

# Philosophical Reflections on Some Concerns and Values in African Societies



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Edited by

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Foundations are designed to be built upon. They are not meant to be swept aside. Sweeping aside a foundation is self-destruction, philosophically speaking. Today, the major problems that have bedeviled African societies and held back erudite homegrown progress have arisen largely due to the numerous short-sighted attempts to sweep aside African foundations and indiscriminately clutch on to foreign credos and indoctrinations, no matter how inverted and precarious some of them might be.

Therefore,  
gratitude to those African sages  
past and present, both men and women  
who despite the confounding mental and psychological invasion of Africa  
by foreign elements  
have nevertheless remained resolute in judiciously safeguarding  
African integrity and conscience.

*Shukran nyote*

*Ero kamano uru*

Kudos



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue.....	ix
Chapter 1 .....	1
The Relevance of <i>Ubuntu</i> to the Study of Philosophy	
Mogobe B. Ramose	
Chapter 2 .....	20
Communalism and Epistemic Authoritarianism	
Polycarp Ikuenobe	
Chapter 3 .....	47
Knowledge Production in Africa	
Oriare Nyarwath	
Chapter 4 .....	61
Moral Responsibility in Traditional Yoruba Society	
Lawrence O. Bamikole and John Ayotunde (Tunde) Isola Bewaji	
Chapter 5 .....	98
Moral Responsibility and Political Leadership: The Case of Indigenous Oromo Society	
Yoseph Mulugeta Baba	
Chapter 6 .....	115
The Role of Sagacity in Educational Philosophizing	
F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo and Michael Kariuki	
Chapter 7 .....	142
African Socialism: Myth or Reality	
Ajume H. Wingo	
Chapter 8 .....	169
Development Theories in Africa: Signposts to Development or Misdirection?	
Winnie V. Mitullah	

Chapter 9 .....	185
African Ontology: Its Implications for Socio-Political Development in Africa	
Francis E. A. Owakah and Daniel Robert Aswani	
Chapter 10 .....	219
A Disquisition on the Essential Features of African Religion Crispinous Iteyo	
Notes on Contributors.....	242
Index .....	247



## PROLOGUE

Some studies point to the supposition that Africa is the cradle of human civilization and philosophy; that African civilizations consist of knowledge and wisdom that has provided diagrams for most of the world's wonders and glorifications. Some scholars have, however, contested that supposition. They do not see how Africa, as it is currently constituted, could be the birthplace of human civilization. Be that as it may, we do not intend to engage in that debate; there is abundant literature in that area for those who are interested to learn more, or those who are simply sceptical. Nevertheless, despite being so-credited, the African continent today continues to face some austere challenges and issues. This anthology consists of ten essays addressing some key issues and predicaments that the continent has had to grapple with. Common to virtually all the essays is the view that though the problems have largely arisen due to Africa's encounter with the Western world, the solutions must basically be found within the continent itself — they must be home-grown. Summarized somewhat differently, the essays in this text consist of philosophical reflections on some concerns and problems in Africa. These concerns, it is presupposed, are a result of European colonial rule and the solutions to these problems should take into account pertinent values and beliefs in indigenous African societies. The essays address diverse problems, ranging from social-political issues through to ontological and epistemological matters, as well as religious and developmental concerns.

The question of the existence (or non-existence) of African philosophy has been a subject of animated, and at times antagonistic, debate within academic philosophical circles. Practitioners of Western philosophy have been very domineering, with some not only denying that African philosophy exists, but further asserting that it cannot exist. The first essay in the anthology entitled "The Relevance of *Ubuntu* to the Study of Philosophy", by Mogobe Ramose, is an effort to debunk the view that African philosophy cannot exist. The author's starting point is that to deny dialogue as the possibility condition for wisdom, is to nullify the basic meaning of philosophy, and thus destroy the path to wisdom. He then goes on to advance arguments to justify the conclusion that African philosophy exists not only in terms of the etymological meaning of philosophy as love of wisdom, but also as a legitimate academic discipline in its own right which

deserves serious attention and study like any other philosophy. This, the author achieves by not only explicating the philosophy of *ubuntu*, but also demonstrating *ubuntu* as a philosophy.

It is generally mused and agreed upon that African traditional cultures are communalistic. The point of disagreement has been whether that is something honorific and advantageous or not. Whilst some have viewed the communalistic spirit in African traditional cultures as something desirable that should be translated into modern society, others have often seen it as the bedrock of the numerous current problems that have bedeviled Africa. The second essay in the collection “Communalism and Epistemic Authoritarianism” by Polycarp Ikuenobe interrogates the view that holds that one consequence of communalism in traditional African cultures is that it leads to, or lends itself to, epistemic authoritarianism; where the community and its elders, who are repositories of the traditions of the community, impose their will on individuals, and hence prevent them from engaging in critical, independent modes of inquiry. The author, for his part, eruditely defends African traditional cultures from this charge, arguing that so-called epistemic authoritarianism is not only justifiable, but involves a rational principle that is accepted, even in modern science, as legitimate.

In the essay by Oriare Nyarwath entitled “Knowledge Production in Africa”, it is argued that knowledge production is a continuous process that involves the use of the existing knowledge to create new knowledge. This implies that old knowledge has to be continuously interrogated and analyzed for appropriateness, and that in the interrogation and analysis process, old knowledge or at least some parts or aspects of it, may be abandoned, modified or refined, to make it relevant so that it may respond efficiently and effectively to the needs and demands of time and space within which it is produced. The essay postulates that with the advent of colonialism and even in the postcolonial era, the colonial powers institutionalized in Africa policy, practice, and attitude, by which knowledge produced in Africa was treated as inferior to that created in the European world. The result is that much of knowledge production, even in present-day Africa, takes place outside Africa, and even in cases where it takes place within Africa, the production is not meant for appropriation in Africa. The essay decries the fact that much of the knowledge and technology that Africa urgently needs at present is not only being produced outside Africa, but is also controlled from outside.

