

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ITS ROLE IN DEFINING AFRICA'S IDENTITY

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Afrika-filosofie: 'n historiese perspektief en die rol daarvan in die omskrywing van Afrika-identiteit

Afrika-filosofie het eers in die periode ná 1950 sy beslag as akademiese dissipline gekry. Pogings om Afrika-filosofie as 'n onafhanklike akademiese dissipline te vestig, moet teen die agtergrond van Westerse politieke, ekonomiese en kulturele oorheersing in Afrika beskou word. Die heersende koloniale opvatting ingevolge waarvan Afrikane as pre-logiese wesens beskou is, het die soeke na 'n onafhanklike Afrika-filosofie help stimuleer. Dit verteenwoordig 'n poging om Afrika se eie kennis-, ideologiese en metodologiese stelsels te ontwerp, 'n onderneming wat sterk herinner aan die wyse waarop Afrika-nasionalisme en Afrika-sosialisme as versetreaksies teen vreemde oorheersing hul beslag gekry het.

By diegene wat Afrika-filosofie bedryf, is daar 'n verskil in siening sover dit die aard en inhoud van die dissipline aangaan. Daar is diegene wat weier om te aanvaar dat Afrika-filosofie enigsins verskil van filosofiese stelsels wat elders aangetref word. Andere meen weer dat daar inderdaad 'n eiesoortige Afrika-element in hierdie filosofie is en behoort te wees. Die debat oor die outonomieit al dan nie van Afrika-filosofie fokus veral op die ideaal van volwaardige ekonomiese en kulturele onafhanklikheid in Afrika. Afrika-filosofie staan dus in die teken van die stryd om 'n "dekolonisering van die denke" by Afrikane teweeg te bring. Dit sal, so word gehoop, die grondslag lê vir betekenisvolle sosiale en ekonomiese verandering op die kontinent.

African philosophy as an academic discipline originated in the post-war period. Attempts to establish African philosophy as an independent academic discipline must be seen against the background of Western political, economic and cultural domination in Africa. The prevailing colonial attitude regarding Africans as pre-logical human beings helped to stimulate the search for an independent African philosophy. It represents an attempt to devise Africa's own epistemological, ideological and methodological systems, in much the same way that African nationalism and African socialism represented a reaction against foreign political and ideological domination.

Those who are engaged in the practice of African philosophy differ in their views concerning the nature and content of this discipline. Some refuse to accept that African philosophy is any different from other philosophical systems. Others are convinced that there is, and should be, a peculiar African element in it. The debate about the autonomy of African philosophy focuses in particular on the ideal of cultural and economic independence in Africa. African philosophy must then be seen in the context to attempt to bring about a "decolonisation of the mind" in Africans. This will, it is hoped, lay the foundation for meaningful social and economic change on the continent.

Introduction

The debate revolving around the issue of an African philosophy and the questions about the validity of such a philosophy, is not only pre-occupied with philosophy as such. It has to do with the question whether African philosophy can provide a framework within which the search for its true values, beliefs and society goals can be undertaken. I would further submit that comprehensive economic regeneration must precede this cultural renewal, because it is only in relatively favourable material conditions that the African spirit and mind can blossom anew. Africa is at present at

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the crossroads of history - whether she can succeed in extracting herself from her numerous political and socio-economic difficulties will, I believe, have a definite bearing on her collective identity and self-image.

The attempt to establish a genuine African philosophy, and not merely a body of anthropological reflections, must then be seen as another step in the process of decolonizing the African mind and proving its own, original contribution to civilization. This brief article aims first of all to trace the history of attempts to establish an African philosophical tradition. It will look at the arguments of both Europeans and Africans, and will consider the question of whether it is advisable, or indeed possible, to refer to an African philosophy as distinct from philosophy in general.

The second aim is to determine whether the search for an African philosophy has helped to shed more light on the debate about an African identity in a post-colonial world, a world in which the very basis of African society is being threatened by hunger, underdevelopment, corruption, exploitation, and a loss of hope.

