

ORALITY, PHILOSOPHY AND AFRICAN IDENTITY

Abstract

In this paper, I engage the epistemic status of orality in culture. As part of the rationale for this engagement, I posit a close connection between technologies of communication and the epistemological and ontological status of cultural productions and subjects.

The background to my argument is this: the historical reason for the European contempt for Africa and the denial of its civilization is the lack of writing and written records in most parts of the African continent at the time of the European incursion. The way in which anthropological, philosophical and historical discourses (of the Other) have shaped Western conception of African identity lends fillip to this claim. It is amply supported by a host of evidence from European and North American philosophers, historians and communication scholars, among the most recent of whom we may recall Walter Ong and Eric Havelock who indeed claimed famously that European civilization can be attributed to one principal cause, the discovery of (phonetic) writing.

But the main thrust of my paper is a critique of the discourse of oral tradition in African philosophy. I categorize the substance of African philosophy as a debate as to whether there exists at all any animal bearing that name. I argue that this identity crisis in African philosophy is traceable to only one cause: doubt regarding the status of African oral tradition. In this way, African philosophers manifest the same Eurocentric and graphocentric conception of what constitutes truth and knowledge - something that these scholars with a slave mentality have obviously learnt from their masters.

This part of the argument is intended to show that the reliance by African philosophers on the Western construction of a knowledge system such as philosophical discourse impacts directly on the question of the status of indigenous knowledge systems and indirectly on the subjective identities of cultural producers. I conclude that once more we see an intimate relationship between the complex knowledge-power, and the construction of racial identity.

I shall begin this exploration by citing statements of two pre-eminent European philosophers, Kant and Hume, on the subject of African identity. Writing in Section IV of "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime", the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, has this to say:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling, which rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges every body, to produce a single example where a Negro has shown talents... So essential is the difference between these two races of men, [black and white] and it appears to be equally great with regard to the mental capacities, as with regard to the colour. The Fetich-religion, so widely diffused among them is a species of idolatry, which perhaps sinks as deep into the trifling, as it seems possible for human nature to admit of... The blacks are remarkably vain, but in a negro manner, and so loquacious, that they must absolutely be separated by the cogent and conclusive argument of caning. (73f)

Blacks, according to the German philosopher, can also be educated only by way of 'training'. Training for Kant, Emmanuel Eze observes, consists in physical coercion, in consonance with Kant's advice on how to flog (that is, 'train') an African servant. This flogging should be done using "a split bamboo cane instead of a whip, so that the 'negro' will suffer a great deal of pains, since the Negro's thick skin would not be racked with sufficient agonies through a whip, and because the blood needs to find a way out of this thick pigment to avoid festering" (quoted in Eze 116).

The idea of educability proper, as distinct from mere trainability, is linked in Kant, as in many other Western philosophers, with both moral and intellectual capacity. To be educable is to be capable of *progress* in the arts and sciences, and to possess the talents and motivation that make such progress possible. The African is excluded from this possibility by virtue of being African. To quote Kant's well known comment on a certain statement attributed to an African person "this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (Eze, 119).

A quite explicit statement of the relation between educability and moral/intellectual capacity can be found in David Hume who presented proof of the congenital inferiority of the African in this way:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the

whites such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly (86)

There are two related ideas in the point Hume makes: (1) the black race has no *individual* genius in any realm of life; (2) nor a *cultural* tradition of inventiveness, creativity or accomplishments however conceived. We shall see much later on how the idea of individuality or personal subjectivity interacts with the concept of community or collectivity in the analysis of identity, in its relation to the communicative technologies of orality and writing. At the same time, it is remarkable how a philosopher renowned for his skeptical spirit regurgitates racial orthodoxies, nor matter how tentatively garnished with the cheap 'apt to suspect'. For the question ought to be raised: how much knowledge of the *dark continent*, beyond the fanciful travelogues that proliferated in Europe prior to colonization of Africa, did Hume, or indeed Europeans in general, possess in the eighteenth century to warrant this conclusion? It is, I believe, a relatively easy refutation of Hume, given our present state of knowledge of Africa, to cite available evidence of African writing even in European languages long before and during Hume's time, or of the work of the empire builders in eighteenth century Africa, east, south and west.

