Peter Bodunrin, who is one of the better-known African contemporary philosophers, examines in this seminal article the issue of whether there is an African philosophy and what its nature is. He examines this issue by suggesting that he wants to provide a set of criteria regarding an appropriate conception of philosophy that must be satisfied in order for anything to pass as African philosophy, and insisting that saying that some subject matter does not satisfy these criteria does not necessarily imply a denial of the existence of an African philosophy. Bodunrin argues that the quest for African philosophy is an attempt to meet the challenges created by the colonial situation, the denigration of Africans as irrational and primitive, and the effort to find something in Africa thought systems that is comparable to the honorific view of philosophy in the West. He starts by examining four trends or approaches identified by Odera Oruka regarding what people have characterized as African philosophy. These approaches are ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. He takes a critical look at each of these trends to determine whether they will satisfy some of the stringent conditions that a subject matter must satisfy in order to be classified as philosophy simpliciter (in the absolute sense).

The first approach, ethnophilosophy, represents the worldviews, folklore, folk wisdoms, myths, and beliefs of certain African groups of people, which were unearthed by anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and philosophers. This category of thought system has been criticized by Bodunrin as one which has not been logically argued for or against, and as not being the thoughts of individuals but groups. He argues that philosophy is a logical and rational discipline characterized by a rigorous methodology, conscious reflection, and systematic and critical analysis of a subject matter; it should not be dogmatic and usually is not the views of a group. The second approach, philosophic sagacity, represents the identification of individuals in traditional African societies, uninfluenced by the West, who are comparable to individual thinkers in the Western tradition. These people, considered
philosophical sages, are regarded in their communities as people of wisdom. These sages, it is thought, must have arrived at such wisdom on the basis of rational, logical, and critical reasoning, except that the reasoning, which has to be reconstructed, was lost for lack of documentation. He criticizes this approach: it is similar to ethnophilosophy. It involves myths, worldviews, dogmas, and unsystematized and monolithic ideas that are unwritten.

Bodunrin argues that these thought systems would not be considered philosophical in the Western tradition. Since philosophy is a universal discipline, what is considered philosophy in Africa must be comparable to what is traditionally considered philosophy in the West. He questions the rigor and universality of the unique method used by professional philosophers who develop philosophical ideas from sages through interviews. By this approach, African professional philosophers have tried to prove that traditional Africans can and did indeed do rigorous thinking or philosophy. Bodunrin also questions the philosophical status of philosophic sagacity by arguing that this is usually not the approach adopted in studying Western philosophy. The third approach, nationalist-ideological philosophy, represents the ideologies of nationalist leaders, who mobilized their peoples along certain political ideologies in order to defeat colonialism and gain independence. During this period, political leaders developed different political ideas about how the state should be governed in order to meet the needs of African peoples. These ideas were said to have originated from the African conceptions of family, humanity, and community. Bodunrin questions whether these ideas can be regarded as authentic African philosophy since all these leaders were exposed to, and perhaps trained in, the Western system of thought. Many of these ideas may be seen as adaptations of Western political, social, and moral principles to the African situation. These nationalists tried to bring into sharp focus how good the traditional African systems were and how much they have changed, a change brought about by the damaging and evil effects of colonialism.

These political ideas, like ethnophilosophy, represent an attempt to try to recapture and glorify Africans’ past. However, Bodunrin indicates that when these ideas are subjected to more critical and rigorous analysis and systematization, they may be significant contributions to political theory. The fourth approach, professional philosophy, represents Africans who are trained in the traditions of Western philosophy and are practicing the profession in universities by teaching and doing research. He accepts that the work of these professional philosophers may constitute the content and subject
matter of African philosophy. They are doing philosophy in a systematic, critical, and rigorous sense, comparable to how philosophy is done in the Western tradition. He argues that African philosophy in this sense is rudimentary because no philosopher has an adequate quantity volume profound enough on philosophical topics to warrant serious study as African philosophy. However, what professional philosophers are doing in conjunction with sages may be called African philosophy. The ideas of the sages in their primitive state is not philosophical, but by infusing the rigor of a professional philosopher, a new element is added to make it philosophical. But we have a problem with how they should be characterized: whether the final products belong to the sages or the professional philosophers who analyzed and reconstructed these ideas.

