

# African Philosophy: Appraisal of a Recurrent Problematic

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## PART I: THE SOURCES OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

“Philosophy” is notoriously difficult to define. In fact, the question of the “definition of philosophy” is itself one of the most interesting topics within the discipline. The term “philosophy” (love of wisdom) in its etymological derivation and early use included all aspects of human knowledge. Today, however, human knowledge has become greatly compartmentalized and specialized, leaving doubts in some minds as to whether there is still any significant area of knowledge properly designated as “philosophy.” Nevertheless, the existence of philosophy within any of the specialized disciplines is not a matter of doubt to those within or without the said discipline who are ready to subject its presuppositions to question or its purported achievements to severe critical appraisal. In like manner, the existence of systems of philosophy seems to be taken for granted as when we talk about, say, British empiricism, continental rationalism, German idealism, American pragmatism, etc. This would seem to indicate that philosophy is essentially an activity rather than a clearly defined body of knowledge.

Philosophy is perhaps the only academic discipline where a hall-full of experts would not be able in an evening’s discussion to agree on a single-sentence definition delimiting the scope and subject matter of their field

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of expertise. This is really not at all surprising, but it takes more than a casual familiarity with philosophy to realize that it is not. The truth is that the question, "What is philosophy?" is itself one of the greatest philosophical problems. Any answer to this question, even a hazarded one, requires philosophizing because it necessarily involves taking a philosophical position. This peculiarity makes philosophy perhaps the only thoroughly self-critical discipline. It infuses in the philosopher a certain permanent reluctance to take things at their face value, thereby turning him/her into an intellectual troublemaker who is always out to disturb complacency. And, if he/she is really a good philosopher, he/she starts with his/her own complacency. But as the late A.J. Ayer once remarked: "In the field of learning, as in politics, it is only because some people are prepared to make trouble that anything of importance ever gets done."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes it has been lamented that philosophy has little to show for its labors. This lament conveniently forgets that philosophy at one time or another has been the mother of virtually all intellectual disciplines including the physical sciences and the only recently nascent psychological sciences. As Walter B. Weimer observes though:

In most cases, the birth pangs have been traumatic with the mother jealously trying to retain sovereignty in the new domain and the offspring childishly distancing itself from its intellectual heritage. Again and again, it is necessary for both sides to learn that philosophical analysis does not diminish because a new science is in practice and that science can never eschew philosophy. Science enriches philosophy, and vice versa; their relationship, though often painful, is symbiotic rather than antagonistic or parasitical. Thus scientific accounts should supplement, rather than replace, philosophical analysis of a domain.<sup>3</sup>

Here, of course, we should understand "science" in its broadest signification as any identifiable exoteric field of academic study.

The problem of the definition of philosophy is thus understandably one of the perennial philosophical problems, and one that is not likely ever to be definitively answered once and for all times. Each epoch, even each individual philosopher, must tackle the problem anew within the context of its/his/her own particular agenda of motivating problems. Nevertheless there are certain permanent and irreducible characteristics that would generally be accepted as inextricably associated with the activity of philosophizing and that would seem to be present in all conceptions of philosophy, for instance, its being essentially a purely intellectual pursuit, an activity of the mind. As Aristotle stated nearly two-and-a-half millennia ago in one of the fragments, *Protrepticus*, "Philosophy is the mother of arguments."

I would suggest the following decision procedure for determining whether or not any putative material (written or oral) is philosophy or philosophical. First, we should ask: is it a result of *reflection*? Unreflective rantings such as those of a madman could never qualify as philosophy even though they may

actually contain some truthful insights. However, that a discourse is reflective is only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition for being philosophical. One might reflect in the simple sense of noticing or being aware of a certain stream of consciousness letting one's thoughts drift along in some sort of daydream or reverie without the slightest attempt to do anything else about such thoughts. The result of such reflection might contain very interesting philosophical insights, but it would be closer to the rantings of a madman than to philosophy. This sort of reflection could, of course, easily become philosophy at the *second moment of vision*, that is, when someone else extracts the significant insights and provides the missing logical links between them.

