

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY... DOES IT EXIST?

Three main issues are of cardinal interest in this paper. The first issue relates to the canons of discourse—the parameters that inform and guide any discussion—in African philosophy. These canons are accepted in one form or the other by the philosophers who have actually formulated some of them and those who have devoted their academical careers to the promotion of the positive study of African philosophy.¹ Consequently this paper should be viewed in the same light as C.E.M. Joad's *A Critique of Logical Positivism* in which the "Great Tradition" in philosophy is classically expounded and defended against the onslaught of the philosophical exuberance and extraordinary claims of the logical positivists in the sense that it is a rejoinder to the attack on African philosophy by those who actually may want to be known as African logical neo-positivists.

¹ Some of the academicians I have in mind here are: Professor William Abraham; Professor Percy Johnston, editor, *Afro-American Journal of Philosophy*; Professor J.O. Sodipo, editor, *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy* and Vice-Chancellor of Ogun State University; Professor I. Onyewuanyi, editor, *Uche*; Professor Kwasi Wiredu—editor, *Universitas*; Dr. Barry Hallen; Dr. K.C. Anyanwu and Dr. Oluwole who are both editorial members of the *Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*.

The second issue concerns “the question of African philosophy.” Understandably this question has tendentiously agitated the minds of the logical neo-positivists in African philosophy.² I distinguish four senses of the “question” and show in each case that the logical neo-positivists have to look for other foundations on which to query the enterprise of African philosophy.

The third issue highlights the flaws—both logical and factual—in the positions of the logical neo-positivists. I agree that there may be subtle differences between the African logical neo-positivists but I insist that agreements between them, in spite of recent disclaimers, point in only one direction—the denial of the existence of African philosophy. But we accept this posture as legitimate because we view African philosophy, in the nature of philosophy *per se* or any other academic discipline, as a multi-mansioned edifice where scholars can occupy different compartments. We also view the posture as traditional and true to type. This is because, from the time the Vienna Circle met in 1922 through the Second World War years, philosophy as usually understood in the West was scathingly jeered at and vigorously denied by the logical positivists.

Of course, some of the factors accounting for the demise of logical positivism are well known. First there was the major recantation by Wittgenstein—one of the mentors to whom logical positivists traced their ancestry. Second there was the major renunciation by A.J. Ayer—a foundation member. Thirdly, P.F. Strawson lent his respected weight, in *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, to the resuscitation of metaphysics devoted to describing “the actual structure of our thought about the world.” After the publication of Strawson’s book, metaphysics, at least of the descriptive variety, became a respected discipline once more. Our concern then is that, a quarter of a century after forces internal and external to logical positivism have put paid to that movement, its African offsprings have continued to behave like the proverbial

² Frontline members of African logical neo-positivism are Peter O. Bodunrin, Henry O. Oruka, Paulin Hountondji and Robin Horton. The group would like to claim that Kwasi Wiredu is one of them but this is very doubtful and I do not now so count him. See P.O. Bodunrin, “The Question of African Philosophy” *Philosophy*, 56(1981), p. 163. I should also point out that Robin Horton has long denied that he is a logical positivist although he clearly was one when he first entered philosophy as a scientist.

deaf man who continues to parrot the only one word he ever managed to hear. It will seem that Africa is destined to lag behind even in the realm of ideas!

As I have already indicated there are now pretty clear and generally accepted canons to inform and guide any scholarly undertaking and understanding in African philosophy.³ The first canon is the one advanced by Professor Paul Radin and this is with specific reference to the study of "primitive" philosophies. Professor Radin correctly affirms that, contrary to the popular and traditional belief, there are in every human group individuals who, in the words of William James, "were constrained by their individual temperaments and interests to occupy themselves with the basic problems of what we customarily term philosophy."⁴ In traditional and ancient African societies, these were generally medicine men, priests, rulers, military leaders and sagacious elders whose position in the group corresponds roughly to the position occupied by the scholars and thinkers in modern societies. Members of this intellectual elite group in the traditional society, again, contrary to popular opinion, were not found to hold uniform views on the community's conception of science, metaphysics, social organization or morality. They were and they still are as individualistic in their views and actions as the modern scholar and thinker is within the bounds of a school of thought. Paul Radin's principle then is a guide to the effect that any scholar doing research in my area of ancient African philosophy should look out for members of the intellectual elite and he should not be surprised if they do not come up with uniform views on the same subject.

The second canon is the one formulated by Professor Gordon Hunnings, one time Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malawi, East Africa. In a paper read to the first conference of the Nigerian Philosophical Association organized by the Department of Philosophy, University of Lagos,⁵ but held at the University of Ife in

³ C.S. Momoh, "The Rationality of An African Religion", *Afro-American Journal of Philosophy* Vol. II, 1-2 (1983-84). Forthcoming.

⁴ Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, New York, Dover Publications, Inc. 1957, p. 17.

⁵ Credit for the idea leading to the formation of the Nigerian Philosophical Association goes to Dr. Barry Hallen, an American Philosopher who was then with the Department of Philosophy, University of Lagos.

March 1975, Professor Hunnings advised African philosophers to put synthesis before critical analysis. But if they cannot but do critical analysis as a result of their professional training, African philosophers should view critical analysis as a means to an end. That end, he says, should be synthesis. Hunnings drew the attention of African philosophers to Plato who did not confine himself to the devastation of Homeric religion. "In Plato," says Hunnings, "what began as criticism ended as synthesis."⁶ Hunnings continues: "This is where philosophy ceases to be a second-order activity, parasitic as it were on traditional culture, and becomes a first-order activity. It must not be supposed that Plato only attacked traditional culture; he attempted to preserve what was best in it. The educational theories of *The Republic*, which dominated the world for 1500 years, represent the life styles, value-systems and social forms of what Plato thought to be the best in Greek societies. African philosophers studying traditional culture will need to be practitioners of the skills of interior reconstruction, comparative criticism and synthesis."⁷

Professor Kwasi Wiredu later added his voice to reiterate this canon of synthesis in African philosophy. He confirms that the logical neo-positivists in African philosophy are doing what he calls "meta-African philosophy" but advises also that they should not just stop at that.⁸ Clearly the impression one gathers here is that African logical neo-positivists should also be concerned with systematic, synthetical and substantive philosophy.

The third guideline or principle of discourse in African philosophy is the one formulated by Professor Robin Horton. By this principle Professor Horton enjoins African philosophers to be more specific in their claims about the non-existence or existence of African philosophy.⁹

Horton seems to be reminding us that philosophy by and large is an umbrella word covering metaphysics, ethics, epistemology,

⁶ Gordon Hunnings, "Logic Language and Culture," *Second Order; An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, no 1 (1975), p. 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.12-13.

⁸ Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, London, Cambridge University Press 1980, p. XI.