But I shall not adopt that tack. Rather, I would like to suggest that the basis of Hume's judgment, typical for the Europe of his time and even in our time, is simply the putative lack of *written* evidence (at least on a substantial or common scale) of those things that he implies confer cultural accomplishments on a nation, race or people. It is my hope that this suggestion is not controversial. At any rate, to be on the safe side, perhaps we should quickly make a logical distinction between *actual* lack of African writing in any language, and European (ac)knowledge(ment) of this writing. For example, a man such as David Hume whose furthest journey from his native Edinburgh was France, or a scholar like Kant who was town-bound, literally speaking, in Konigsberg, and both of whom had no personal knowledge of Africa, could have known nothing of any black writing for the simple reason that, with the state of communication at the time, none was available to them. However, precisely on this excusable ground of ignorance, the least you would expect from a man described as the 'greatest British philosopher', is to suspend judgment or at least temper his conclusion by

adverting to the contemporary condition of knowledge. This is not a harsh judgment, as my eventual conclusion of this essay will show.

It is a fair guess that the general tone of smugness of European writing on non-European subjects, acutely betraying that bigotry or narrowness of vision that is euphemistically called eurocentrism, would probably have impeded any attention to writing or ideas or concerns other than European ones. Late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century European writing of the most important kind could not but focus almost exclusively on Europe, particularly as the very concept of Europe had begun then to be formalized in the wake of the French revolution and the eventual rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. It is therefore not at all surprising that European attention to non-European subjects should be limited, among philosophers and serious writers in other disciplines like history, to such *ex tempore* remarks as we have seen above.

The shift from an exclusive European focus in European writing came about in the nineteenth century. This shift can be safely attributed to the development of a new science, a science whose primary concern was in fact the non-European subject or culture. I refer to the science of anthropology. The institutionalization of anthropology within the European academy, and even more importantly, in the European episteme, is significant, not because it marked any sea change in the European conception of the Other, but principally because it demonstrated that the study of other races and cultures could no longer be accommodated under the fanciful travel tales of explorers, adventurers and missionaries, tales which appeared designed to titillate the native European imagination or sell a reputation, or under the laughable speculations of armchair philosophers. Understanding the Other became politically important and the academy had to provide space for this effort.

In saying this, I have in mind also internal developments in the discipline of anthropology regarding the methods needed to investigate the new subject. Anthropology rapidly moved beyond speculations about monogenesis or polygenesis of the human specie or the origins of ritual or myth (Harris 80-107; Bell 13-17; Okpewho 45-520). Special methods, eventually dubbed ethnography and participant-observation, involving the study of language and cultural behavior *in situ*, soon emphasized the scientificity of the new field. Reporting and documentation became increasingly rigorous. Some of the highlights of this new situation include: (a) the idea that the societies in question merit scientific investigation, whatever the political and ideological uses to which the findings could be put; (b) the fact that many anthropologists had no obvious commitment to a political or partisan principle or program and appeared to be driven by nothing more sinister than individual ambition; (c) the global scale of this enterprise.

On the other hand, it was no accident, as hinted at above, that anthropology as an academic discipline and a section of the Western episteme, rose in tandem

with colonialism. The relationship between power and the knowledge system in the European Project, as expressed in imperialism, has received some critical attention in our time (cf. Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, 1993; V.Y. Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa 1988). Political power made possible and paved the way for anthropology. In some instances, for example in the British Imperial Service, there were existing bureaucratic positions for anthropologists in the colonies. This government tink-tank was responsible for some of the earliest ethnographic studies carried out in Africa. Apart from the notable example of Rattray, others were otherwise contracted by the imperial bureaucracy while maintaining their positions in the academy. Anthropology was therefore a sign that Europe was serious in its political and ideological intention, namely, to conquer and dominate exteriorly and interiorly. In this sense, anthropology was thus a positive science. If in the long run the conclusions that it frequently arrived at compromised its scientific status somewhat and made it inseparable from the political and ideological motivation, in retrospect this was inevitable.