I remember, when I first read the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I had the strong impression that I was reading a poet rather than a philosopher until further and more careful reading revealed to me that his highly pithy aphorisms were in fact mainly enthymemic conclusions of otherwise highly elaborate arguments whose missing premises had been purposely suppressed in the service of a very radical economy of words. For many people, Wittgenstein is a philosopher only at the second moment of vision. And this is quite consistent with the fact that, even though he wrote very little, philosophy libraries are today full of commentaries and works on him. Today, in fact, the list of serious studies based on his works is counted in the hundreds.

But, to get back from the digression, what is needed to turn mere reflection into philosophy is the *critical* element. And whenever this critical element is present, the discourse takes the shape of an argument; in other words, deliberation or reasoning is necessarily involved. This, inevitably, is a slow and painful process, consisting in a trial-and-error procedure in which inferences or conclusions are drawn from putative facts or premises.

### *African Philosophy*

The difficulty of saying what philosophy is has been carried over into the problematic of African philosophy. Naturally. This partly explains the intractability of the questions: "Is there an African philosophy?" and "What is African philosophy?" The chances of the question, "What is African philosophy?", getting a definitive answer are exactly as good as those of the question, "What is philosophy?" No answer in the guise of a *timeless verity* seems likely for reasons already mentioned. Nevertheless, this does not mean that some of the answers already proffered are not illuminating. It only means that none of these can pretend infallibility, sacrosanctity, timelessness, etc., or in any other way become tyrannically canonical.

Some people object to the term "African philosophy" on the ground that there is no philosophy common to *all* Africans. This is a silly objection. Usually what is argued here is that some author had described his ethnic philosophy and then presumptuously raised it to the status of African philosophy. It is therefore assumed that by pointing to some African peoples who do not

fit into the analysis the claim of its being African philosophy is thereby demonstrated to be false. But, to say, for instance, that African men love fathering many children is not invalidated by pointing to an African man who is childless and celibate or to a non-African man with many wives and children. When we talk of American or British philosophy we do not thereby imply that all Americans or Britons believe in or are even aware of the said philosophy. How could a philosophy or anything else be Akan without, *a fortiori*, being Ghanaian or Ghanaian without necessarily being African?

It needs repeating that the objection that there is no philosophy properly designated "African" has grown out of inappropriate and unjustifiable fastidiousness. This has misled many people into thinking that the best or the only way of demonstrating African philosophy is to show that *all* Africans have a common "worldview." In this way it has been made to appear as though African philosophy consists only of metaphysics. That there is no collective African mind, that there is no philosophy in which *all* Africans believe, or even of which *all* Africans are aware, are obvious truisms. But that does not imply that there is no African philosophy.

### *Two Senses of Philosophy*

In discussing African philosophy, there are two common legitimate meanings of the word "philosophy" that must be firmly kept in mind. In the first sense, "philosophy" refers to a set or system of fundamental beliefs and convictions which are usually reflected in action. In this sense, every identifiable society and even every normal individual person has a philosophy even though this fact may not be apparent either to an observer or to the society or person in question. In this sense, having a philosophy is not necessarily equivalent to being a philosopher. In the second sense, "philosophy" refers, in the first instance, to a consciously articulate and critical discourse (verbal or written) that is necessarily individual in origin, and secondarily to a corpus or system of such discourses together with the supporting structures in which they are symbolically encoded.

We may call these two senses of philosophy the *loose* and the *strict*, the *general* and the *particular*, the *popular* and the *special*, the *mild* and the *rigorous*, or whatever, provided these terms are not necessarily construed as assessments of value. Such descriptions need not be taken as expressing the relative importance of the one vis-à-vis the other. In my view, the main purpose of philosophy in the second sense delimited above should be to convert it into philosophy in the first sense. In other words, philosophizing is not and should not be an aimless purposeless exercise, a prize in a vacuum, as it were. Its aim should be the discovery of the *true*, the *good*, or the *beautiful* with a view to making use of them in living. The relationship between thought and action is dialectical in the sense that earnest thought necessarily manifests in action while action cannot but provide the agenda for reflection. If this

were not the case, philosophical theories would hardly generate any serious controversies.