⁹ C.S. Momoh "The 'Logic' Question in an African Philosophy" *Kiabara: Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 5, n. 2, (1983). Forthcoming.

logic and what is now known as infrastructural philosophy. Infrastructural philosophy or more appropriately, philosophy of the infrastructure of disciplines, critically examines the fundamental concepts, basic propositions and rival theories in any discipline, say history, and the relationship of that discipline to other areas of study. Instead of a blanket denial or assertion of the existence of African philosophy, Professor Horton, consequently, thinks it is more exact to talk of ethics or metaphysics or, as he did himself, of logic, epistemology or philosophy of traditional thought in African philosophy. Horton examines the “logic question” in African philosophy and denies its existence within that context.¹⁰ That denial notwithstanding, Horton added, in my view, an important dimension to the study of African philosophy. This dimension has so percolated the study of African philosophy that Professor Peter O. Bodunrin can talk positively of “the moral sphere” in African traditional culture while speaking negatively of African philosophy.¹¹ Of course Bodunrin’s paper would have been more illuminating if he had kept strictly to the Hortonian canon and asked those he called “ethno-philosophers” to show the nature of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology or logic in African philosophy instead of the general and nebulous contention that they have not shown what African philosophy is to the satisfaction of the logical neo-positivists.

The fourth guideline is the one advanced by Professor William Abraham in his book *The Mind of Africa*. There are two aspects to Professor Abraham’s guideline.¹² The first aspect is the distinction he drew between private and public aspects of African philosophy. The private aspect is intimately synonymous with Paul Radin’s notion of an intellectual elite group in a traditional society wherein it would be discovered that some elders hold individualistic and even critical views from what is generally believed to be the uniform world-view of the community. The public aspect of African philosophy is what it says: the world-view of the commun-

¹⁰ Robin Horton, “African Traditional Thought and the Emerging African Philosophy Department: A Comment on the Current Debate” *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. VII, n. 1, (1977), p. 64.

¹¹ Bodunrin, p. 179.

¹² W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 104.

ity which is public property, which is supposed to be known by every Tom, Dick and Harry in the community. Abraham's distinction between public (communal) and private (individual) aspects of African philosophy also closely parallels G. Dieterlen's two tiers of knowledge to the extent that the public in a traditional African setting can be said to possess "simple knowledge," which is regarded as "only a beginning in the understanding of beliefs and customs," and some individual elders can be said to possess "deep knowledge," which takes years to acquire.¹³

The second aspect to Professor Abraham's guideline is his advice to the effect that in African philosophy or studies, scholars, in order to avoid mis-representation and over generalization, should always discuss matters within the context of a cultural spatio-temporal paradigm. It is not enough, and it could be very misleading at any rate, to say that Africans hold such-and-such a view.

It is less misleading if a scholar indicates the epoch and the paradigm of African culture he is talking about, of which African people, and what, if any, dominant streak there was in that culture, how and why that dominant streak has survived, if it has, till the present time. This guideline is without prejudice to the fact that there are common and perennial themes in African philosophy. But it helps further to highlight the fact that Africans do not by any means hold uniform views on philosophical themes. African philosophy is not like the African skin which is black everywhere and anywhere.

Abraham's guideline also entails the requirement that African elders who are interviewed on any topic in African studies should be identified by name and their views credited to them. In other words, it is no longer sufficient for any researcher to report simply that "according to my informant(s), such-and-such African people hold this view." The names of the "informants" should be given even when it is thought that the discussion centered only on the public aspects of the community's philosophy. These days, after all, the line between the public and private aspects of African philosophy is becoming more and more difficult to draw. The reason is that many Africans are fast losing touch with their roots

¹³ Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotommeli; An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, London, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. XV.

and it is only fair that those who still keep the contact should be credited and identified accordingly.

The fifth canon to inform any intellectual undertaking and understanding in African scholarship is the one proposed by my humble self. This is the clear cut reconstitution of African philosophy into three periods: The Ancient Period, the Transitional Period and the Modern Period.¹⁴ I refuse to endorse the locution “African Traditional Philosophy” or “African Traditional Thought”. I prefer, instead, to talk of ancient African philosophy and this makes it obvious that the words I quarrel with are “traditional” and “thought”.

The attempt to establish African philosophy as a respectable discipline has been impaired by this thought that it is traditional thought. Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that African pneumatological beliefs, metaphysical and moral doctrines, political and social principles, epistemology, logic, law, science and the scholars’ own theories and extractions from all of these should not be indiscriminately labelled “African Traditional Thought.” This gamut of African knowledge is not traditional because the word “traditional”, in the thinking of those who foist it, drips with images of naiveté, low intellect, stagnation and crudity. It is also not thought, because comprising this gamut of knowledge is African science—physical, chemical and biological.

Ancient African philosophy deals with the substantive doctrines and reflections that can be extracted from African philosophy in its ancient settings about the strenuous attempts of African elders to ponder over the mysteries of the universe, the hostility of the environment, the difficulties of living with fellow beings, human and non-human, the desire to establish and live in a stable society, the necessity to communicate freely with others, and to know and master the environment either through co-operation or by conquest. These strenuous attempts led to asking philosophical questions. African elders came up with answers to such fundamental questions and it is these answers that constitute ancient African philosophy.

¹⁴ C.S. Momoh, *An African Conception of Being and the Traditional Problem of Freedom and Determinism*, Bloomington, Indiana, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1974, pp. 64-74.

Modern African philosophy deals with the theories of professional philosophers or scholars on African philosophy. William Abraham's Theory of Cultural Essentialism, Paul Radin's Theory of the Existence of a Primitive Intellectual Class, Lucien Levy-Bruhl's Theory of Savage Pre-Logicality readily come to mind here and also the more recent and coherently but not necessarily correctly argued critical survey on ancient African philosophy by Peter Bodunrin.

I hate to sound pedantic but it just happens that the canons or principles of discourse in African philosophy which I have been discussing lend themselves to formal nomenclatures. They are five principles in all and what we have, consequently, are the following:

Radin's Principle of the Existence of an Autochthonous Intellectual class;

Hunnings' Principle of Synthesis;

Horton's Principle of Departmentalization;

Abraham's Principle of Distinction between private and public aspects of African philosophy;

My own Principle of Identification.

There are two salient points worthy of note in relation to these principles. The first point is that the principles or canons or guidelines (I use these terms interchangeably) of discourse in African philosophy are by no means unique. Indeed they are assumed in other philosophies. The second point is that these principles collectively constitute a criterion of evaluation of any work in, or claims about, or comments on, African philosophy.

As a collective criterion of evaluation, the canons constitute a double-edged sword which does not discriminate between proponents and opponents of African philosophy. In other words, a work on African philosophy that discusses only ethnophilosophy, (i.e. public or communal philosophy) without discussing alongside with it the views of some members of the autochthonous intellectual class is, by the standards that are now generally accepted, incomplete. Such a work must also identify the "primitive" philosophers

¹⁵ C.S. Momoh, "Modern Theories in an African Philosophy" *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, n. 2, 1981, pp.8-10.

by name, the period, the cultural paradigm and the area of philosophy in question.

In the same vein, an African logical neo-positivist such as Professor Bodunrin who draws an absolute dichotomy between “ethnophilosophy” and the philosophy of sagacious elders¹⁶ fails to realize that the pontifications of the latter are based on metaphysical, ethical, epistemological or esoteric themes in the former. And by Hunnings’ Principle of Synthesis we can see that the sceptical nose-thumbing by the African logical neo-positivist often ends in nothingness if not naughtiness. A devastating criticism that does not end on a salutary synthetical note is nothing but negativism and recidivism and, at its best, a sign of intellectual stagnation.

