some very good philosophers are not as abstract as some people would wish them to be.

A General Observation

It has been shown that much of the criticisms levelled against philosophic sagacity are largely a result of some misconceptions of the approach. However, some observation is going to be made regarding the approach; an observation which does not augur well for philosophic sagacity.

In his book *Sage Philosophy*, Odera Oruka has strengthened the position of philosophic sagacity by writing out the thoughts of some Kenyan sages, an act some thought was long overdue. Prior to the publication of the book, admirers and opponents of philosophic sagacity alike were treated to what appeared like mere abstracts of the thoughts of the sages. In the book Odera Oruka devotes two chapters, exposing the thoughts of some sages. Odera Oruka possibly had in mind the criticism that had been offered by Masolo, that the texts that had been put across by Odera Oruka to support philosophic sagacity were not adequate, in that they were too brief for one to discern the philosophical elements in them.

In order to do this, we must be able to provide longer texts of discussions with these sages which will reveal to us points of passage from the level of mere wisdom and cleverness to that of philosophical debates proper.²⁶

In the light of this criticism, Odera Oruka's book, specifically chapters six and seven, is a milestone in philosophic sagacity. However, there are some 'sages' whose thoughts do not appropriately reflect sagacity. As a result even if their thoughts happen to be philosophical, they cannot fittingly be referred to as philosophic sages. Specifically, the thoughts of the 'philosophic sage' in question is Chaungo Barasa.

As already clearly stated, a sage, as far as sage philosophy as an approach to African philosophy is concerned, is an individual who is,

versed in the common-place culture, customs and beliefs of his people. He can recite or describe them with much competence. However, he is unable to raise critical questions about them, nor is he able to observe the inherent contradictions.²⁷

A philosophic sage, on the other hand,

May equally well be versed in the beliefs and values of his society. His main task is to make critical assessment of them and recommend, as far as the communal pressure allows, only those beliefs and values that pass his rational scrutiny.²⁸

Philosophic sagacity is therefore,

a reflection of a person who is a sage and a thinker. As a sage, the person is versed in the wisdoms and traditions of his people, and very often he is recognised by the people themselves as having this gift...Some sages go beyond mere sagacity and attain a philosophic capacity. As sages, they are versed in the beliefs and wisdoms of their people. However, as thinkers, they are rationally critical and they opt for or recommend only these aspects of the belief and wisdoms which satisfy their rational scrutiny.²⁹

From the interview.³⁰ It is not apparent how the thoughts of Chaungo Barasa, a youthful, self-taught philosopher, constitute sagacity. Within sage philosophy, sagacity is defined in terms of wisdoms pertaining to beliefs and customs of a people. A sage is therefore a master of these beliefs and customs, and acts as a mirror reflecting the beliefs and values of his community. During the interview, Barasa is not asked questions requiring answers that would test his understanding of the world-view of his community. More accurately during the encounter with Barasa, Odera Orika interviews him on seven topics. Of these topics only one (the one on culture) is what is relevant in testing Barasa's understanding of the world-view of his people. But even here Barasa addresses himself quite briefly to only three aspects of Luhya beliefs i.e., marriage, circumcision and life after death. Consequently, on the basis of only the interview, Barasa's sagacity is not proved. And by extension therefore, that he is a philosophic sage is questionable. It is worth pointing out that Barasa may very well be a sage, it is not a logical impossibility. However, the problem is that the way this is claimed to be proved, is what is not satisfying.

It is important to note that it is not being denied that Barasa is a philosophic sage; he could very well be one. All that is being pointed out is that the text does not prove that he is one. It would also be wrong for one to think that Barasa's sagacity is being questioned on the basis of his age. Age is one of those things that should not be

taken too rigidly on the issue of sage philosophy. Whereas it is true that most sages (folk or philosophic) are ordinarily old people, it does not follow that only old people are sages. Indeed there is no necessary and logical connection between sagacity and old age.

In the debate on the nature of African philosophy, one should not lose sight of the significant role philosophic sagacity plays. The approach of ethnophilosophers and professional African philosophers have been shown to be open to criticisms. The former portraying world-views as philosophies, or assuming that they could be used interchangeably. This approach grants the existence of African philosophy, but in a pejorative sense. On the other hand, professional African philosophers who grant the existence of African philosophy in the technical sense of the word, are often accused of illegally using western methods in African philosophy, largely because of their training in Western philosophy. They use 'Western spectacles' to see African philosophy, hence what they conceive is not African philosophy as it is in itself. It is at this juncture that philosophic sagacity comes in handy. It seeks to identify African philosophy in the technical sense, as seen through, 'African spectacles', that is as portrayed by Africans with little western influence. In a way therefore, philosophic sagacity is an attempt to rescue both the ethnophilosophers and the professional African philosophers.

If Barasa is considered to be a philosophic sage, then philosophic sagacity would not, in any reasonable way, be rescuing the professional African philosopher. Why is this so? The reason is simple. Barasa is not very different from the professional African philosophers. Even at the risk of being superfluous, it should be re-affirmed that the professional African philosophers are accused of treating African philosophy from a western angle because of their formal education and studies in western philosophy. Though Barasa is not a classroom trained philosopher, he is nevertheless a self-taught philosopher. He is one who is well-grounded, if not better grounded than some of his contemporaries who are classroom trained philosophers, in western philosophy. In particular, he is an admirer of some ancient Greek philosophers, and has read some of their works well. For all practical purposes Barasa is a philosopher, in the sense that he is a serious student of philosophy who has attended and participated in a number of philosophical conferences and seminars. He has to his credit a work entitled 'A Philosophy of Philosophy', though yet to be published, and a number of articles on philosophy. As a result, the criticism levelled against the professional African philosophers would with no difficulty apply to him. Therefore his candidacy for philosophic sagacity would be of disservice and counter-productive to the school in the debate on African philosophy..

Despite the cautionary remarks that have been made regarding philosophic sagacity, it is the approach that surpasses the other two. It saves African philosophy from the criticisms levelled against ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, by making redundant the objections on the former and manoeuvring its way past the main objection of the latter. However, as already noted, meaningful criticism on philosophic sagacity comes from those who feel that the texts given to date of philosophic sagacity do not prove it. With this criticism in mind this work intends to prove philosophic sagacity from another angle.

This work proposes to compare philosophic sagacity with ancient Greek thought. The rationale of this exercise is as follows. It is generally accepted that ancient Greek thought is not only philosophy in the strict sense, but it also marks the origin and basis of philosophy as known through its development in the Western world. Philosophic sagacity, on the other hand side-steps some of the criticisms which have been levelled against ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy: that what ethnophilosophers call African philosophy is not philosophy proper, whereas the professional philosophers are accused of treating African philosophy from a typical western standpoint. If therefore, this thesis succeeds in showing that there are fundamental similarities between the two thought systems, then it will *ipso facto* adequately prove that African philosophic sagacity is also philosophical.

However, it should also be noted that in comparing the two thought systems, interest will not only be on similarities. Attempts will be made to find out the basic differences, if any, which would warrant the claim of ethnophilosophy. It is also worth noting that difference(s) between African philosophic sagacity and ancient Greek thinking could be due to cultural factors, and this need not necessarily lead to difference in philosophy. In other words, differences in culture need not entail the position of ethnophilosophy.

Other scholars have more-or-less undertaken similarly researches. Notable works in this regard are those by Henry Orla, George James and Claude Sumner amongst others. However, these works are interestingly different from what this thesis has set itself to do.

Orla in his work *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece* is basically concerned to show that ancient Africa is the cradle of Western civilisation; that the basis and foundation of Greek philosophy and hence modern western philosophy is to be found in Egypt. This is also the position taken by George James in his *Stolen Legacy*. Sumner on his part in trying to prove that African thought is philosophical tries to trace the Greek origins of Ethiopian philosophy, in his paper 'The Ethiopian Philosophy of Greek Origin'. One notices that the concern of Orla and James on one hand, and Sumner on the other, is to show that one thought system has its basis or

origin in the other. For Olela and James the concern is the African origin of Greek philosophy, whereas for Sumner it is the Greek origin of African philosophy. However, both the camps are concerned with correcting the view that belittled the African thought system by way of comparison.

This thesis will take a somewhat different approach. In the main, it will not be concerned with tracing and identifying the origin of one thought system in the other, as is the case with Olela's, James' and Sumner's approaches. On the contrary, this thesis assumes a scenario where the two thoughts systems have not influenced one another, at least not directly. However, one may argue that this is the position of philosophic sagacity as an approach to the debate on African philosophy, and hence that there is nothing unique about the approach this study intends to undertake.

The above observation has some element of truth in as far as the question of methodology is concerned. However, despite the fact that Odera Oruka has to date put on paper the thoughts of some traditional Kenyan sages, he has yet to make a deliberate and explicit attempt at comparing sagacious African thought with Western thought, be it ancient, medieval, modern or contemporary. In Odera Oruka's works, there is a subtle assumption that African philosophic sagacity is in a way equivalent to Western philosophical thought; an assumption which this study seeks to verify.

However, before comparing the two thought systems, efforts will be channelled towards explicating them. The next chapter is therefore an explication and elaboration of the ancient Greek thought. Chapter nine will do the same to African philosophic sagacity.

Notes

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ibid.

ibid., p.169.

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See **ibid.**

D.A. Masolo, **op.cit.**, p.315.

Vide Supra, pp.166-167

21. H. Odera Oruka, "Sagacity In African Philosophy", *op.cit.*, p.387.

22. *ibid.*, p. 388.

23. D.A. Masolo, *op.cit.*, pp. 309-310.

24. It is useful to note that Masolo's criticism was made before he actually had access to the texts of the sages. With the publications of Odera Oruka's *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), *Sage Philosophy* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991) and *Oginga Odinga: His Beliefs and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Initiative Publishers, 1992), one wonders if Masolo would still cling to the criticism.

25. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 142.

26. D.A. Masolo, *op.cit.*, p. 316.

27. H. Odera Oruka, "Sage Philosophy: The Basic Questions and Methodology", *op.cit.*, p. 36.

ibid.

.See H. Odera Oruka, "Philosophic Sages", *Sage Philosophy*, *op.cit.*, pp. 147-156.H.

Odera Oruka, "Sagacity in African Philosophy", *op.cit.*, p. 386.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT

...The Egyptians and Babylonians had gone further than the Greeks in mathematical and astronomical observations, but their aims were entirely practical and utilitarian. It was left for the Greeks, who took up their results and investigated them in a spirit of disinterested curiosity, to lay the foundations of mathematical and astronomical science. The Greeks were led to philosophy...by that same disinterested curiosity - by that desire to know, not because knowledge is useful, but because it is good - which must be the motive of all genuine study.¹

The previous chapter was generally an exposition of traditional African sagacity. More accurately however, it was a critical analysis and evaluation of the tenets and methodology of the approach. Notwithstanding the criticisms that have been offered, the school denotes a non-controversial approach to the question of African philosophy.

To determine the strength or weakness of the view expressed above, this work is going to make a comparative analysis between African philosophic sagacity and ancient Greek thought. However, before making the comparison an exposition of both the thought systems is deemed necessary. This chapter will be limited to the exposition of ancient Greek thought. However, despite the limitation, it should be recognised that such an exercise is without doubt an Herculean task and for it to be commendable, it would require several volumes. In this regard W.K.C. Guthrie has

this work however, the exposition will be further limited to the pre-Socratics. Even here, the expose will be restricted only to some ancient Greek thinkers whose views and statements feature highly in the history of Western Philosophy, and are generally regarded to mark the birth of philosophy in Western Europe.

8.1. The Beginnings of Philosophy in Greece

Though it has been argued that the beginnings of Greek philosophy can be traced in ancient Egypt,² in the history of Western philosophy, the thought system that is regarded to constitute philosophy is said to have begun in ancient Greece in the person of Thales (640-550 B.C.). It is argued that this period saw the abandonment of mythical and religious solutions to problems, concerning the origin and nature of the universe and the process that go with it. In its place, emerged solutions that were pegged on human reason. They were personal and exhibited some degree of abstraction. In parenthesis, it is worth asking what the precondition of philosophy is, or better still, what circumstances lead to philosophy?

It has often been argued that philosophy could be hampered by utilitarian motives, since philosophy demands a greater degree of abstraction from the world of immediate experience and a freer movement of reason in the sphere of pure concepts; a degree of abstraction and freedom of thought that submission to practical

concepts; a degree of abstraction and freedom of thought that submission to practical ends would not allow. In the origin of history of Western philosophy, it is argued by some thinkers that, philosophy did not arise from a demand for the necessities or amenities of human life. Rather it was the satisfaction of these demands that were a precondition of its (philosophy's) existence.