Now when philosophy passes from the second into the first sense, it becomes difficult to recognize it as such unless the original arguments which led to the conclusions (positions) adopted are reconstructed. This is one reason that philosophy seems to be a vanishing discipline. Once its achievements are *used* they become philosophy only in the first rather imperceptible sense of the word. But philosophy is condemned to this apparently self-annulling task because, to be relevant and worthwhile, it must seek to achieve results which have a bearing on human life. Luckily, ineradicable human fallibility guarantees that philosophy in the second sense will never run out of problems to consider.

### *The Importance of Writing*

It is immediately clear that writing and all structures which support it—journals, books, libraries, computers, etc.—is indispensable for the preservation of philosophy in our second sense. In the absence of writing, philosophy in this sense can only come down as philosophy in the first sense and can be reconstructed as philosophy in the second sense only from retrospective hindsight. Some African philosophers, it seems to me, have so far failed to recognize the indispensable role of writing, and this has made many of them argue in circles in their attempts at defending African philosophy.

We must not disparage oral tradition and orality in general in pre-literate societies. Nevertheless, the limitations of oral tradition are not only very palpable but easily demonstrable. One of these glaring limitations has to do with *the poverty of human memory*. You can try the experiment on yourself. On my part, sometimes while rummaging through the shelves of my personal library, I would occasionally come across a book and be very surprised that I had it all the time without ever having read it. But when I settle down determined to read it, I am often further surprised to discover that I not only had read the book before but had carefully underlined several passages and even written comments on the margins. And yet I could have sworn on oath that I didn't have the book in question and had never read it.

Human memory is just no good. A few months ago, I forgot my handbag containing, among other things, an entire month's salary inside my car in downtown Yaounde. The bag was neatly stolen from the car and I did not even realize it until much later when I needed something from the bag. Of course songs, folktales, proverbs, etc. may be designed precisely to aid human memory. But all these devices are themselves subject to the very ailment which they are designed to cure. There is among my own people a well-known folktale about a clever trickster named Wanyetoh. But every village tells the story differently, although the moral of the story remains, admittedly, the same. In fact one of my grannies who used to tell the story of Wanyetoh

to us as children told it quite differently on some occasions, thereby sometimes drawing protests from us. This clearly shows that if philosophy in the second sense is oral in form it can survive over any period of time only as philosophy in the first sense. One could go on and multiply examples, but it is unnecessary. Enough has been said, I believe, to justify the conclusion that oral tradition, since it is based on human memory, could not really be the basis or vehicle of any exact science or of philosophy in our second sense.

It has sometimes been argued that some famous philosophers, such as the Greek pre-Socratics and Socrates himself, never wrote down anything, and yet their philosophies have come down to us. But there is no doubt that we have to thank Plato and Aristotle for these philosophies, just as it is Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that we have to thank for the philosophy of Jesus Christ. These people wrote in an age with a more generous attitude towards matters of authorship and copyright, an age in which economic motives had not yet complicated matters relating to authorship. If it were in our day, some of them would probably have plagiarized the philosophies they were recording and presented them as their own work. They must have recorded honestly but they could hardly have done it accurately. In the case of Plato especially, there is no doubt that some of the views he attributes to Socrates are his own (Plato's) views. But had the matter been left entirely to oral tradition, it is unlikely that even the name "Socrates" would have reached our age. The philosophies of Socrates, the pre-Socratics, Christ, etc., are philosophies mainly at the second moment of vision, *mutatis mutandis*, since none of them is certified verbatim reporting.

The distinction we have just made cuts across many others which have been proposed by African philosophers in their attempts to define African philosophy. Examples of such distinctions are the following: the *simple/unique*, the *universalist/culturalist* (Odera Oruka), *folk philosophy/philosophy* (Kwasi Wiredu), *ethnophilosophy/philosophy* (Paulin Hountondji), *traditional philosophy/critical philosophy* (T.U. Nwala), *thought/philosophy*, *traditional philosophy/modern philosophy*, *implicit philosophy/explicit philosophy*, etc.