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The second issue of central concern in this paper relates to the queries raised by the logical neo-positivists about African philosophy. Some of these queries initially took the form of an outright denial of the existence of African philosophy but they are now getting more sophisticated and subtle and the fashion now is to criticise and query the status, style and content of African Philosophy.¹⁷ Since I have already set out the parameters of discourse in African philosophy it is natural that many of the queries raised about African philosophy will be answered or viewed in the light of these principles. The following are the four basic propositions, which summarise the queries raised by African logical neo-positivists:

P1: African philosophy in its communal aspect does not exist.

P2: African professional philosophers hold too dearly and sometimes parochially to doctrines of ancient African philosophy.

P3: African philosophy is non-critical, non-reflective, and it is not unique.

P4: African philosophy exists; without it there could not have been Greek philosophers—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

P3 and P4 are the pivotal propositions of the African logical neo-positivists and they are referred to as the “Critical Question” and the “Egyptian Question” in African philosophy respectively.

¹⁶ Bodunrin, p. 163.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 161.

I hold that P4—the “Egyptian Question”—is ultimately a denial of the existence of African philosophy. But first P1 and P2 call for some comments, however brief.

There is a traditional difference which is often thought to exist between Western philosophy and ancient African philosophy; the one cannot be divorced from its individual philosophical giants, and the other was often thought to be communal (public) philosophy; critics of ancient African philosophy call it “ethno-philosophy.”¹⁸ There are two forms of criticisms in respect of P1. The first form represented by Henri Maurier denies that there were any philosophers in traditional African Societies and, *a fortiori*, that “ethno-philosophers” are simply not doing philosophy. Henri Maurier, of course, believes that analysis is the essence of philosophy.¹⁹ The second form is represented by Professor Bodunrin and it starts by affirming P2 only to end by affirming P1. This is because Professor Bodunrin believes that a people without a literate civilization cannot really have a philosophy.²⁰ Bodunrin had started by criticizing some African professional philosophers for holding on too dearly and parochially to doctrines of ancient African philosophy, the existence of which, in the final analysis he doubts, because of the lack of a written and literate tradition.

Hunnings’ Principle of Synthesis answers Maurier’s query. Philosophy might begin with analysis but it does not end with it. The works of Plato, (ancient Greek philosophy), Wittgenstein, Moore, and Russell (to name only a few of British modern philosophers) and Strawson (contemporary British philosophy) testify to that fact. What we look for in the works on ancient African philosophy are the substantive and synthetical doctrines on God, man, society, evil, freedom and determinism, life, life after death, death, reincarnation, space and time and spirit.²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.* I will make copious references to this work first because Professor Bodunrin regards himself as the chief spokesman of the African logical neo-positivists and, secondly, because his article, published in *Philosophy*, is the most widely read and circulated on account of that fact.

¹⁹ “Do we have an African Philosophy” in Richard A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, Washington, D.C., University Press of America, p. 24.

²⁰ Bodunrin, p. 177.

²¹ D.E. Idoniboye, “The Concept of ‘Spirit’ in African Metaphysics”, *Second Order*, vol. II, no 1, 1973, pp. 83-89.

These are some of the sort of issues that have normally been the preoccupation of the “Great Tradition” in philosophy and they are no less so now with many professional African philosophers. Professor Bodunrin himself concedes, in Plato’s tradition, that philosophy begins in wonder. That is an understatement. Philosophy still wallows in the quagmire of wonder. But Bodunrin’s concession places a huge burden on him: what roles do critical analysis and writing play in wonder?

With regard to P3, we note that scholars who hold that African philosophy is not unique and is non-critical often do not make clear whether their criticism is restricted to either a communal African philosophy or the partiality of African philosophers or both. The criticism cannot apply to the former because it simply does not make sense to say that a communal philosophy is not unique and is non-critical. The communal aspect of any philosophy is, by its very nature, non-critical. Evans-Pritchard finds this an interesting point in his reference to Vilfredo Pareto’s *The Mind and Society*. Institutions like parliaments, democracy, and universal suffrage are invariably the products of faith and sentiment.²² Criticizing them has to be undertaken as second-order activity. If the criticism that African philosophy is non-critical and not unique is meant to apply to ethnophilosophers it has to be shown, first, that the African professional philosophers in question take language analysis and infrastructural philosophy as areas of perspectives in philosophy, and second, that there is in fact no philosophy which is unique in the univocal sense of that word.

The existence of African philosophy is sometimes reduced to a uniqueness question. Invariably the scholars who flaunt this type of criticism to the effect that African philosophy is not unique are already thoroughly steeped in some aspects of Western philosophy. When their attention is drawn to African philosophy they look around with their minds already made up. They are likely to be confronted with one or two outcomes; either they discover themes which have been thoroughly worked in the familiar philosophy or they discover themes which are foreign to the philosophy with which they are already acquainted. Proverbs and myths fall into

²² E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, London, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 97.

the second category, and they are foreign only to the extent that the familiar philosophy is not explicitly based on them.²³ If the scholars discover themes which have been thoroughly worked in the familiar philosophy, a declaration is seen to follow that African philosophy is not unique; if they discover foreign themes that are not emphasized in the familiar philosophy—a situation which obviously can be a result of philosophic peculiarities—we will have seen that African philosophy is not critical, the disguised accusation really being that, if it were critical, those who base African philosophy on myths and proverbs would have known that they are not doing philosophy. But it could very well be that, especially in the case of proverbs, a reconstruction of African philosophy can be based on them. Unless this reconstruction is completed, it is premature to be sceptical.

The place of myths in African philosophy is on a different plane. In this I do not want to risk the generalization that my observation is true for the rest of Black Africa; but myth, for an Uchi elder, is not an end in itself. The moral or metaphysical, and sometimes logical, lesson to be imparted is the end. The myth is just a means, a sort of objective prop to hold the lesson together, to make it coherent, comprehensible, and acceptable. The average Uchi person is more likely to go along with a proposition whose truth is demonstrated by a myth than by an “argument”. The former seems objective to him, the latter subjective. The average person also believes that it is more difficult to make up a coherent myth than to be “sharp in the mouth” which, in Uchi language, is the meaning of “argument”. Myth-making is the property of an elder, argument the property of a youth who is a rascal.

A person like Odera Oruka, one of the logical neo-positivists, holds that mythologies should not be presented as African philosophy.²⁴ If there are any scholars who badly present myths as philosophy they indeed need to be reminded that myth is not philosophy. However, when one is writing about the public aspect of African philosophy, it can be seen that myths are being presented as philosophy until one actually holds discussions with an elder.

²³ The familiar philosophy, of course, always has a written language and known individuals who are the authors of its philosophical literature.

²⁴ H. Odera Oruka, “The Fundamental Principles in the Question of ‘African Philosophy’ ”, *Second Order*, IV (no 1, 1975), p. 44.

When this is done we will be confronted with myth-in-use, and find that myths are used only as a ladder to climb to the higher realms of philosophy.