What the above assertion means is, for example, that what a hungry man immediately needs is food not philosophy. It is only when one is somehow satisfied that he would meaningfully engage in some level of abstraction. Quite in line with this, it is commonly argued that what the countries of the so-called third world need are studies oriented towards immediate technological advancement and material well-being, not philosophy. In this vein one is inclined to agree with Aristotle, who after making his point that philosophy has its origin in wonder, added: "History supports this conclusion, for it was after the procession of the chief necessities not only for life but for an easy life that the search for this intellectual satisfaction began".³

The widely read historian of Western philosophy, W.K.C. Guthrie, in his assertion that philosophy began in ancient Greece, discredits ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia on two grounds, despite their high levels of civilization. One of the grounds has to do with the religious nature of the two societies, and the other has to do with their

utilitarian needs. This second aspect is clearly reflected in the first note of this chapter.

On the religious grounds, Guthrie argues that in spite of the very high levels of civilizations in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, they were nevertheless places where freedom of thought was inhibited by the demands of their religions. According to Guthrie, these religions heavily weighed on every aspect of life of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, and was used in the interest of despotic central government where the king was the embodiment of divinity. "The King was the embodiment of divinity, of Ra or Marduk, and the priesthood which surrounded him took care that its authority was not diminished by an encroachment of free thought".⁴ In modern social and political philosophy this view is regarded as the religious grounds for the justification of the existence of the state and obedience to its authority.

In contrast to the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, Guthrie argues that, the Greeks were intolerant to such a system. This, he rightly stated, does not mean that the Egyptian and Mesopotamian peoples were not knowledgeable. Indeed, as already indicated in an earlier chapter, they were knowledgeable. Even some ancient Greek and modern European thinkers acknowledge this. Herodotus, for example, wrote that in his opinion geometry was invented in Egypt and brought from there into

Greece, and that the Greeks learnt from the Babylonians the division of the day into twelve parts. Aristotle on his part, notwithstanding what George James says, makes a general statement that the mathematical arts were founded in Egypt.⁵ According to Guthrie, the Cuneiform documents suggest that though the Egyptians led in geometry, the Babylonians were even further ahead in arithmetic. He also mentions that papyrus documents from Egypt as far as 2000 B.C. show that considerable progress had already been made there in the arts of medicine and surgery.⁶

Guthrie goes on to argue that despite the knowledgeability and skill of the ancient Egyptians, people nevertheless refer to that Egyptian form of cognition as a science, whereas with regard to the ancient Greek form they talk of philosophy. In other words, whereas people regard the ancient Egyptian form of knowledge as constituting a science, it is more natural to refer to the ancient Greek knowledge as constituting philosophy. This therefore means that there is some fundamental distinction between ancient Egyptian knowledge on one hand, and ancient Greek knowledge on the other. The question to ask is: what is this distinction?⁷

According to Guthrie, the Egyptians felt no interest in knowledge for its own sake, but only in so far as it serve a practical purpose. Their knowledge of geometry, it is argued, was essentially a result of land-measurement or pyramid building.⁸ Similarly, it is argued that in Babylon the conduct of practical life was governed to a

great extent by religious considerations, and that their religion was a stellar one. In this way therefore, astronomy was a practical study, its virtue lying in the explanation which it gave to educated men of the behaviours of the stellar gods. The observations and calculations which it called faith were extensive and accurate, but were however tied to the service of established religion. Greek philosophy (knowledge) on the other hand, was in its beginnings, so far as the traditional gods were concerned, agnostic or positively hostile. The Egyptians and the Babylonians were therefore contented with their knowledge as far as it worked, and felt no interest in the further question of why it worked, since the realm of causes was still governed by religious dogma instead of being open to the free debate of reason. Here, asserts Guthrie, lies the fundamental difference between the Egyptians (and Babylonians) on one hand, and the Greeks on the other. The Greeks asked "Why?" and this interest in causes leads immediately to a further demand: the demand for generalization.

The Egyptians, Guthrie argues, knows that fire is a useful tool. It will make bricks hard and durable, will warm their houses, turn sand into glass, temper steel and extract metals from their ore. But if, like the Greeks, one ask why the same thing (fire) does all these different things, then one is no longer thinking separately of the fire that is lit in the brick-kiln, the fire in the hearth and the fire in the blacksmith's workshop. One begins to ask oneself what is the nature of fire in general: what are its properties as fire? According to Guthrie this advance to higher generalizations

constitutes the essence of the new step taken by the Greeks. In his own words, Guthrie writes:

The Egyptians had thought of geometry as a matter of individual rectangular and triangular fields. The Greeks lift this from the place of the concrete and material and begin to think about rectangles and triangles themselves, which have the same properties whether they are embodied on several acres or in pieces of wood or cloth a few inches long, or simple represented by lines drawn in the sand... It marks the advance from precepts to concepts, from the individual examples perceived by sight or touch to the universal notion which we conceive in our minds - in sculpture no longer an individual man but the ideal humanity; in geometry, no longer triangles but the nature of triangularity and the consequences which logically and necessarily flow from being a triangle.⁹

Guthrie's distinction between the Egyptian and the Greek forms of knowledge on the basis of perceptualisation and conceptualization, respectively, can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that whereas the Egyptians were perceptual in their cognitive approaches, the Greeks were essentially conceptual. The second interpretation would be that, whereas a few Greeks were credited for raising cognition to the conceptual level, none of the Egyptians had attained that mark in the ancient times. Though these two interpretations imply each other, they do not assert one and the same proposition. The first interpretation is rather general, and it gives room that a few Egyptians may have risen to the conceptual level. The second interpretation rules out such a possibility.

However, a careful analysis of Guthrie's view reveals that to interpret his position in the first sense would be anomalous. In his exposé the presupposition is that none of

the Egyptians had elevated themselves to the second order conceptual level. According to him, only the Greeks had reached that rung. Guthrie must therefore be interpreted in the second sense. However, given this interpretation, Guthrie's views can be shown to be, at best, inconsistent. The notions of 'generalization' and 'concepts' are in a way necessary to the disciplines of geometry and algebra. Surely, one cannot be a master in these two areas and yet be innocent of the concepts involved. The fact that one is a master in any one of these two areas implies that he is at grips with the concepts involved. At any rate, these disciplines are by their very nature conceptual and hinge on generalizations, and this is what it means to say that these disciplines belong to the sciences. Hence, the fact that "the Egyptians were able to calculate the height of a pyramid as well as the distances of ship in the ocean from a given point on land"¹⁰ implies that they were familiar with the essential concepts of geometry, otherwise how else would they be able to make such calculations? This means that Guthrie's distinction of the two thoughts on the basis of generalization is not coherent.

At this juncture it is worth pointing out that following the analyses in chapter two, the distinction between science and philosophy does not lie in generalization but in the method of verification, for example. Indeed, as argued in that chapter both science and philosophy involve generalization. Hence, Guthrie's argument that ancient Greek thought is philosophical while the ancient Egyptian is merely a science on the basis that the former involves generalization while the latter does not,

is not sustainable. Generalization is not what punctuates a philosophical thought from a scientific one.

The arguments above show that Guthrie in his analysis of the origins of philosophy in Greece is misguided when it comes to the nature of Egyptian knowledge and secondly, with regard to the nature of philosophy.

This section however, does not intend to revisit the debate on the origins of philosophy; chapter four took care of that. This chapter is restricted to the birth of philosophy in Greece. The personality who is generally regarded to be the first Greek philosopher is Thales of Miletus. It is believed that he lived between 640 and 550 B.C. The question to ask is: why is he so regarded?

Thales of Miletus

From the analysis of the previous section, it is evident that the origin of philosophy is traced in ancient Greece or more precisely, is traceable to the pre-Socratic mainly because of their rejection of mythology, mysticism and religion and their replacement by rational and critical thinking. In his "Story of the Origins of Philosophy", Justus G. Mbae argues that philosophy is in fact a journey which starts in the clearly defined and cock-sure world of religion and mythology and ends in

the less certain, less dogmatic but more cautious world of critical reasoning. Accordingly therefore, to travel the road of philosophy is to move from the world of sensuous, concrete or empirical thought to the more abstract, more subtle realm of pure thought. There is no doubt that the road began in the 6th century in ancient Greece.¹¹

It is generally accepted that Thales of Miletus is the first traveller on the road of philosophy. He was evidently recognised as a sage, and in particular a philosopher. He was regarded as a philosopher because he “evidently abandoned mythic formulation: this alone justifies the claim that he was the first philosopher”.¹²

It is argued that Thales’ impulse to generalize, to discard the individual and accidental and bring out the universal and permanent, constitute the claim that he was the founder of Greek philosophy. Thales thought that the first principle of all things is water. Any Greek at that point in time if asked, if anything, in his experience was ever-living, would have only one answer: not water as Thales thought, but *theos*. Everlasting life for them was the mark of the divine, and nothing else. It is important to note that it is not as such the choice of water as the unity of all things that gives Thales the position he has been slotted into in the history of philosophy. “If he had championed the cause of treacle as the sole element, he would still have been rightly honoured as the father of speculative

science".¹³ In other words, what makes Thales be honoured as the founder of Greek philosophy is not his answer to the question of the unity of things, but rather the manner of his approach to the question.

Thales decided that, if there is any one thing at the basis of all nature, it must be water. It is the hypothesis, the question he asked, that in the scientists' view constitutes his claim to immortality. Others like Hesiod...had adumbrated the same idea, but by having recourse to the gods and spirits endowed with special powers they begged the question, because the existence of such beings can neither be proved nor disproved by the means wherewith we know the natural world. In a word, it was Thales who first attempted to explain the variety of nature as the modifications of something in nature.¹⁴

Prior to Thales, the origin of the World and hence the unity of all things was given a divine basis. The origin and sustenance of all things was attributed to the divine. This was often in the form of mythologies. With Thales emerges a new era, detached from the mythological tradition. H. Olela observes this, though he talks of science rather than philosophy. However, for the purpose of punctuating Thales' mode of thought from the mythological one, the two may be used interchangeable.

Olela writes:

The basic distinction...between Homer and Thales lies in the fact that Thales was a natural scientist and natural theologian, whereas Homer, like Hesiod and Orpheus, was a mythic and mystic., The thrust of the implication which such a distinction penetrates, is that Thales reflected a typical Greek mind. Hence, when one speaks of

the pre-Socratic, he means the period beginning with Thales. In other words, Thales was of a scientific rather than mythologic persuasion.¹⁵

In mathematics, Thales was universally believed to have introduced geometry into Greece, having become acquainted with the study during his travels in Egypt. In Western philosophy he is credited with the following theorems:

- (a) A circle is bisected by its diameter.
- (b) The angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal.
- (c) If two straight lines intersect, the opposite angles are equal.
- (d) The angle inscribed in a semi-circle is a right angle.
- (e) A triangle is determined if its base and angles relative to the base are given.

Without going into the details of these theorems, Guthrie concludes that in Thales one sees the beginning of the extraction of the universal law from particular instances, the form from the matter. In Thales one sees the dawning of a tradition hitherto unique to the Greeks. So much for Thales. Another member of the Milesian school, who also addressed himself to the question of the basic element of life, and whose taught also occupies a significant place in the origin of Greek philosophy, is none other than Anaximander. He is considered to have lived between 610 and 547 B.C.

Anaximander of Miletus

Anaximander of Miletus was the second Greek thinker about Nature after Thales. It is believed that if the first Greek philosopher was Thales mainly because of his abandonment of mythic formulations, then "Anaximander is the first whom we have concrete evidence that he made comprehensive and detailed attempt to explain all aspects of the world of man's experience".¹⁶ According to Anaximander, the world was a boundless or infinite substance out of which are segregated the different substance; not only water, which Thales had supposed to be the primary matter, but fire which is its opposite. Though Anaximander was a student of Thales he did not share some of his teacher's doctrines. He believed that the basic element must be neutral, because any of the other elements (like water, fire and air) are always in opposition to one another. He rejected the view that water, fire or air could serve as a basis for all the rest. Instead, he argued that an unnamed substance was the basis of all these, and it was less definite in character. Anaximander described this substance as **apeiron** (boundless, unlimited). For Anaximander, there was no adequate reason for regarding water, fire, earth or any such familiar, sensibly manifest phenomenon as prior to the rest. The original substance of the universe must be something more primitive and ultimate than any of them of which they are manifestations or modifications, obtained by a process 'of separating out'. The conflict of opposites is an undeniable fact of nature. Water, for example,

extinguishes fire, and as a result it cannot be the original substance out of which fire came into being. Anaximander rightly observed that it is a natural tendency of each of the elements to swallow up its opposite. Fire and water are in conflict, and when they meet they struggle until one or the other prevails, and either the fire is put out and nothing but the water remains, or the water is dried up and the fire remains in sole possession of the field. However, in reality, complete and final victory is never granted to any of the opposing forces: the balance between them is always being restored or maintained. If one gains a local advantage, the other is encroaching elsewhere. Anaximander goes to argue that if the world is evolved from a single substance, there must be at least enough of this substance to make the whole world, and probably a good deal more besides. But if fire existed in that quantity, it would inevitably enjoy a permanent victory over its potential rivals, none of which could be allowed to come into existence; or if it were water, there could never be fire. Hence, for Anaximander, the primary state of matter is indefinite in extent, or simply an indefinite quantity large enough to serve as source or reservoir from which all that exists has been drawn.