### *The Traditional and the Modern*

The distinction we have made between philosophy as a system of fundamental beliefs and convictions reflected in action and philosophy as a consciously articulate critical discourse calls for another distinction between traditional African philosophy and modern African philosophy. Traditional African philosophy can be conceived as being mainly, though not necessarily exclusively, unwritten. If it is true, as some scholars argue, that the legacy of so called Western philosophy, usually credited to the ancient Greeks, is, in fact, a stolen legacy properly belonging to ancient traditional Africa, then some traditional African philosophy is to be found in written form.

Furthermore, who can rule out the possibility that future archaeological excavations might reveal some African community which, like the Bamouns

of Cameroon, not only developed a script but also wrote down their philosophy? Modern or contemporary African philosophy is mostly, though by no means entirely, written. When we listen to discussions or arguments in the village courtyard we hear a good deal of this philosophy. Furthermore, some researchers who take the pains to talk to wise illiterate people hear a lot of this philosophy and eventually some of it reaches all of us as philosophy at the second moment of vision. This is the case with H. Odera Oruka and what he has termed "Sage Philosophy."

As far as traditional African philosophy is concerned, I consider the most pertinent question here to be the following: in the absence of writing, what are the sources of traditional African philosophy? The provocative denial by some scholars of the existence of African philosophy, which sparked off the long academic debate to which this essay is a contribution, when not a purely political issue, is at bottom a denial of the existence of any sources for such a philosophy. It has usually been assumed by defenders of African philosophy that these sources exist and that they include, *inter alia*, proverbs, idioms, songs, myths, legends, etc. But since other philosophic traditions do not normally consider these as sources of their philosophy, this assumption, with regard to African philosophy, stands in need of some justification. The general limitations of oral tradition notwithstanding, I think it can plausibly be argued that traditional African philosophy is to be found in these vehicles to an extent not matched by other philosophic traditions. The reason here is that within traditional African cultures, these vehicles have always served didactic purposes and philosophy would not have been an exception. As E.A. Ruch observes,

... African languages indicate a richness and flexibility of concepts and of grammar which is unmatched in any Indo-European language... Words are symbols of thought. Perhaps the need for oral communication has forced the Bantu languages into a grammatical conciseness which the written Western and Eastern languages did not need.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting, for example, to compare, say, English proverbs and idioms with their counterparts in an African language. It would appear (although I may be wrong here) that most English proverbs and idioms are mere linguistic contrivances whose significance is scarcely ever much more than semantic or literary. Of course, these types of proverbs and idioms are also found in African languages. But, by and large, African proverbs and idioms are serious vehicles for transmitting African traditional wisdom, morality, and philosophy.

This means that proverbs, idioms, songs, myths, legends, aphorisms, folktales, etc. might be genuine sources of traditional African philosophy. But the philosophy they contain is philosophy in our first delimited sense. They can become philosophy in the second sense only at the second moment of vision, that is, when analyzed and/or interpreted by some contemporary thinker. It is evident that this type of philosophy would form a rather small part of



African philosophy. It would therefore be wrong to assume or conclude or in any way give or receive the impression that this is all that African philosophy is about. It is when this is done that a serious worry arises as to whether African philosophy is really philosophy or rather “mythologies” presented as a continental philosophy. It is this worry that has mainly preoccupied some contemporary African philosophers, such as H. Odera Oruka, Paulin Hountondji, P.O. Bodunrin, and Kwasi Wiredu, who in their several attempts to come to grips with the worry have sometimes given some people the impression that they were denying the existence of African philosophy.

## PART II: WHAT IS AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY, AND WHO IS AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHER?<sup>5</sup>

### *The Most Important Question*

Now, given that philosophy in our second sense of a consciously articulate and critical discourse (verbal or written) must form the larger part of African Philosophy, the most important question here is this: Who is an African philosopher and what type of writing or discourse can justifiably be considered as African philosophy? This question needs very careful conceptual analysis. So far, African philosophers seem to have exhibited thorough confusion in addressing themselves to this question; I have already suggested in the first part of this chapter a procedure for determining if any putative material is philosophy or philosophical.