Philosophy: a definition

Various definitions of philosophy have been attempted, though certain recurring elements may be found in most of them. These common elements are clear from the following quotations: The work edited by Edwards and Pap titled *A modern introduction to philosophy* presents the following definition: "(C)ritical reflection on the justification of basic human beliefs and analysis of basic concepts in terms of which such beliefs are expressed."¹ The emphasis on rationalism is also reflected to a greater or lesser extent in the works of most African philosophers such as the following conception of Okolo: "In spite of a lack of uniform meaning or definition of philosophy, many, if not most philosophers today, would view it as some form of rational activity, a systematic and ordered inquiry concerning the nature of the universe and man's place in it. A philosopher subjects the unorganized, uncriticized mass of various (mythical) beliefs and unfounded assumptions about nature and human experience to rational scrutiny in order to find out if a reasonable man has sufficient grounds for holding these views."² Ruch also subscribes to the emphasis on reason when he states that the philosopher should inter alia aim at a critical inquiry into the basic assumptions, as well as the content, logic and methodology of all forms of human endeavor, including his/her own, but he also believes that it should entail more than a critical attitude. He believes that philosophy should try to establish a system of human values and ideals and to justify it through human reason and intuition.

In general, it may be said that philosophy is the result of humankind's desire to establish meaning and comprehend reality, to arrive at true knowledge and to establish the truth about the natural and supernatural order of things. *The Oxford English Dictionary* elaborates as follows on the generally accepted definitions of philosophy: 1. The love, study, or pursuit of wisdom, or of knowledge of things and their causes, whether theoretical or practical. 2. The knowledge or the study of nature, or of natural objects and phenomena. 3. That department of knowledge or study that deals with ultimate reality, or with the most general causes and principles of things. 4. A particular system of ideas relating to the general scheme of the universe; a philosophical system or theory.³

Traditional African thought

It was not until the post-war era that traditional African thought came to be regarded as having a philosophical character. Traditional thought was usually only

Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap (eds.), *A modern introduction to philosophy* (New York, 1973), p. xiv.

2. C.B. Okolo, 'African philosophy and social reconstruction', *Journal of African Studies* 12(1), 1985, p. 4.

3. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (London, 1978), p. 782.

considered as part of the field of study covered by anthropology and as such was considered to consist of certain communally held, uncritical attitudes, beliefs and values. There are still African intellectuals who support this view. Wiredu for example declares that "Folk thought, as a rule, consists of bald assertions without supportive arguments, but philosophy in the narrower sense must contain not just theses. Without argument and clarification, there is, strictly no philosophy."⁴ According to him traditional philosophers could have had sound and convincing reasons for their beliefs, but it is no longer possible to indicate what these reasons were. He nevertheless refused to accept that rational thought belongs to Western people only and that irrationality is peculiar to Africans.

Many African writers have stressed that it would be wrong to measure and judge African thought constructs in terms of Western norms. Udoidem has this to say of the widely held notion about the so-called pre-scientific nature of African thought: "... The claim that Africans have no theoretical or scientific thought is not only erroneous but misleading. In my opinion, such a conclusion can only be reached through a one-dimensional and uncritical view of the notion of science and philosophy."⁵

Although attempts to disprove arguments about the so-called pre-logical nature of traditional African thought have been undertaken by individual philosophers, there are many scholars that accept that there exists a peculiar African way of thinking. Two elements are identified as being vital to this system of thought: the first is the collective nature of thought, which is lived, rather than deliberated upon, and the second is the mythical union between person and environment, physical and spiritual, that allows for a more comprehensive and ultimately sound system of thought. Some people compare African philosophy to the German concept of *Weltanschauung* "...and more generally, that of practical and traditional wisdom rather than that of a systematically explicit and critical system of thought".⁶ Maurier explains this difference as follows: "Western philosophy is polarized by the problem of knowledge, the problem of universals, the problem of immediate awareness, the problem of empiricism, the problem of philosophical critique, and, recently, the question of phenomenology. We do not believe that this sort of problem seriously exercises African thinking. The problem of living, of life, is far more important than the problem of knowledge."⁷