This primal substance was pictured by Anaximander as being in everlasting motion, as a result of which it happened, at sometime in some part of it, that the opposite substances containing them, began to separate themselves out. Hence, arose what Anaximander called a seed of a world. At first it must have been something like the whirling nebulae known to modern astronomy. Gradually the cold and wet element

condensed into a wet mass of earth at the center, wrapped round in cloud or mist. The hot and dry showed itself as a sphere of flame enclosing the whole, which as it revolved burst apart into rings or wheels of fire around which surged the dark mist from within the sphere. This is his explanation of sun, moon and stars, each of which is really a ring of fire right round the earth. Under the influence of the fire at the circumference, parts of the earth were dried out and separated from the water that surrounded them. Life first arose during this process in which the warm mud or slime, for the origin of life was in moisture acted upon by warmth. The first animals were therefore fishlike, and enclosed in scaly coverings. From these developed land-animals, including man, who has evolved ultimately from a sort of fish.

Whether Anaximander's cosmogony is sound or not, it is clearly a remarkable reflection of rational thought, more so, if seen in relation to the epoch he lived in. His was an age when the supernatural was still taken for granted, when the forces of nature were attributed to the action of anthropomorphic gods, and the origin of the universe had hitherto been sought in grotesque stories about a sexual union of heaven and earth, conceived as vast primeval deities, and their forcing-apart by another gigantic spirit. Given such a state of affairs, Guthrie rightly asserts that with Anaximander human reason asserted itself and produced what, right or wrong, was for the most part an account in purely natural terms of the origin of the world and life.¹⁷

8.4 Anaximenes of Miletus

If Anaximander showed some progress in thought by selecting as the original substance of the universe something different from any known substance, it seems at first sight as though Anaximenes, his younger compatriot, had taken a step backwards by selecting, like Thales, a substance of definite form, namely air. In reality, however, Anaximenes made a definite advance on his predecessors. Thales and Anaximander had merely assumed a transformation of the original substance. Thales had done this quite unconsciously. Anaximander was perhaps vaguely aware that what he called the 'separating out' of the 'opposites', hot and cold, from the 'Boundless' really implied the transformation of the 'Boundless' into the hot and cold. Anaximenes was the first to recognise openly that there is transformation.

It occurred to Anaximenes that the different forms of matter might be explained as different degrees of density in one original substance. There is no difficulty in supposing one form of matter to be more real and primary than the rest, provided it is of such a nature that the rest can be accounted for as rarer or denser varieties of it. Air naturally seemed to Anaximenes to be the primary substance, because it stood mid-way between the rarer form, fire, and the dense form, moisture or mist, so that here again we have the primary opposites, hot and cold as transformations of the

primitive air. Thus Anaximenes, though he goes back to Thales in assuming a definite known substance as the real primary substance, goes beyond Anaximander in accounting for its transformation by the processes of rarefaction and condensation.

The 'air' of Anaximenes retains the characteristics of indefinite extension and incessant motion which belonged to Anaximander's 'Boundless'. He also thought of it as containing within itself the power to transform itself. He also compares the world to a living being. "Just as our soul, which is air, holds together, so do breath and air encompass the whole world".¹⁸ Breath and life are closely connected.

The life in the human body is breath and is sustained by inhaling the air from without. Just in the same way, the life of the world is sustained by its constantly inhaling air from the boundless store of air outside the world. It is clear from this that the original substance is regarded as possessing life.

In Anaximenes one easily traces the roots of the modern formulation of the law of rarefaction and condensation. Air transforms into other elements; if it is rarefied, becomes fire; and when air is condensed it changes into winds and clouds - further condensation results in water, earth and stones. The changes through which the

elements go cause certain opposites to occur. For instance, hot and cold are not real states of things; they are not permanent characteristics of things since they are the outcome of inner changes.

In the history of philosophy, what is important about Anaximenes is the fact that he is the first to have attempted to deal directly with the problem of change. With Heraclitus, the fact of change takes a more prominent place, and continues thereafter to be of the chief problems of philosophy.

8.5 Heraclitus

As a philosopher, **Heraclitus** stands in direct succession of the early Ionians (the Milesians), and his distinctive doctrines are the logical development of theirs. The underlying assumption in the doctrine of the Milesians was that the universe is rational. This is to mean that they (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes) assumed that the universe is a coherent whole, that despite its appearances of manifoldness it is **one**. This conception of unity took shape in the hypothesis of an underlying permanent original substance, which in essence was what things really were. But as the milesian thinkers proceeded to work out their views as to the nature of this permanent original substance, it became apparent that there was something in their facts that did not accord with their hypothesis. As Taylor puts it:

If it is true that there is something changeless and permanent underlying all things, it is equally true that experience makes us aware of things that are many, not one, that change, and are not permanent. This antithesis of Being and Becoming, One and Many, Permanent and Change, is implicit throughout the development of Ionian school. The three earlier philosophers cling firmly to the hypothesis of one permanent world-stuff, which remains unchanged beneath its various forms. But the awkward fact of change obtrudes itself and claims attention.¹⁹

Anaximander seems to recognise this inconsistency when he suggests that the Boundless has the power of putting out 'opposites' from itself. However, one may argue that this is not very satisfactory because the Boundless itself must cease to exist as itself in the separated opposites. Anaximenes gives a better explanation when he states that the original substance, air, appears now in a denser and now in a rare form. Heraclitus carries the hypothesis of Anaximenes a stage further. Rather than regarding change as an awkward intruder upon the permanence of one unchanging world-substance, he declares that change is the very nature of the world-substance itself. It is a fundamental fact, which has merely to be accepted, and calls for no explanation.

Being is in fact a constant process of **becoming**; permanence is but the permanence of the fact of change; the unity of the whole is the unity of law, the harmony that binds opposites in one. This thought of Heraclitus is consistent with his view that the world is an everlasting fire. It should be noted that unlike the Milesian thinkers,

he does not say that fire is the basic principle as such. The nature of fire is to burn, and to burn is to change. The world and all things in it is an incessant process of combustion, by means of which one is continuously transformed into another. The transforming process takes two directions - an upward and a downward path. The balance is exactly even, and that is how the apparent permanence of things is maintained. There is no question of rarefaction or condensation: it is a real transformation. The incessancy of change and movement is expressed in such saying as: "All things are flowing: nothing abides". 'You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you'.

The notion of a union of opposite, whereby the whole is kept together, sometimes takes an extreme paradoxical form: 'Fire is want and fullness'. 'Good and ill are one'. 'The way up and the way down is one and the same'. 'Mortals are immortals, immortals are mortals, living the other's death, dying the other's life'. 'We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not'. All this variety of expression, the way up and down, the constant strife, the coexistence of opposites, the flux of things, is the direct outcome of the assumption that fire is the underling principle of the universe. The word fire is the process of change, the law of the universe, the divine. 'God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace': but he takes various shapes. The soul of man is identified with fire. "Man is kindled and put out like a light in the night". 'The dry soul is the wisest and the best' - because of course it has most in it of the divine fire.

In Heraclitus, Being is identified with Becoming, and the unity of all things has been converted into the one unchanging law of change. In maintaining Change to be the one reality, Heraclitus throws down a challenge to reason. Can thought be satisfied with Change as ultimate reality? Is not Being annihilated by its identification with Becoming? These are the questions that later pre-Socratics addressed themselves to.

8.6 Parmenides

Parmenides picks the thread where Heraclitus had stopped. His main thesis was an address to the challenge Heraclitus had thrown to reason. The earlier pre-Socratics had assumed that something *is*, and on the strength of this assumption they set out to discover what this something is. Further, what *is* needs no accounting for: it accounts for everything else: *is* implies *was* and *will be*. That is why they thought of the original substance as underived and permanent. The whole work of Parmenides centres on the investigation of the real meaning and implications of the verb 'to be'.

One thing that seemed clear to Parmenides was that **what is** must always be itself and nothing but itself. He used this belief to criticise the view of the earlier thinkers.

His attempt was to show that these thinkers had been inconsistent in their application of the principles they professed to follow. They had assumed something permanent and unchanging, something that **is**. But when they tried to explain the world that we know they were forced to admit that this permanent something undergoes change. In the earlier thinkers this inconsistency is merely implicit, but in Heraclitus it is explicit, for him the real is the changing; it **is** and **is not**. This paradox of Heraclitus' view forms the basis of Parmenides' protestant thesis. **What is** is just itself and nothing but itself: it cannot change, because to change must mean ceasing to be what it is. Things cannot both be and not be: The notion **is** excludes the notion of **is not**.

Parmenides developed a very monistic thesis. He believed that there is **one** truth, which is **what is**. That **what is**, cannot **not be**, because it is impossible that **what is** should fail to exist. He further argues that the **one** is not created; the one does not come into being. **What is** cannot come into being because if it did, then either it comes into being from **what is not** (non-being), or it comes into being from **what is**. But it cannot come into being from **what is not**. Nothing comes out of nothing; in fact according to him nothing cannot be conceived.

Because being is **one**, Parmenides systematically denied multiplicity, which the Milesians and Heraclitus acknowledged. He argued that if multiplicity was

granted, this would mean that here must be something distinguishing the various things (items). The property (the something) which differentiates between things must either be that **what is** or the **what is not**. But the **what is not** is not thinkable. Therefore, it must be **what is** which is the **one**. Hence, it is absurd to speak of **what is** as coming from itself.

Another claim made by Parmenides is that being or **what is** cannot pass away or perish. If **what is** passes away into **what is**, then there is no difference between the two states. Also, **what is** cannot pass into **what is not**. Therefore, there is no change in **what is** because change implies negation. All determination is negation; Parmenides denies determination or limit. Parmenides' thesis is a denial of plurality, creation of Being, destruction of Being and change of Being.

Parmenides believed that the truth about **what is** can only be reached by thinking, and anything that contradicts the results of thought must be untrue. The world as it seems to us in our everyday experience does contradict the result of thought. It tells us that **what is** changes, while thought tells us that **what is** cannot change. The ordinary world then is unreal; we cannot know anything about it; for all that can be known is simply what can be thought out as to the nature of **what is**.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

From the analyses of the thoughts of the pre-Socratics, the following characteristics can be drawn regarding the philosophical nature of their thought patterns.

First, that the pre-Socratic thought patterns are by their very nature critical, rational and independent reflections. As is already clear by now, any thought pattern that claims (or deserves) to be a genuine philosophy must be characterised by critical, rational and independent reflection as opposed to mystical, mythical, religious and collective thought. Such thought pattern must exhibit clear evidence of having risen from the (initial) stage of **myths** to that of **logos**. The philosopher, unlike the vast majority of people in his society, will give the mystical, mythical and religious beliefs of his society, a critical, rational basis and interpretation. The task of the philosopher is to make explicit that which is implicit and hidden.

Second, a thought pattern that constitute a philosophy is an individual endeavour. It is the mythologies and religions that are collective and communal affairs. "Philosophy arises only when an individual person goes to work on the collective culture, retrieving it and giving it a new interpretation and meaning".²⁰ In this regard it is vital to mention that Greek philosophy, for example, is not the

philosophy of each and every Greek. The phrase 'Greek philosophy' refers only to the thoughts of some inspired Greeks.

Third, a thought pattern that is philosophical must be both systematic and universal. It must be systematic largely because of its critical and rational approach, and it must be universal principally owing to its logical methodology. Every philosophy aims at preserving a viable world-view (a **weltanschauung**) and it can attain this objective only if it is systematic and universal. However, not every **weltanschauung** is a philosophy.

Lastly, since philosophy is an individual endeavour, it is necessarily a self-conscious activity. Indeed, a thought pattern cannot constitute a philosophy if the author did not engage in self-conscious deliberation. These characteristics will be useful in determining whether the thoughts of African sages are philosophic or not. The next chapter is devoted to these thoughts.

Notes

1. M.E.J. Taylor, *Greek Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p.13.

2. *Vide Supra*, pp. 74 - 87

3. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 31.

4. *ibid.*, pp. 32-33

5. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974).

6. W.K.C. Guthrie, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-34.

7. In the discussion that follows, one should bear in mind the distinction made between science and philosophy in chapter two.

8. According to Herodotus, taxation in Egypt was based on the size of the rectangular plots of land into which the country was divided under a system of private ownership. If a plot had its area reduced by encroachment of the river Nile, the owner would put in a claim and royal surveyors were sent to measure the reduction, in order that the tax might be suitably adjusted. In giving the Egyptians credit for being the first geometers, Herodotus states it as his opinion that it was these problems which gave the stimulus to its development.