Oruka also listed Professor Abraham as one of the African philosophers who “have fallen into the pitfall of considering African philosophy to be a philosophy only in the unique sense.” But there is nowhere in Professor Abraham’s writing where African philosophy is offered as unique. In fact Abraham specifically warns against arguing that African philosophy is unique:²⁵

The question of the existence of African philosophy is not a uniqueness question. There is no reason why, in order that there should be an African philosophy, it has to be different from every other philosophy. It is sufficient that philosophy should occur in Africa such that it is not derived from outside Africa.

In fact Professor Abraham even goes on to say that there are answers in African philosophy to some of the philosophical problems raised elsewhere.

Professor Bodunrin, in his paper “The Dilemma of African Philosophy,” insists that proverbs cannot be part of the African philosophical inventory because proverbs are not unique to Africa.²⁶ Here again two issues are being mixed up. Individual Uchi elders did not give me a catalogue of proverbs as their philosophy. Proverbs are helpful only as telescopes with which to view the metaphysics and morality of ancient African philosophy as far as its communal aspect goes. To perform this task they do not have to be unique.²⁷ It is indeed true that proverbs have never been and are not unique to Africa, but I doubt, with the possible exception of the Chinese, if there are any other people in history who know their proverbs as much as the Africans do.

²⁵ Abraham, p. 104.

²⁶ This is an unpublished paper which Professor Bodunrin read to his students on the occasion of the “1967 Philosophy Students’ Week,” University of Ibadan. There is some evidence that Professor Bodunrin may have shifted his position in this regard.

²⁷ A variant of the objection that African philosophy is not unique is that “African proverbs would be of philosophical interest only if they could be used to produce a philosophical system different from that of the West.” Kwame Gyokye, “Philosophical Relevance of Akan Proverbs,” *Second Order* IV (no 2, 1975), p. 51.

Some scholars begin by asserting that there is no African philosophy. Then, when their attention is directed to the existence of at least African metaphysics and morality, they ask to be shown, and be convinced, how it is different from that of the West; what is unique about it? But they do this without taking back their initial assertion; as if the question of there being no African philosophy were synonymous with the question of there being no uniqueness in African philosophy. To the extent to which a people's philosophy can affect the superstructure of its society, those who are dissatisfied on account of the fact that African philosophy is not unique will ultimately end up embracing a dangerous doctrine: for to say that African philosophy should be different from that of the West is to agitate for the view that African political doctrines, economic practices and social values should be different from those of the West. This on the humorous side.

On the serious side, I fail to see how uniqueness can define philosophy. It is as if athlete A were to accuse athlete B of being incapable of running but, when athlete B had successfully demonstrated his ability to run, then athlete A would turn round to say that his adversary has no unique style of running! The issue has thus been shifted from the question of an inability to run to the question of a uniqueness in the style of running. The outside world has been late in the discovery of ancient African philosophy because of the peculiarities, facts and exigencies of colonial history. Even where the French scholars and ethnologists delved into the mind of Africa and published their works, they were often neglected not only by English scholars but also, more painfully, by well-known indigenous African scholars who were more interested in finding in ancient African philosophy analogues of a Christian concept of the universe. If ancient African philosophy had not been ignored, perhaps it would have been obvious that neglect culminating in what is lateness in discovery is neither synonymous with non-existence nor lateness in formulation. For suppose African philosophy was in fact formulated earlier than other philosophies; then other philosophies were discovered late but were found to be concerned with the same philosophical themes. Would not the African philosopher be deemed peculiar who would dismiss these other philosophies on account of the fact that they came up with topics which had been thoroughly covered in the existing "official"

philosophy?

Another well entrenched and popular view about African philosophy is that it is not critical. Although there are three senses of this “critical question,” one undoubtable insinuation is that African scholars do not find fault with African philosophy. In two of the senses of the “critical question” this insinuation is very much unobscured. Generally, however, the complaint that ancient African philosophy is not critical should be well taken if “criticism” is assumed as a meta-activity and as a tool in philosophy, and not as its essence. To assume it as the essence of philosophy is to impose, arbitrarily and unnecessarily, on all other areas what is the central concern of one area perspective in philosophy.

The first sense in which African philosophy is said to be uncritical is the sense in which an ancient African philosopher—an Uchi elder, for instance—does not critically evaluate his own views. This is the sense of *self-criticism*, and it correctly applies to the Uchi elders. But an Uchi elder is a good critic when his own views are not in question.²⁸ When his own views are questioned with undertones of criticism, at least by a youth, he would rather rain abuses than answer the query. On many occasions, I was subjected to this kind of unpleasant experience. Saliu Ikharo was discussing with me his mind-body theory. His doctrine is that the food we eat contains both intellect-building and body-building elements. Then I asked him what, for instance, is the intellect-building element in the water we drink? His answer was:

So you don't believe me. All right. When you leave here, stay without drinking water for twenty days. I will start counting the days. On the twentieth day, I will come to your house because I know you will be, if you are still alive, too weak to walk here. When I come to you I will ask you to tell me your name. If you are able, then I am wrong.

Aliu Oshiothenua is one other Uchi elder who abused me instead of answering my question. He had been narrating the story of the disorder, chaos, and war which existed at Edo (now Benin-City) before the Uchi decided to leave with members of his family and followers. In his own words:

²⁸ Momoh, *Kiabara*.

The powerful captured the weak; the powerful crushed the weak. The weak one was so helpless he could not even shed tears. Wives would put food on fire to cook; they will not live to eat the food. Fear so gripped children; when they drank water, the water stuck on their throats. Husbands became cowards in the presence of their wives; what was worse they became cowards in the presence of their in-laws. God was unhappy that his children were fighting, this way, among themselves. So he sent the white men to settle our quarrel...

Much of what Oshiothenua said in this part of our discussion deals with Uchi history. I asked him why it was the white man God sent to settle our quarrel. His answer: "You ask me why it was the white man God sent to settle our quarrel? You'd rather God sent you. No. God sent the white man."

The point is that the Uchi elders have the habit of answering questions put to them by a fellow elder, without growing impatient and getting abusive. But the important point, and I cannot emphasize this too much, is that the Uchi elder knows what it is to be critical. He could be intolerant of a critical evaluation of his own views but that does not stop him from being critically evaluative himself.

The second sense of the critical question is the sense of *other-criticism* whereby it is not the philosopher who criticizes his own views but a scholar of his philosophy.²⁹ A corollary of this sense is that African scholars, and sometimes African youths, uncritically assume the position of African philosophy as correct.

To the extent that the African professional philosopher actually feels at home with any aspect of ancient African philosophy, what this accusation comes down to is that the professional philosopher has refused to criticize the tenets of a school of thought to which he subscribes. This is by no means peculiar to the African professional philosopher. With the possible exception of Plato, Bertrand Russell and Ernst Cassirer, it is doubtful if there are any other major philosophers who went out of their way to devastate their own views. In fact the stock-in-trade of routine professional philos-

²⁹ I have in mind critics like Henri Maurier whose article has already been cited and J.E. (now Kwasi) Wiredu, "How *Not* to Compare African Thought with Western Thought" in Wright p. 149.

ophers is to produce works which have anticipated objections and criticisms. We also know, of course, that some philosophers—Aristotle, Karl Marx and Karl Popper and most of the logical positivists readily come to mind here—owe much of their prominence to their overwhelming criticisms of the doctrines of rival philosophies and schools of thought. The African logical neopositivist also quickly discovered that the surest and most tested way to earn a place in the community of philosophers is to come down hard on what he calls “ethno-philosophy.”