Sometimes during a conference, seminar, or symposium, someone would get on the podium to narrate or recite and interpret folktales, proverbs, rituals, etc. or some other cultural practices in the name of African philosophy. When this is done at an international forum, it often provides exotic comic relief from what can sometimes be accurately described as incomprehensible quibbling over trivialities. I suspect that it is mostly for this reason that these sorts of contributions are often sought and even sponsored. But I do not think that this is philosophy at all, although it may well be good anthropology, sociology, linguistics, literature, or whatever. That is not to denigrate these disciplines or to say that a philosopher should be forbidden from engaging in them. Far from it. The point, however, is that such studies should not be presented in the guise of philosophy. To qualify as philosophy any such exercise would have to be part of some project which is distinctively philosophical in the sense of being consciously and articulately critical and argumentative. “Critical” is not, of course, to be construed as limited to negative appraisal but should be conceived simply as articulate, rational, and impartial appraisal whether negative or positive. There is no suggestion here that an anthropologist, linguist, sociologist, etc. is incapable of engaging in this sort of activity. But such an activity cannot be conceived as part of such disciplines in so far as they are descriptive sciences and to the extent that any scholar of



such disciplines engages in this sort of activity, to that extent does he/she transcend the confines of such a field and become a philosopher.

The work of sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, political scientists, etc. cannot but be of interest to philosophers who may use the results of such works in their own analytical and prescriptive works. It is thus in the interest of philosophers as well that these social scientists and other scholars should use methods and analyses that are rationally credible and defensible. Philosophers can therefore engage in critical appraisal of such methods and analyses. Some philosophers go as far as engaging in the actual work of these other scholars. This cannot be proscribed. But the dangers of committing blunders which any scholar is likely to commit when operating outside his/her proper frame must not be underestimated. In any case, such works whether done by philosophers or non-philosophers should not be presented for what they are not. Particularly, they should not be presented as philosophy, if they are wholly or mainly descriptive.

In some departments of philosophy in African universities there is a cleavage among the staff into two mutually antagonistic camps: militants for African philosophy who look on African colleagues who do not share their sense of mission as traitors, and non-enthusiasts who view philosophy in overly universal terms as some sort of sacred discipline in danger of being profaned with folktales and mythologies by their antagonists. I think it is time to make peace between these two groups.

At the XVIIth World Congress of Philosophy in 1983, I prepared a paper entitled "For and Against God: A Consideration of Some Traditional Arguments on the question of God." The main thrust of my paper was that the question as to whether or not God exists is improvable either way, and that if we weigh good reasons for belief in either proposition, it would turn out that belief in the theistic hypothesis is more reasonable (or rational). When I gave the draft of this paper to a colleague for criticism, he told me that it was a very good paper, but asked how on Earth an African philosopher could travel all the way to Canada to present a paper on a topic in Western philosophy. I answered that I did not consider my paper a contribution to Western philosophy; that I considered the problem of God as being of universal relevance and interest. Whereupon, he pointed out that I had used only Western philosophers such as Kant, Popper, and Mackie to support my arguments. He suggested that if I could support my arguments using African philosophers, proverbs, idioms, myths, etc. it would be more appropriate. I complained that I did not know of any African philosophers who had concerned themselves with this particular problem or of any relevant proverbs. He then suggested that if I went to my village and talked to wise old people or sages I would learn a lot on the question of God. But at the time I neither considered this the job of a philosopher nor did I feel the slightest inclination to undertake it.

Ever since, however, further reflection has convinced me that a philosopher can undertake such a job. Moreover, given the African historical

experience and contemporary realities, an African philosopher should whenever and wherever desirable strive to undertake this extra burden. The reason here is that he/she has usually inevitably and sometimes quite unconsciously accepted uncritically many things from Western culture, through Christianity for instance, which stand in need of critical appraisal from an African perspective. Supposing then that a discourse is undeniably philosophical; what, in addition, makes it justifiable to qualify it as "African"? I would say that the adjective "African" should be applied to such a work if the discourse arises mainly from, is rooted in, or is in some other sense about the African historical, cultural, social, or political experience; or if the work is in some sense specially or particularly relevant to Africa. The "or" in the preceding statement is, of course, to be taken in the inclusive sense. Any universal thesis of philosophy, if at all plausible, will certainly be relevant to Africa, but not necessarily specially or particularly relevant. Relevance is a matter of degree and the degree of relevance is a matter of critical appraisal.