The fourth essay “Moral Responsibility in Traditional Yoruba Society” co-authored by Lawrence Bamikole and Ayotunde Bewaji, argues that within traditional African societies, comprehension of the question of morality and moral responsibility is possible only when one considers and

scrutinizes the different social, metaphysical and epistemological outlooks of their traditional beliefs. Whilst in Western societies, these different outlooks lay claim to different realities — they do not coalesce into a unitary worldview — in traditional Africa, these different outlooks coexist with one another. Expressed differently, the essay in its finality is an effort to demonstrate the relevance of some aspects of traditional African morality to contemporary (modern) moral discussions and conduct worldwide. The implication of the paper is that present-day moral dissipation could benefit from traditional African morality. Though the essay is focused on traditional Yoruba society, much of what is supposed applies equally well to several other traditional African societies.

In postcolonial Africa, the question of leadership, or lack of it, has been a chronic predicament. Political leaders and their cronies seem to have engaged a *modus operandi* that is anchored in corruption, non-accountability, and impunity. Elections are rigged, political assassinations are typical, and state coffers are treated as personal. These are some of the concerns that underlie Yoseph Mulugeta Baba's essay entitled "Moral Responsibility and Political Leadership: The Case of Indigenous Oromo Society". The essay notes that the current African political leaders are part and parcel of the political malaise, and at best, are indifferent to the problems. In addition, in cases where they attempt to find solutions, their actions usually run counter to indigenous African political leadership. The essay advances the argument that the solution to the current political crises in Africa should be autochthonous to Africa, given that in the African traditional *weltanschauung*, the moral and the political are inseparable; that the problem in postcolonial nation-states in Africa stems from the fact that there is a meltdown between morality and political leadership. The essay makes specific reference to the Oromo people of North Eastern Africa.

Until quite recently, mainstream European philosophy had arrogated universality to itself and appointed itself the spokesman for humanity in its totality. This had detrimental social and political consequences on non-Europeans who were derogated and denied humanity. In Africa, in order to rebut this view, philosophical sagacity evolved as a trend or approach to African philosophy. Today, philosophic sagacity has gone beyond merely showing or proving that Africans are also rational; it has empowered itself with the task to reclaim African philosophy, humanity, and identity, from the European rationality (philosophy) that had claimed universality as the core of reality itself in its explanation of the world, history and philosophy. Besides highlighting the function of philosophic sagacity in general, the essay by F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo and Michael Kariuki, entitled "The Role of Sagacity in Educational Philosophizing," hones in on showing the

significant function the approach can perform in the teaching of philosophy of education in Africa.

Ajume Wingo's essay entitled "African Socialism: Myth or Reality", is an exploration of the social-political development in post-colonial Africa. The post-colonial era is viewed as a development in two phases: (1) the 1960s through to the '70s, which were marked by African leaders' efforts to undo imperial capitalist establishments for socialist arrangements, and; (2) the 1980s and '90s, which were marked by efforts to undo socialist arrangements back to *laissez-faire* capitalism. The essay makes very interesting thought-provoking claims with regard to these two phases. With respect to the first phase, the conventional view that traditional African societies are socialistic is examined. With respect to the second phase, the question of free market economies is analyzed. The conclusion of the essay is that it is not simply a question of which of the two systems is good for African economies, since both have their place in the lives of Africans.

Africa has often been described as under-developed or categorized as belonging to the third world. The benchmark for such description or categorization has been economic. In the eighth essay, the author, Winnie Mitullah, argues that this is a narrow minded view of development, since the concept of development has several facets besides economics — built into it is the question of morals and values. The essay then proceeds to outline several theories of development that have been applied in Africa, assessing whether they have been of service or disservice to Africa. The conclusion arrived at, is that these theories have not been signposts to development, but signposts for misdirecting development within the African continent. The author deduces that in order to turn the sad state of affairs around, there is a necessary requirement for a home-grown theory of development that takes into account local African dynamism, which inevitably includes the informal sector, since over the years it has become the bedrock for sustaining livelihoods.

The essay by Francis Owakah and Daniel Aswani "African Ontology: Its Implications on Socio-Political Development in Africa" shares the major viewpoint with Winnie Mitullah's essay that though the yardstick usually used to categorize African nation-states as 'third world' has basically been economic, the truth is that one cannot entirely divorce it from social-political and historical issues. This essay identifies the notion of African ontology as crucial in explaining the myriad of problems that have bedeviled Africa, hindering its socio-political and economic progression and development. Owakah and Aswani elucidate some historical events, such as slavery, the slave trade, Christianization, colonialism, and imperialism, which it is argued went a long way in portraying a false and

deformed African ontology meant to serve the interests of the Western world. This deformed African ontology has found expression in, amongst other things, tribalism and ethnicity. The authors then propose a careful examination of the understanding of tribalism as the most reasonable option or explanation for solving socio-political developmental issues in Africa.

With reference to the African worldview on matters pertaining to God, spirits, and the general human behavior and conduct, what is the correct terminology: African religion or African religions? Over and above outlining African belief systems or thought on matters concerning religion, the final essay in the anthology, by Crispinous Iteyo, entitled, “A Disquisition on Essential Features of African Religion”, addresses the issue of whether the worldview is singular or constitutes a plurality. It settles on ‘religion’, but cautions that that is not cast in stone. The essay is an effort to define African religion by way of identifying and examining its essential characteristics. The author is also cognizant of the fact that, due to their different academic backgrounds, scholars are yet to come to a consensus as to the definitive characteristics of religion; because of their different areas of specialization, they tend to emphasize different features that each of them consider to rightfully constitute religion. However, in this essay, it is Mbiti’s characterization of religion that is adopted, and therefore forms the framework within which the examination of essential features of African religion is outlined and discussed.