9. Guthrie, *op.cit.*, pp. 36-37.
10. Henry Olela, *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece* (Georgia: The Black Heritage Corporation, 1981), p. 86.
11. Justus G. Mbae, "From Myth to Reason: The Story of the Origin of Philosophy and its Relevance to the African Situation, *African Christian Studies*, Nairobi, Vol. 7, No. 4 1991, p.22.
12. G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 98.
13. W.P.D. Wightman, *Growth of Scientific Ideas* (Edinburgh: 1950), p. 10.
14. Guthrie, *op.cit.*, p. 68.
15. Henry Olela, *op.cit.*, p. 118.
16. G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *op.cit.*, p. 100.
17. See W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers from Thales to Aristotle* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1950), p. 29.
18. M.E.J. Taylor, *op.cit.*, p. 17.
19. *ibid.*, p. 25.
20. Justus G. Mbae, *op.cit.*, p. 23.k

CHAPTER NINE

THOUGHTS OF SOME AFRICAN SAGES

An idea must be thought out before it is expressed or written down... the sages were thinking and expressing their thoughts. The time has now come to put their thinking and expressions into the written word for a larger audience and for the world community.¹

The preceding chapter has been an exposition, and to a lesser extent an analysis, of the thoughts of the main exponents of ancient Greek thought, in particular the pre-Socratic thought. That exercise was undertaken in preparation for a comparative analysis between that thought system and that of African philosophic sages. If this comparative study is to be fair, then detailed exposition of the latter thought is necessary. This chapter is therefore geared towards that end. However, before the exposition of the thoughts of some African sages is made, one or two issues need to be addressed to regarding the methodology of philosophic sagacity, and its general postulates.

9:1 The Question of Methodology

In choosing the sages, two broad categories were employed. These were:

- (a) Persons rooted in the traditions and customs of their people and are innocent of formal classroom education. These people however have the capacity of transcending the traditions and customs of their people.
- (b) Persons rooted in the traditions and customs of their people, and have had the benefit of formal classroom education. In this latter category, it should be made sure that the sage has not learnt classroom philosophy. Otherwise it would contradict the initial objective of sage philosophy.²

After identifying the sages, the general method of sage philosophy was employed. Questions (and responses) were formulated in such a manner that lee-way was left for open and free discussion. The interviewer (the trained philosopher) played a secondary role, of a provocateur. He was not assertive and never played the domineering role. He played a passive role and let the sage take the initiative during the encounter. Credit therefore goes to D.A. Masolo's observation that:

...the interviewer must give in to the direction of the interlocutor (sage), and often the course of the interview may change frequently according to the answers given to questions and further related questions that the answers may solicit, sometimes leading away from what may have been the original objective of the interviewer.³

One difficulty of the research project was in identifying the sages. In any community, philosophic sages are exceedingly rare. Even amongst the few, some

never wish to express their views openly to any person. Some “opt to remain unknown to the community. They do not always go about selling their wisdom.”⁴

One in some cases must plead with the sages.

In order to minimize the problem above, local administration and recognized clan elders played an important role in identifying the philosophic sages. Once a few philosophic sages were identified, they were asked if they were aware of some sages. The snow-ball rolling method was thus used in the research.

9.2 Masolo’s Criticism: An Appraisal

The position of philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy was elaborately enunciated in chapter seven. Criticisms levelled against the approach by various scholars such as L. Keita and P. O. Bodunrin were analyzed and found to lack in exactitude. However this does not imply nor should it be understood to mean that philosophic sagacity is problem free. D.A. Masolo’s criticism on this approach regarding instances of philosophic sagacity as expressed by Odera Oruka is useful, and should be used as a basis upon which the approach must be strengthened and sustained. In the face of such valuable remarks, there is need to revisit African philosophic sagacity with a view of making it articulate.

H. Odera Oruka’s Sage Philosophy is a milestone in the history and development of sagacity in African philosophy, in the sense that prior to the publication of the book

the approach was in some way justified only on the basis of what one may call extracts of the thoughts of the African sages. Possibly, it is this manner of presentation that offered the opponents of the approach with an opportunity to air captious criticisms. This, for example, is evident in Bodunrin when he asserts that:

...it is one thing to show that there are men capable of philosophical dialogue in Africa and another to show that there are African philosophers in the sense of those who have engaged in organised systematic reflections on the thoughts, beliefs and practices of their people.⁵

According to Bodunrin, African philosophic sagacity is only a pointer to philosophic capability, but not a philosophy. A close analysis of his view reveals that he holds this position because African philosophic sagacity is yet to be presented in the form of long wound systematic reflections.

In this regard, Masolo's criticism is indeed useful, Masolo, as already, noted in chapter seven, argues that the extracts presented by Odera Oruka fall short of what they are supposed to prove. That extracts attributed to Paul Mbuya on "equality of sexes", for example, is common sense. To Masolo, philosophy in the sense that philosophic sagacity is interested in, must involve great elaboration and technical sophistication.⁶ Given this criticism, chapters six and seven of Odera Oruka's later work *Sage Philosophy* is a step in the right direction. In these two chapters Odera Oruka makes an exposition of the thoughts of African sages. However, there is still a need to go beyond what he has done in these two chapters. In the chapters Odera Oruka has presented the views of several sages on various topics and in some cases

the response of the sages have gone beyond mere utterances. This is a praise worthy effort but it may not adequately quench the thirst in Masolo's criticism.

It is now high time that within sage philosophy a transcendental level be attained. This means that the philosophic sages have to be visited again. This time the aim being that they be required to rationalise over their views in some detail. At this point in the history of African philosophy, such an exercise is an urgent need. A need which all philosophers concerned with philosophic sagacity must strive to fulfil for the benefit, development and betterment of philosophic sagacity as an approach in African philosophy. If this is done, this will further authenticate the approach, for under such circumstances no one would doubt that the views of the sages are philosophical, and by the very token Masolo's criticism will be annihilated.

At this juncture, it is opportune to make an observation regarding Odera Oruka's view on some ancient Greek thinkers. A view which may have led him to express the thoughts of the philosophic sages in enthymematic forms or merely as brief expressions. In the introduction of *Sage Philosophy*, he states that:

Some of the Greek sages are known and treated as philosophers for having made only one or two utterances. Thales, for example, is known to have said that 'everything is made of water' and Heraclitus that 'strife is the truth of all life'. Such sayings have been repeated and commented upon in numerous books, giving their utterers the prestige of 'philosophers'. Now, what reasonable proof is there that traditional Africa was free from the sayings of such kind.⁷

It is fair to mention that Odera Oruka in expressing the position above was largely interested in showing that the critics of philosophic sagacity were inconsistent. If Thales and Heraclitus were regarded as philosophers on the basis of the few utterances they made, then the African sages must also be so regarded given that their utterances are of such a kind. It is inconsistent to regard the Greek sages as philosophers yet deny this attribute to the African sages, though their utterances are of the same sort.

However, despite the position above, to assert that "some of the Greek sages are known and treated as philosophers for having made only one or two utterances", is being fairly simplistic. Whereas it is true that in most texts of history of philosophy, the views of the pre-socratic thinkers are only given in the form of utterances, this may be attributed to a large extent to laxity on the part of most historians of philosophy. However, some historians of philosophy have made tireless efforts in this regard by presenting the views of the pre-socratics in some detail.⁸

Similarly, chapter eight of this work has made a useful contribution in this respect. Essentially, the pre-socratics were regarded as philosophers because of, over and above the break they made from the hitherto mythological and religious explanations of the world, they made attempts to justify their divergent views which were not in mere utterances.

From what has been said above, it follows that it would not be fitting for one to present expressions and utterances of the African sages as being philosophical on the basis that the utterances of Greek sages are. Such a basis as already observed is itself not true. This therefore brings us back to the point that the thoughts of the African sages must be developed in detail. During the research, the researcher should sufficiently provoke the sage. He should not simply ask a question such as, "Do you think that men and women are equals?", and then move on to another question on a different topic. After asking the question the researcher should ask the sage several questions arising from the sage's response(s). The questions should be probing. This would be useful in making the sage clarify and develop some of the concepts and issues in his response.

If such an exercise is done carefully by the researcher, then the sage would be required to offer finer details of his arguments, rather than mere utterances. During the research however, the researcher should desist from playing the leading role, the sage should be left to take the initiative. The next section of this chapter will be devoted to the thoughts of some philosophic sages.

Naftali Ong'alo

Naftali Ong'alo was born in 1921 in North Ugenya Location, Siaya District. He has no formal education. He learnt how to read and write in adulthood. He spent his later childhood and adolescence grazing cattle. Between 1938 and 1939 he learnt

tailoring and in 1940 was employed by an Asian as a tailor and his monthly income was 3 shillings. The following year, he started his own tailoring business. Today, he runs a bar at Luhano trading centre and is an acknowledged sage. He married two wives and is blessed with 25 children.

Q. Mzee, you are lucky to have lived for so long, most people today die before they turn 60. Now what is the basic difference in life-style between the traditional and modern societies?

A. In traditional society, life was communal and peaceful. Land did not belong to individuals but was communally owned. People readily came to one's assistance whenever he or she had problems. In fact, there were no individual problems as such. In traditional society nobody felt deprived of anything. If calamity struck everyone was affected by it. Even marriage which these days is so personal and private was a communal affair, in which every member of the community participated. Death was also a communal affair in the sense that every member of the community was affected and actively participated in the burial ceremony.

The nuclear family system is a recent phenomena, in traditional communities it was non-existent. Everyone viewed those belonging to his or her age group as brothers and sisters, and felt obligated to all members of the community. Today, however, this is not the case, we feel obligated only to members of our immediate families.

Q Of the two life-styles which one do you prefer?

A. The communal one.

Q Why the communal?

A Things within the universe play complementary roles. Nothing is self-sufficient as such, except God. The communal life-style is a recognition and application of this principle of complementary roles. The modern life-style which is individualistic and hinges on greed is a negation of this principle. It is a life-style that goes against nature. It cannot be right.

Q That you have mentioned God, tell me something more. Did the Luos believe in God?

A Yes, they did. They believed in the existence of God (Were Nyaka Laga). Were nyaka laga assisted them in their day to day activities and chores. Very early in the morning before doing anything else, the head of the homestead would request Were nyaka laga to guide them during the course of the day. Were had the attribute of omnipresence.

Q Was he omnibenevolent?

A Yes, that is exactly why people prayed to him asking for assistance.

R But even evil people pray to God.

R Yes, but that does not show that God is evil.

R It does not show that He is good either?

R When evil people ask for assistance, most do so on the basis of ignorance.

Q What do you mean?

A A child who wants something even if the thing is not for its good, would use all means available, whether crooked or otherwise, to get it. The child would even seek the assistance of his/her parents. But if the parents are good people they will not accept to be so-used. In fact, they would point this out to the child.

Q Isn't God a good parent then?

R Why do you ask that?

R If God was good then just like the good parent, He would point out the wicked deeds to us and would not assist. Don't you think so?

A Aaaha, I see what you mean. God is good and that is why he does not help people in wrong doing. God has his own way of telling us that the actions we are about to engage in or have engaged in are bad.

Q Are you sure?

A Yes, just assume for a moment that God was an accessory in our wrong doings, what would the world be like?

R I don't know, you tell me.

A If God abetted in wrong actions, the world would be full of evil, it would be evil, itself. In fact, it would cease to exist.

Q How then do you account for the existence of evil? Did God create it?

A No. Evil is a result of man's intelligence (**rieko**)

R Yes, but he created man so he created evil by extension.

R No. Don't look at it that way, whoever made malariaquine meant it to be used to prevent and cure malaria, and if used correctly it does just that. In other words, if used correctly it satisfies the manufacturer's intended purpose. But if one misuses it, by taking an overdose it would result into death, which was not the manufacturer's intention. Now, if this happens, would you hold the manufacturer responsible? You answer me.

(The question was rhetorical and the philosophic sage did not expect a response from me, he then continued). So, God never created evil and neither is he responsible for it. One who thinks so is simply wrong. The existence of evil has to do with **rieko**. Man, because of **rieko**, has misinterpreted God's intentions and consequently misused His artefacts. God has nothing to do with the coming into being of evil.

Q How about death? Is it good or bad?

A It is something bad, nobody wants to die those left behind mourn; they are sad. It is something not welcomed.

Q Yes but why is death something bad? Why do the bereaved mourn?

A Do you expect them to be happy? You know what death means. It is the cessation of life. One is buried never to be seen again.

Q Just a second, some people believe that death is actually the beginning of another form of life, the dead continue living in a form of a spirit. Don't Luos believe that?