There seems to be general agreement that traditional thought did not constitute a comprehensive philosophical system, but that its proverbs, concepts, myths and religious beliefs provided the core out of which such a system could develop. Owomoyela rejects in this respect the notion of "collective pseudo-philosophies" that are supposedly common to all traditional (read "primitive") societies. "Even when one attributes ideas or beliefs to whole communities one says no more thereby than that the ideas or beliefs have undergone the necessary communal proofing to be judged consistent with the group's ethos."⁸ There were indeed in African societies the equivalent of individual philosophers, for example griots - dispensers of traditional wisdom. The emphasis in traditional thought was to ensure that the individual could comfortably fit into society, not by dissecting life, beliefs and customs in order to arrive at a more complete truth, but by striving for harmony. According to Okonye, "Philosophy, theology, politics, social theory, land law, medicine, psychology, birth and burial, all were logically concatenated in a system of belief so tight that to subtract one item from the whole is to paralyze the structure of the whole."⁹

4. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African culture* (London, 1980), p. 47.

5. S.I. Udoidem, 'Wiredu on how not to compare African thought with Western thought: A commentary', *African Studies Review* 30(1), 1987, p. 101.

6. Smet, 1980, as quoted in V Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa, gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge* (London, 1988), p. 154.

7. H. Maurier, 'Do we have an African Philosophy?' in Richard A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: an introduction* (Washington, 1977), p. 13.

8. Oyekan Owomoyela, 'Africa and the imperative of philosophy: a sceptical consideration' in R. Hunt Davis (ed.), *African Studies Review* 30(1), 1987, p. 87.

9. Mokwugo Okonye, *African responses* (Devon, 1964), p. 279.

Ruch believes that the traditional "popular, mythical, unconscious and lived philosophy" possessed by traditional thinkers constituted the basis of a philosophical system, but one with a different character than that of Western philosophy with its peculiar critical-scientific character.

According to him the thought processes of the African is simultaneously pre-scientific and post-scientific in nature. "Myth is therefore pre-scientific in so far as it remains at the level of hypotheses, comparisons and analogies; it is post-scientific in the sense that it concerns itself with those areas which lie beyond the field which is accessible to science: values, moral options and decisions for practical action. It is a dialectics of existence."¹⁰ Myth thus becomes in a certain sense less than, but in another sense more than philosophy, because "... it transcends mere doctrine and theory and becomes a mode of life ... in the sense of an intuitive, nonabstractive and untheorized experience of being."¹¹ Western man, especially those who are not philosophers and are not religious, is being left without an understandable and meaningful grasp on life. Mythical man searches for the wisdom of life, rather than a science of reality. "Because the myth does not follow the fragmenting activity of abstractive knowledge, its contact with the real is more immediate and involves the whole man and not only his intellect."¹²

Insistence on a uniquely African way of comprehension, namely by means of intuition, drew fire from people who felt that this was just another way of emphasizing the so-called pre-logical nature of African thought. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka argues that those who argue that the African possesses a unique intuitive grasp with regard to knowledge, only serve to fuel the misguided notion derived from the Négritude concept, which conceives of the African as a pre-logical being, incapable of understanding knowledge (the act of reason), but nevertheless able to intuitively grasp it.¹³ Soyinka did not offer clear evidence of why Africans should be considered capable of reason and logic, but he seems to take it for granted that these capabilities are common to mankind.

However, it is difficult to deny that African thought systems, with their insistence on the unity of the individual with the physical and spiritual environment, seem to be somewhat different from Western ones, at least as far as the ultimate aim of thoughts and beliefs is concerned. As Ruch explains, myth is concerned with the perfection of life forces in the "beginning", at the moment of creation.¹⁴ This may seem very unsatisfactory to someone who subscribes to the cause and effect theory and who considers analysis and reason essential in the quest for knowledge, but it certainly offers a new dimension to the comprehension of truth and meaning in life.