I started this book project in 2012, but encountered some unexpected bottlenecks on the way which resulted in publication delay. Therefore, I wish to thank the contributors to this anthology not only for their dynamism, but also, significantly, for their patience, and understanding. It was joyous working with them. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to my international colleagues who readily agreed to assist in peer-reviewing the essays. Their comments, suggestions, and recommendations went a long way in giving this anthology its current structure, diction, and tone. Thanks is due to my colleague within the department, Roxanne Burton, who, despite her busy schedule, made time to peruse some sections of the manuscript with painstaking care. Last, but very far from least, I am indebted to members of my family — both immediate and extended — for their unending support. They have been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. And to paraphrase Kenyan-born religious philosopher, John S. Mbiti: “I am because they are and, since they are, therefore I am.”  
*Ero Uru Kamano.*

**F. Ochieng’-Odhiambo**

Barbados, West Indies, December 2022



# CHAPTER 1

## THE RELEVANCE OF *UBUNTU* TO THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY

MOGOBE B. RAMOSE

**Keywords:** *Ubuntu*, *umuntu*, be-ing, rheomode, wholeness, dogmatism.

### Synopsis

*Ubuntu* is a gerundive in Bantu languages. It is ontologically and conceptually linked to *umuntu* or *motho*. *Umuntu* is the basis of the epistemology and ethics of *ubuntu*. Philosophically, *ubuntu* recognises motion as the principle of be-ing. The recognition of motion as the principle of be-ing is the ground for the rheomode language of *ubuntu*. Such a language is incompatible with –ism of any kind, and thus against dogmatism. The ethics of *ubuntu* revolves around *umuntu* — female or male, young or old, and without regard for skin colour — as a human being. Beings belong to the wholeness of be-ing.

### Introduction

*Ubuntu* or *botho* is a verbal noun. It is a concept used and lived by the Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa. The philosophy of *ubuntu* emerges out of the lived experience of the Bantu-speaking peoples. Nevertheless, eyebrows are usually raised whenever one mentions Africa and philosophy in the same sentence; the listeners or readers question whether or not the word philosophy is linked to Africa.<sup>1</sup> Because of such surprised and skeptical reaction to the claim that there can be philosophy in Africa, it becomes necessary to inquire into the grounds of such skepticism. Doing so becomes an exercise in justifying the existence of African philosophy on the one hand, and affirming its right to be heard or studied like any other

philosophy on the other. It becomes an argument for the study of *ubuntu* — an important aspect of African philosophy — which, like any other philosophy, should be studied. The core of the argument is that the study of *ubuntu* is relevant to the teaching and learning of any philosophy.

Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, makes it imperative to engage in active dialogue with others, since wisdom grows only from the exchange of experience and knowledge. To deny dialogue as a possible condition for wisdom amounts to nullifying the basic meaning of philosophy, and thus destroying the path to wisdom.<sup>2</sup> To advance this argument it is necessary to turn to some of the skeptic's objections to the claim that African philosophy exists. We will identify, and then answer, the specific objections of the skeptic. In answering some of these objections, our focus will revolve around the explanation of the philosophy of *ubuntu*, and *ubuntu* as a philosophy. This will be followed by a discussion of four paradoxes of *ubuntu* philosophy. The purpose of the discussion in this essay is to reveal the problems of philosophy generally, and African philosophy in particular. The essay ends up suggesting that African philosophy is indeed a legitimate academic field, worthy of study like any other philosophy.

## Naming and power

The discussion of this subject is predicated on the premise that it is critical to remember that the name 'Africa' is not the result of voluntary and ordinary name-giving from time immemorial by the indigenous peoples of the continent. Therefore, it does not have an autochthonous identity. Instead, it is reminiscent of the conquest of North Africa by the Romans. It is an imposition, and an importation based on the power of conquest in war. It is important to consider the questions of why and how the name ultimately applied to the whole continent, since it initially referred only to North Africa. Surely, North Africa is not the whole of the continent. Yet, the entire continent eventually came to be known as Africa, despite the lack of autochthonous identity in the naming of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

Conquest typically connotes the struggle for power eventually won by the victor. Sometimes, even without conquest, name-giving can manifest power relations, as in the case of parents giving a name to their child. In this sense, the very act of giving a name signifies the power of the name-giver. The name 'Africa' is a reminder of the initial power relations that has prevailed from time immemorial between the indigenous peoples of the continent and those who conquered them. The continued use of this name is the commemoration of the initial conquest. At the same time, it is the reaffirmation that the power relations based on conquest have remained



fundamentally the same to date, benefitting primarily the descendants of those who conquered, and thus assuring their advantage, especially in economic wealth, over the indigenous peoples of the continent. This condition gives rise to the question of whether or not the name 'Africa' should be discarded in preference for one (or even more for different regions of the continent) that is the expression of voluntary autochthonous name-giving affirming the power of the indigenous peoples of the continent over themselves. The ethical and political dimensions of this question constitute a vital matter in understanding the name 'Africa'.<sup>4</sup>

### **African philosophy cannot exist**

It is curious that at this point of human civilization in general, there is still a segment of humanity which holds that African philosophy cannot exist. In the past, this claim was supported by the belief that the pre-Adamites could not have the same soul as the real children of Adam and Eve. One would expect that the bull of Pope Paul III, issued in 1537, namely, *Sublimis Deus*, which declared that "all men are rational animals", together with robust arguments against scientific racism, should have established the invalidity and nullity of this claim. The effect would be that ideally, this claim would not be raised again. But the depth of conviction surpassed the solid demonstrations of reason and facts. The result is that this claim is alive in our time, manifesting itself in either subtle or plain forms. It is therefore fitting to consider the precise meaning of this claim.<sup>5</sup>

To claim that African philosophy *cannot* exist is not the same as claiming that it *does not* exist. In the latter case, the proponent is denying the factual existence of African philosophy. In the former case, however, the proponent is advancing an ontological proposition that it is impossible for African philosophy to exist. On this view, the concern is ontological: it is the very being of being an African human that is called into question. It involves the assertion that it is impossible for the African to be, and also to belong to the category or species of human being. According to this claim, the African simply cannot be a human being, because biology and physiology give the African only the appearance, but not the reality, of a human proper. It is therefore unnecessary to consider the next question, namely, whether or not African philosophy does in fact exist.