A I know that the Luos believe in life after death. But they are wrong, death is death (tho en tho). When one dies, he is buried and it's all over for him/her. My son, do not expect another form of life after this one. When you die or I die, we will not be able to communicate and that is the sad part of it. It is precisely because of this aspect of death that it is feared and hated by all, the Luos inclusive. Otherwise why should one fear death?

Long time ago, the Luos buried the dead immediately (on the same day) and the ceremony of **tero buru** (chasing death away) was performed thereafter, so that another member of the bereaved family does not die soon. Was this not done out of fear of death rather than reverence? Man's activities and mental disposition make nonsense of the notion of life after death.

Q Let us revisit our discussion on God and relate it to death. If God is good, how and when did the evil (of death) creep into the universe?

R What do you mean? I don't quite understand your question.

Q Death, as evil as you are putting it, is a reality which eventually catches up with everyone. Now, some deaths cannot be attributed to the deceased. What I mean is that some deceased persons cannot be held responsible for their deaths. In such cases who is responsible for their deaths? Is it God?

A No! Let me make my point clear. When someone does something good, it is he (the person) who is responsible and therefore deserves praise, to give God the credit would be far-fetching. The point I want to make is that, my position should not be understood to mean that good human acts are attributed to God and bad ones to the individuals. No human acts, whether good or bad, are attributable to God. God is responsible for his actions not man's. However, since God is good his actions are necessarily good. Evil is a result of man's acts?

Q So death falls under human acts?

A Yes.

Q Now tell me. What is God? Can you describe him?

A God cannot be described and anyone who thinks that he can sufficiently describe God is mistaken. God is an idea; an idea of uniformity, unity and peace.

Q What do you mean?

A Look at nature. There are so many different things in the universe. Yet all these things complement each other. The soil is different from plants, the plants from human beings, human beings from cows etc., yet all these things sustain each other. Do you think that this was by accident? Clearly not. Look at a dog and a cow or even a hyena, despite the differences amongst them, they are similar in fundamental respects. Was this by accident? No.

Q Now, of all things and instances that you have mentioned to show the existence of God rather than describing Him, which is the most important?

A None, they are all complementary to each other.

Q Yes, I understand, but even if things are complementary some may be of a higher rank, I don't know. Don't you think so? Yesterday you told me that equality of sexes is a myth, that men are naturally superior to women yet despite this each plays an important role in the family.

A Aaaha! I see what you mean, water is the single most important thing in the universe. Without water life is not possible; water is life. It is the primary substance.

Q I can see some people disagreeing with you and saying that air is the primary substance. What do you have to say to that?

A Air cannot be the primary substance though its role in the universe cannot be diminished. When one talks of water, he is also making reference to air. But to talk of air has no reference or bearing to water.

Q What exactly do you mean?

A My son, you know just as well that water is made up of air.

Q Does that mean that it is air that is primary and not water?

A No! Water is not just a mixture of air, it is much more than that. I told you earlier that water is life. In order to live you need water.

Q Yes, but don't I need air just as much?

A Let's get this straight. In order to live one needs several things, that is true. Amongst these things the basic ones include water, air, food, shelter and clothing. Isn't it?

R Yes.

R Let's start with clothing. We get clothing from plants and animals. In other words, without plants and animals we would have no materials from which to make clothing. On the other hand, plants and animals need water, air and food to survive. So, clothing is reducible to water, air and food.

Let's move to shelter. Similarly, materials for constructing a hut are largely products of animals and plants. And these need water, air and food. Hence, shelter is also reducible to these three, that is, to water air and food.

Food is nothing but water and air. In other words, food is ultimately analyzable in terms of, and reducible to, water and air.

Q Yes, that is a good analysis. What of water and air?

A As I had said earlier, air is reducible to water. So water is primary.

Q How would you compare God and water? Which is primary?

A No! that is not a good question. How can one compare God and water? One cannot compare the creator and the created.

9.4 **Nashon Oduor**

Nashon Oduor was born in Bonde Village, South Ugenya location in Siaya district, in the year 1929. His father saw no need of formal education and therefore never sent his children to school. Nashon Oduor learnt how to read and write on his own. He was baptised in 1944. In 1950 he joined the army but left in 1952, in the same year he married his first wife. In December of the same year he joined the prisons, he retired in 1986. He is now concentrating on his farm.

Q Today women are fighting for equality. They want to be accorded the same status and opportunities as men. What is your opinion on this issue?

A The women are fighting a battle they cannot win. No individual in his proper and sane senses can accord women equal status and opportunities to men. Women are naturally inferior to men both in physical and mental strength.

Q But in reality some women are cleverer than men, and even physically stronger. Isn't it?

A Yes, that is true. But only a handful. On the whole men are physically and mentally superior. When one comes across a case where a woman is physically or mentally stronger, or a family where the woman has the upper hand, this is usually taken to

be an odd case. Such a woman or family is considered to be outside the normal, that's the truth. It may be a bitter truth to the women of today, but it is nevertheless the truth.

Take university professors as an example. University professors are respected, but more often than not female university professors are more respected. This is because they have excelled in areas that men are supposed to.

Q But there could be cases where female university professors are hated?

A In such a case you will find that they are mostly hated by men, especially those who have not attained such a position. The feeling of such men would be that those women are where they are not supposed to be. This is an indicator of the inequality of sexes.

If you are stronger (physically) than a woman we would not praise you for that, but if a woman is physically stronger than you then she would have people's praise. In the first case no one would praise you because that is the normal state of affairs, but in the second case the woman would be praised because it is not normal. It is a special case. Ordinarily a car moves faster than a bicycle, but if one comes across a case where a bicycle moved faster than a car, that would be extra-ordinary. Men are cars and women are bicycles.

Q Aren't we all equal in the eyes of God? You told me that you are a Christian.

A Yes, I am a Christian, I was converted into the religion in 1944. In the eyes of God it is true that we are all equal, men and women, the young and the old, Europeans and Africans. What this means is that God treats us equally.

Q Doesn't it therefore mean that we are equal?

A No, to treat people equally is not the same as saying that they are equal. As a parent, I treat my sons and daughters equally, precisely because they are all my children. But as individuals I recognise the fact that they are not equal. So, as human beings we are equal, but as men and women we are not. In fact, in the Holy Bible, there is a recognition that men and women are not equal. The man is superior and the woman is advised to be submissive. However, despite this we are equal in the eyes of God.

Q Now that we are on God, let me ask you this: Before the advent of Christianity did Luos believe in God?

A Yes, they believed in God. In reality the Luos worshipped the sun. Very early in the morning the head of the homestead would pray facing the direction where the sun

would rise requesting it to guide them in their day's activities (**Wang' chieng' iwuognwa maber to ipodhnwa maber**). They would also offer libations to the sun.

Q Was the Luo God, a God for all human beings?

A No, the Luos believed that was their God and other tribes also had their gods.

Q Do you think that was rational?

A It was not. God is Omnibenevolent and omnipresent, and therefore can only be one for all the people, irrespective of tribe and race. To divide God into various tribes and races is no longer talking of God. The Luos were mistaken, that is why I believe in Jehova God.

Q But there are other religions besides Christianity, that talk of God. The Moslems, for example, talk of Allah. Is Allah different from Jehova?

A If Allah has the attributes of Omnibenevolence and omnipresence, then Allah is another name of Jehova.

Q Why not Jehova another name of Allah?

R What's the difference?

Q God created the universe. What in your opinion did God create first? Or alternatively, what do you think is the primary and most important substance in the universe?

A That's a difficult question (Mzee Oduor paused to ponder the question and then answered) In the very beginning God created water and I believe he did this because he thought that water was the most important.

Q That may have been God's thought, what about yours?

A If it was God's thought why do you need my opinion. God is omniscient.

Q O.K., let's take it that water is the primary substance, what reasons can you, as a mzee whom people in the locality respect as a wiseman, give to support that position that water is the primary substance without relapsing to God?

A You see, all living things need water. You often see and experience what happens when there is drought, famine follows. Plants need water, human beings need water, animals need water, even vehicles use water. Try to imagine a world without water. How would it be?

R To say the least, dreadful

R That's why water is important

Q Yes, I see your point, but isn't it also true that besides water, there are several other things that human beings need?

A True.

Q What are they? Let's list them.

A Food and Air.

Q Shelter and clothing as well, isn't it?

A Yes, but those are not so important

Q Why do you say that?

A Our ancestors used to live in caves and covered themselves with hides.

Q But that falls under shelter and clothing. Anyway, let's not bother ourselves with that. Now that you mentioned food and air. Of the three, that is water, food and air, which is the most important?

A (Mzee Oduor does not answer immediately, there is a pause, then comes the answer) All these three are important. But I think that the most important is air.

Q Air and not water, why?

A Assume that all foods in the universe were destroyed at once, people would still nevertheless survive for a while before they perish, and similarly if all waters become dry we would still stay alive for a while. Now, imagine what would happen if air became non-existent; all living things would die instantly.

Q I see your argument. However a certain mzee who lives in this very locality told me that according to him, water and not air is the primary substance. His argument being that air is reducible to water, that water is a mixture of air but not the vice versa. What do you have to say to that?

A That mzee was right but he was also not right.

Q Can you explain what you mean?

A That air is reducible to water is correct, but that the *vice versa* is not the case is not true. Water is also reducible to air. The two are reducible to each other. During very cold mornings, one finds water on grass and on leaves of plants; water is condensed air. On the other hand, when water is boiled to a certain temperature it turns into vapour. In truth water and air are similar.

Q Mzee, can you please clarify one issue. At first you said that water is the primary substance in the sense that God created it first. Then you have also reasoned that air is primary in that in its absence living things die immediately. Now, which is the primary substance?

A Air is the primary substance

Q But God created water first!

A Wait a minute...in the book of Genesis, it is true that we are told that God created water first but nowhere are we told that God created air despite the fact that he went on to create light on the first day, sky on the second, plants on the third, sun and moon on the fourth, sea creatures and birds on the fifth and, human beings and animals on the sixth. This therefore implies that prior to the creation of all these things, there was air, so air must be the primary substance.

9.5 **James Oluoch**

James Oluoch was born in Simuru sub-location, North Ugenya, Siaya district. He was born in 1918 and spent his childhood assisting in the grazing of cattle. He has no formal education, but speaks English fairly well which he learnt when he was working in the Kenya Police Force. He joined the Police Force in 1941 and left in 1950. During this period he worked in various Police Stations. He started by working at the police headquarters in Nairobi, he was then transferred to the Kenya Railway Police. Amongst the stations he worked included Railway Police (Mombasa) Mnazi Moja Police Station (Mombasa), Likoni Police Station (Mombasa), Kisumu Police Station and Sondu Police Post (Nyakach). Upon leaving the police Force in 1950, he became a fishmonger in his rural area, a job he did until the early 70's. He is now a peasant farmer. His marriage is blessed with 12 children, 6 deceased.

Q Tell me Mzee did the Luos traditionally, believe in a God?

A Indeed yes, they not only believed that there was a God, but they knew God.

Q What's the difference?

A One can believe that there is a God without necessarily having the knowledge and certainty of the God he believes in. Most people today merely believe that God exists.

Q O.K., what makes you say that Luos not only believed but knew God? What are your reasons?

A They knew the attributes of God, they knew his benevolence, potency and worth, in full confidence. They never doubted the help and knowledge God gave them. In knowledge there is confidence and trust, but in belief there is doubt, mistrust and uncertainty.

Q Is there a difference between the God the traditional Luo communities believed in (or rather, knew) and the christian God?

A No there is no difference.

Q But some people say that Luos used to worship the sun, but that's not what the Christians worship?

A Luos never at any point worshipped the sun, the sun was only a symbol for God, but it wasn't God. The basic difference between Christianity and traditional Luo religion was that the latter had so many taboos as opposed to the former, which were adhered to strictly and rigorously. God however, is one for all people.

Q I see, now tell me about men and women. Do you think that they are equal or not?

A The two are not equal.

Q Which is superior?

A It is common knowledge that men are superior to women.

R Well, it may not be so common to some.

R I know, but such individuals are simply misguided

Q What are your reasons for asserting this inequality?

A In the family, the man is always the head, the woman acts as his deputy. The reason being that man excels in a lot more areas than the woman. The man is generally physically stronger, mentally more alert, emotionally stronger. How then can the woman claim equality leave alone superiority.

Q You know the late Mzee Paul Mbuya?

A Yes

Q He is noted to have argued that men and women are equal. He argued that though men have the physical capacity to run faster than women, women on the other hand have the physical capacity of undergoing the pains of bearing a child, a quality which men lack. Hence, Mbuya's position is that to use physical strength to prove man's superiority is not appropriate. What do you have to say to this?

A That men have the capacity to run faster and women the capacity to undergo child bearing, is a correct observation and no one would doubt that. But however, to assert equality of sexes on the basis of that observation is not correct. Men never give birth, indeed they can never give birth. Nature has not offered them with that opportunity, hence it is not fair to assert man's inferiority or woman's equality on that basis. The correct equation would be an instance where man is also offered with that opportunity but the woman does a better job.