Now we show that in some aspects of ancient African philosophy there were different schools of thought with the ensuing intellectual disagreements even within the same community. Uchi people say that the three basic natural elements in this world are Earth, Water, and Air. Unlike the pre-Socratics they neither deduce nor reduce all the other elements to any of these basic natural elements. Their arguments rather revolve around which of these elements is the most effective as an agent through which to contact other agents in the world. Although Uchi people make requests from Olhe’s river, it is not the water but the spirit in the river that is the object of their concern. A belief that water is the most effective of the three fundamental agents does not result in the worship of rivers. Rather the belief in the more or less metaphysical principle underlying the professional practice of the medicine man.

On this matter there are three schools of thought among the practising metaphysicians.³⁰ They often argue for their school of thought, in order, some people say, to retain their clients, and attract more. But the important point is that they do argue for and against a school of thought. Now some Uchi youths support the arguments of one or another of these three schools: the *Earthist*, the *Waterist* or the *Airist* school of thought. If a person encounters an Uchi youth who is, say, an airist, and launches an attack against “those who think we can operate through air” such a person is assured of a spirited defence of the airist position and a pay-in-kind attack on the other two positions.

A defence of the *earthist* school of thought can arise, for instance, when a client is disappointed. We said that the argument revolves

³⁰ The term “practising metaphysician” was first coined by D.E. Idoniboye as a non-pejorative substitute for “Juju man.”

around which of the three elements, earth, water and air, is the most effective agent to use in contacting other agents in the universe. This means of communication and contact was developed at a time when there were no postal or telephone services and even now they are still used because the new services, though available, are inefficient and unreliable. Suppose a father sends a message from the village “through the earth” to the son in Lagos that he should hurry home within three days. At the end of the three days the son did not show up. The man then goes to the earthist-practising metaphysician to demand the return of his money. It is then he will be given all sorts of reasons why the message got stuck: his son may not be the type of person who occasionally walks bare-footed on natural ground; maybe the son lives or works upstairs or that he has been too mobile of late. These and many other reasons will be given why the message “through earth” could not get through. The earthist-practising metaphysician assumes that the city is like the village where people walk bare-footed on plain natural ground. The other two methods have their limitations which the client gets to know only after a disappointment. His money, of course, is never refunded.

A third sense of the criticism of the uncritical nature of African philosophy is that it is not analytical. This complaint is helpful in so far as it is a reminder to African professional philosophers that analysis of substantive concepts in ancient African philosophy can go a long way to unravel a thicket of doctrinal metaphysical beliefs. This kind of analysis, however, would necessarily be related only to the communal segments of a people’s philosophy in the sense that the concepts being analyzed are used by the general public and are not in the words of P. F. Strawson, “the specialities of the most refined thinking.” My own analysis of the Uchi concept of death is in this category.³¹ Sometimes the generality of the people are cognizant of the moral and metaphysical implications of a concept in everyday use. Uchi people know that they should not speak of the death of an elder in the same way as in the case of the death of a youth. Dr. Barry Hallen analyzed the Yoruba concept of person and found that the average Yoruba man knows

³¹ Momoh, *An African Conception of Being*, pp. 162-5.

the metaphysical implication of *ori*. Adeolu Adebola analyzed the same concept in its moral connotations. Professor Evans-Pritchard analyzed the Nuer word *kok* and discovered that its sacrificial meaning has assumed a commercial usage.³²

Although I have given three senses of what is taken to be the uncritical nature of African philosophy, I doubt if they are exhaustive. The critics themselves do not clarify the sense in which they mean their complaint to be taken. Criticism is a calling proper to professional philosophy. It is a tool which can be used to evaluate, critically, a philosophical work, be it piecemeal or system-building. An Uchi elder knows what it is to be critical, but he is, first and foremost, a system-builder and a moralist. If his work is to be criticized this will be undertaken by an outsider, not by himself except in so far as he is assuming the role of an outsider to criticize another person's views.

What, to my mind, is ultimately a denial of the existence of African philosophy is the conflation and reduction of Black African philosophy to ancient Egyptian philosophy. Scholars belonging to this school of thought assert, first, that African philosophy exists; second, that this African philosophy is ancient Egyptian philosophy; third, that there could not have been Greek philosophy were it not for the existence of this ancient Egyptian philosophy. One aspect of the overall contention, then, is that there could not have been Greek philosophy without African philosophy.³³

It is indeed true that ancient Egypt hosted an advanced civilization—scientific, technological, educational, artistic, mystical and philosophical. But it was also, above all, a civilization with a written language. This issue of a written language is the big question mark on all academic attempts to trace Black African origins, culture, and learning to ancient Egypt. If, as could be argued, none of our ancestors who emigrated from ancient Egypt belonged to the *literati*, then we have it that our forefathers were the peons and scum of the ancient Egyptian society, an admission which will dampen the excitement of desiring to identify with an advanced ancient civilization.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Yosef ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family*, New York, Alkebu-Lan Books Associates, 1978, pp. 318-319.

Africa is said to be the cradle of two things in history: civilization and mankind; the civilization applies to Egypt and the mankind applies to Black Africa. As regards the second ascription I just want to point out that Africa is the easiest place in the world to dig for archaeological finds without monumental costs, threats of lawsuits, and requests for land compensation. The insinuation underlying this ascription, however, is what I find objectionable: the cradle of mankind has not really gone beyond the cradle of intellectual development. For a people have to be at least intellectually developed before they can be said to be philosophically minded. Edward Tylor and Lucien Levy-Bruhl gave explicit scholarly comfort to this insinuation.³⁴ Supercilious opinions of this sort are ultimately aided by the attempts to found everything African on the basis of ancient Egyptian culture.

Professor Wiredu speaks of the nudgings of Afro-Americans to be shown an African philosophy. I might add that they want an African philosophy with roots in a famous ancient civilization. But Professor Saburi Biobaku has shown that there were indigenous people in the Yoruba country when the Oduduwa group was supposed to have decided to settle there.³⁵ Assuming that the “natives” were not intellectually acute enough to be philosophical, should we also say that the immigrants were so intellectually supine as not to have changed their philosophy in the course of centuries of emigration, different environment, and different experiences? All this notwithstanding, the onus of showing why our ancient Egyptian ancestors did not bring the art of writing lies with the Egyptologists.

Lansana Keita is another Egyptologist who divided African philosophy into the following three periods: the classical African thought of ancient Egypt, African thought in medieval Africa, and philosophy in contemporary Africa.³⁶ His principal opinion is that African philosophy is the philosophy contained in the *Corpus*

³⁴ “... There is this plain difference between low and high races of man” insists Edward Tylor, “that the dull-minded barbarian has not power of thought enough to come up to the civilized man’s best moral standard.” *Anthropology*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crafts, 1897, p. 407.

³⁵ S.O. Biobaku “An Historical Sketch of Egba Traditional Authorities”, *Africa: Journal of the International Institute of African Languages and Culture*, XXII, 1952, p. 35.

³⁶ Wright, pp. 41-61.

