



African Philosophy Reconsidered

Africa, Religion, Race,
and Philosophy

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Abstract

The still-nascent academic discipline of African philosophy has spent most of its energy and ink wrestling with issues of authenticity (what makes it “African”) and validity (what makes it “philosophy”). In this article, I argue for a reconsideration of these categories—“African” and “philosophy”—by tracing the closely related history of their development. Then, on the basis of this genealogy and after critiquing some of the most influential academic attempts to engage with African religious/intellectual traditions (by Evans-Pritchard, Horton, Wiredu, Appiah, Hountondji, and Mudimbe), I propose an alternative framework for approaching and understanding the intellectual traditions of the continent. Drawing on Pierre Hadot’s work on ancient philosophy, I argue that the vast majority of religious/intellectual traditions in Africa are better described by the “philosophy as a way of life” paradigm exemplified by the ancient Greeks and Neoplatonists than the “philosophy as written, rational discourse” model of the Enlightenment. I conclude by exploring the implications of this reconsideration of “African philosophy” for our academic approach to African religious/intellectual traditions, theory, and methodology in the social sciences and humanities, and our understandings of race, rationality, progress, and development.

Keywords: African philosophy, philosophy, rationality, religion, theory

Aristotle started praising his master, Plato, [in such a manner that] I was astonished, so I asked him: “Has there ever been a Muslim philosopher on a par with him?” “Not at all, not even close to,” he added earnestly, “a thousandth of Plato’s glorious rank.” I began to mention the names of some of those with whom I was acquainted, but he paid no attention to any of them. Finally, I arrived at the names of Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī [Bayazid] and Abū Sahl ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Tustarī and others [among the Sufi mystics]. Then he seemed to become delighted and was moved to the extent that he said, “These are, however, true philosophers and people of wisdom, since they have not confined themselves within [the limits of] representational knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-rasmī*), but have transcended to knowledge by presence (*‘ilm al-huḍūrī*) [which is] unity and vision. They also did not occupy themselves in material interests; thus, they succeeded in [attaining] the *near approach and the excellent resort* (Qur’an 38:25); they have proceeded [in the same path that was taken] by us, and expressed what we ourselves have already spoken.”

—SHIHĀB AL-DĪN SUHRAWARDĪ, recounting a dream encounter with Aristotle in the *Kitāb al-Masharī’ wa’l-Mutarihāt*¹

While browsing through a bookstore during my first year of college, I saw the title of a book that got me so excited that I almost yelled out loud. The book was entitled *African Philosophy*, an anthology edited by Emmanuel Eze. I bought the book on the spot and almost ran into a few trees and lampposts on my way home because I could not take my eyes off of its pages. But the more I read, the more my excitement cooled into disappointment. Aside from one or two articles, the book’s title seemed to me to be false advertisement. I felt as if I had bought an album labeled *The Royal Drummers of Burundi*, but when I played the music, it was Taylor Swift—enjoyable in its own right, but not what I was looking for.

A bit of context will help explain why I felt this way. At the time, I had been reading, spellbound, a translation of al-Ghazzālī’s *Deliverance from Error* while borrowing the books and handouts from my roommate’s Indian philosophy course, most of which were translations of mind-blowing primary texts by Buddhist philosophers such as Nagarjuna (d. 250 CE) and Dignaga (d. 540) and the Vedantin philosophers Adi Shankara (ninth century CE) and Sri Harṣa (d. 1180 CE). In middle school and high school, my favorite book—besides the books on Greek and Norse mythology that my brothers and I wore the spines off—was another anthology, *Classics of Philosophy*, edited by Louis Pojman, which contained the equally mind-blowing (at least to me at the time) excerpts

of the writings of some of the most influential figures in Western philosophy from the pre-Socratics to Wittgenstein, along with short introductions designed to contextualize the readings and make them more accessible. So when I saw Eze's anthology, I was excited to have my mind blown again, but this time by the thinkers and traditions of Africa! I was expecting the book to introduce me to radically new ways of seeing the world (as Indian philosophy had done), to expose and challenge my assumptions (as both Indian and Western philosophy did), and to provide the concepts, words, and origins for some of the ideas I already had half-formed in my head.

Instead, I found a group of academic articles, almost exclusively by Western-trained scholars, about what should count as African philosophy and about the philosophy of race, gender, slavery, colonialism, and so on. Almost all of the articles seemed written from a perspective with which I had become familiar through years of schooling but in which I never fully felt at home.² With the exception of an article by the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob, I felt more at home in the works of Ghazzālī, Nagarjuna, Plotinus, St. Augustine, and even Kierkegaard, Hume, Berkeley, Spinoza, and Wittgenstein than I did in the articles of the *African Philosophy* anthology. I remember asking myself, "If this is African philosophy and I'm African, should I just suck it up and learn to love it, like I do with my great-aunt's *moin-moin* [bean cakes]?" "Is there no African equivalent to European, Ancient Greek, Indian, and Islamic philosophy?" "Does it matter if there is or is not? Should it matter?"