The new science was given its theoretical direction by the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer, an influence immediately evident in the work of James Frazer, and Edward Tylor, two pioneering figures of anthropology. But it was in Henry Lewis Morgan, across the atlantic, that this theory and its methodological form found its most rigorous expression. Morgan's Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family (1870), patient and systematic, massive in the quantitative evidence (his questionnaires were distributed globally through diplomatic channels), without ignoring the qualitative instruments of personal interviews and observations, daring and comprehensive in its conceptualization, brought to the new science the sort of scientific spirit that destined it for the commanding role it was to play in the next century. The three core stages of socio-political evolution – savagery, barbarism and civilization – corresponded to forms of marriage and kinship relations on one hand, and to forms of technology on the other. For instance, savagery corresponded to consanguine (i.e. incestuous) marriages, to non-technological subsistence on fruits and nuts; upper barbarism corresponded to patriarchal forms of marriage as well as to the technology of iron implements. At the level of civilization, the defining kinship form is monogamian marriage, while its key technology is writing, particularly the phonetic alphabet. The form of social organization of civilization is the state, just as that of the middle period, barbarism, is the clan.

The admirable symmetry of this theoretical schema was made more credible by the fact that actual, existing human societies could be seen to fit the postulates. You did not need to seek too far in order to recognize many non-Western, specifically African, tribal societies, as precise fits to the stage of barbarism, nor would anyone fail to notice that the only society that achieved the highest evolutionary stage was Western society. It is surely not at all surprising that Morgan's unilinear evolutionism became the standard reference point for subsequent cultural explanations and critiques, commanding high praise and

reliance for their own theories among such diverse Western thinkers as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (see his Totem and Taboo for example).

If the host of conceptual and material errors since noted in Morgan's work (cf. Harris 183-187) is anything to go by, this reliance on the Systems of Consanguinity should occasion a bit of surprise. Yet more than a few of Morgan's concepts have passed into universal currency, not only in anthropology as such, but in the recent ancillary field of cultural theory and criticism. This is amply illustrated by Morgan's suggestion that civilization's defining characteristic is phonetic writing. For this reason, this idea needs closer attention.

The idea that writing is the hallmark of civilization and, more specifically, that phonetic writing defines Western civilization, has usually been traced to Plato especially to the discourse on writing in the Phaedrus (cf. Havelock, Preface to Plato, 1963; Derrida, Of Grammatology, 1976; Ong, Orality and Literacy, 1982). In the Phaedrus, Socrates narrates the Egyptian myth of the origin of writing, about how the god Theuth revealed the art of writing to the king, Thamus. After the revelation, the god says to the king:

“Here, O King, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom.’ But Thamus answered: “O man full of arts, to one it is given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they will rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them, you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.” (Plato, Collected Dialogues, 520)

The moral of this myth, according to Derrida (1976), who examines this against the background of Plato's metaphysics, is that speech takes precedence over writing as a vehicle or mirror of the truth. In this perspective, writing is at a second remove from truth and being, a copy of a copy ('a brother' Socrates calls it) as it were. The notion of logocentrism thus goes beyond the matter of the relation of speech to writing as communicative media. A critique of logocentrism is less a critique of language as such than a critique of metaphysics and the metaphysical aspirations or habits of language and culture. The idea of presence

as can be elicited from Derrida's critique is bound up with Plato's metaphysical theory of forms and of his epistemology of knowledge as an act of memory of the (Absolute) world of forms.

But skepticism about the ability or power of language to convey or apprehend reality, is an argument that, in going beyond, actually obscures and devalues or deflects the critical question of the *forms* of language and their axiological relationship to power, that is, to the ways forms of language are institutionalized hierarchically as instruments of domination. In other words, the central issue of the ways in which writing became an icon and symbol of Western civilization, and the most important categorial tool in the Western construction of itself and the Other, is seriously obscured by the general postmodernist cultural critique of logocentrism, whatever merits this critique possesses in other respects.

We may note also that in some way, the Derridean critique is a continuation of a tradition begun arguably in the Enlightenment, with the positivism of August Comte, and which runs through the skepticism of Hume, down to the logical positivism of Alfred Ayer. What I mean is the rejection of metaphysics, and it is anticipated in the late medieval period by the nominalism of William Ochkam (c. 1290-1349) and his followers. By what may appear as a contradictory movement, postmodern cultural criticism also rejects logical positivism; yet this rejection does not necessarily entail the reinstatement of metaphysics, a situation that additionally accounts for the appeal of Derrida in contemporary theory. But to this extent, cultural theory as practiced in the West, particularly in France and the United States, is at one with positivism, in spite of its disavowal of a unitary vision, or the claims of a universalism or essentialism in positivism.