Q So you affirm that man is superior

A Yes

Q Let's look at it this way. Do you think that some women are stronger than men physically, mentally and emotionally?

A Yes, that is true.

Q Doesn't it follow then that to assert that men are superior to women is false?

A No, it doesn't

Q Please explain?

A You see when a particular woman happens to be superior to most men, that is taken to be something extra-ordinary. This in itself shows that this is not the normal state of affairs.

Q Today most women are fighting for equality, they would not subscribe to your point of view. Do you know the reasons they advance in their struggle for equality?

A I have never understood them. But what I can say is that what has encouraged this point of view is education and employment. Because of their education and employment they feel equal to men. But to feel equal is not the same as being equal. Because of education and employment, some women have become self reliant and

consequently they see no need for having a husband. The struggle for equality by women is actually an expression of freedom.

Q What do you mean?

A All that the women want is more freedom but not equality to men. A son may rebel against the father because he (the son) wants more freedom, but not that he wants to be equal to the father: indeed they cannot be equal.

Q So you daughters are inferior to your sons?

A Yes, but I sense some cynicism in your question, so let's be clear on some issue here. To say that women are inferior is not to mean that we (men) are better than them. No! in fact, women play some very crucial and fundamental roles in society. We need them just as much as they need us. The Presidency is superior to the citizenry, but nevertheless both the president and the citizens are equally important in the nation.

Q Now mzee, let's move on to another issue. When you look at the universe, what do you think was created first or rather, what to you is the most important substance in the universe?

A My son, your question is not clear, something may be created first but it need not be the most important thing.

Q But it could. Anyway let's not combine the two. Let's start with the first one. What do you think was created first?

A I don't know! It is difficult to tell.

Q You are a christian, isn't it?

A Yes

Q According to christian doctrines, what did God create first?

A In the Bible, one reads that water was there first

Q O.K., fine. Let's move on to the second question. Do you think water is the most important substance in the universe?

A Water is very important, but you seem to emphasize on the "most important" a lot, why?

Q I don't know how to answer you. But let me tell you this. Some people think that water is the most important, others that it is air, yet others that it is fire. What would be your comment?

A The first thing, I'll say is that all those three things are important.

Q Why?

A Because we depend heavily on all of them for survival, we need water to drink, to cook and to bathe. We need fire to cook and keep us warm.

R O.K. proceed on.

A But to single out one of them as the most important is not appropriate. This is as absurd as asking whether it is water or light that is the most important in the growth of plants. In principle both are important.

Q Mzee, let's go back to the question of the original substance, that is, the substance that was created first. You said that according to the Bible it is water. Isn't it?

A Yes.

Q Now, try not to bring God into the picture. O.K?

A Yes.

Q Do you think that in such a situation water would be the original substance?

(Mzee Oluoch does not answer, he seems to be in deep thought I then rephrase the question).

Q Do you think in such a situation fire would be the original substance?

A In such a situation fire can not to be original substance.

Q Why?

A Fire burns, it destroys, how would other substances come into being then?

Q I don't know. Now, would water then be the original substance?

A No. How would fire come into being. Water puts off fire

Q Would the original substance be air?

A Even here it would be difficult to conceptualise how other things (different from air) would emanate from it. In the absence of God, talking of the original substance would be absurd. This is a way of proving God's existence.

9.6 Eliud Onyango

Eliud Onyango was born in 1913 in Sikinga Village in Siaya district. For his primary [sector] education, he went to a school in Kisumu. After his primary education he proceeded to Maseno for his secondary education. MZEE Eliud Onyango was a student who passed all his examinations with flying colours. Upon completion of his education at Maseno, he joined the teaching staff of the same school where he taught for two years. Among his teaching colleagues at Maseno was Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. From Maseno, MZEE Onyango was transferred to Nairobi and he taught at Nairobi Boys School and at Kahuthia Secondary School in Waithaka location. When the second world war broke, he was drafted into the army as a regular soldier. He left the army in 1948, and joined land survey as a Land Executive Officer, a job he held until 1956. He is an acknowledged wise man and people in the village recognise his high intellectual capability.

Q MZEE there are some things that I would like to discuss with you. These issues have been problematic even at the university and a lot of researches are going on to resolve these issues, this one being one of the researches. These issues revolve round

the question of God and change in the universe. Let's start with God. Did the traditional Luo communities believe in the existence of God?

A Before I answer that question, allow me to tell you something about the Luo. Let's be clear on who they are.

R All right

R Luos are Nilotes. They are so-called because they followed the river Nile from Sudan right up to Uganda. When they reached Uganda they settled there for quite some time. While in Uganda they stayed and mingled with the Acholi, who are up to today closely related to the Luos both in terms of language and culture. Because of hardships in Uganda, the Luo left and moved into Kenya, leaving behind the Acholi. They settled around mount Ramogi and later spread out to the adjacent areas. The areas they occupied largely covers the Nyanza Province of Kenya. The Luos were largely farmers and fisherman and as a result they never desired to settle far away from the lake. As they grew in numbers, there was need to enlarge their territories and this brought them in conflict with other ethnic groups, notably the Kipsigis and the Luhyas. However, they lived harmoniously with the Banyala (a luhya sub-ethnic group). Because of the co-existence, the Luos and the Banyala have similar customs and cultures. The Luos in Ugenya came from Alego from a place called Malaha. Their settlement in the place was not peaceful. They had to fight with and chase away the Marachi who previously occupied the place.

Q Now about God, did the Luos believe in the existence of God?

A Yes, they did, I am yet to come across a community that does not believe in God.

Q Is there a difference between the God Luos believed in and the Christian God?

A No, there is no difference.

Q You can recall that when Christian missionaries came to Africa, they labelled us all sorts of names. They called us pagans, heathens etc. did this show that the God we were worshipping was different from theirs?

A No, I don't think so. God is and can only be one. What differs is the manner of worship. The difference between christianity and traditional African religions lies in the manner of worship, it is not a reflection of different Gods. Two or more people may want to travel to Nairobi, they could all take different routes some of which may not lead to Nairobi, yet others may. The difference is in routes taken, the destination is the same, whether they get there or not.

Q Yes, your analogy is quite convincing. However, some people say that the Luos believed that the sun was God. Is it the christian belief as well?

A No, it is not the christian belief and it is not the Luo belief either. I have also come across some individuals who say that the Luos believed in the sun as their God. But such individuals are wrong. Luos did not believe that the sun was God, though they worshipped it. In fact, besides the sun they worshipped the moon and different types of large snakes. They regarded these things as divine and idolised them and that was all. They never saw these things as God. Take the **Omieri** case. **Omieri** was a large snake which the Luo people of Nyakach honoured in their religious rites. The Nyakach people believed that Omieri was the go-between them and God and that's why they resisted the government's efforts to have it transferred to Nairobi museum's snake park for treatment and safe keeping when it was wounded. My son, if you believe that that book is the intermediary between you and God, wouldn't you resist any attempts to dispossess it off you?

R Certainly

R But the point is that, that book is not God.

Q I see. So there is no difference between the Luo God and the Christian one?

A None. The Luos believed that God was a spirit and could not be seen. Isn't that what christians say too?

Q Yes, now let's make a shift. You are now 80 years old. Would you say that you are the same person you were say 70 years ago or are you different?

A Both

Q What do you mean, can you explain?

A I am the same person, Eliud Onyango but I have also undergone a lot of change.

Q So you are saying that you are the same person and not the same person at the same time?

A What I mean is that whereas there is something in me that has not changed, there are others that have changed. That there is something in me that has not changed is why I am referred to as Eliud Onyango, but that there are other things that have changed in me is the reason why somebody who saw me 75 years ago may not recognize me now.

Q Isn't it possible that those who saw you several years ago may not recognise you because of their poor memory, not because you have changed?

A Yes, that is possible, some people at times do not recognise things because of their poor memory, despite the fact that the things themselves have not changed. That is a reality. But it is also true that some people do not recognise some things because the things have changed, not because of poor memory.

Q Can you tell me exactly what it is in you that has not changed?

A I cannot exactly say what it is, that is a difficult task. But it is obvious that something in me has not changed. Things change but despite this, people can still recognise them. If everything in everything changed, the question of recognition and knowledge would not arise, and that is absurd.

Q Is it possible that the only thing that has not changed about you is your name?

A Yes, it is true that my name has not changed. But that is not the only thing that has not changed about me. Even if my name has changed, I would still be the same person. I cannot say exactly what it is that has not changed. That thing whatever it is must be metaphysical.

Q Mzee, you have said that if everything in everything changed talking of knowledge would be absurd. Now what if everything in everything did not change what would be the consequence?

A There would be no change

Q Yes, but what would be the consequence, in other words, do you think that things do not change?

A No! things change

Q All things?

A Yes. There are things that seem not to change. But this is so because the change in them is slow in relation to the life span of man. Take for example a tortoise. Some tortoises that were in existence when you were born, would seem to you not to have changed. But the truth is that they have changed. It is only that, given that the life span of tortoises is much longer than ours, together with the fact that change in them (tortoises) is much slower than in us, we do not readily notice the change in them.

Q There are some individuals who hold that everything changes and permanence is not a reality, on the other hand there are those who argue that change is not a reality, that things do not change. What can you say?

A Both groups are wrong. The truth is that both Change and Permanence are realities. Of a particular substance, there are those things in it that change and those that do

not change. Now, if the latter outweighs the former then one is able to recognise the substance easily, **but** if the former out weighs the latter one is not able to recognise the substance **with** ease.

Q So, in you as a person which one outweighs the other?

A It all depends. For a boy say of 10 years the Permanence in me outweighs the Change but to my contemporaries or those older the Change outweighs the Permanence

Q Mzee let's try to summarize your view. You are saying that Change and Permanence strictly speaking applies to attributes of substance, but not to the substance as such. So that when one says that a substance has changed or not changed, this should be seen in the light of the Change and Permanence of its attributes. Such that a substance would be said to have changed if the Change in its attributes outweigh the Permanence, and it would be said not to have changed if the Permanence of the attributes outweigh the Change. Is that a correct summary?

A Yes, it is

Q One last question, Is it possible for all attributes of a substance to change?

not change. Now, if the latter outweighs the former then one is able to recognise the substance easily, but if the former outweighs the latter one is not able to recognise the substance with ease.

Q So, in you as a person which one outweighs the other?

A It all depends. For a boy say of 10 years the Permanence in me outweighs the Change but to my contemporaries or those older the Change outweighs the Permanence

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A Yes, it is

Q One last question, Is it possible for all attributes of a substance to change?

A Some change while others do not

Q It follows therefore that according to your view, all substances change; no substance remains permanent.

A That is correct.

9.7 Rose Odhiambo

Rose Odhiambo was born in 1944 in Bonde village, in South Ugenya Location, Siaya District. She attended Miyare Primary School. In 1954 she sat and passed class 4 examinations but could not proceed to class 5 due to lack of school fees. In 1955 she taught at the same school. She got married in April 1956 and gave birth to four children in 1957, 1958, 1960 and 1961 respectively. In 1966 when the children were old enough, she went back to school in class 7 to continue her studies. She passed here examinations and joined form one at Ramogi College, Kisumu. In 1970, she sat and passed the E.A.C.E. examination

As Rose Odhiambo was busy preparing herself for the E.A.C.E. examination, her children were closely behind her. Her first born was in form one, second born in standard six, third born in standard five and last born in standard three. Rose Odhiambo could not proceed on with her education because of pressing financial problems within the family. She took a nine month secretarial course at Kianda

College (Nairobi) in 1971 and later in the year was employed in the Office of the President (Nairobi). In 1975 she attended a shorthand course. Today she is a personal secretary in the Ministry of Public Works (Nakuru).

Q Can you tell me something about life in traditional Luo communities?

A The traditional communities were largely communal. Work was done on collective basis. People loved each other and as a result it was difficult to distinguish a rich person from a poor one. Those who **had** willingly shared with those who **had not**. Personal problems and issues were given concerted effort. Birth, marriage and death were therefore collective affairs in which every member of the community was involved in, in one way or another.

Q Let's look at marriage. What can you say about marriage?

A What do you want to know about marriage?

R Anything. Anything different from what we know of marriage today

A Marriage was polygamous and he who had only one wife could not be elected to any leadership position. One who had only one wife was seen as someone who was dominated over by the wife. Whenever such a person attended beer parties he would sit near the door. The women were allowed to attend beer parties, but they

would sit on the floor and the men on stools. The women were not free to drink. They would only drink after the men had had enough.

Thereafter they (the women) would start singing and each man would praise himself (**pakruok**). Women would praise their men too.

Q Was a woman free to praise any man?

A Yes. But in most cases they would praise their brothers-in-law, not their husbands

Q That is interesting. Why was that so?