Oruka attempted to present a more refined analysis of traditional African thought, by not simply stating that it either contained a philosophical character of nothing at all, but rather by distinguishing between a critical and a non-critical element in it. According to him the work of philosophers, poets, sages, prophets, scientists, constitutes the critical element of a culture or a tradition. In contrast, those views and activities that concern religion, folktales, legends, myths customs and superstitions, constitute the non-critical part of such a tradition.¹⁵

Although he believes that true philosophy only resides in the critical aspects of a society's tradition, he at least allows for the possibility of a philosophical element in

10. E.A. Ruch, 'The nature of philosophical endeavour', in E.A. Ruch and K.C. Anyanwu (eds.), *African Philosophy, an introduction to the main philosophical trends in contemporary Africa* (Rome, 1981), p. 43.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

12. E.A. Ruch, 'The nature of the philosophical endeavour', p. 46.

13. For a discussion of the alleged difference between African and Western thought systems and a rejection of the idea that Africans do not possess a critical faculty, see Wole Soyinka, *Myth, literature and the African world* (London, 1979), pp. 130-138.

14. E.A. Ruch, 'The nature of the philosophical endeavour', p. 47.

15. H. Odera Oruka, 'Four trends in current African philosophy', in Alwin Diemer (ed.), *Philosophy in the present situation of Africa* (Wiesbaden, 1981), p. 3.

traditional thought. He is supported in this respect by Okoye, who has stated that myth "May not be as lucid or universal as a theoretical statement, but it claims recognition of its validity from the faithful even if the critical demur to give it credence or credit. Myth then, is a form of poetic truth, a reasoning introducing a theme far wider than it can comprehend, and as the antique ancestor of philosophy it may be false but nonetheless quite amusing."¹⁶

One reason for the confusion about traditional African thought is the absence of written records, which led to the situation that foreigners were usually the first ones to comment on African customs and beliefs. In this context Mudimbe posed the question whether the "primordial African discourse in its variety and multiplicity" is not being distorted by expressing African modalities in non-African languages.¹⁷

Anthropology and Ethno-philosophy

The first attempts to record African beliefs, legends and cultural forms were usually undertaken by anthropologists, which resulted in the now discredited static view of African societies and the assumptions regarding "primitive" thought. "From this view emerges a theory of two types of mentality. One is rational, functioning according to principles of logic and inquiring into causal determinations and relations; the other, pre-logical, seems completely dominated by collective representation and strictly depends upon the law of mystical participation. Westerners participate in logical thought. In the pre-logical and symbolic, one finds "such peoples as the Chinese included with Polynesians, Melanesians, Negroes, American Indians, and Australian Blackfellows".¹⁸ Over the years it became clear that it was necessary to revise outdated stereotypes regarding African cultures, which resulted in more sympathetic portrayals of African society. Scholars now attempted to prove that there were indeed substantial ontologies and belief systems in Africa and it became clear that as far as gnosis (the knowledge of spiritual mysteries) is concerned, Africans were probably as much, if not more, advanced than people elsewhere. Still critics regarded studies in African culture in order to determine whether traditional beliefs and thoughts had a philosophical character as being related to the previous preoccupation with ethnicity, and therefore termed it ethno-philosophy, indicating that it was still some way removed from a "true" philosophy.

Given the residue of suspicion left behind by traditional anthropology, it is ironic that it should have been in this discipline that works started to appear which tried to present African beliefs and ideas as constituting systems of thought that had its own unique character and could be considered as ontologies in their own right, and not merely as pre-philosophical, "primitive" views. From 1954 onwards several works started to explore "... the significance of cosmological ideas as expressions of moral values in relation to the material conditions of life and the total social order" and to "show this intricate interdependence between a traditional pattern of livelihood, an accepted configuration of social relations, and dogmas concerning the nature of the world and the place of men within it."¹⁹ It thus became possible to consider myths and rites as guides to comprehending symbolic dimensions as well as mirrors of systems of thought.²⁰

A significant event in the evolution of an African philosophy was the publication of father Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* in 1959 and Marcel Griuale's *Conversations with Ogotomelli*. These were the catalysts that led to a vast increase in works on African systems of thought, not to mention the many critical works that focused on the merits and deficiencies of ethno-philosophical works. Most African writers agree that Tempels' work did not succeed in positing a general African philosophy, but credit him with destroying the sterile views of colonizers and racists about Africans. "While attempting to 'civilize', Tempels found his moment of truth in

16. M. Okoye, *African responses*, p. 267.

17. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 186.

18. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 136 (quote within reference is from Evans-Pritchard, 1980:88).