From the African point of view, or at least from the point of view of this African writer, it is important to recover the main thread of arguments on the relations of orality to writing, a thread obscured by the focus on a critique of metaphysics. To this we shall turn to take a closer look at the claims made by Eric Havelock and Walter Ong concerning this relation. Havelock says that Western civilization is attributable to (phonetic) writing, and that without this technological invention, "we would not have science, philosophy, written law or literature, nor the automobile or the airplane" (Havelock, 1991, 24). This thesis has since been subjected to very rigorous criticism by several scholars (cf. Street, 1988; Finnegan, 1988; Biakolo, 1999) on different grounds, including the validity of cultural monocausality, that is, the attribution of a cultural process or order to a single cause, as also its dubious factuality and logical errors.

Yet at a deeper level, Havelock is not unique in this claim. I would suggest that in fact this claim underlies the history of thought in the West. The theory of modernity (never mind recent revisions) now recognized as identical in essential respects with the theory of Occidentalism, or what I call the European Project, is founded on the function of writing in the Western episteme. Writing, in particular, phonetic writing, according to this view, has not merely made Western civilization

possible; it is at the heart of the distinction between Europe and the rest of us. Cultural hierarchies erected since the genesis of European modernity are built according to the degree of their approximation to European alphabetic civilization, that is whether or not they possess writing and of what kind. This is one result of Lewis Morgan's work, and it is at the basis of the binaries in anthropological writing: tradition versus modernity, logical versus alogical mentalities, primitive versus civilized societies (Biakolo, 1999 and 2002). Needless to add: Africa is invariably at the bottom of the hierarchy. And for good measure, lest any misunderstanding should arise, a distinction is then made between on one hand, black, sub-saharan Africa, and Arab Africa where writing is found; and on the other hand, between pre-writing such as hieroglyphics in Egypt and 'true' writing such as is found among the Greeks.

If writing is at the heart of the European Imaginary, and if it forms the foundation of European cultural discourse, it not at all obvious that it should also occupy a similar position in Africanist discourse, specifically the discourse of cultural identity. But in what follows below I shall try to show that this is precisely the case. I shall be illustrating the point with reference to what has seemed to me the discourse of African philosophy. By discourse of African philosophy, I refer to the range of academic debates and institutional practices regarding the place and identity of African philosophy. As one scholar remarked at a philosophy colloquium at St Paul, Minnesota, five years ago, the main theme of African philosophy seems to be whether there is African philosophy.

Why is the question of African identity tied up with the identity of African philosophy? The answer to this question is to be found in the relations that have been established between ontology and epistemology, or to put it quite simply, between questions of identity and forms and modes of knowledge. Inevitably, so many issues are entangled here but we shall try to separate them as much as possible. Accordingly, we must get back to Walter Ong regarding the identity of what he calls 'primary oral cultures', that is, cultures that are predominantly oral in their mode of communication.

Ong's argument is that since primary oral cultures have no fixed (i.e. written) texts, they organize and transmit knowledge in ways designed to facilitate the labor of human memory. As a result of this mnemonic necessity, whatever is conceptualized tends to be formalized or institutionalized in existential terms: skills and information are acquired by personal contact and personal instruction or example. Thus oral cultures and their discourses are traditionalist, conservative (they conserve what they have) and communal (knowledge and life skills have to be shared to survive). A different situation obtains in literate cultures. Since they have no fear of losing what has been created or conceived, writing being in itself a palpable storage system, literate cultures are innovative, inventive, and individualistic (writing is a solipsistic activity and reading, even public reading is always by one person at a time).

Even more pertinent to our purpose is Ong's analysis of the form of discourse produced in the two types of cultures. Literate discourse, Ong says, is abstract, analytical, syllogistic and definitional; it is also objective and prosaic. Oral discourse on the other hand occurs in rhythmic (poetic) patterns, it is repetitive, formulaic and lapidary in form (Ong, 1982, 34). One consequence of this difference is that the possibility of extended discourse through analysis and exposition, in short, philosophy and criticism, are excluded in oral cultures. Elsewhere (Biakolo 1999) I have noted at some length the problems with this position, but for now I would like us to reflect on how Africanist discourse of African philosophy actually repeats these errors, and how African subjective and cultural identity are implicated in it.