A In the traditional set-up, wives really respected their brothers-in-law. They channelled all their energies in trying to please them (brothers-in-law). This was so because the in-laws played an important role in their lives. For example, if a wife happened to be disrespectful (even to her husband), it was the duty of her in-laws to discipline her, not the husband. A good wife was seen in terms of her relationship with the in-laws and hardly the husband. This is unlike today, where the wives are concerned and interested only in their husbands and children.

Q Now, tell me about the process of marriage in traditional societies?

A When a boy attained the age of marriage, it was the duty of the elders of his village to look for a suitable girl for him to marry. In identifying the suitable girl, the elders would always scrutinise and assess the background of the girl's family. After identifying the girl the elders of the boy would approach those of the girl. If both the elders agreed, negotiations would begin. The girl would be called and asked if she accepted to marry the boy, the mother's consent would also be sought. However, it was the mother's consent that was paramount. Even if the girl accepted but the mother refused then the negotiations would end there (**Kend Okethore**)

Q What if the girl refused but the mother accepted, what would happen?

A That was not possible. For if the girl refused then there would be no need to proceed on and ask for the mother's view.

Q Were there several instances where the girl accepted but the mother refused?

A Yes, though not so many. In such a situation, if the boy and his clansmen happened to like the girl so much they would not give up. The boy would approach the girl. If he managed to seduce her then, the boy and his people would sneak her to their place (**Nyako Opor gi wuoi**)

Q What would be the reaction of the girl's parents in such a case?

A Of course they would be angered, but with time they would have to accept it.

Q Assuming that both the girl and the mother accepted, would the boy go with the girl to his place as his wife?

A No, not on that day. The boy and his people would arrange amongst themselves for another day that they would take the girl.

R I am told that this was usually violent. The girl would not willingly walk with them to their place. She would resist and they would drag her.

R Yes.

Q Why?

A In man-woman relationship, it is the man who is supposed to be outgoing not the woman. A woman who says 'yes' to a proposal was considered to be cheap and of loose morals. Even when she liked a certain boy she was not supposed to show it openly. This is unlike the girls of today who are too bold as to even make proposals.

Q But you have just said that before marriage the girl's acceptance was sought?

R Yes, but even then the girl would not say 'yes I would like to marry the boy'. She would be euphemistic by saying something like, 'To that proposal of marriage, I don't see any difficulty.'

Q Was divorce common in traditional Luo communities?

A It was a very rare phenomenon

Q Why do you think that divorce rate is higher in modern societies than in the traditional ones? Or conversely, why do you think that divorce rate was lower in traditional communities?

A Today love is what propels people into marriage. Couples marry because they love each other. In traditional communities this was not the case. A man married because he was ready for it, and a lady got married because there was someone asking for her hand in marriage. Couples therefore married because of trust and not love.

Q Do you mean to say that marriage based on trust would last longer than the one based on love?

A Yes.

Q Can you explain?

A Love never lasts. You ask any old couple and they'll confirm my view. The other thing is that love has ceased to be spiritual, it is material. So a lady would want you to marry her because of your material wealth or physical built. Once these dwindle or change for the worse, you don't expect such a lady to cling to the marriage.

Q Now, tell me something on Change and Permanence. Do you think that things change or do they not?

A Both of them are realities

Q Yes, but which one do you think outweigh the other?

A It is difficult to give a straight answer to that question. Whereas in some things Change outweighs Permanence, in others it is the other way round.

Q Can you explain? In you, for example, which one has outweighed the other?

A In me, I think that Change has outweighed Permanence. Someone who saw me when I was 3 or 4 years old and then never saw me until today, would definitely not recognise me as the same person.

Q But to be honest and fair, would you be the same person to such an individual?

A I may not appear to be the same person to such an individual, but that does not mean that I am different. All that it means is that because of the long period of time, and the tremendous amount of change that has taken place in me, he is unable to recognise me. But his being unable to recognise me does not mean that I am a different person altogether. I am still the same person.

Q Can you give an instance of something in which the Permanence outweighs Change?

A Take, for example that tape recorder that you are using. Even after 100 years it would more-or-less be the same, unless someone interferes with it.

Q I see your point. There are however some people who think that only Change is a reality, and others who hold that it is only Permanence which is a reality. What do you have to say to the two positions?

A They are both wrong. If Change was the only reality how would one ever know anything. If I was ever-changing then at no point would I ever be myself.

Knowledge of something assumes that that thing has some inherent characteristics that make it what it is and nothing else. It is difficult to conceptualise a world where everything was changing. Such a position is obviously false.

Q What of the other position that holds that Permanence is the sole reality?

A That position is also not right. Things change that is a fact. If things do not change then I would be the same four year old girl that I was several years ago. In fact I would not even be that, I would still be a foetus in my mother's womb. In fact I would not even be that, I would be something prior to the formation of the foetus. And that is absurd. If Permanence was the sole reality, it would be difficult to explain how things came into being.

9.8 Concluding Remarks

Those then are the thoughts of the five sages that were interviewed. Their thoughts are quite diverse and in some cases contradict one another. At this juncture it would not be prudent to make a conclusion regarding the philosophical import in them.

That is an exercise that will be done in the next chapter. Despite that however, for the time being, one cannot fail to see and appreciate the philosophical significance of their views and the coherent reasoning involved.

Notes

1. H. Odera Oruka, **Sage Philosophy** (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991) Preface.
 2. See **Vide Supra**, pp 177 - 179
 3. D.A. Masolo, **African Philosophy in Search of Identity** (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995) p. 240
 4. H. Odera Oruka, **op.cit.**, pp. 57.
 5. P. O. Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy" **Philosophy: The journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy**, Renford Bambrough, ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). p. 170.
 6. D.A. Masolo, **op.cit.**, p. 245.
 7. H. Odera Oruka, **op.cit.** p.2.
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8. See for example W.K. Guthrie, **A History of Greek Philosophy** Vol.1 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), and G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, **The Presocratic Philosophers** (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969)
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CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

...all that follows is that we should also give room for the idea of modern African philosophy which needs not be regarded as foreign or inauthentic...some professional philosophers have persisted in the denial of the very idea of traditional philosophy even in the modified sense of philosophical reflections of traditional Africans on their cultural experience.¹

10.1 Philosophic Sagacity: A Rationale

This thesis amongst other things has analysed and evaluated what it considers to be the three major trends in African philosophy. Prior to that analysis, it had shown that philosophy as an academic discipline is not restricted in terms of its subject-matter, unlike other disciplines of study. It has also underscored the role of philosophy in human enquiry and enunciated some basic characteristics of philosophical problems and emphasised the role of logic within philosophy.

The work has also formulated and discussed the conventional European conception of the African mentality as explicated in some of the works of G.W.F. Hegel, L. Levy-Bruhl and Diedrich Westermann amongst others. The conclusion has been that this conception of the African mentality is misguided and consequently unwarranted. This has been done from two standpoints. One, the position has been found to be untenable from a purely logical and conceptual angle.² Two, it has been

shown to be intellectual archaic in the face of tremendous amount of research and literature pointing to the contrary.³ The second approach is restricted and is complemented by the first. Whereas the second approach is limited to Africa of antiquity, the first approach goes beyond that. It transgresses into modern traditional Africa.

The thesis has then gone on to explicate and analyze the views of those scholars who argued for the existence of African philosophy. In the very first place, the views of ethnophilosophers are presented. It is then argued that though the reactions of these scholars to the conventional European conception of the African mentality was a move in the right direction, it was not in itself adequate. The implication in their views was that the African and European thought systems were significantly and diametrically different. And that the latter was of a superior quality.⁴ The propounders and exponents of ethnophilosophy were, strictly speaking, neither concerned nor interested in showing that the African mental disposition and rational faculty was equal to that of the European. Though *Prima facie* they gave that impression. Indeed, they were not even bothered with the comparison. Theirs was simple and straightforward; they wanted to study and understand the African mentality, for they thought and believed that this would be useful in the European's mission of evangelising and civilising the African. Consequently what they (the ethnophilosophers) qualified as African philosophy was merely an African world-view; a *weltanschauung*. Therefore, on the debate regarding the existence and nature of African philosophy, ethnophilosophy is a non-starter. It merely adds salt

to injury. Indeed, some of the tenets and assumptions of ethnophilosophy do not comply to the basic principles and suppositions of philosophy as explicated and discussed in chapter two.

It is against this shortcoming and background that the professional philosophy as a trend in African philosophy emerged and is appreciable. This trend refutes ethnophilosophy and its paraphernalia. This trend has an edge over ethnophilosophy in that it is not discriminative. According to this trend the difference between African philosophy and Western philosophy has nothing to do with methodology. Proponents of this school hold that philosophy whether African or Western, should satisfy some basic criteria. Professional philosophy in as far as the definition of philosophy goes, holds a universalist thesis, as opposed to ethnophilosophy which holds a particularist position. However, one major drawback with the professional school is that it limits itself to modern Africa. Therefore, in the debate on the existence and nature of philosophy in traditional Africa, the professional school would not be useful.

Here then lies the rationale and importance of philosophic sagacity. Like the professional school, philosophic sagacity is not discriminatory. It upholds the universalist thesis.

10.2 Universalism and Particularism

This section was originally intended to appear at the end of chapter six, but as an afterthought it was deemed fitting for it to be inserted in this chapter. The reason being that had it been at the end of chapter six it would have precluded the school of philosophic sagacity, yet much of what is going to be said necessarily includes it.

From the analysis presented regarding the question of the nature of African philosophy, Jay M. Van Hook observes that the central point at issue may be put in the form of a couple of questions.

First: Is philosophy the product of a universal human reason or is every philosophy in some significant way an expression of the culture which produces it? And a different but closely related question: Are logic, rationality, and argumentation intrinsic and even necessary characteristics of anything which claims to be philosophy, or are these just peculiar to Western philosophy and thus not normative for African philosophy?⁵

Besides the three major trends in African philosophy that the thesis has discussed, one may delineate two schools within the controversy; universalism and particularism. The universalist position contends that philosophy has some basic characteristics and features that are irreducible. For a thought, whether an individual's or conceived as a system, or a belief to be regarded as philosophical, it must possess and be engrained in the these basic characteristics regardless of where and when it is practised. The specific issues at the centre of attention may vary from

place to place, or from time to time, but the methodology and activity of philosophy is essentially and inescapably the same, these features and characteristics transcend the categories of time and place.

The particularist position, on the other hand, regard and see philosophy as an expression of the problems and proposed solutions of a people within a specific historical and cultural context. Since problems and their proposed solutions differ from place to place, and from time to time, it follows that philosophy is determined by historical and cultural contexts and as a result philosophy is not universal but particular, or as others would put it relative. Accordingly therefore, the particularist school would hold that African philosophy is free to develop its own methodology.

Ethnophilosophy holds a particularist view of philosophy, whereas professional philosophy and philosophic sagacity, by contrast hinges on the universalist thesis. Ethnophilosophy as shown in chapter five, argue that African thought is collective and participatory as opposed to Western or Greek thought which is individual and analytic. Tempels and his henchmen Mbiti, Horton and Ruch are and must therefore be referred to as particularists. On the other hand, professional philosophy and philosophic sagacity, as shown in chapters six and seven respectively, advance the position that philosophy whether African, Eastern or Western must be engrafted by logic, rationality and argumentation. These are basic and irreducible characteristics of philosophy. In other words, for these two schools for anything to fall under philosophy, it necessarily must have these basic characteristics

irrespective of the historical and culture contexts, or time and place. Hountondji, Wiredu, Bodunrin and Odera Oruka given their views on African philosophy can be referred to as universalists.

The universalists accuse the particularist of doing disservice to African philosophy by denying it logic and reason, and dressing it in myths, magic and extra-rational traditionalism.⁶ The universalists rightly believe that by so-doing the particularists are:

...settling for an inferior and idiosyncratic conception of philosophy which lacks the intellectual rigor of Western professional philosophy and thereby virtually guarantees its own marginalisation in the world market.⁷

Interestingly on the other end of the scale, the particularists also accuse the universalists of doing disservice to African philosophy because of their (universalist) ape-manship. They argue and accuse the universalists of allowing the West dictate the rules and agenda of philosophical enterprise, thus playing the game as their oppressors would have and want it played and by the very token guaranteeing its irrelevance to the issues, problems and struggles of Africans. Some particularists further argue that what their universalist opponents are claiming to be universal is really essentially another particular, a particular emanating from the historical and cultural context of the West. Thus, for instance, Outlaw rejects the claim that African philosophy has to be rational and argues that the concept of rationality itself as used in philosophy is a product of Western culture.⁸

The particularist seems to have a point worth pursuing. In some fairness, philosophy is an English word that expresses a Western or Greek concept; a problem could thus arise in applying or ascribing it to thought systems outside the sphere of the West. All such ascriptions are comparative, there are the thought systems in Africa on one hand, and there is the Western concept of philosophy on the other - to what extent is one like the other? At this juncture, the questions one may want to ask are: Why should such a comparison be made? In making such a comparison what is one trying to achieve or prove? The implications of such questions, the particularist would argue, is such that the questions are honorific and value-laden

If we insist on making this comparison are we not implying that if a culture has something which is like what is called philosophy in the West, then that is a mark of superiority, and if not, not? But why assume Western criteria for non-western cultures.⁹

The particularists are against such a comparison, it is to them an unfair and unwarranted comparison. They do not see any rational grounds for assuming Western criteria for non-western cultures.