Hermeticum of ancient Egypt. Consequently his idea of African philosophy in medieval Africa is still the one contained in the *Corpus Hermeticum* excepting that during this period it was expressed, with no appreciable improvement, through the medium of the Arabic language and carried through the Sahara southwards. He also opines that the situation was not different in medieval Europe. The illusory difference was in the medium of communication, in this case Latin, but European medieval philosophy is the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle cast in theological guises. Since, however, Plato and Aristotle themselves owe their philosophies to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, philosophy in medieval Europe is the philosophy of ancient Egypt.

Arguments of this sort commit their authors far beyond the horizons they imagined. Ancient Egypt indeed had famous and reputable centres of learning which, naturally, attracted scholars from all over the then known world. But history is replete with instances where a scholar not only made use of what he learnt in his own original way but also outgrew his *Alma Mater*. And once a centre of learning had been so famous and international in outlook, it becomes petty for a national group, except for the fact of geographical location and initial establishment, to claim the credit exclusively.

Since 1614 the Hermetic writings have been shown, at any rate, not to be ancient Egyptian at all. According to Isaac Causabon, the writings were not authored by a very ancient Egyptian priest but by post-Christian writers.³⁷

The name of the supposed all-knowing ancient Egyptian priest was Hermes Trismegistus. Eminent theologians had lent their weight to the reality of Trismegistus and the Renaissance went along. But it was, in fact, a mythical name, and very probably a Christian forgery. The Hermetic writings could not, therefore, be the source whence Plato and the Greeks had derived the best they knew. To think otherwise, as some people like Keita and Fudd before him are wont to do, is to get involved in perpetrating what is, in the words of Yates, a "huge historical error" dating back to the Renaissance.³⁸

³⁷ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, New York, Vintage Books, 1964, p. 398.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 6.

Whether at home or abroad, the education of the African is Western-oriented. The libraries of the universities in Africa are stocked with Western books, most of them written by Western authors, in Western style. Thousands of Africans are educated in the West. What people like Keita are now saying is that educated Africans cannot be original in their own way without being reminded of their intellectual indebtedness to the West, or worse still without being accused of plagiarizing the West. The reason Keita and the Egyptologists are oozing with anger is that Plato and Aristotle are said to have failed to acknowledge their indebtedness to ancient Egypt.

But my central point of disagreement is with Keita's belief that there was no indigenous African philosophy in medieval Africa. Ancient African philosophy should be seen to stretch into the medieval period in African history in the sense that even at this time African elders were still largely outside the influence of the so-called Arabic civilization. Arabic civilization was embraced predominantly by the royal courts for the primary reason that it encouraged centralization of authority. African elders were largely unaffected by it, and together with the specialists they opposed its introduction even though it might ultimately triumph.

* * *

The final major point concerns the logical and factual deficiencies in the positions of the African logical neo-positivists, but I would like, first, to highlight the ambiguity inhering in the word "philosopher." To whom and what can the word be properly and appropriately applied? When we talk of a historian, for instance, we mean the academician who records, analyses and interprets historical events and issues and even sometimes is said to be able to predict future historical events. We do know that it is a simple matter to distinguish between a maker of history like Murtala Mohammed and a historian like Ade Ajayi or between Hitler and Trevor-Roper or John Folland.

With philosophy things are not so easy. Any scholar who teaches philosophy in a university wants to be known as a philosopher ostensibly in the manner and stature in which Plato, Russell, Karl Marx or Ogotommeli can be referred to as philosophers. The correct position is that most philosophy teachers are involved in

nothing but the teaching, the exegesis, the interpretation and reinterpretation, the visiting and revisiting, and the criticisms and defence of the works of the likes of Plato and Russell. Many other philosophy teachers do nothing but apply the Kuhnian paradigms in the philosophic realm. They are, in other words, routine philosophers who are engaged in applying the paradigm of logical positivism to the original and first-order work of others. They are indeed philosophers but they are not “philosophisers.” The philosophisers are the Platos, the Russells, the Abrahams, the Ogotommelis, the Tempels’, the Peirces and the Oshiothenuas.

It is true that there are three steps in the philosophic ladder: the step of erudition where one studies the works of other philosophers or wonders about the mysteries of the universe, the step of critical evaluation or reflection where one takes a critical look at the works of others or the mystery of the universe and the step of intellectual creation.

This is where critical evaluation or reflection ends in synthesis and a world-view or philosophical theory or doctrine is born. The philosophisers operate on this realm while the philosophers are still largely in the world of the second realm.

“Philosophy”, according to a department’s student handbook, “aims at systematic answers to fundamental questions all of us have thought about at one time or another, e.g.: What should we do? How should we live (ethics, social and political philosophy)? What kind of world do we live in (metaphysics)? How do we know these and other things (epistemology, logic)? And what answers have great thinkers given to such questions (history of philosophy)?”³⁹ The philosophisers are the great thinkers who have tried to give answers to such questions while the philosophers are those who have studied or are studying and querying the adequacy or otherwise of these answers. The ambition of any philosopher, even if it is unconscious, is to become a philosophiser.

The distinction between philosopher—one who does philosophy as a second-order activity, and philosophiser—one who does philosophy as a first-order activity, comes in very handy when we consider the various definitions of philosophy offered by Professor

³⁹ *Study in Philosophy*, Department of Philosophy, Indiana University, 1984-85.

Peter O. Bodunrin, the chief spokesman of the African logical neo-positivists. Bodunrin defines philosophy variously as:

D1: Philosophy is a body of logically argued thoughts of individuals.⁴⁰

D2: Philosophy is an exercise in wonder.⁴¹

D3: Philosophy is a conscious reflection on one's beliefs.⁴²

D4: Philosophy is largely a negative appraisal of received ideas.⁴³

It is obvious that D1, D2 and D3 are the trademarks of the philosophiser and D4 the trademark of a philosopher. Bodunrin leaves no one in doubt that the group he represents identifies with definition D4 as the main business of the professional philosopher. Hear him: "Since we hold that philosophy is properly studied through the examination of the thoughts of individuals ... we expect him (the philosophiser) to let us have a say; let us, that is, ask and raise questions about his thesis."⁴⁴ One only wonders what work would be left for Bodunrin and his like to do if there were no theses in the first instance. It is unnecessary to point out that definitions D1-D3 on the one hand, and definition D4 on the other, are not entirely consistent especially when they issue from the pen of a critical analyst. But both hands considered together constitute an antinomy in the philosophic enterprise. They seem inconsistent but they co-exist although the preponderant leaning in contemporary British philosophy is towards definition D4.

Another point of inconsistency in Bodunrin's paper is his admission, in one vein, that the doctrine of communalism is truly African and, in the same vein, to deny that the African world-view is holistic. But this inconsistency can be allowed to pass because it arose out of Professor Bodunrin's ignorance about what holism is! According to Bodunrin any philosophy that believes in "critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgements by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus" is not holistic.⁴⁵ The next logical question would have been: is such a philosophy then individualis-

⁴⁰ Bodunrin, p. 161.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

tic? This is an intelligible question because the traditional dichotomy is between holism and individualism. A philosophy that believes in “critical independent thinkers ...” is neither holistic nor individualistic until we know what exactly is the content of the philosophy. Holism or individualism is the attribute of philosophies, not an attribute of philosophers or philosophisers.