The ontological argument stated above implicitly, and at times expressly, rendered support for the attempt to refute the finding of biological anthropology that *homo sapiens* emerged from African soil. The exodus of *homo sapiens* out of Africa precedes the *Exodus* of *The Bible*. Yet, this latter position appears to have assumed singular and significant importance in the

belief about human destiny shifting focus away from the origin of the human species to its destiny. The shift of focus also involved giving primacy to the destiny of humanity. Accordingly, it allowed for the classification and hierarchisation of 'civilization'. This in turn became the basis for the forcible Christianisation and 'civilization' of Africa and other parts of the Earth. The historical trajectory of this enterprise, together with colonisation, is well-known, and contemporary Africa continues to live with some of its consequences.

The putative refutation of the finding of biological anthropology also paved the way for the assertion that Africa did not write. Writing, according to this assertion, was never a part of African culture. Instead, the spoken word, orality, or oral tradition, is a special character of African culture. It is important to note that this assertion rests on the understanding and definition of Africa which excludes both Egypt and Ethiopia, for example. With the inclusion of Egypt and Ethiopia, the assertion loses both substance and credence.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is crucial to note that this assertion is based on a narrow understanding and definition of the concept of writing. What makes and qualifies ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Greek way of writing, the Chinese, Japanese, Roman and Russian forms of writing, for example, as writing proper? On what ground does such qualification justify other kin modes of communication as writing? In the light of these questions, it suffices to state that the concept of writing used to exclude Africa from the culture of writing, and to consign it to orality is historically myopic and conceptually flawed by its own unduly restrictive definition of writing. One may consider, for example, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in order to appreciate the significance of this point.<sup>7</sup> It is also necessary to recognise that in terms of biological anthropology, and conceptually, the speaking human being precedes the writing human being.

In the sphere of religion, there was the zeal to impose Islam and Christianity upon Africa, even by force if necessary, as Faupel's *The African Holocaust* testifies.<sup>8</sup> The underlying assumption supporting this zeal was that if Africa had any religion at all, then that religion was not worth having. It ought to be replaced. This replacement occurred with limited success. Islam and Christianity assumed the status of superiority over the religions of the indigenous peoples of Africa. Their superiority was justified by the claim that they belonged to the grand monotheistic threesome of the world's great religions. With condescending benignity, the enduring religions of the indigenous peoples of Africa were relegated to the bottom of the scale. Their religions were simply referred to as African traditional religion. Ironically, this has become recognised as an academically legitimate field, with its own professionals and followers.

In the sphere of arithmetic and mathematics, it was averred that Africa simply did not have concepts of counting and measurement. Thus Africa did not count. This averment was made in the face of common historical knowledge that the indigenous peoples of Africa had livestock, such as cattle. In view of this, it is inconceivable to venture the vacuous conjecture that Africans did not know how many cattle they possessed at any given point in time. Nor may it successfully be argued that African parents actually could not, and, did not, know how many children they had. With regard to measurement, biology could be the best teacher, since the effects of drinking more than enough water and eating more food than the body needs were well-known among the peoples of Africa. When one considers the great pyramids of ancient Egypt and the Zimbabwe ruins, for example, it can hardly be argued that these significant wonders of the world could have been intellectually conceived by the Africans if they did not know the laws of physics and the principles of mathematics. Thus the averment that Africa did not count appears indefensible and unsustainable.<sup>9</sup>

It was also asserted that the indigenous peoples of Africa simply did not have a culture or civilization. They were deemed to be ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric’, and therefore in need of help to ascend to the level of culture and civilization. This inherently dubious claim justified the violence of the mission to civilize under the aegis of Christianisation and the colonisation of the rest of the world, including Africa. Again, this assertion was made in complete disregard of the many ancient African cultures and civilizations which flourished long before the period of colonisation. It preferred to ignore the fact that the Sahara Desert did not come into being at the same time as the continent known today as Africa. There was a time when the desert did not exist. During that time the indigenous peoples of Africa interacted at cultural and civilizational levels. Their gradual subsequent separation by the Sahara Desert did not create a divide characterised only by the incommensurability and irreconcilability of cultures and civilizations in the African continent. The historical works of Cheikh Anta Diop,<sup>10</sup> Margaret Shinnie,<sup>11</sup> George James,<sup>12</sup> Maulana Karenga and Jacob Carruthers,<sup>13</sup> Basil Davidson,<sup>14</sup> John Jackson,<sup>15</sup> Chancellor Williams,<sup>16</sup> Martin Bernal,<sup>17</sup> Valentin Mudimbe,<sup>18</sup> Innocent Maduakolam Osuagwu,<sup>19</sup> Théophile Obenga,<sup>20</sup> and Innocent Onyewuenyi,<sup>21</sup> go a very long way in exploding the myth that the indigenous peoples of Africa did not have a culture or civilization. In spite of this, supported by, among other factors, the robust refutation of scientific racism, the myth that Africa never had a culture or civilisation prevails in many forms, sometimes subtle, and at other times undisguised and forthright. There are several contemporary literary works, such as novels, arts, and poetry, that still denigrate Africa, and therefore make it

necessary, even now, to explode the myth that Africa never had, and still does not have, any culture or civilization worth the name.