19. D. Forde, quoted in V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 143.

20. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 143.

an encounter with people of whom he thought himself the master. He thus became a student of those he was supposed to teach and sought to comprehend their version of truth. During this encounter, there was a discrete moment of revelation, which radically complicated the convictions of the civilizer."²¹

From a traditional (Western) philosophical point of view, Tempels' evidence lacks certain vital elements. There is, according to Maurier, little indication of an interpretation (hermeneutics) of African beliefs.²² (Tempels constructed his hypothesis on the prevalence of life-force in African society, and argues that an African philosophy can be built around this concept, which serves to link individuals, society, the dead and the physical environment together). Nevertheless, the impact of *Bantu Philosophy* was quite substantial and it was recognized as a path-breaking work by people like Allioune Diop, editor of *Présence Africaine*.

The period after independence was characterized by a nationalist-ideological philosophy that attempted to redefine the African character, destroy the negative effects of colonialism and establish a philosophical framework within which certain desired society goals could be achieved.²³ The latter has, according to Lancinay Keita distorted the philosophical traditions of Africa, and therefore the best works that were produced were political and literary by nature. (Protest and resistance in politics and literature were obviously a more suitable response to domination than philosophical reflection). Négritude and Pan-Africanism did make an intellectual contribution, but it was not philosophical in nature. Keita regards the former as romantic and a-historic, and the latter as empirical and historically-based.²⁴

African philosophy at present

A vigorous debate about the conditions for an African philosophy has been conducted during the last thirty years and that in itself can be considered a contribution to the construction of a philosophical system. This debate was characterized by its dual nature - on the one hand Western methods and the Western philosophical tradition were used as yardsticks against which African beliefs and thought constructs were measured. On the other hand, it was attempted to enquire into the possibility of establishing a true African philosophy. The last mentioned initiative was fueled by the desire to remove African thought from the philosophical straitjacket that was imposed by Western trained philosophers. Mudimbe identifies three main approaches in this era: first the philosophical critique of ethno-philosophy; secondly the "foundational" trend which since the 1960s, "deliberately and in a hypercritical way, interrogates both the bases and representations of social and human sciences in order to elucidate epistemological conditions, ideological frontiers, and procedures for the practice of philosophy"; "the third approach is that of philological studies, critical anthropology, and hermeneutics, which indicate avenues to new praxes on African cultures and languages".²⁵ Apart from Africans, many European scholars especially in the fields of sociology, religion and philosophy, joined in the search for originality in African thought.

It would be instructive to determine to what extent Africans today still subscribe to the beliefs, values, myths and legends which guided traditional society conduct in Africa. It may be argued that despite being confronted with Western material culture and a somewhat different value system and world view, Africans to some extent still live by and define themselves in terms of traditional beliefs and values. It is evident though, that there is no unanimity on what exactly should be retained from the past

21. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

22. H. Maurier, 'Do we have an African philosophy?', p. 5.

23. Several African leaders have attempted to evolve a philosophy which could serve as a guide for their people. Kaunda's *Zambian Humanism*, Nyerere's *Ujamaa*, Mobutu's questionable "Authenticité" and Senghor's *African Socialism* were all philosophical justifications for a unique, African solution to the problems of Africa.

24. Lancinay Keita, 'The African philosophical tradition', p. 57.

25. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 154.

and what should be discarded. In fact, it is noticeable that, as far as I am aware, there has not yet been any attempt to construct a comprehensive African system of beliefs and values that may serve as a guide in the contemporary world.

Africans used to and still seem to believe that critical thought alone cannot account for reality. Imagination, intuitive experience and feeling are also considered ways of knowing. This is why reflection about the African cultural reality is usually expressed by and through art, music, folk songs and myths, rather than through logical analysis. Because there is an ontological relation between life-forces, Africans cannot see things in isolation. The individual observer cannot be separated from the observed reality - he/she is part of it. "No scientific and philosophical knowledge can go beyond the world as experienced by the self who brings all his faculties to bear on it".²⁶ It is interesting to note that many African scholars consider Western thought to be obsessed by logic and reason and that this obsession alienates the individual from society, instead of as is the case, by implication in African society to reintegrate him/her in society. It is evident however, that Western philosophy has been as much concerned with grasping reality and the basis of true knowledge by concentrating on the spiritual or metaphysical dimension in humankind as it was with employing logic in this process.