Who, then, is an African philosopher? This apparently straightforward question, within the context of our enquiry, has become more complex. If we are asked who an American philosopher is, we can confidently answer that it is any American who also happens to be a philosopher. But if to designate an "African philosopher" we say it is any African who happens to be a philosopher, such an answer would be considered unsatisfactory. The reason here, I believe, is that the question arises against the background of a problematic whose historical starting point was the denial that the expressions "African philosophy" and "African philosopher" had any extra-conceptual reference.

Hountondji dismisses what, in his view, had usually been presented as "African philosophy," especially in such works produced by Placide Temples, Alexis Kagame, etc. as a myth.<sup>6</sup> According to Hountondji, such a "philosophy" is supposed to be a collective philosophy, common to all Africans. He considers such a supposition palpably erroneous because it implicitly assumes that all people of a community or nation could adhere to the same ideas or conceptions. He therefore sees a myth or fallacy of unanimity or consensus in the idea of traditional African philosophy as presented in such works whose ostensible aim, it must not be forgotten, was to prove the existence of African philosophy. Hountondji considers such ethnophilosophy, implying a collective worldview or consensual philosophy, as non-existent anywhere in Africa. However, he accepts as plausible philosophical works those which try to describe these worldviews. For him, furthermore, those of them which are the work of fellow Africans like Kagame should be considered as part of African philosophical literature. But those which are works of non-Africans like Temples should not be regarded as part of African philosophy. On his part, Kwame Gyekye emphasizes the sociocultural element involved in philosophizing and concludes that "if any philosophy produced by a modern African has no basis in the culture and experience of African people, then it cannot appropriately claim to be an African philosophy, even though it was created by an African philosopher."<sup>7</sup>

This is perhaps the most unguarded statement in Gyekye's book. It might contain a radical fallacy. I consider it to be completely false no matter how we choose to understand the word "basis." If such a recommendation is adopted, it would put certain branches of philosophy such as those based on modern formal logic out of reach of African philosophy forever. Furthermore, any real development as distinct from mere growth would be impossible within such a setting. In the process of the development of knowledge, including philosophical knowledge, eccentric, "heretical," non-conformist, and novel ideas have, in fact, always been more catalytic in their impact than generally accepted conformist or received ideas. Gyekye rules out the works of the eminent Ghanaian thinker, Anton Wilhelm Amo, who, in his own words, "distinguished himself by his philosophical acumen in Germany in the eighteenth century" as being *African* philosophy, though he admits this to be rather odd.<sup>8</sup> But this oddity cannot, he maintains, be dispelled given the reality or relevance of the cultural element involved in philosophizing. For Gyekye this oddity must continue to "stare us in the face" (Ibid).

I believe that Hountondji and Gyekye, as well as some other African philosophers, can be rescued from the quandaries into which they have unnecessarily run themselves. We can use a racial or cultural criterion to distinguish people and artifacts, but we cannot use a racial or cultural criterion to distinguish principles or arguments as arguments. We cannot therefore use such a criterion to distinguish philosophical discourse as such. There may be an inevitable cultural element in philosophizing, but this does not mean that it is this element which constitutes the philosophy in question. In other words, philosophy may be inevitably culture-tinted, but the tinting should not be mistaken for the philosophy. Much less then should we try to define the philosophy in terms of the cultural element. In fact, the cultural element, to the extent that it exists in an individual's philosophy, is largely unconscious and inevitable. It is not something that can or should be purposely sought or cultivated. For any given work this cultural element would be a matter of degree. This is very clear if we compare, for instance, Gyekye's own work on Aristotle or on some of the Arabic philosophers with his essay on the Akan conceptual scheme.