As you read Bodunrin, consider and reflect on the following questions: What are the four trends regarding what has been identified as African philosophy? Why are some of the approaches and subject matter of African philosophy not comparable to the approaches and subject matter of Western philosophy? What are the essential elements of philosophy that African philosophy must have? What are the challenges that the quest for African philosophy are intended to meet? Does Bodunrin think that African philosophy currently exists in the strict sense of philosophy?

Philosophy in Africa has for more than a decade now been dominated by the discussion of one compound question, namely, is there an African philosophy, and if there is, what is it? The first part of the question has generally been unhesitatingly answered in the affirmative. Dispute has been primarily over the second part of the question as various specimens of African philosophy presented do not seem to pass muster. Those of us who refuse to accept certain specimens as philosophy have generally been rather illogically said also to deny an affirmative answer to the first part of the question. In a paper presented at the International Symposium in Memory of Dr. William Amo,¹ the Ghanaian philosopher who taught in German universities in the early part of the eighteenth century, Professor Odera Oruka identified four trends, perhaps more appropriately approaches, in current African philosophy. The four trends identified by Oruka are as follows:

1. **ETHNO-PHILOSOPHY**

This is the term Paulin Hountondji used to refer to the works of those anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers and philosophers who present the collective world views of African peoples, their myths and folk-lore and folk-wisdom, as philosophy. What ethno-philosophers try to do is “to describe a world outlook or thought system of a particular African community or the whole of Africa.” As opposed to seeing philosophy as a body of logically argued thoughts of individuals, ethno-philosophers see African philosophy as communal thought and give its emotional appeal as one of its unique features. Representative authors in this category are Tempels, Senghor, Mbiti and Kagame. Oruka says that this is strictly speaking not philosophy, but philosophy only in a “debased” sense of the word.

2. **PHILOSOPHIE SAGACITY**

This trend implicitly rejects a holistic approach to African philosophy. Rather than seek African philosophy by the study of general world outlooks, customs, folk-lore, etc., the attempt is made to identify men in the society who are reputed for their wisdom. The aim is to show that “literacy is not a necessary condition for philosophical reflection and exposition,” and that in Africa there are “critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgments by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus,” and that there are in Africa men uninfluenced by outside sources who are capable of critical and dialectical inquiry. In Marcel Griaule’s *Conversations with Ogotemmeli: An Introduction to Dogan Religious Ideas*, published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press (1965), Ogotemmeli displays a great philosophic sagacity in his exposition of the secret doctrines of his group. How much is Ogotemmeli’s own philosophy and how much belongs to his secret group may not be known.

3. **NATIONALIST-IDEOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY**

This is represented by the works of politicians like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Leopold Senghor. It is an attempt to evolve a new and, if possible, unique political theory based on traditional African socialism and familyhood. It is argued that a true and meaningful freedom must be accompanied by a true mental liberation and a return, whenever possible and desirable, to genuine and authentic traditional African humanism.
4. PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY

This is the work of many trained philosophers. Many of them reject the assumptions of ethno-philosophy and take a universalist view of philosophy. Philosophy, many of them argue, must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects that receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation in the society within which the philosophers operate. According to this school, African philosophy is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics or history of philosophy. It is desirable that the works be set in some African context, but it is not necessary that they be so. Thus, if African philosophers were to engage in debates on Plato’s epistemology, or on theoretical identities, their works would qualify as African philosophy. It is the view of this school that debate among African philosophers is only just beginning and that the tradition of philosophy in the strict sense of the word is just now being established. 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 systems or the thought systems of any other society would not pass as philosophy. Oruka identifies four African philosophers—Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, himself and myself—whose works reflect this position. I agree with Oruka that the four of us broadly belong to the same “school.” We have met more frequently perhaps than any other group in Africa and have exchanged and discussed our published and unpublished works to the extent that I am afraid I may be doing just what Ayer did in Language, Truth and Logic, expounding, explaining and defending the views of a school. Nevertheless, some subtle differences, as is to be expected, remain among us. In this paper, I shall not repeat in detail our usual arguments for rejecting the works of others as not being philosophical.