There are two forms of the doctrine of holism—methodological holism and ontological holism. In its first form, holism is a method of explanation in history and social sciences, viz., that there are residues in social phenomena, events, occurrences or experiences that are not atomistically regimentable and that cannot be fully explainable in terms, according to J.W.N. Watkins, “of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, beliefs, and physical resources and environments.”⁴⁶

In its second form, holism is an ontological claim about the primacy of the whole over its parts, the state over the individual, communal interests over personal interests, duty over rights or, as Jan C. Smuts first formulated it, that the determining factors in nature are wholes which are irreducible to the sum of their parts. It is unconceivable that any African sage—past or present—would ever deny that communal interests should take precedence over individual or personal interests. If philosophers, as individuals, cannot expound holistic doctrines why do we refer to philosophers such as Plato, Hegel, Marx and Bradley as holists? More will be said later about Bradley.

The other remaining points to be made on Bodunrin’s paper relate to some factual errors in it. The first glaring factual error to come to mind in this regard is Bodunrin’s claim to the effect that “the Westminster model (of parliamentary democracy) was failing in several places” in Africa.⁴⁷ The true position is that the Westminster model was not given a chance to succeed because it is a political practice whose tradition does not allow for “sit-tight” and life presidents. The net result was that the constitutional arrangements which ushered in independence for African states were invariably tampered with shortly after the attainment of indepen-

⁴⁶ W.H. Dray, “Holism and Individualism in History and Social Science” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, Paul Edwards, ed., p. 57.

⁴⁷ Bodunrin, p. 165.

dence to make room, as I have pointed out elsewhere, for personal leadership as opposed to collective leadership; rigged and rubber-stamped elections as opposed to free and fair elections; life dominance as political boss as opposed to terminal dominance; mystical leadership as opposed to public accountability and ruthless muffling of opposing views as opposed to healthy discussion of thorny issues.⁴⁸ The African leader often ended up, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is the latest in this series, turning his state into a one-party state along socialist lines, but he would be quick to add that European socialism cannot be imported wholesale into Africa; there is always the need to add cultural content.

The pattern of political evolution emerging in Africa, at least south of the Sahara, is, first, the achievement of independence on the platter and promise of the practice of a Western type of democracy; secondly, the abortion of that promise by the introduction of one-party states and one-man rule often along socialist lines, and lastly, the intervention and installation of military governments. Even the latter had not assured political stability and economic prosperity for African states. Instead, as in the cases of Nigeria and Ghana, a chain of endless *coups d'état* is set in motion. I challenge Professor Bodunrin, therefore, to show which model of government was not failing in Africa. The problem is not with the model but with the man.⁴⁹

The second factual error made by Professor Bodunrin is his assertion that "Socrates' interlocutors are his intellectual peers."⁵⁰ He made the assertion in rebuff of Dr. Barry Hallen's plea that African philosophers should go out into the field, as they go into the library to study Ayer's work for example, to hold discussions with African elders on philosophical matters and document the findings for posterity. What Bodunrin is saying in effect is that such a practice is unbecoming to a professional philosopher. In other words, it is certainly a disgrace for an African intellectual academic elite with all the chains of high degrees from American and British universities to go out into the field (a euphemism for village) to

⁴⁸ C.S. Momoh, "Socialism is not the Answer to Society's Problems", *Sunday Times*, Sept 7, 1980, p.14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁰ Bodunrin, p. 169.

hold discussions with an illiterate elder. There are better and more comfortable environments to spend departmental votes and research grants—air-conditioned suites in five-star hotels, university conference halls in university guest houses with the departmental vehicle and driver in attendance. Maybe Bodunrin's reaction would have been less hostile if Hallen had suggested that the African village elder be invited to the city and be lodged in a five-star hotel for purposes of the philosophical discussion. Bodunrin is also saying in effect, assuming that a philosopher's interlocutors must be his peers, that a philosophy teacher has no business soliciting questions and comments from his students! It simply is untrue, at any rate, to hold that Socrates' interlocutors are only his intellectual peers. Why was Socrates arraigned before a court charged with corrupting the youth with dangerous and heretical ideas? Are the youths his intellectual peers or is Bodunrin saying that no youth was ever an interlocutor of Socrates. We have specific examples, amongst others, of Socrates' discussion with Meno's lad in the *Meno* and with Theaetetus—a school boy—in the *Theaetetus*. In this dialogue Socrates makes it clear that his interlocutors were not only his intellectual peers when he says: "... There's truth in the criticism which many people have made of me before now, to the effect that I question others ...". The assumption in Bodunrin's position is really that the African village elder is an inferior philosophic entity. Those of us who have held and are still holding discussions with the African elder know that such *a priori* assumptions are wrong and unfounded. Many of these African elders are philosophisers (sages if you like) in the true meaning of that word. In my view, that fact immediately makes them superior to the conventional philosopher whose only aim, as a means and as an end, "is the negative appraisal of received ideas."

The remaining factual error committed by Bodunrin which I simply cannot allow to pass is his statement that idealism was the dominant philosophical doctrine in Britain towards the close of the last century.⁵¹ There was never a time in British philosophic history when idealism was dominant. Idealism held quite some sway in ecclesiastical circles but that is about all one can definitely say. The idealists in fact, according to Atkinson, "are alien to the

⁵¹ *Ibid.* pp. 177-178.

British philosophical tradition.” Atkinson also tells us that “the concerns of Russell, Moore, Ayer are continuous with those of Berkeley, Locke, Hume, Reid and J.S. Mill.”⁵²

Perhaps we should wonder why idealism ever held some sway in the land of empiricism, logical atomism, Cambridge analysis and logical positivism? What, in Bodunrin’s words, were the challenges the British idealists were trying to meet? To understand the challenge it is important to remember that the leading British idealists were all sons of Evangelical clergymen within the Church of England. Intelligent and well-placed believers in the Christian religion desired to make sense of their faith in view of the trend in modern philosophy (“negative appraisal of received ideas”) and the development of natural science. Like the church fathers, the British theological idealists wanted to rationalize faith. It was an attempt, says David Bell, to save the moral baby from being tossed out with the revelatory bath water by the philosopher.⁵³

T.H. Green, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet and A.S. Pringle-Pattison (formerly known as Andrew Seth) were the leading philosophers who tried to meet the challenge. Idealism had to collapse for a number of reasons. The most primitive of these reasons is that idealism is alien to the British philosophic tradition. Idealism as preached by Bradley was too absolutely holistic. It saw individual selves as aspects of the absolute. Andrew Seth was later to defend the unique reality of the self against the almighty absolute. Ontological individualism has always been a respected doctrine in Britain and if the British were to flirt with idealism at all, the nearest they would go would be the Kantian variety and not the Hegelian variety which Bradley tried to foster in the theological domain. Idealism did not even dominate philosophy at Oxford—home of English idealism. There Professor John Cook Wilson was said to have argued vigorously against Bradley’s logic and epistemology.⁵⁴

The demise of idealism in Britain is not surprising. It is a philosophy alien to the British philosophic tradition and its exis-

⁵² R.F. Atkinson, “British Philosophy” in *The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas and Literature in Britain*, II, 1918-1945, C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, ed., London, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 107.