In two recent millennium-end reviews of African philosophic writing in the last half century, D.A. Masolo (2000 and 2003) discusses the concern of this writing with oral tradition. Oral tradition, in his analyses, is invested with cognate or alternative terms and concepts like indigenous knowledge and ethnophilosophy. According to Masolo, an important part of this concern is the need to distinguish philosophy from ethnophilosophy. Following Hountondji (original 1977), Masolo distinguishes between first order discourse, that is, ethnophilosophy, which is characterized as *collective*, *passive* and *anonymous*. Philosophy proper, the second order discourse, on the other hand, is a true academic discipline "born out of a deliberate reflective practice guided by specific rules of the game." (Masolo 2000, 152f).

But it is in the work of the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, that the African philosopher's attitude to ethnophilosophy is most graphically represented. I make reference to attitudinal representation, because woven intricately with the argument that Wiredu makes on the issue, is a tone and manner towards African oral knowledge that is nothing short of contempt. I shall not be dealing with this attitude however but shall concentrate on the substance of the argument. According to Wiredu, "it was a pervasive trait of this indigenous [African] culture that enabled sparse groups of Europeans to subjugate much larger numbers of Africans and keep them in colonial subjection for many years, and which even now makes them a prey to neo-colonialism. I refer to the traditional and non-literate character of the culture with its associated underdevelopment." (40). Wiredu adds, for good measure, that "a culture cannot be both scientific and non-literate, for the scientific method can flourish only where there can be recordings of precise measurement, calculations and, generally, of observational data." (41)

Wiredu then goes on to distinguish between folk philosophy, written traditional philosophy and modern philosophy (46). The first is called philosophy only in a loose, broad sense, since without argument and clarification, philosophy in the strict sense does not exist. Folk thought, a far preferable term for Wiredu than philosophy, is hampered by non-discursiveness (47). In Africa, so called African philosophy (as distinguished from academic philosophy in Africa) is nothing but traditional folk thought. Thus, for Wiredu, the "African philosopher has no choice

but to conduct his philosophical inquiries in relation to the philosophical writings of other peoples, for his own ancestors left him no heritage of philosophical writings” (48).

Putting together this and similar discussions in the literature, we can present the arguments against oral traditions that purport to be philosophy, that is, ethnophilosophy, including Africa’s, in the following way (cf. ‘the three negative claims’ of H. Odera Oruka, xv-xvi). According to the argument, ethnophilosophy is not philosophy because:

- (a) unlike philosophy which is the product of an individual mind, ethnophilosophy is basically the work of the collectivity. In this sense, we can speak of traditional African philosophy in the same way we can speak of traditional Indian philosophy and traditional European or English philosophy, with this significant difference of course, that there is a second order Indian philosophy represented by the written meditations of the gurus which a modern Indian philosopher might rely on as a foundation for a (third order) discourse. The English example is even more complicated by Wiredu’s suggestion that in truth traditional English philosophy might in fact refer to the philosophy of Hume (strangely enough a Scotsman) and the English empirical tradition. In spite of all these foreign complications, the situation regarding Africa as far as Wiredu is concerned is fairly straightforward: individuals do philosophy in the true sense, the community or tribe does not; as since in Africa the traditional philosophy is the work of the collective, it does not qualify as philosophy. Let us for the sake of simplicity call this the Individualist or Subjectivist argument.

- (b) Another reason why ethnophilosophy is not philosophy is that the former is not analytical, or expository or discursive, these three terms being used rather synonymously. A collection of proverbs, sayings and other wisdom literature do not constitute philosophy. To clarify the point: Wiredu states clearly that philosophy occurs where there is a thesis or argument, and there is a discussion or clarification (47). But as I shall be arguing below, this statement is rather ambiguous. Is it the form (prose) that constitutes the defining criterion here, or is it the structure (thesis-counter thesis-conclusion or first premise-second premise or premises-conclusion), that is, the syllogistic structure? Is each of these criteria, that is form or structure, sufficient; is any necessary? We shall call this the Formal argument or argument from form.