Recent discussions and further reflections on the matter have convinced me that the different positions as to the nature of African philosophy held by various contemporary Africans reflect different understandings of the meanings of philosophy itself. I now think that our not wholly terminological dispute as to what is and what is not to count as African philosophy cannot be settled without answering some important questions. Some of these questions are: What exactly are African philosophers trying to do, namely, what challenges are they trying to meet? What is the proper answer to these challenges? In other words, what would constitute an appropriate answer to the problems African philosophers are trying to solve? What is the difference
between a piece of philosophical discourse and discourse in some other discipline? What is it for a given idea or philosophy to be correctly definable as African philosophy? I shall attempt in this paper to answer these and related questions.

Philosophy begins in wonder. The universe itself provided men with the first source of wonder. There are the stars, the oceans, the phenomena of birth, life, death, growth and decay. Men wondered about the fate of the dead. About the living, they wondered about the purpose of life, about what is the proper way to behave. They wonder about whether there is a guiding force behind all these things, etc. All human societies have answers to these questions. The life of a society is organized according to what are accepted as the answers to these fundamental questions. These answers may in fact be grounded in error and ignorance but they are usually not questioned. Rarely do men turn around to criticize themselves without some (usually external) impetus, rarely do men feel the necessity to provide justifications for their beliefs without some challenge.

In Africa, the challenge to the traditional world view and belief systems came chiefly from contact with Western Europeans. For although there must have been some contact through trade and other means between the different peoples of sub-Saharan Africa from time immemorial, yet because of the similarity of their environment and hence the similarity of the problems the universe posed for them, the world views of these peoples, their customs and social organizations were not sufficiently dissimilar to provide significant challenges to one another. The similarity which social anthropologists have found among several African cultures is not surprising for, given identical problems, it is to be expected that some solutions would be similar since human options are not infinite. But things changed upon contact with the West. Large parts of Africa were colonized, evangelization began and writing was introduced. Two different world views came face to face. The four trends identified by Oruka are different attempts to meet the challenges created by the new situation. What are those challenges?

1. Partly out of a desire to understand the Africans better in order to make their governance or conversion to Christianity easier, or, simply out of curiosity in the presence of new and to the Europeans, strange ways of life, European ethnographers began to study the Africans. Their findings were unanimous in concluding that not only were the Africans radically different from Europeans in the hue of their skin, but that they were also radically different in their mode of life and in
their capacity for rational thinking. They emphasized the irrational and non-logical nature of African thought. Many of the early anthropologists and ethnographers being clergymen, their interest was in the religious and spiritistic thoughts of the African. The usual verdict was that the African mentality was primitive, irrational, and illogical. With the growth of education among Africans it began to be realized that an unworthy picture of Africans was being presented and that a misinformed and false interpretation was being given to African thought and way of life. A new interpretation which would do the black man proud was called for. This is what the authors described by Oruka as practitioners of ethno-philosophy are trying to do.

2. The second challenge came with the rise of African, or shall we say, black nationalism. There was struggle for political independence. It was felt that political independence must be accompanied with a total mental liberation, and if possible a total severance of all intellectual ties with the colonial masters. By this time Africans had acquired western modes of life in many ways—we wore Western type of dress, spoke English or French, etc. The political system was modeled after the Westminster pattern or after that of some other European parliament. The traditional method of government was displaced in most places. This was not without tension. It is easier and less damaging to a people’s self-pride to adopt a foreign language, a foreign mode of dress and culinary habits than it is to adopt and internalize foreign ways of social organization. The Westminster model was failing in several places. We began to think of the traditional social order and to seek salvation in the pristine values of our ancestors. Nationalist-ideological philosophy is a response to this challenge.