One of the manifestations of this myth in our time is the enduring belief that African philosophy cannot exist. The responses offered above to the skeptic's arguments justify the conclusion that African philosophy exists in terms of the etymological meaning of philosophy as love of wisdom, and also as a legitimate academic discipline. It deserves serious attention and study like any other philosophy. Its historical marginalisation in no way makes it an insignificant junior partner in philosophy as a common and collective human endeavour. Against this background we now turn to consider the philosophy of *ubuntu*, and *ubuntu* as a philosophy. This is intended to demonstrate to the skeptic that the African does not suffer from any ontological defect which would make it impossible for him to produce philosophy.

## **The philosophy of *ubuntu* and *ubuntu* as a philosophy**

The term *ubuntu* is found among the Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa. Among these peoples, the Nguni-speaking group use the term *ubuntu*, whereas the Sotho-speaking group use the term *botho*. The Shona people of Zimbabwe use the term *hunhu*. Despite the different words used, the meaning of *botho* in all the kin groups among the Bantu-speaking peoples is philosophically the same. We illustrate this by focussing on *ubuntu*.

*Ubuntu* is actually two words put together as one. These are *ubu* and *ntu*, or *bo* and *tho* in the Sotho language group. *Ubu* expresses the idea of be-ing. It is be-ing written in hyphenated form to convey the meaning that it is simultaneously indefinite and general. The indeterminacy and generality contained in the meaning of *ubu* underline the philosophic presupposition that to be is to be in, with, and from, motion. It is the philosophical recognition that motion is the principle of be-ing. This is the fundamental reason why be-ing in relation to *ubu* must be written in the hyphenated form. Understood on this basis, *ubu* may be said to be in search of a mate; it is oriented towards logging onto something. Until, and unless, it is latched onto something, the meaning of *ubu* remains indefinite and general. In this state, the constant question would be: latched onto what? One may answer, latched onto – *hlungu*. The one word then becomes *ubuhlungu* meaning pain. The answer could also be, latched onto –*ntu*, thus constituting the one word, *ubuntu*. This is our point of focus.

When *ubu* latches onto –*ntu*, it retains its philosophic recognition of motion as the principle of be-ing. It invests that principle onto which it is logged with this same recognition. Once it is latched onto something, *ubu*

loses its indeterminacy, making the temporal transition from be-ing to being. Since the *-ntu* is vested with the philosophic recognition of motion as the principle of be-ing, *ubuntu* becomes determinate; it ceases to be general and becomes particular in the realm of temporality. It is, accordingly, a definite verbal noun, because motion denotes doing or activity. Understood from this philosophical basis, *ubuntu* emphatically means human-ness, that is, be-ing a human being. To render *ubuntu* as meaning humanism is to divest it of its specific philosophic quality. It is merely to translate into English without regard for the specific philosophical character of the concept of *ubuntu*. It is, at best, the inadvertent substitution of the original philosophical meaning with a meaning that is epistemologically at odds with the concept of *ubuntu*. It is philosophically important to discern and question such substitution. This is because the practical consequences of *ubuntu* understood as humanness are different from those based on the understanding of *ubuntu* as humanism. This point is illustrated below by explaining *ubuntu* under various sub-headings.

### ***Ubuntu* – the verbal noun without the doer**

*Ubuntu* as a verbal noun still retains the ontological investiture with indeterminacy, insofar as it does not identify the doer constituted by the verbal noun. This problem of indeterminacy is solved through the introduction of *umu*. *Ubu* disappears and is replaced with *umu* which shares the indeterminacy and generality of *ubu*. In this sense, *ubu* is not completely lost. What remains from *ubuntu* is the suffix *-ntu*. When *umu* latches onto *-ntu* then we have the composite term *umuntu*. Because of the conceptual equivalence between *ubu* and *umu*, *umuntu* remains embedded in be-ing even though it is now a determinate and particular being. *Umuntu* is the embodied rational human being. It is the conceptual constitution of the oneness of *ubuntu* and *umuntu*. It is the oneness of humanness and human being. Accordingly, it is the constitutive moment when the verbal noun without the doer now has a determinate identifiable doer. It is important to stress the point that we may not speak of unity between *ubuntu* and *umuntu*. This is because the idea of unity denotes the condition of being one without special emphasis on ontological dynamism. In other words, the idea of unity does not speak directly to the philosophical recognition of motion as the principle of be-ing. It conceals and suppresses the indeterminacy and generality of *ubu* and *umu*. In order to overcome this concealment and suppression it is necessary to talk the language of *-ness*. *-ness* is the philosophical language of *ubu* and *umu*. It is the rheomode language that is discussed in detail below.

As an embodied entity, *umuntu* enters the world of experience through its faculty of perception. The perception and interpretation of experience lead to the construction of knowledge; to an epistemology. *Umuntu* acts as the mouthpiece, the spokesperson of *ubuntu*. The repertoire of knowledge, thus constructed, includes the discernment, and even the determination, of good and evil, right and wrong. And this is the domain of ethics and morality. The emergence of *umuntu* is the constitutive moment of both epistemology and ethics.

### ***Ubuntu* as attunement to be-ing**

The gerundive character of *ubuntu* is predicated on the philosophical perspective that motion is the principle of be-ing. The ontological condition of *ubu*, to seek to latch onto something, to acquire determinateness, means that it is permanently open to be attuned to be-ing. This ontological condition of openness to be-ing ends — but only for an enduring period in the realm of temporality — when *ubu* becomes definitely latched onto the suffix *-ntu*, for example. This is what is meant by stating that *ubuntu* is attunement to be-ing.