- (c) The third argument may be called the Disciplinary or Epistemic argument or thesis. According to this argument, ethnophilosophy is not philosophy because it does not follow, in the words of Masolo, the ‘rules of the game’, that is the rules of philosophic discourse. Some questions immediately

arise here: (i) what are these rules of philosophic discourse; (ii) who makes them; (iii) are they the same as the formal or structural requirements of (b); (iv) are these rules universal such that anyone from any culture or language can recognize given an adequate translation, or are these rules culture-specific but binding on all others in as much as they come to the 'game' of philosophy. To come to the bald point without further equivocation: is philosophy a specifically Western discourse or discipline as indeed Hegel and Heidegger had claimed? This is for me the critical question, the very heart of the debate. But let us proceed in a more systematic manner and take each of these arguments in the order above.

The view that philosophy is not a group or collective activity but a practice of individual investigators inquiring into an aspect of truth or reality is a subjective thesis. It is subjective in the ordinary sense that philosophy is not *out there*, an anonymous intellectual event or process. It is the expression of the thoughts and ratiocination of a specific human subject. And because it is the subject who initiates and carries out this activity, the content of the process is the expression of the subjectivity of the inquirer. Philosophy, in this view, expresses the identity of the inquiring subject. What we call philosophy is the discourse of a particular subject who in and through this discourse expresses his or her subjective identity. The arguments and clarifications, the thesis, even when they have nothing to do with the actual workaday life of the subject as such, are nevertheless the work, the inner work of a subject, and these cannot be expropriated from him or her. The subject's identity is embedded in the very act of thesis formulation.

This way of putting the matter naturally raises other questions. For example, does this mean that the only truth or reality that a subject can express is his or her subjectivity, or is there room for an objective or transcendent truth or reality and how does it relate to the immanence of personal subjectivity? This forum is perhaps not the most appropriate for examining these questions closely. Nevertheless, the question of subjectivity by its very nature raises the cognate issue of how this subjectivity is constituted in itself. Does a human subject have the capacity to constitute itself? Or is it the case that the collectivity is invariably implicated or involved in the constitution of the subject? That is to say, is it possible for a philosophical statement or thesis to be posited without reference to a social or communal context? Can a subject's identity be constructed outside the context of a collectivity of any description? Is it not a fairer, more accurate explanation of reality to adopt the contrary view, namely, that no personal subjectivity can be constituted outside some kind of social context; that no matter how original the philosophical thesis of the subjective inquirer might be, it derives its meaning and purpose – or even its origin - from the community. This origin, meaning and purpose is articulated with and has various dimensions and ramifications in the life of the community, including the language, a social product and process which makes philosophical communication possible; including the teleology of the thesis, namely, to increase the human knowledge of the

community or make receivers of the communication better citizens or human beings and so on.

Now at the basis of the subjective thesis is the implicit sub-thesis, namely, that every community or society possesses a set of principles, laws, mores and lore, which together constitute an ordinary ethos or view of life and which the philosophic subject interrogates, challenges, and often discards in favor of his or her own inner lights. It is through this interrogation, rejection and reconstitution of truth that the subjective identity as a philosopher is expressed. That is, the subjective identity of the philosopher consists in bringing this world view to critical examination. The philosopher lives the *examined* life, or he/she is no philosopher.

But this sub-thesis actually commits one to the view that the origin of the content of the philosopher's thesis is the community or society. It may well be that at the end of the examination, the communal world view is replaced by a subjective view. Yet it cannot be claimed that this new view bears no relation to the communal world view. Or that any philosopher's thoughts originate from the blank slate of personal subjectivity. Furthermore, even from the point of view of the ends of the activity, no matter how misanthropic a philosopher may be, the fact that a world view has been rigorously re-examined and thus considerably clarified for the human intellect, is itself a purposive improvement of the community and therefore teleologically the subjective philosopher's thesis is oriented to the common good.