3. A third challenge arises from man’s natural urge to look for comparisons everywhere. The way we understand the world is by putting things into categories. If you come across a strange object somewhere you think of what it is like, you compare it with other things of the same sort you have seen elsewhere. Africans who study the intellectual history of other peoples naturally want to know the intellectual history of their own people. They are naturally curious to find out whether there are African opposite numbers to the philosophers they have studied, say, in Western intellectual history, or least whether there are equivalent concepts to the ones they have come across in Western philosophy, and if so how the concepts are related.
or different in their logical behaviour from those of Western philosophy. This point has become immensely important because of the honorific way in which philosophy has come to be seen. Philosophy has become a value-laden expression such that for a people not to have philosophy is for them to be considered intellectually inferior to others who have. No one laments the lack of African physics. African mathematicians have, as far as I know, not been asked to produce African mathematics. No one has asked that our increasing number of express-ways be built the African way. Yet philosophers in Africa are asked, if not directly, yet in a subtle way, to produce an autochthonous African species of their discipline. It is natural for the nationalist non-philosopher colleague on a university curriculum committee to wonder why a philosophy department in an African university is not offering courses in African philosophy while there are courses on British philosophy, American philosophy, European philosophy, etc. He would simply argue that if these other peoples have philosophies, the African too must have a philosophy. Unacquainted with what is taught in these other courses and fully acquainted with the many rich “philosophical” and witty sayings and religious practices of his own people, the nationalist cannot understand why African philosophers do not teach African philosophy. To fail to teach African philosophy is almost tantamount to crime and an unpatriotic omission. What seems to be unclear to many is the sense in which a philosophy or an idea is described as the philosophy or idea of a people. What does an expression like “British philosophy” really mean? I shall address myself to this question towards the end of this paper.

Philosophers might try to face the challenges by introducing ethno-philosophy or teaching the political ideologies of African politicians as philosophy. They may also adopt the method of the social anthropologists and engage in field work: have a tape recorder in hand and visit, and conduct interviews with, people who are reputed to be wise men in the society, hoping that they will discover African philosophy that way.

4. Added to the foregoing, there is a rather recent and growing challenge arising from the scarcity of resources in Africa. Philosophy, and indeed the whole of the education sector, has to compete with other social needs in the allocation of scarce resources. Roads must be built,
hospitals equipped and agriculture developed. In these circumstances, that a philosopher, like any one else may be required to show the relevance of his discipline is understandable. The emergence of African this and African that is a familiar phenomenon in the African academic scene. It is as if anything becomes relevant once you stick on it the prefix “African.” It might even be argued that if historians and students of literature have succeeded in creating African history and African literature, we too ought to create African philosophy. It is against these challenges that we must now examine the different approaches mentioned earlier. We shall consider them in a rather different order, treating nationalist-ideological and philosophic sagacity first, and ethno-philosophy last. Ethno-philosophy is the one which stands in the sharpest opposition to the position we wish to urge, and it is in consideration of it that our own conception of philosophy will become clearer. We can give the other positions a fair day fairly quickly.

I sympathize with the efforts of our African political thinkers. It would be great indeed if we could evolve a new political system, a new socio-political order which is different from those found elsewhere and based on an autochthonous African philosophy. That indeed is a worthwhile aspiration which one must not give up without trial. But I am disturbed at certain presuppositions of attempts so far made. To begin with, I think that the past the political philosophers seek to recapture cannot be recaptured. Nkrumah seems to realize this in his Consciencism. That is why he advocated a new African socialism that would take into account the existential situation of Africa. Contact with the West through colonization and Christianity and the spread of Islam have had far-reaching effects on African traditional life. Any reconstruction of our social order must take these into account. Yet Nkrumah and Nyerere both think that the traditional way of life must be their point de depart. But the traditional African society was not as complex as the modern African societies. The crisis of conscience which we have in the modern African society was not there. In the sphere of morality there was a fairly general agreement as to what was right and what was expected of one. In a predominantly non-money economy where people lived and worked all their lives in the same locale and among the same close relatives African communalism was workable. Africa is becoming rapidly urbanized. The population of a typical big city neighbourhood today is heterogeneous. People come from different places, have different backgrounds, do not necessarily have
blood ties and are less concerned with the affairs of one another than people used to be. The security of the traditional setting is disappearing. African traditional communalism worked because of the feelings of familyhood that sustained it. This was not a feeling of familyhood of the human race, but a feeling of closeness among those who could claim a common ancestry. I do not know how to check continued urbanization with its attendant problems. We may advocate the organization of our cities into manageable units and encourage the sense of belonging among people however diverse their origins, as Wiredu suggested. Still, it should be realized that this would have to be based on new premises, not on the old ones.