The attunement to be-ing of *ubuntu* means also that there is openness to the ever present possibility of change. This is to be expected since *ubuntu* is based on the philosophical recognition of motion as the principle of be-ing. Where there is motion there is activity and interaction. Interaction results in change regardless of whether or not the change is desirable. On this reasoning, change cannot, and may not, be foreclosed by resort to the absolutisation and sameness of be-ing. It is interesting that over the centuries, resort to absolutisation and sameness has expressed itself concretely through the adoption and commitment to an *-ism* of some sort, for example, capitalism. The epistemological paradigm of *-ism* reasoning is tantamount to the ontological refutation of openness and attunement to be-ing. As such, it is an obstacle to the exercise of freedom, and is an already-failed-attempt to prescribe, predetermine, and limit the breadth and depth of human thought. The epistemological paradigm of *-ism* reasoning is the curtailment of the human quest for truth. It becomes such curtailment precisely by attempting to arrest and contain truth within absolute and fixed boundaries. It is in this sense that the epistemological paradigm of *-ism* reasoning is by definition dogmatic. This dogmatism stands in sharp contrast to the openness and potential flexibility of *ubuntu* as a philosophical disposition, ready to recognise human fallibility and willing to censure it whenever necessary.

## ***Ubuntu* and the rheomode**

The *ubuntu* conception of be-ing as –ness, that is, be-ing in the state of continuous becoming, is not readily represented in the dominant language structure in use. According to the dominant language structure, thought follows the pattern of subject-verb-object. The subject is regarded as standing outside of the ob-jective world. The bridge between the sub-ject and the ob-ject is the action by the sub-ject. This action is known as the verb. The verb then is the means and mode of interaction between the sub-ject and the ob-ject. The subject-verb-object is the linear one-directional sequential structure of the dominant language in use. The basis of this structure is the fragmentation of be-ing as a whole-ness. This means that be-ing becoming is interrupted first by the action of the subject. The second level of interruption is the constitution by the doing subject of the ob-jective world into knowledge and truth. Constructed knowledge and truth now function as re-presentations of be-ing. The fundamental epistemological problem with this re-presentation is that it delivers be-ing becoming as simply being, that is, as the fragmented be-ing becoming. As such it is the superimposition of being upon be-ing becoming. The question is whether or not this misre-presentation of be-ing can be overcome. The rheomode, the philosophical language of *ubuntu*, appears as a plausible answer to this. We now turn to an explication of this.

The rheomode is derived from the Greek verb *rheo* meaning to flow. One needs to remember Heraclitus' famous *panta-rei* — everything flows — to appreciate this meaning.<sup>22</sup> It goes without saying that Heraclitus' insight had a lasting influence on philosophical thought in the West, for example, the thoughts of Hegel, Marx, Charles Sanders Peirce and David Bohm, in so far as these philosophers ardently appropriated the insight that motion was the principle of be-ing.

We have already shown that *ubuntu* is a gerund, a verbal noun. The point of departure of the rheomode language is the do-ing. In this way, the doer emphasises on do-ing, that is, the verb takes logical precedence over the noun, the sub-ject. This retains the ontological attunement to be-ing becoming. The doer is, from the beginning, from, in, and with, be-ing becoming. The doer in constant quest for attunement to be-ing becoming delivers knowledge and truth from unfolding experience. Such knowledge and truth is engraved with the ineradicable stamp of temporality and changeability. Knowledge and truth constituted from the experience of the doer can neither be absolute, immutable, nor eternal, precisely because of the doer's ontological grounding in be-ing becoming. The dimension of temporality allows for the recognition of the temporary endurance of

knowledge and truth. This ensures the avoidance of the fragmentation and ultimate misre-presentation of be-ing becoming. Since motion is contemporaneously multi-directional, the linguistic structure of the rheomode language cannot, and does not, follow the linear, one-directional sequential structure of the subject-verb-object. Accordingly, the proper definition of the structure of the rheomode language is that it is the doer seeking attunement with be-ing becoming, and finding such attunement without the fragmentation of be-ing becoming. Consonant with this definition, the rheomode language defines truth as the contemporaneous convergence of perception and action. In this definition, human beings are the makers of knowledge and truth. They are not made by metaphysical knowledge and truth that is logically anterior, immutable, and independent of their action. This understanding of knowledge and truth has practical implications for the *ubuntu* philosophical orientation. These will now be discussed as the paradoxes of *ubuntu*.

### The paradoxes of *ubuntu*

1. It is difficult to conceive of a meta-physics of *ubuntu*. If meta-physics is understood literally as beyond or outside of nature or be-ing, then this stands in tension with the ontological groundedness of *ubuntu*. There seems to be no possibility to ease or resolve the tension. For as long as this remains the case then there is scope for the argument that *ubuntu* philosophy does not have a metaphysics. Yet, it seems natural, judging from abundance of literature, that the expression “African metaphysics” is meaningful. The question then becomes: does the apparent meaningfulness of this expression apply to *ubuntu* philosophy?

2. The *ubuntu* philosophy of religion recognises the triadic relations between the living, the living-dead, and the yet-to-be-born. With regard to the second and third spheres of this relationship, one may speak properly of the ontology of invisible beings. Doing so forecloses talk about the metaphysical dimension of the *ubuntu* philosophy of religion. Does it follow from this that the concept of *badimo* or *abaphansi* stands in tension with the idea of *Mo-dimo*, *motho wa godimo*—a human being above others in status—*Unkulunkulu*? The basis of the tension is that *abaphansi* is conceivable and recognisable in the sphere of the ontology of invisible beings, whereas *Unkulunkulu* belongs to metaphysics. Could it be that the absence of metaphysics in the *ubuntu* philosophy of religion is the reason why it (the *ubuntu* philosophy of religion) does not recognise any obligation to impose itself upon other religions and, even replace them?