However, it should be started that the particularist's objection to universalism of philosophy in the history and development of African philosophy is not fitting and is uncalled for. What Hegel and Levy-Bruhl denied the African people was philosophy in the technical usage of the term. They believed that the Africans had not risen to the level where they were capable of rigorous and dialectical inquiry. In

other words, what they denied the Africans was the universalist aspect of philosophy. In the particularist language one may say that, they (the universalists) were using Western criteria to deny philosophy to the Africans. Here one may want to ask; how else could the Hegelian/Levy-Bruhlian position be prove otherwise? From a purely logical and analytic angle, the only reasonable way in which the position could be shown to be untenable and absurd, was by grasping their argument by the horns, not evading or going between the horns. This is precisely what the universalists did.

It therefore follows that in order to rebut the position of the conventional European conception of the African mentality, it is logically imperative that one also uses philosophy in the very sense that they were using it. Any attempt to refute their position using the word philosophy in a different sense is not fitting. At any rate, it would not constitute a refutation. It is largely because of the different use of the term philosophy by the particularists that the debate on the nature of African philosophy has been prolonged and persisted to the present day.

Gene Blocker has observed, quite correctly, the dangers of changing the meanings of words. It is true that people create language and can change it. Despite this fact however, the history of philosophy shows quite clearly the dangers confronting any alteration in the meaning of a well-established concept. Basically the problem is that sooner or later the old, rejected meaning re-enters the discussion through the back-door and its clash with the newly constituted definition leads to a tautology or

contradiction. When Tempels addresses himself to the question of African philosophy, he conceives philosophy to mean any belief pattern of any group of people. In this sense it is analytically true that every belief pattern of any group of people is a philosophy of that group. But if that is analytically true then the question: 'Is African thought philosophy?' is nonsense -it must be and cannot be anything else. Similarly, a denial of the African thought being philosophical is nonsense - it would be a contradiction. But this misses the force of the question. It seems to be in response to this problem that universalists would, for example, ask: "Is African philosophy, philosophy?". The word philosophy in the second place means philosophy in the sense of a systematic, critical, reflective tradition appealing to reason¹⁰

From what has been said above, it follows that in the debate regarding the question and nature of African philosophy, philosophy must be used in the universalist sense. There should not be a shift in the meaning of the term. Since the conventional European conception of the African mentality used philosophy in the universalist sense, any meaningful rebut to their position must also use philosophy in the same sense.

Having rationalised on philosophic sagacity on the basis of universalism, and also having given some paradigm cases of it (in the previous chapter), the next section will be devoted to making some commentaries regarding philosophic sagacity and ancient Greek thought.

10.3 Comments on Philosophic Sagacity and Ancient Greek Thought

The philosophic sages, as is evident in chapter nine, were interviewed on several issues and problems. But so as to make comparison of their (philosophic sages) views and those of pre-Socratics easier, they were also interviewed on those issues and problems that pre-Socratics are noted to have addressed themselves to. These include the issue of the primary substance and the question of Change and Permanence.

As to what the primary substance is, Naftali Ong'alo thinks that it is water. According to him this is so because everything in the universe is ultimately reducible to water. In his analysis, he identifies five basic human needs. These are water, air, food, shelter and clothing. He then goes on to argue that food, shelter and clothing are sustainable by or reducible to water and air. Between these two, he argues that water is primary. His reasoning being that air is but a constituent of water. On the primary substance Ong'alo concurs with Thales. What is important and worth noting is that during the encounter, Ong'alo exhibited a critical and independent bent of mind as is evidenced by the dialogue in the previous chapter.

On the question of God and the existence of evil, Ong'alo presents arguments which are not far from those presented by renowned scholars within philosophy of religion. His explanations are simple, clear and logical. His use of fitting analogies

to drive his point home is also evident. His discussion on the topic of death or more appropriately, on the question of life after death is terse enough. He disagrees with the common Luo belief of life after death by pointing to activities within the Luo set-up which contradict that belief and hence proving his position. In all sincerity and fairness, it would take too much effort for one to disqualify Ong'alo's thoughts as not being philosophical.¹¹

The next philosophic sage, Nashon Oduor starts by saying that the primary substance is also water. However, when his mental faculty is provoked and he engages it, he arrives at the conclusion that it is not water but actually air. This position is quite in line with that of the pre-Socratic Anaximenes and in contradiction to that of Ong'alo and Thales. Oduor's starting point is comparable to that of Ong'alo up to a certain point. He believes that the basic needs are water, air, food and to some extent clothing and shelter. Of the first three which he considers cardinal, that is, water, air and food, he argues that air is primary. His reasoning here is quite interesting and smacks of intelligence. Oduor disagrees with Ong'alo proposition that air is reducible to water but not the *vice versa*. His reasoning in opposition to the proposition is comparable to that of Anaximenes. Water is air condensed and water boiled to a certain temperature is air. The modern formulation of the law of rarefaction and condensation of air is based on this principle.

Besides the primary substance, Oduor addresses to the issue of equality of sexes and God. In both the cases he gives rationalised and coherent reasons as to why he

thinks that men are superior to women and why the traditional Luo conception of God was misguided. In the first case, Oduor is actually expressing the general Luo belief of man's superiority whereas in the second, his disagreement with the traditional Luo society's conception of God. However, in both the cases there is no doubt that Oduor is an independent thinker who exhibits critical and well thought-out premises for his conclusions.¹²

On the question of the primary substance James Oluoch was rather vague or better expressed, indefinite. He recognises that water, air and fire are all essential but restrains from singling out one of them as the most important. In fact, he brings it to the attention of his interviewer that the question of 'importance' and 'primary' substance should not be confused and used interchangeably. He goes on to argue that neither fire nor water nor air could have been the primary substance. If any of them happened to be the primary substance, then it would be difficult to conceptualise how other things which are in opposition to it would come into being. Without any need of going further one immediately realises that Oluoch's reasoning is not different from that of Anaximander, who held the view that the primary substance is indefinite and infinite - **apeiron**.¹³

On equality of sexes, Oluoch just like Oduor holds the common Luo view that men are superior. In fact his reasons for holding the position is somehow similar to that of Oduor. However, the interesting part of Oluoch's views are his reasons for disagreeing with Paul Mbuya and his rationalisation of 'equality of sexes'. For him,

women are struggling for a greater degree of freedom than that which they are currently accorded, and that is all. Equality of sexes is a natural impossibility. Whether Oluoch is right or wrong is another matter. What is important is that his reasoning belongs to a critical thinker.¹⁴

The last two philosophic sages Eliud Onyango and Rose Odhiambo both disagree with the positions of Heraclitus and Parmenides regarding the question of Change and Permanence. Heraclitus declared that change is the very nature of world-substance itself, the real is the changing whereas Parmenides believed that permanence is the reality or alternatively the real is permanent. Onyango and Odhiambo think that the two positions are excesses. Both Change and Permanence are realities.

Onyango gives the example of a human being to illustrate his position. However, he acknowledges that it is difficult to say what exactly it is that does not change in a human being. For him if Change was the only reality then knowledge would be impossible. Onyango's argument can be summarised as follows: Change and Permanence actually applies to attributes of substance. So when an individual says of a substance that it has changed, what this means is that the change in some of its attributes outweigh those that did not change. And when the permanence of the attributes significantly outweigh the change of attributes then the substance is said to have not changed. However, through discussion with the interviewer, Onyango

agrees that his (Onyango) reasoning leads to the conclusion that no substance ever remains permanent.¹⁵

It is important to note that Onyango begins by holding the common sense view that both change and permanence are realities. He gives good reasons to support that contention. However, through insightful and probing questions from the interviewer, his reasoning leads him to a position similar to that of Heraclitus.

Rose Odhiambo gives logical arguments in support of both Change and Permanence, or more accurately, she gives logical arguments to show that neither one of them is the sole reality. In her attempt to prove that change cannot be the sole reality, Odhiambo's reasoning is similar to that of Parmenides. She even invokes two of the three basic laws of thought; the principles of identity and excluded middle. The third law, the principle of contradiction is implied in her thought. Odhiambo's argument in favour of the existence of change can be paraphrased as follows: If permanence is the sole reality then this would mean that any substance at any point in time has characteristics which it had, has, and will forever have. So of herself, for example, she says that if permanence was the sole reality this would mean that at any given time (past, present or future) she has had, has and will always have the very same characteristics. This is an impossibility and therefore the position of permanence being the sole reality is absurd.¹⁶

Besides the question of Change and Permanence, Onyango and Odhiambo addressed themselves to the questions of God and marriage, respectively. Even in these cases, both exhibit acumen and give very incisive answers. Odhiambo's reasons for the increase in the divorce rate today is philosophically interesting.

10.4 Philosophic Sagacity: Concluding Remarks

This work has shown that philosophic sagacity is philosophical. The thoughts of the philosophic sages expressed in the previous chapter are not only a reflection of the basic characteristics of philosophy as formulated in chapter two, but are also comparable to some of the thoughts of the pre-Socratics formulated in chapter eight. It is an undeniable fact that scholars unanimously agree that ancient Greek thought is not only philosophy in the strict sense, but that it is the source and paradigm of all philosophy. This thesis has argued for and shown that some thoughts of African sages are comparable to and at par with, ancient Greek thought. The conclusion that follows should be obvious; that philosophic sagacity is also philosophy in the strict sense.

Some scholars are on record to have lamented that what has hindered the development of African philosophy is that philosophers have busied themselves on trying to define what African philosophy is (or is-not), rather than doing it. They have even gone to the extent of saying that courses on African philosophy in several universities discuss nothing other than the debate on the definition of African

philosophy. These are very serious allegations which need to be looked at carefully, though the latter criticism would only come from one who is innocent and ignorant of what African philosophy is all about.

One should appreciate the efforts of several scholars who have engaged themselves headlong in defining African philosophy. The historical and social circumstances (as explicated in chapter three) are what led to the heated debate on the question of African philosophy. Western or European philosophy was lucky in this regard in that it had no such precursor. There was no need therefore for a debate as to the definition of Western philosophy. Indeed, when one looks at the history of Western philosophy no such a debate ever took place. Scholars of Western Philosophy who are innocent of the historical circumstances that led to the debate should therefore not discredit the debate on the question and nature of African philosophy. The same reasoning also applies to courses on African philosophy. Any sober course on African philosophy cannot afford to ignore the question of definition and nature.

It is important that African philosophy should not be construed as being concerned with nothing other than issues related to the question of definition. Several scholars have been and are doing African philosophy. The amount of literature in this regard is tremendous, starting with Tempel's *Bantu philosophy*, Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*, Kagame's *La Philosophie Bantoue Rwandaise de L'etre*, Jahn's *Muntu*, Wiredu's *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Gbadegsin's *African Philosophy*, Odera Oruka's *Sage Philosophy*, Anyanywu's *African Philosophy*,

Hallen's Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft, Griaule's Conversations with Ogotemmeli, Gykye's The Akan Conceptual Scheme, Odera Oruka's Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs, amongst so many others.

Notes

1. Segun Gbadegesin, **African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities** (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 6-7
 2. **Vide supra.** pp. 59 - 68
 3. **ibid.**, pp 91 - 96
 4. **ibid.**, pp. 121 - 126
 5. Jay M. Van Hook, "African Philosophy: Its Quest for Identity", unpublished paper, North Western College Orange City, Iowa, pp. 5-6.
 6. See H. Odera Oruka, "African Philosophy: A Brief Personal History and Current Debate", **Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey** Vol. 5, ed. Guttorm Floistad (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic publishers, 1987), p. 66.
 7. Jay M. Van Hook, **op.cit.**, p. 6.
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8. Lucius Outlaw "African Philosophy: Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges". *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey* Vol. 5, ed. Guttorm Floistad, *op.cit*, pp.13,35.
9. Gene Blocker, "African Philosophy" *African Philosophical Inquiry*. Vol. 1, ed. G.S. Sogolo (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, January 1987) p.3.
10. See *ibid.*, pp.4-5.
11. *Vid supra*, pp. 218 - 228
12. *ibid.*, pp. 228 - 235
13. *ibid.*, pp. 197 - 200, pp 235 - 243
14. *ibid.*, pp. 237 - 240
15. *ibid.*, pp 247 251
16. *ibid.*, pp 257 -259

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