Political thinkers are also guilty of romanticizing the African past. Certainly not everything about our past was glorious. Anyone who has watched Roots (even if he has not read the book), and however melodramatic the movie version might have been, does not need to be told that. The interminable land disputes between communities, sometimes within the same village, show that the communalism we talk about was between members of very closed groups. A way of life which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious. Any reconstruction of our past must examine features of our thought system and our society that made this possible. African humanism must not be a backward-looking humanism. There is no country whose traditional ideology could cope with the demands of the modern world. Despite claims to the contrary, the works of Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere are not entirely divorced from foreign influence. Indeed they have studied philosophy in Western schools and the influence of this training is noticeable in their idioms. However, they do not claim to be merely describing for us the African traditional philosophy, nor do they claim that their work represents the collective view of the traditional African. What they are doing is trying to base a philosophy of their own on the traditional African past. The fact that they may have given an inaccurate picture of the past is beside the point. Divorced from their nationalistic-ideological bias and with a more critical approach, their work may be significant contributions to political theory, and it is hair splitting trying to make a distinction between political theory and political philosophy. What is needed in these works is more rigour and more systematization.

There appear to be two ways of approaching the investigation of philosophic sagacity. One is the procedure currently being used by Dr. 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 a real dialogue with them on the Yoruba concept of a person. . . . Another is the method of Dr. Oruka and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. It consists in recording the philosophy of an individual Kenyan (they hope to find many more such Kenyans) uninfluenced by modern education. It is not pretended that they are recording the common thought of the Kenyan Luo tribe. The purpose seems to be to find out the critical thinking of some native Kenyans, and thereby establish that there are native Africans capable of doing rigorous philosophy.

But a number of questions must be asked. First, whose philosophy does the philosopher produce as a result of such research? What does he succeed in doing vis-a-vis the challenges earlier discussed? I suggest that what the philosopher is doing here is helping people to give birth to philosophical ideas already in them. The product of the joint enquiry of the traditional sage and the trained philosopher is a new phenomenon. Both the traditional sage and the trained philosopher inevitably enter the dialogue with certain presuppositions. What they come out with is a new creation out of their reflections on the beliefs previously held by them. But, and this is the important point to remember, the philosopher and the sage are “doing their own thing.” They are doing African philosophy only because the participants are Africans or are working in Africa, and are interested in a philosophical problem (howbeit universal) from an African point of view. As will be argued later, if they were merely interested in how and what Africans think about persons their work would not be philosophically interesting, not any more interesting than the works of ethnographers. Second, this “going out quite literally into the market place . . . something we are told philosophers used to do before they became encapsulated in our academic institutions,”14 is not to be understood as being the same as what Socrates and his contemporaries did in the Athenian agora. Metaphors can be misleading. Socrates’ interlocutors, if Plato’s dialogues have any verisimilitude, are his intellectual peers. Among them were etymologists like Euthyphro (Cratylus 396d) after whom Plato named the Euthyphro, renowned orators like Gorgias (Symposium 198c), mathematicians like Theaetetus, etc. The Athenian agora was not a mere market place in our sense of the word; it was the speakers’ corner, the conference centre and the seminar auditorium of the Athenian free and leisure class citizenry. Socrates did not leave us any written work but he was not an illiterate.
There is indeed evidence that Socrates and a large section of the Athenian free adult male citizenry was not illiterate.\textsuperscript{15} It is reasonable to assume that those who met in the *agora* for intellectual discussions were well-educated persons thoroughly familiar with the written and oral traditions of their people. Their search was not for the Athenian conception of justice, piety or what have you. In fact, Socrates insisted almost *ad nauseam* on the necessity of distinguishing between popular conceptions of notions like justice and piety and the real meaning of these concepts—what the thing is in itself. It was in this process of searching for the real meaning of concepts (mostly ethical concepts, at first) as opposed to popular beliefs about them that Greek philosophy was born. It was a criticism of traditional cultural beliefs.

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. It is unlikely that such conscious reflection did not take place in traditional Africa; it is however left to research to show to what extent it has. That it has cannot be denied *a priori*.