3. The social and political philosophy of *ubuntu* holds that *motho ke motho ka batho*. This means that one's social status is meaningful if it is recognised, respected, and promoted by people. This underlines the crucial importance of assuring good relations with the members of one's society. The ethical side of this maxim is that pride, arrogance, contempt, indifference to others, and unwillingness to share with, and care for them diminishes one's dignity as a human being. That is why such a person is referred to as *selo feela*, just a thing, devoid of humanness. *Selo feela* is deemed to be not worthy of consideration or treatment as a human being.

The social and political philosophy of *ubuntu* holds also that *kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*. This means that a king is a king by the grace of those he rules. This maxim recognises that ultimately it is the people who are more powerful than the king who rules them. As such, it is a statement of the principle of popular sovereignty. Accordingly, if there is evidence that the king is involved in misconduct and displeases his subjects, then the subjects do have the right to depose him. It appears then, that the Western principle of popular sovereignty can hardly be new to the philosophy of *ubuntu*. However, it is interesting to note that at the attainment of Independence, some countries of Africa opted for constitutional supremacy. This was a shift and, indeed, a movement away from the principle of parliamentary supremacy. The latter retained the connection with one of the elements of representative government, namely, that government shall be subject to the sovereignty of the people. This is consistent with *kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*. The option of constitutional supremacy shifts the focus, as follows. First, it allows for the preservation of the principle of popular sovereignty to the extent that this is translated into practice through the elections. It redefines the meaning, and actually limits the scope of the effectiveness of this principle in practice. This becomes clear when we consider the second step. In the second step it turns the constitution into virtually an immortal god vested with omnipotence, eternity and immutability. The limit on the scope and effectiveness of the principle of popular sovereignty is translated into practice by appeal to the omnipotent, eternal and immutable constitution whenever there is doubt about the constitutionality of a particular law. By virtue of its omnipotence, eternity, and immutability, and, in its capacity as guardian of the rights of the people, the constitution may nullify a law if it is deemed to be repugnant to any of its principles. Thus the constitution plays the role of a virtually immortal god of the legislature. In order to preserve and protect this role, intricate, substantive and procedural requirements are stipulated for any attempt to amend the constitution. Of course, the amendment of the constitution is one thing and the abandonment of the principle of constitutional supremacy is quite another. This means

that the option for either parliamentary or constitutional supremacy is, by itself, neither irreversible nor immutable.

The doctrine of *trias politica* is the third aggravating factor. Through elections, the representatives of the people are identified. Their mandate is to carry out the will of the people. One of the means of doing this is the enactment of laws aimed at fulfilling the mandate derived from the people. Parliament is the forum for the debate on the proposed laws, and, with due regard to all the relevant procedures, the end of the debate will be a specific law. Once parliament has spoken in this way there should be — ideally — no reason to test the substance of the law, the assumption being that the law is the expression of the will of the people. This is the norm in the context of parliamentary supremacy. In the case of constitutional supremacy, the substance of the law may be tested. The testing is the exclusive province of the Judiciary. One of the nettlesome theoretical and practical problems is that ordinarily, the Judiciary is not a body elected by the people in recognition of the principle of popular sovereignty. Instead, the judges are appointees of the Executive arm of the government. One may argue that this is acceptable, since the Executive is elected by the people who trust that it will execute and fulfil the will of the people even in the appointment of judges. However, this particular form of representation is problematical since judges make judicial decisions having important consequences in the lives of the citizens. Also, the appointment of judges by the Executive does not eliminate the subjective idiosyncracies in their appointment. Because of this, the independence of the Judiciary might be compromised despite the intricate measures to assure and protect it. It seems then, that elections must be extended to include the Judiciary. Judges must be elected by the people in recognition of the principle of popular sovereignty. As long as this is not the case, the problem of whose mandate the judges do serve will remain thus, putting into question the independence of the judiciary. It follows then that the *trias politica* doctrine does not necessarily function as support for the option for constitutional supremacy. The question then is whether or not the option for constitutional supremacy is consistent with the *ubuntu* philosophy of law.

One of the elements of an answer to the above question would be that prescription - that is, the statute of limitation - is unknown in African law. The principle that an injury - or a wrong - ceases to be wrong after a certain lapse of time is untenable according to the legal philosophy of Bantu-speaking peoples, and indeed, other Africans as well. The lapse of time by itself is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to restore the equilibrium lost when the original injury occurred. It follows then, that even the principle that a right may be subsequently affirmed and granted on the basis

of an original injury (*ex injuria ius oritur*) shall be equally untenable in terms of *ubuntu* legal philosophy. This logic applies even more to the principle of constitutional supremacy. This is because the principle is fundamentally at odds with the logic of the rheomode language and its implications for the meaning of knowledge and truth. According to the *ubuntu* philosophy of law, the constitution cannot be a fixed, permanent and immutable statement of the law once and for all time. For this reason, the essential features doctrine cannot be sustained in terms of the *ubuntu* philosophy of law. Hans Kelsen's philosophy of law need not be the panacea for all law.<sup>23</sup> It therefore remains a paradox that some African countries opted for constitutional supremacy at the attainment of Independence.

4. In the sphere of economic relations, *ubuntu* philosophy espouses the ethical maxim that *feta kgomo o tshaware motho*. This means that whenever one ought to choose between the protection of wealth and the preservation of human life then the option must be for the latter. The modern states of Africa rest on an economic system which historically, structurally, and systemically, contradicts the ethical maxim of *feta kgomo o tshaware motho*. Because of this, the cardinal principle of social relations, namely, that "life is mutual aid" as Kwasi Wiredu puts it, is set aside.<sup>24</sup> Instead, we have the ontological condition where amoral deadly violence in its various manifestations is permitted under the guise of civilization predicated on the transition from the 'state of nature' to the 'civil state'. The supersession of democracy by tymocracy in our time emphasises the reality of amoral deadly violence in various manifestations. Also, 'life is mutual aid' is set aside strongly by the contemporary leitmotif of life which is mutual destruction epitomised by the MAD - mutual assured destruction - condition of the ever-present threat of nuclear weapons omnicide.