We might also examine the communicative tools with which the philosopher carries out the function of critiquing the communal world view. The basic tool, we remarked earlier, is language. Even if one contests an instrumental or referential theory of language, that is, if language is rejected as a direct way of naming and appropriating the world, seeing it instead as a self-reflexive, self-signifying system, we are still bound to admit that every meaningful philosophy to date has had recourse to the communal resources of natural language and is thus indebted to society. No matter how clever or creative the philosopher's use of language, no matter how much he/she extends the boundaries of the language, this debt cannot be fully repaid. Therefore, in the same breath by which every serious philosophy contributes to the enrichment of the language resources of the community, by that same token, a debt is being paid and the relation of philosopher to community becomes symbiotic.

We are thus forced to conclude that the subjective thesis draws a wrong emphasis concerning the philosopher's relationship to the community. It seems to me a false conclusion that a philosopher is a philosopher because of the subjective relations that he/she bears to the community, or that philosophy is principally characterized by the unique subjective relationship that its practitioner, the philosopher, has with the community and its world view. This just does not work as a defining criterion.

We shall now proceed to the second argument, the so called Analytical thesis. The way this thesis is framed, analyticity is sometimes mistaken for a material value rather than a descriptive term for the formal properties of an argument. A category mistake is afoot somewhere. The analytical does not refer to concepts or judgments, as in the Kantian sense. In that sense, they have the character of substantives. But in the ordinary sense, the analytical refers to the *way* a thesis or argument is presented or structured. Taking the simple example of a syllogism, the analytical refers to the manner in which the premises are posited from which a certain conclusion is derived. That is, it indicates the relationship between premises and conclusion. All analysis is analogically of this type. There is really no new term or element produced or that it *discovers* or that can be discovered in it. All analysis does is to *uncover* what is hidden or embedded in concepts or terms. This is the ordinary sense of analysis, to which we must suppose our African philosophers subscribe, especially as they have not shown that they attach a special sense to the term.

So then, are we to understand that philosophy is not philosophy unless it adopts this particular way of presenting an argument? To address this question, we must go back to the example of Kwasi Wiredu and what he says in connection with analyticity. Wiredu argues that philosophical analysis of any rigorous kind is not possible without writing. Now this is a rather curious point. Are we to understand that Socrates was not in fact doing philosophy, since his arguments were orally delivered and that it was not until Plato committed these arguments to writing that a philosophical activity took place? Does this make sense?

What this position commits one to is the view that writing is a *necessary* means for doing philosophy, for analysis. That is, no argument can be constituted analytically without the material aid of writing. Yet this very point permits a distinction to be drawn between the term (and I hope the properties of) analysis and the means (writing). By adumbrating form (formal properties) and content (the material means), proponents of this argument make what appears to be an iron-clad case against ethnophilosophy. But in truth they merely confuse two different features of a process.

Ironically this confusion actually clears up for us a few grey areas of the debate. I refer to the relationship among the nature of analysis, prose as a form of language, and philosophy as a human activity. There is a common view, associated with Havelock and Ong on one hand, and scholars such as Ian Watt and Jack Goody (1963) on the other, that writing and prose are genetically connected. The suggestion is that without writing, prose would not have been possible. But this is just a dispute about language and terms. If prose is equated with prose *writing*, then of course the association is understandable. However, this also empties the distinction of any value.

What really ought to be done is to identify prose with *prosaic language*, that is, ordinary, every day language, and thus separate it from the specialized language

usage such as poetry, ritual discourse and so on. The history of writing attests to a much earlier ancestry or precedence of this specialized language in writing. It may well be that the association of priestly, scribal or clerical orders with writing in its earlier stages, explains the precedence of poetic and specialized writing. The growth of secular writing and of such forms as scientific, philosophic and historical discourse, with the power they command over the development of knowledge and the academy, may have been the main factor in shaping this association of prose and writing. The point therefore is that the postulation of some kind of genetic relationship between writing and prose is false. Prose writing is a much later development, and philosophical prose, as in Plato, even later than literary or historical prose writing. The view that philosophy is not possible without writing, or more specifically, prose writing, is a good example of how not to read the history of writing – or philosophy for that matter. It is simply a piece of *professionalitis* among academic philosophers. Philosophy and philosophers are most certainly not going to make themselves relevant to Africa (something Africanist academic philosophers always appear to be anxious about) or any where else, by this sort of misplaced intellectual smugness, a trait so characteristic of Occidentalism.