\dots

Let us now come to ethno-philosophy. The sources are African folklore, tales, myths, proverbs, religious beliefs and practices, and African-culture at large. In respect of these it is necessary to make clear what we are denying. We are not denying that they are worthy of the philosopher’s attention. We are not denying the existence of respectable and in many ways complex, and in some sense rational and logical conceptual analysis in Africa. In one sense a system of beliefs is rational if, once you understand the system, individual beliefs within it make sense; in other words, if one could see why members of the society within the system would hold such beliefs as they do in fact hold. And a belief system is logical if, once you identify the premises or assumptions upon which the system is based, individual beliefs would follow from them and can be deduced from them alone. Such a system may also even be coherent. \dots

The usual criticisms against ethno-philosophers\textsuperscript{16} have taken the following forms. (1) That some of the things they say about African culture are false; such as when one shows that Mbiti’s claim that Africans have no conception of the future beyond the immediate future to be false by drawing attention to various modes of reference to the distant future in African language and social life,\textsuperscript{17} or that Senghor is wrong for claiming that “Negro African reasoning is intuitive by participation” by showing the unemotional
rationality of some African thinking (as in Robin Horton’s works). This method by itself does not show that the works so criticized are unphilosophical works. A philosophical work does not cease to be philosophical merely because it contains false claims. (2) Since we hold that philosophy is properly studied, according to us, through the examination of the thoughts of individuals, another argument we have used against ethno-philosophers is that the collective thought of peoples upon which they concentrate is not genuine philosophy. Although any attempt to give an account of the collective thoughts of a whole people lends itself to a usual objection against holistic explanations of social phenomena (namely, that they must posit the existence of group minds), this objection is, in and of itself, not sufficient to dismiss such attempts as non-philosophical. Philosophers like anyone else may err. At any rate, it is not clear why the thought of groups, if there is such a thing, cannot be a proper subject for philosophical study. To argue that it cannot is to beg the question for it is to assume that the question of what methods and materials belong to philosophy has been settled in advance. This history of philosophy is replete with discussions of different sorts of things and various approaches to the subject. One cannot dismiss the discussion of anything and the use of any method as unphilosophical without argument. To opt for one method is to take a philosophical stance. There is no a priori reason why proverbs, myths of gods and angels, social practices, etc., could not be proper subjects for philosophical enquiry.

The African philosopher cannot deliberately ignore the study of the traditional belief system of his people. Philosophical problems arise out of real life situations. In Africa, more than in many other parts of the modern world, traditional culture and beliefs still exercise a great influence on the thinking and actions of men. At a time when many people in the West believe that philosophy has become impoverished and needs redirection, a philosophical study of traditional societies may be the answer. The point, however, is that the philosopher’s approach to this study must be one of criticism, by which one does not mean “negative appraisal, but rational, impartial and articulate appraisal whether positive or negative. To be “critical” of received ideas is accordingly not the same thing as rejecting them: it consists rather in seriously asking oneself whether the ideas in question should be reformed, modified or conserved, and in applying one’s entire intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer. What seems to me clear is that the
philosopher cannot embark on a study of African traditional thought whole-
sale. He would have to proceed piecemeal. He may have to begin by an
examination of philosophical issues and concepts that have loomed largely
in the history of world philosophy, and he must not be charged for being
unoriginal or being irrelevant as an African philosopher simply because he is
discussing in the African context issues that have also received attention
elsewhere. If a problem is philosophical it must have a universal relevance to
all men. Philosophical systems are built up by systematic examination of
specific features of the world and out of the relationships that are perceived
to obtain between them. Some contemporary African philosophers have
begun the piecemeal study of philosophical concepts embedded in African
traditional thought.

...  

In a more important sense of “rational,” showing why a people hold a
particular belief is not sufficient to show that the belief is rational. Given any
human social practice one ran always find a reason for it. In the case in point
here, an explanation of an event in terms of the motives of a person or a god
is rational only if evidence is given for the existence of the person or god, or
sufficient reasons given why their existence must be assumed and arguments
adduced as to why the person or god should be supposed to be implicated in
the particular event. Surely, to show that a belief arises from emotional
needs, if this is in fact true, can hardly be construed as having shown it to be
rational. In all this one notices a reluctance to evaluate lest it be understood
as condemning a particular culture. This same reluctance to pass evaluative
judgments is evident in Hallen’s discussion of the concept of destiny in the
Yoruba thought system.21

...  

The influence of writing in all these cannot be under-estimated. Writing
helps us to pin down ideas and to crystallize them in our minds. It makes the
ideas of one day available for later use. It is by its means that the thoughts of
one age are made available to succeeding generations with the least distor-
tion. We do not always, as it were, have to begin again. How much of the
present discussion would I carry in my memory ten years from now? How
much of it, if I were to rely on oral transmission, would remain undistorted
for the future? Surely, writing is not a prerequisite for philosophy but I doubt
whether philosophy can progress adequately without writing. Had others not
written down the sayings of Socrates, the pre-Socratics and Buddha, we would today not regard them as philosophers, for their thoughts would have been lost in the mythological world of proverbs and pithy sayings.