Western philosophy since its inception has been concerned with, inter alia, the relationship between mind and body. Edwards points out how difficult it is to view mind or body as being two separate entities without any causal linkages. "It is a unique relation which one can help to describe by comparisons and contrasts with other relations. But once it is identified with any of these relations we have insoluble problems on our hands, since our customer simply will not fit into the clothes which we have tailored for him".²⁷

It would seem that the real difference between African and Western philosophies lies in the fact that the one aims at establishing harmony and avoiding anything that may have a negative effect on society, while the other one is bent on a rigorous search for truth in the belief that only in this way would it be possible to solve the problems and questions that mankind has been grappling with since the beginning of time. Seen from this perspective, the more comprehensive African approach to philosophy, which involves all the faculties and senses of people, may be less critical and rational than those applied by Western philosophy, but in attempting to establish a meaning and truth for African people, it would be no less valid. Africans find it difficult to distance themselves from the physical and spiritual world. Azikiwe long ago alleged that: "Africans, in the majority of cases, are fond to impersonate criticism without attempting to expersonate themselves. Even among highly educated persons, the critical outlook is usually blurred by the forces of this type of criticism."²⁸

The attempt to establish African forms of knowledge as different from and, in a sense, superior to Western knowledge, can sometimes lead to questionable assertions. Ruch indicates that knowledge for its own sake is as far as the African is concerned, worthless. Pure theoretical or abstract knowledge is therefore of no use. He then goes on to explain that "... while science is morally blind, the myth is normative knowledge and implies an ethical and social dimension."²⁹ This implies that Western philosophy has no ethical dimension, while the actual aims of, and results produced by even such disciplines as physics, astronomy and chemistry, have at the least indirect moral implications. Ruch's view also ignores the fact that Western philosophy has long since realized the limits of the mind in comprehending spiritual and metaphysical mysteries.

The trend in African writing aimed at identifying Western influences in African thought, developing an own African epistemology, an own ontology and establishing a philosophical system which can nourish an own system of thought, has gained momentum in recent years. It is clear however, that this is still largely a debate about

26. K.C. Anyanwu, 'The African world-view and theory of knowledge', in E.A. Ruch and K.C. Anyanwu (eds.), *African philosophy*, p. 98.

27. P. Edwards and A. Pap, *A modern introduction to philosophy*, p. 172.

28. Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renascent Africa* (London, 1968).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

the preconditions for an African philosophy and not yet a methodological investigation into the subject matter of African philosophy. In other words it is still concerned with methodology, concepts, paradigms and the ideological locus within which the discourse is to be undertaken.

One field in which the preconditions for an African philosophy has been explored to a greater extent than anywhere else is that of African Christianity. Various scholars have pointed out the great harm that was done by Christianity in applying a Western cultural framework for African Christianity. Some African scholars now see their role increasingly as the guardians of a true Christianity, one uncontaminated by negative Western influences. "The Christianity preached today, not only in South Africa, but by the West as a power and civilization, is far, very far from the gospel."³⁰ For many leading Christians, the "... most important issue for followers of Jesus is the liberation of their own faith and its conversion into a practical means for a true transformation of the world."³¹ Still, it is being admitted that this search is only beginning: "To date the question of African theology is largely one of principle. Existentially concrete problems are perceived and felt specifically by African Christian communities. African theology will realize itself effectively by trying in a radical way to answer the problems posed by the principles of African culture, the evolution of African societies with numerous questions concerning spiritual and ethical problems that are not lacking."³²

African philosophers regard African philosophy as an instrument with which the challenges and problems of the present can be met. In this regard Mudimbe formulates three aims: "(a) to understand and define the configuration of scientific practice in social and human sciences as an ideological locus determined by three major variables - time, space, and the (un)conscious of the scientist; (b) to analyze and understand African experience as formed on the basis of a particular history and as witnessing to a regional Weltanschauung; and (c) to think about and propose reasonable modalities for the integration of African civilizations into modernity, this in accordance with critical thinking and scientific reason, for the purpose of the liberation of man."³³

This clearly implies an integrated approach, which tries to steer a middle course between the demands of rationalism on the one hand and those that accept the concept of a human spirit and a human environment that cannot be fathomed by the intellect alone, but by harnessing all the faculties and senses of the human being - intellectual and spiritual on the other. The question which arises in this respect is whether it would be possible to decolonize the African mind in particular and African culture in general, and at the same time accept the demands that modernity imposes, because traditional African beliefs, customs and thought systems may arguably prevent precisely such an integration. This is what African philosophy must try to achieve, namely the framework of an ontology and epistemological system that is true to Africa, but at the same time flexible enough to deal with the demands of changing times.