### *The Way I See It*

This matter looks rather simple and straightforward to me. I think that African philosophy should be defined in terms of relevance rather than in terms of cultural elements. The latter view is backward looking, static, dogmatic, and unprogressive, and would reduce African philosophy to traditional philosophy since culture cannot but be defined at least partly in terms of tradition. In the development of all societies, novel and "heretical" ideas have always been more catalytic in their import than received ideas. It would be very unwise to imprison African philosophy within the straitjacket of the wisdom of our ancestors. The absence of writing in the traditional past of Africa has made it inevitable that traditional African philosophy would be mostly

philosophy at the second moment of vision. But as Kwasi Wiredu has quite rightly remarked, this can “hardly provide the basis for the main part of a modern course in philosophy.”<sup>9</sup>

If we are asked who a philosopher is, I believe we answer rightly by saying that it is someone endowed with or someone who has acquired certain skills in analyzing issues and systematizing facts, someone with a deep insight into certain fundamental problems, someone with a critical outlook vis-à-vis the ideas we live by, and someone with remarkable skill in sound argumentation. Such skills could be used within any context and on any material. Every philosopher necessarily operates against the background of some culture or other, whether or not that culture is his/her natal culture, whether or not he/she is aware of the fact. But this by no means implies that his/her philosophy, if at all significant, cannot be separated from such a culture. What this means is that philosophy may be more universal than has usually been supposed in the present debate. If we look carefully at what makes any discourse philosophical, we would discover that philosophy not only can be universal as Kwasi Wiredu assumes,<sup>10</sup> but that it necessarily is or, in any case, ought to be universal in the sense that, if at all significant, what makes it good philosophizing may be related to but cannot be restricted to any particular culture or milieu.

At a particular time an African philosopher may, for one reason or another, be concerned with problems and issues that may be more directly relevant to another milieu or culture. But this does not mean that he/she cannot turn from these to face problems and issues more directly relevant to the African milieu or to African culture. In fact, nearly all contemporary African philosophers, including those who are most militant in their conception of African philosophy in the exclusive sense, have had their philosophical training in contexts in which the philosophical problems they have been greatly concerned with did not arise from or were not particularly relevant to the African cultural milieu. But, just like the skills of an engineer or surgeon, the place and context of the acquisition of such skills, is largely irrelevant to the use to which they are put.

I should therefore define an African philosopher simply as an African versed in the skills of philosophizing. Of course, the question as to who an African is may raise some general problems such as whether black Americans, Arabs, or white South Africans should be regarded as Africans. But apart from this question, which can be tackled on its own, no further problem arises about determining who an African philosopher is. But whether the work of such an African philosopher should be classified as African philosophy would depend on the use to which it can be put or on the relevance of such a work to the African contemporary or historical experience or to politico-economic and sociocultural contexts. Similarly, we are to class as American philosophy all philosophical works which are useful, important or otherwise relevant to the American context whether produced by Americans or non-Americans.

In other words, African philosophy need not be the exclusive product of Africans, just as the work of African philosophers need not necessarily be classified as "African philosophy." A single work can, of course, be classified under several contexts depending on relevance, importance, and/or usefulness, since these are not mutually exclusive between contexts.

I am aware that my concept of "relevance" here raises some problems. Traditionally, for instance, Africans have been greatly concerned with issues such as those concerning human personality; Indians have traditionally also been greatly concerned with the same problems. It can therefore be said that Indian philosophy of the human person is relevant to the African context since there are the same identical problems in both contexts. Should such Indian philosophy then, according to me, be classed as African philosophy? I should answer in the negative without admitting that my criterion of relevance is thereby falsified. "Relevance" is admittedly a very loose standard. As such, it is to be applied with plastic rather than cast-iron rigidity. Moreover, it is to be considered as a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition. No work should be classed as African philosophy unless it is at least in some way relevant to the African context. But that a work is relevant in some sense does not, *ipso facto*, make it African philosophy. But if, in addition to being relevant, it is also the work of an African philosopher; or if, in addition to being relevant and in spite of being the work of a non-African, it is aimed at solving African problems, satisfying African needs, achieving African goals, etc., then it can also be classified under African philosophy. In actual practice, determining relevance or even importance is a matter of critical appraisal. If any broad guideline is required here I would suggest the following: a good reason should always be given for considering the work of an African philosopher as not being African philosophy or for considering the work of a non-African as African philosophy.