The *ubuntu* ethical maxim that *bakgori ba moriti gase badudi ba wona* – states that when you plant a tree, do not do so with the intention that you will sit down under its shade. Do not place the pursuit of your own good first before the good of others. Do not consider the self as the centre of everything that exists, since this view is not complementary to *feta kgomo o tshaware motho*. The decentred self is the original starting point for the ethics of *ubuntu*. It is the ethics of selflessness in the sense of removing the self from the imagined centre of the pluriverse. It is the ethics of mutual care and concern, the ethics of sharing tersely, stated in the declaration of Ogotemmêli, that:

The altar gives something to a man, and a part of what he has received he passes on to the others, ... A small part of the sacrifice is for oneself, but the rest is for others. The forces released enter into the man, pass

through him and out again, and so it is for all ... As each man gives to all the rest, so he also receives from all. A perpetual exchange goes on between men, an unceasing movement of invisible currents. And this must be so if the universal order is to endure. The Word is for everyone in this world, it must come and go and be interchanged, for it is good to give and to receive the forces of life.<sup>25</sup>

The question is: how do we deal with this paradox of the life of the African today?

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is more than apparent that African philosophy is a legitimate academic field of study in its own right. To argue otherwise is to contradict the very meaning of philosophy in the dual sense of love of wisdom and academic discipline. If it is argued that African philosophy has no legitimacy as an academic field of study in its own right because it is a departure from, and different from, other philosophies including Western philosophy, then the proponents of such an argument should be reminded of Nkrumah's insightful observation about the study of philosophy with particular reference to the non-Western student. According to Nkrumah:

A non-Western student of philosophy has no excuse, except a paedetic one, for studying Western philosophy in the same spirit. He lacks even the minimal excuse of belonging to a cultural history in which the philosophies figure. It is my opinion that when we study a philosophy which is not ours, we must see it in the context of the intellectual history to which it belongs, and we must see it in the context of the milieu in which it was born. That way, we can use it in the furtherance of cultural development and in the strengthening of our human society.<sup>26</sup>

There is thus, no reason to tender an apology that African philosophy may be found to be different from Western philosophy.

This essay has discussed the philosophy of *ubuntu* as an aspect of African philosophy in order to substantiate the argument that African philosophy is a legitimate academic field of study in its own right. The discussion about the four paradoxes of *ubuntu* philosophy in the spheres of religion, politics, law, and economics, has demonstrated that the philosophical problems arising therefrom deserve the title "problems of philosophy". Direct and indirect references to Western and other world philosophies were intended to underline the vital importance of dialogue or, polylogue if you prefer, as the principle, the source and inspiration of philosophy. This inscribes philosophy proper upon African philosophy. It

refutes the frivolous objections of the irredeemable skeptic about the existence of African philosophy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Several scholars have explicated and exhaustively discussed the relationship (or non-relationship) between 'Africa' and 'philosophy'. See for example, F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo's first chapter, *Trends and Issues in African Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); D. A. Masolo's first chapter, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo's first chapter, *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 1997); Barry Hallen's first chapter, *A Short History of African Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Samuel Oluoch Imbo's first chapter, *An Introduction to African Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In deed H. Odera Oruka underscored the necessity of dialogue, ethical inspiration and wisdom (sagacity) in philosophizing. See the introduction of his *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Nairobi: Acts Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> One of the important sources to consult in connection with this discussion is Ali Mazrui's *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: BBC Publications, 1986). See also V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> For further reading, see Theophilus Okere's book, *African Philosophy: A Historic-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of Its Possibility* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> There are several texts that express this negative attitude towards Africa. See, for example, L. Lévy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975); Diedrich Westermann, *The African Today and Tomorrow* (London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1969) and; John C. Carothers, *The Mind of Man in Africa* (London: Tom Stacey, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel argued that Egypt, which he referred to as the river district of the Nile, was not part of Africa as such. According to him, it was Asiatic. In his words, he asserted that: "This region because of its connection with Asia was adapted to become a mighty centre of independent civilisation and therefore is as isolated and singular in Africa as Africa itself appears in relation to other parts of the world." G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 91-92.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> John F. Faupel, *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> There are several texts that counter the view that the indigenous peoples of Africa were innocent of the principles of arithmetic, geometry, and physics. See for example Henry Olela, *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece: An Introduction to*

*the Philosophy of History* (Atlanta, GA: The Black Heritage Corporation, 1985) and; George G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, edited and translated by M. Cook (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co., Publishers, Inc., 1974) and his *Precolonial Black Africa*, translated by H. Salemonson (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press Edition, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Shinnie, *Ancient African Kingdoms* (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1965).

<sup>12</sup> George G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Maulana Karenga and Jacob H. Carruthers, *Kemet and the African Worldview* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Basil Davidson, *Africa in History* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1974) and his *Discovering Africa's Past* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> John G. Jackson, *Introduction to African Civilizations* (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (Chicago, Illinois: Third World Press, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol. I, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1787-1987* (New Brunswick: Free Association Books, Rutgers University Press, 1987) and his *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, II. The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and his *The Idea of Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Innocent M. Osuagwu, *African Historical Reconstruction* (Owerri, Nigeria: Amamihe Publications, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Théophile Obenga, "Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. K. Wiredu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 31-49.

<sup>21</sup> Innocent C. Onyewuenyi, *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy* (Nsukka, Nigeria: University of Nigeria Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> The epigraph, a saying of the philosopher Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BCE), is repeated by Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus*, 402a.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Kelsen, *Pure Theory of Law*, trans. Max Knight (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, "The Moral Foundations of an African Culture." In *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, eds. P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2002), 338-348.

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemméli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 137.

<sup>26</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonisation* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1964), 55.