⁵³ David Bell, “Philosophy” in *The Twentieth Century Mind*, I, 1900-18, p. 183.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 184.

tence could not have been anything but brief and *ad hoc*. In the same way, we regard African logical neo-positivism as anything but a philosophic fad, bound to fade away not only because it is alien to the African philosophic tradition but because it holds no attraction any longer even in its original homelands. Whether history repeats itself or not, Bodunrin committed a grave factual error when he said that idealism dominated British philosophy towards the close of the last century.

There are many other factual errors in Bodunrin's paper⁵⁵ but I will rather move on to consider one or two claims which he holds in common with some of his fellow African logical neo-positivists. Professor Bodunrin agrees with Paulin Hountondji that any philosophical work done by an African philosopher qualifies as African philosophy.⁵⁶ Of course there is the much stronger thesis of this school that it is only Africans who can do African philosophy. Both theses remind one of a view expressed by Abraham: "The question whether there is an African philosophy must be distinguished from the question whether there are African philosophers. Though a negative answer to the latter implies a negative answer to the former, a positive answer to it leaves the former question still open."⁵⁷

What Abraham is saying is that if there are no African philosophers it automatically follows that there is no African philosophy but that the fact that there are African philosophers does not guarantee that there is African philosophy. Abraham is clearly wrong here in one respect. If there are no professional philosophers of African origin, there could still be ancient African philosophy such as in the works documented by Marcel Griaule, Placid Tempels and Barry Hallen who are not African philosophers. Abraham is correct, however, to say that the existence of African philosophers is not a guarantee for the existence of an African philosophy. In other words, the writings of African logical neo-

⁵⁵ The errors are too numerous to exhaust but some deserve a passing mention—that there are European, British, American or Russian physics and mathematics; that there is no African literature or history hence the need arose to "create" them; and that mathematics is an eminently rational, logical and consistent system, although Bodunrin did not say whether mathematics is all of this on the logistic or intuitionist or formalist approach to the foundations of mathematics.

⁵⁶ Bodunrin, p. 178.

⁵⁷ Abraham, p. 104.

positivists and other African professional philosophers would not necessarily constitute African philosophy.

After all, the history of philosophy has shown that there is some national flavour to that subject. Thus we talk of British empiricism, American pragmatism, European existentialism, Greek rationalism, African spiritualism and Egyptian mysticism. A flavour and a label captures a dominant and persistent orientation in a nation's or people's philosophy. It is also a primitive flavour in the sense that a philosophy that claims to be British, for instance, must submit itself to the "atomic" test, atomism being an important hall-mark of the old empiricism and the new linguistic philosophy. Such a philosophy will be absorbed into the mainstream of British philosophy to the extent to which it passes the test or it will, like idealism, pass into the British philosophic museum.

It is on the basis of the same consideration that Barry Hallen's work on the Yoruba concept of *Ori* can never be absorbed into the mainstream or even the periphery of American philosophy. For Dr. Hallen is an American whose work on African philosophy, if we are to accept Wiredu's, Bodunrin's and Hountondji's positions, should properly belong to American philosophy! Are we also to say that an African historian writing on the reign of the Stuarts in British history is doing African history? The African logical neo-positivist confused works on African philosophy with works by African philosophers. Works by the latter can belong to British, American, Russian or Chinese philosophy while works on the former can be done by British, American, Russian or Chinese philosophers. If we accept the position of the logical neo-positivists we will find that African philosophy will be a cacophony of philosophies—empiricism, linguistic analysis, symbolic logic, pragmatism, Marxism, rationalism and existentialism. The reason is that these are the areas in which the African professional philosopher normally works in his higher degree and often ends up restricting his publications to his area of specialisation.

The African logical neo-positivists are actually being tactical in their game. They refused the title of philosophy to "ethno-philosophy" because they realized that if African philosophy was to consist in that they would have no place in philosophy. They have not done any positive and original work on "ethno-philosophy" and Western philosophy can do without their patron-

age. But they still had to carve out a niche for themselves so they came up with this brilliant idea that any philosophical work done by an African philosopher is a work on African philosophy. There is really, however, no need for the jitters. A philosopher's work may not be on "ethno-philosophy" or on ancient African philosophy but it can still be classified under modern African philosophy if it is a work on African philosophy, "ethno-philosophy" or "ethno-philosophers." Whether the work is negatively or positively critical or even destructive is beside the point. It is a fact in the history of African philosophy that its critics get published in Western philosophy journals. When the same critics write on Western philosophy they never get published in the same media. Yet they originally specialised in Western philosophy.

Some of the African logical neo-positivists say almost anything, however outrageous, to get Western attention. Thus Professor Bodunrin can say that writing is a pre-requisite for philosophy and Paulin Hountondji can say that science is a pre-requisite for philosophy.⁵⁸ Who has been deficient in writing and science if not the African? Without going to any length to refute these two sycophant claims, I refer simply to two inconsistent positions held by Paulin Hountondji. First Hountondji says, "... The development of philosophy is in some way a function of the development of the sciences ... we shall never have in Africa a philosophy in the strict sense ... until we have produced in Africa a history of science, a history of the sciences."⁵⁹ But the same "philosopher" also holds that "In the last resort, philosophy, in the active sense of the word, is, before anything else, just that: a huge public debate in which every participant's intellectual responsibility is at stake. Everything else, including science, will come afterwards, in its train."⁶⁰

Hountondji, I presume, knows that until the advent of logical positivism proper, many philosophers thought they could also be competent scientists not because the development of philosophy is a function of the development of the sciences but because there are always in nature and science, as in religion and theology,

⁵⁸ Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Translated by Henri Evans with the collaboration of Jonathan Ree, Introduction by Abiola Irele, London, Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983, pp. 97-98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

perennial and mysterious issues which cannot but excite the curiosity of the philosopher. Great names in Western philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hegel and Francis Bacon (to mention just some) made pronouncements about science or God. Many of such scientific pronouncements are now known to be wrong and unempirical if not downright ludicrous and superstitious. A scientifically minded philosopher like Descartes, for example, propounded it as a fact, without any empirical testing, that the clouds could rain blood! Descartes' theory of the physical universe also had little contact with experiment. Yet Descartes' philosophy has remained unscathed. The point I am trying to make is that a philosophy is no less a philosophy just because its scientific cognates are wrong or crude or because it has none at all.

When the chips are down, the chief question which we and the African logical neo-positivists have to answer is whether the new philosophy—"analytical rigour, a preference for the rarefied discourse of theoretical physics, a utilisation of the new mathematical logic as a basic philosophical tool, a piecemeal step-by-step approach to philosophical problem-solving, a respect for the methods and achievements of natural science"⁶¹ can help to answer the great perennial problems of life here and hereafter? It cannot, although we concede that the new philosophy, even though it is more of a conspiratorial digression than a revolution in philosophy, can at least help the "philosophisers" to be clear, consistent and coherent in their synthesizations, presentations and pontifications and if this is what is done in the direction of the moral, the spiritual and the mystical it is within the tradition of ancient African philosophy both in its communal and private aspects. This is because for the African what is, in the words of Abraham and Tempels, is, in the first place, spirit or vital force. Spirit or vital force is primitive in ancient African philosophy.⁶²

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⁶¹ Bell, p. 206.

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