Soyinka, who has rejected the attempt to distinguish certain characteristics peculiar to the African (intuition as a way of comprehending, in the case of Négritude), nevertheless supports the view that a special relationship exists between African ways of thinking and acting, and Africans as racial beings. "Does the racial self-conception of the African really exclude the process of intellection? More critically, is the reality of African social structure - from which alone 'class' can obtain concrete definition - not a thorough fusion of individual functional relations with society, one that cannot be distinguished from a 'psychological syncretism' of self and community, from a mode of self-conceiving that is identical with that of racial belonging? The contrary is not only unprovable but inconceivable in the traditional African view of man, and the question then remains: whether this conceptual totalism cannot be rescued from European compartmentalist intellect or

30. Mveng, as quoted in V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 173.

31. Eboussi-Boulaga, as quoted in V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 173

32. Tshibangu, quoted in V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 172.

33. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 175.

must be subsumed by the more assertive culture in the 'realization of the human in a society without races'."34 The supporters of Négritude, having been seduced by European intellectualism, have according to Soyinka "... accepted the consequences that befall the junior relation in all dialectic progressions. Possessed, they tried to constrict the protean universalism of the African experience into the obverse monothetical appendage...of a particularised, unprovable and even irrelevant European criterion."35

The search for an African philosophy has acquired an urgency in recent years because of the increasing disillusionment that has gripped African philosophers, writers, historians, sociologists, economists, theologians, etc., because of the non-fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations that political independence implied. It has also given impetus to the movement that aims at redefining the African personality. This was especially due to the realization that Africans are only in a very theoretical sense free and that they are still shackled to the Western industrial countries, in particular. The impact of the colonial era is still detectable in many ways, and the continued role that Western educationalists, economists, philosophers and academicians have played underline this view.

Impressive advances have already been made to destroy the intellectual dependence of Africa on the West. The works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Joseph Ki-Zerbo36 are significant examples in this respect. It is noticeable though, that most of it has assumed the character of an impassioned defence of African society, gnosis, epistemology and systems of thought, rather than being expositions of exactly what these things are supposed to entail. African scholars are grappling with these issues though, as this quote from Mudimbe indicates: "How can one unveil and describe African experience? Is it just a matter of the methodological association of concepts, which when applied well will reveal an empirical reality, or is it a problem concerning the explanatory principles of scientific and philosophical models?"37 Just as in the case of African philosophy where Western methodological approaches are not accepted at face value any more, there is an increasing tendency to look at the African experience in a new way: "The authority of reading and classifying genres, texts, and literatures from some kind of divine position, which does not demand a knowledge of a specific social context, its culture, and language, is being progressively replaced by concrete questions bearing upon contextual authority and the necessity of linking narratives to their cultural and intellectual conditions."38

Many African leaders have received a Western education and are thus torn between Western and African systems of thought. This crisis is especially acute in contemporary Africa where rejection of Western norms are undertaken with the knowledge that there will be little comfort in embracing African values, methods and beliefs yet to be clarified, tested and widely accepted. According to Mudimbe, many of the concepts and categories that Africans employ, are derived from the West. "When prominent leaders such as Senghor or Nyerere propose to synthesize liberalism and socialism, idealism and materialism, they know that they are transplanting Western intellectual manicheism."39 The simpler, more humane and less ambitious socio-economic aims, and philosophy of living that former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, advocates as a possible starting point for African economic redemption, have elicited a noticeable lack of support among African leaders.