It remains to consider the thesis that philosophy is a uniquely Western discipline or activity. This view, as is widely recognized, has been explicitly formulated by Hegel and his followers. It is connected with the project of modernity or the concept of Europe. What it espouses is the cultural and ideological position that philosophy, as a critical science, not only arose or was developed in the West, but uniquely speaks to Western concerns and culture; it expresses the 'mind' of the West. As such, it is a thesis at one with the claim that writing, the sign of the Logos, is the spirit of the West.

Now if philosophy is a uniquely Western discourse, then all that African philosophers are trying to do is to recreate in their own environment a Western product, something analogical to creating an African Ford or African Toyota car. No serious theoretical questions of identity can be raised in a situation like that. Rather, it is a simple matter of indigenization of a foreign construct. To introduce an African motif in the conception of the body and engine parts will not obscure the fact that we have there an American or Japanese product. There can be no great shame in that. After all, as Martin Bernal (1991) showed years ago, the cultural appropriation of whatever is valuable is also a Western habit.

But pursuing that automobile analogy further, if any African manufacturer, adopting the general principles of automobile manufacturing were to create a car by the name of *Uzo* and he/she called it an African car, this would perhaps be more in the nature of an authentic African invention. Any deeper level question such as the origin of the principles of automobile making would then take us all so far back into perhaps the pristine, preliterate past that at the end we might all be content to allow that to each their cultural claims. That really would be a more satisfactory state of affairs. Unfortunately we do not have that luxury just yet and

therefore we must return to the question facing us: is philosophy a European discourse?

At first sight, this appears to be a valid question; it is simply the interrogative form of the thesis: philosophy is a European discourse. However, we find that the logical obstacles to answering it are insurmountable. I refer to logic, because history itself provides no adequate proof of the case, for the reason that history itself is complicit in the case. That history, which is part of the Western control and power over the global system of information, communication and education, cannot sit as impartial judge; neutral, objective history is a fiction. In this regard, if you were to contest the claim that philosophy is a European enterprise, you would be asked to provide *written* evidence that any other cultural group has the *sort of* philosophy that the Europeans possess. The onus is thus placed on other cultures to prove that their counter-claims are also valid, with the proviso that they must follow the European criteria of validity. The query goes something like this: can you provide evidence of philosophy in your culture that is written, analytical and argumentative? In this way, it becomes quite clear that there is no rational way to engage the argument. Its circularity makes it impossible to do so. For, once philosophy is defined in this culturally exclusive way, it becomes the special preserve of the one who does the defining. This is precisely the trap that African philosophers have fallen into. It is also the main reason for the backwardness of African philosophy, the lack of progress it exhibits. It is entangled in the non-issue of whether it exists and in what form and by whose doing.

Instead of this futile merry-go-round, African philosophy should borrow a leaf from the excellent example of other genres of humanistic studies such as literary and historical writing. The enormous strides made since the end of formal European colonialism in African literature and history, the creative and critical output in these two genres of writing, are such that even the chauvinistic West is forced to acknowledge their vitality and originality. These two disciplines were able to discover, indeed recover, their energies from a rampant colonialist obliteration of African knowledge claims because they refused to be bogged down by self-defeating arguments whether oral literature is an authentic form of literature, or whether oral history is historiographically permissible or genuine, according to some other people's cultural lights. Cultural producers in those disciplines simply went ahead and did their thing, never bothering to look perpetually over their shoulders for approving glances from some European Master.

I shall wind up this discussion by quoting once more from that famous passage in the Phaedrus. After Socrates concludes the narrative of the origins of writing, his interlocutor, Phaedrus, then rebukes the philosopher for invoking a foreign origin for the art of writing. To this, in a crushing sarcasm, Socrates retorts in words that his European philosophical and cultural progenies and their camp followers appear to have never heard:

Oh, but the authorities of the temple of Zeus at Dodona, my friend, said that the first prophetic utterances came from an oak tree. In fact the people of those days, lacking the wisdom of you young people, were content in their simplicity to listen to trees or rocks, provided these told the truth. For you apparently it makes a difference who the speaker is, and what country he comes from; you don't merely ask whether what he says is true or false. (Plato, 520)

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