The remaining point is this: what does an expression like “British Philosophy” mean? It does not mean the philosophy of the average Englishman, nor a philosophy generally known among the British people. The average Briton is not aware of much of Principia Mathematica or of the contents of the Tractatus. British philosophy is not a monolithic tradition. At this point in time empiricism and logical analysis seem to be the predominating features of that tradition but by no means can all present philosophers in the British tradition be described as empiricists or analysts. Towards the close of the last century, the dominant figure was Bradley, a Hegelian idealist. British philosophy is not a body of thoughts that had its origins in the British Isles. Greek thought (itself informed by early Egyptian thought), continental idealism, and scientific philosophy (the philosophy of the Vienna Circle) have all had influences on British thought. Some of the most influential figures in British philosophy have not even been British by birth—e.g. Wittgenstein and Popper.

The view of philosophy advocated here is not narrow. It enables us to study African traditional thought, but it cautions that it be done properly. Philosophy as a discipline does, and must, have autonomy. The view that anything can pass for philosophy will hurt the development of philosophy in Africa. Not everyone is a philosopher. Philosophy requires training. Why must we lament a late start in philosophy? No one laments our late start in mathematics. I think that we must disabuse ourselves of the evaluative and honorific undertones that philosophy has come to have and regard it just as one discipline among others. That certainly is the way professional philosophers see their subject. It is just another of man’s cognitive activities, not especially superior to others. A department of philosophy in a university is one among many other academic departments in the university, but in order that the foundations of the discipline be well laid it is necessary that the boundaries of it be clearly delimited. We are probably all capable of doing philosophy, but we are not all philosophers, just as we are not all historians. We must advocate rigour. Whether we like it or not we will have science and technology. We have to acquire the thought habits needed to cope with life in a technological age. It is now time to begin self-criticism in Africa. Philoso-
phers cannot afford to expend all their energies on the often unproductive and self-stultifying we-versus-you scholarship. We as Africans must talk to one another. We are likely to have a more honest and frank debate that way. If Marx is right that the important thing is to change the world, then it seems to me that our choice is obvious. No doubt many things are worth preserving in our traditional culture—especially in the moral sphere—but we stand in danger of losing these if we do not take pains to separate these from those aspects that are undesirable. This we can do only by the method of philosophical criticism.23

ENDNOTES


2 Paulin Hountondji, “Le Mythe de la Philosophie Spontanée,” in Cahiers Philosophiques Africains, No. 1 (Lubumbashi, 1972). Although Oruka had Hountondji in mind, it must be realized that Hountondji was not the first to use this expression. Kwame Nkrumah had written a thesis on “Ethno-philosophy” in his student days in America.


4 This is from an unpublished version of the paper referred to in footnote 1 above.


6 See the revised version of Oruka’s paper referred to in note 3, footnote 15.

7 Just as the contact of the Greeks with the Egyptians, and that of Medieval Europe with Arabic thought had influences on the thoughts of those peoples.


9 Some of my colleagues criticized the syllabus I drew up for the Philosophy Department, University of Ibadan, in 1974 as being not sufficiently African and too Western.

10 This is in disagreement with Professor Ntumba’s universalist interpretation of African familyhood, and Nyerere’s own claim in his Ujamaa. See note 5 above.


13 Kwasi Wiredu, loc. cit.


15 In defending himself against the charge of atheism brought against him by Meletus, Socrates said that the views attributed to him were in fact those of Anaxagoras whom he would not plagiarize. Anaxagoras’ book, Socrates adds, was readily available at a cheap price at every corner store. Of the Athenian jury Socrates asks Meletus, “Have you so poor an opinion of these gentlemen, and do you assume them to be so illiterate as not to know that the writings of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae are full of theories like these?” (Plato, *Apology*, 26d).

16 I do not use this term with any pejorative connotations.


22 In the line of argument that follows I am greatly indebted to Professor Kwasi Wiredu’s “What is African Philosophy?”, presented at the William Amo International Symposium referred to earlier.

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