African attempts at establishing a framework within which an own epistemological system could be established, have been riddled with major contra-

34. W. Soyinka, *Myth, literature and the African world*, pp. 137-138.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African origin of civilization: myth or reality* (Chicago, 1974) and *Black Africa, the economic and cultural base for a federated state*; Joseph Ki-Zerbo, 'African personality and the new African society', in Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso and S.W. Rohio (eds.), *Readings in African political thought* (London, 1975).

37. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 183.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

39. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 185.

ditions such as the dominance of the Western cultural world as far as the African intellectual sphere is concerned.⁴⁰ This contradiction is reflected in the increasing gap that is developing between social classes and, within the classes itself, between those who are culturally Westernized and the others.⁴¹ The search has been on for the last twenty years to depart from the legacy of people like Tempels and Kagame, to avoid searching for a "more sympathetic understanding of the African" and instead, to search for an understanding of African thought systems and practices in their own right, without using as yardsticks Western premises and methods. Obviously, this process is bound to lead to the further questioning of the origin of systems of knowledge, beliefs and values in Africa, as well as the political, economic and cultural power that conditions these aspects. It is indeed sad that, generally speaking, attempts at questioning the validity of foreign value systems and beliefs has generally been met with either intolerance or indifference.

Lip service may be paid to the necessity of the "decolonization of the African mind", but there are very few indications that Africans in general, are willing to undertake the sacrifices required in this process - to a large extent because it will also entail accepting more moderate expectations as far as material needs are concerned.⁴² In other words, if Africa is to be fully decolonized Africans must accept that a price is to be paid in achieving this - it will presumably entail that excessive economic and other forms of dependence must be abandoned and strategies for development, such as those advocated in the Lagos Plan of Action, must be accepted and implemented. Only then, with Africa determining its own goals and pace for economic development, and being more prudent and realistic in linking these goals to the philosophies, systems of knowledge and morals underpinning African society, may a true link between theory and reality be established. The relevance of this issue is at present even more apparent than it was almost three decades ago when Kaunda voiced the following concern: "Whatever changes take place in our society, whatever sacrifices are made or are urged on individuals to make, by the Party and Government, in our task of fighting to preserve the Man-centered society, we must remember that it is people above ideology; Man above institutions. We must continuously refuse to slavishly tie men to anything. Society is there because of Man."⁴³ Okoye once posed the question of whether mankind would really be well-served by constantly striving for better material conditions, instead of appreciating the basic joys of life which can be achieved with the minimum of exertion. He went on to state that "The cultural alienation and impersonal heartless politesse and false pretensions of contemporary life are shattering and disquieting, bringing into relief the self-assurance, simplicity and fellowship as well as a sense of social responsibility we have left behind."⁴⁴ Africa will have to address this issue - it goes right to the heart of the whole search for relevance and authenticity.

In conclusion then, African philosophy cannot yet claim to have identified a uniquely African approach to life, but it has certainly succeeded in identifying the

40. A concrete example in this regard is the extent to which Western scholarship has infused the writing of African history. A. Temu and B. Swai, *Historians and Africanist history: a critique* (London, 1981), have clearly indicated how African historians have generally followed the Western practice of concentrating on heroes (African resisters) and villains (colonial rulers), while ignoring the role of the ordinary people in the march of history, to the point where the writing of history was distorted. See for example pages 5, 6 and 114-120.

41. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*, p. 185.

42. This statement needs qualification: Although the trend in African thinking can generally be described as motivated by a desire to shed Western cultural baggage, it does not automatically follow that it will turn to the traditional African way of life, as to a greater or lesser extent advocated by Senghor, Nyerere, Nkrumah, Kaunda and others. The failure of Socialist political systems in Eastern Europe will undoubtedly influence this process, but is not necessarily due to deflect it back to Western ways.

43. K.D. Kaunda, *Humanism in Zambia and a guide to its implementation I* (Lusaka, 1967), p. 4.

44. M. Okoye, *African responses*, pp. 276-277.

many foreign influences that still exist in African intellectual discourse and in suggesting possible ways of maintaining the continuity of African thought. The next task will be to prove the relevance and validity of African philosophy in the search for, inter alia, intellectual independence and economic self-reliance.⁴⁵

45. In this respect I certainly support the view of Karl Marx that the economic sub-system determines the nature of structures in society.