There is thus no oddity at all in saying that Anton Wilhem Amo was an African philosopher who contributed significantly to German philosophy. Just as there is no oddity in saying that some American, British, French, and Belgian philosophers such as Horton, Tempels, Griaule, Hallen, Pratt, etc. have contributed to a greater or lesser extent to African philosophy. Such contributions might, of course, also be relevant to other sociocultural contexts. Amo's work might be at one and the same time a contribution to German philosophy and to African philosophy. On what grounds can it be argued that his work is not African philosophy? Should it be on the grounds that it is not interspersed with proverbs and folktales? A philosophy is always culture-tinted, of course, and this tinting is a matter of degree. Those who care to look hard might find the tinting of African culture in Amo's works. Kwasi Wiredu informs me that he already has some fairly definite "suspicions" regarding what I have termed the African tinting in Amo's work.

I consider cultures as forming concentric circles. For example, there is a culture peculiar to my family lineage. Further, the group of families which

make up my village share a certain culture in common. Then, there is the culture of my tribe, the Nso, which is common to all Lamnso-speaking peoples. But what we call Nso culture is only a subset of a culture which is clearly common to all the so-called *graffi* peoples of Cameroon. Cameroon as a whole has a peculiar culture which may not be very striking to those Cameroonians who have never had the privilege of that distancing afforded by travel abroad. From within, it may appear as though there is no Cameroonian culture over and above the various tribal or regional cultures. And yet, Cameroon culture is only a subset of African culture, which no African who has sojourned or lived abroad would doubt. But African culture is itself only a subset of what we may call human culture in general.

It appears to me that the importance of an issue or problem can be viewed as being directly proportional to the diameter of the cultural circle over which it extends. I could make a contribution to issues or problems peculiar to my tribal culture. But this is relatively of less importance than a similar contribution with regard to Cameroon culture in general which would, in turn, be of less importance than a comparable contribution to African culture. This way, the most important contribution would be one relevant to human culture in general, and if something is relevant to human culture in general, then it is surely relevant to all particular cultures. Thus, if such a putative contribution is made by an African philosopher, it may not be classifiable as African philosophy but, nevertheless, it remains relevant and may easily become African philosophy at the second moment of vision when recognized and used by an African philosopher for specifically African purposes. Extreme cultural anarchists may not be convinced by this line of reasoning. But it is inevitable once we admit that philosophy is not its own justification, not a prize in a vacuum, and that the general purpose of philosophy in the second sense we delimited (in Part One) is to turn it into philosophy in the first sense.

It could be said that philosophy by its very nature seeks to attain results which are relevant to human culture in general in spite of the inevitable cultural tinting with which every actual philosophy comes to us. One way, perhaps, to find out if a given philosophy has missed its proper vocation is to check whether it has substituted or mistaken the cultural tinting for the philosophy itself. I believe that something of the sort happened with certain brands of so-called linguistic philosophy in the Western tradition. At present there is a noticeable shift, within the same tradition, from linguistic issues to more substantive and practical problems with which nearly all traditions of philosophy can identify. In my view, this is a good thing for philosophy.

## NOTES

1. This section appeared first as: Godfrey Tangwa, "African Philosophy: Appraisal of a Recurrent Problematic, Part 1: The Sources of Traditional African Philosophy." *Cogito* 6(2), 1992, pp. 78–84. DOI: [10.5840/cogito19926219](https://doi.org/10.5840/cogito19926219).
2. Ayer (1967: 18).

3. Weimer (1979: 72).
4. Ruch (1974: 13).
5. This section appeared first as: Godfrey Tangwa, "African Philosophy: Appraisal of a Recurrent Problematic, Part 2: What Is African Philosophy and Who Is an African Philosopher?" *Cogito* 6(3), 1992, pp. 138–143. DOI: [10.5840/cogito19926331](https://doi.org/10.5840/cogito19926331).
6. Hountondji (1983).
7. Gyekye (1987: 33).
8. Ibid., 34.
9. Wiredu (1980: 28).
10. Ibid., 33.

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