A little over a decade later, I now have a bit of perspective on this important experience of disappointment. Part of the problem, I think, was that I was looking for the wrong thing. I was looking for an *African version* of the works of philosophy with which I already had some familiarity—that is, I was looking for a written treatise with clearly stated premises, standard logical arguments, refutations of other known positions, and relatively clear conclusions that defined the author's position on a certain topic. I already knew what I was looking for and was just hoping to find a new flavor or style that perhaps had some resonances with my ancestry and upbringing. What I have since concluded is that while the works of many African intellectuals fit this description (such as those of the Neoplatonic, the North and Northeast African Christian, and the even more voluminous Islamic traditions of the continent), part of what makes the indigenous philosophies or intellectual traditions of the continent so interesting and worthy of study are the ways in which they *do not* fit this description. Practitioners of African traditions such as Ifa pursue knowledge and truth and engage in critical debates with one another, but they do so

in very different ways, ways that I may not have recognized as philosophy back in the bookstore in 2003 during my first year of college.

Because of this, not only was I not looking for the right thing, but I was also not looking in the right place. I began to realize this while reading Amadou Hampaté Bâ, the seminal Malian belle-lettrist, activist, and scholar of traditional West African culture, literature, religion, and thought. A Tijani Sufi himself, Bâ quotes his master Tierno Bokar's observation, "Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photographing of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light which is within man. It is the heritage of all the ancestors knew and have transmitted to us as seed, just as the mature baobab is contained in its seed."³ Thus I came to realize that in order to find what I was looking for back in the bookstore, I would have to change my ideas about what philosophy looks like and where I could find it.

It is important to consider why I did not find what I was looking for in the bookstore all those years ago. Why didn't the anthology (with a few exceptions) have the kind of African philosophy, the "photographs of knowledge," I was looking for? And why was I looking for that kind of philosophy in the first place? Ironically, the anthology has many articles that did address *these* questions, but before turning to them, we must first understand a bit of the history of philosophy itself and how I (and most of the rest of the Western-educated world) came to have the particular conception of it that I did back in 2003.

A Brief History of the Conception of Philosophy in the West

Although it is now a professional academic discipline and subject of study like mathematics, physics, economics, or history, philosophy started out as something rather different. The first person to call himself a "philosopher" (*philosophos*, which means "friend or lover of wisdom") was probably Pythagoras (d. 495 BCE), whom we all know for his theorem about triangles. But just as Pythagoras's geometry was about much more than shapes and angles, his school of philosophy, which we today would probably call a "religion," "cult," "brotherhood," or "monastic order," was concerned with achieving a divine mode of life. Through initiation, strict moral discipline, secret lessons on the esoteric symbolism of numbers and forms, the study of the world through this numeric symbolism, dialectics, and other ritual exercises, including listening to music, Pythagoras's school sought to mold the characters of its members into this divine ideal.⁴ This school is believed to have profoundly influenced Plato (d. 348 BCE) and his Academy, which was but one of many

such philosophical schools that operated in Greek and Roman antiquity. These schools or brotherhoods of philosophers differed greatly on some points, but all of them were concerned with using argument and reason (as well as other rituals) as “spiritual exercises” in order to cultivate an ideal way of life. As Pierre Hadot writes, “For the ancients, the mere word *philo-sophia*—the love of wisdom—was enough to express this conception of philosophy. . . . Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one’s being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom.”⁵ This state of “wisdom,” the goal of the philosophical life, was understood as a way of life characterized by peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and an elevated state of consciousness. In this way, ancient philosophy presented itself more as a kind of therapy to cure man’s existential suffering than as an academic discipline or set of mental exercises. Thus, the idea of the “philosopher” and “philosophy” of the ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman eras was something very different from the contemporary idea and practice of academic philosophy, although the older notion still has some resonance in today’s popular imagination.

The coming of Christianity eventually eclipsed these philosophical schools, but many of their texts, practices, ideas, and terminology (including that of “philosophy” itself) were assimilated (and transformed) by Christian thinkers to the extent that many Christian intellectuals interpreted and presented Christianity *as philosophy*. This perspective was widespread and influential, as Hadot explains: “It is essential to recall that there was a widespread Christian tradition which portrayed Christianity as a *philosophy*. . . . They did not, however, consider Christianity to be just one philosophy among others; they thought of it as *the philosophy*.”⁶ This was particularly true of monastic life, which, as Hadot notes, was designated by the term *philosophia* throughout the Middle Ages. However, the texts, doctrines, and exercises of the Greek and Roman philosophical schools found a receptive home not only in Christianity; they were also taken up with great enthusiasm and creativity in Islamic civilization (by Muslims, Christians, and Jews living under Islamic rule) from the ninth century onward, as well as by some pre-Islamic Jewish intellectuals, such as Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 CE). What many today call Islamic philosophy took the form of many distinct traditions that engaged with the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition in various ways. The discipline or science known in Arabic as *falsafah* or *hikmah* creatively engaged with Pythagorean, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, Stoic, and other traditions and sought to wed them with, and interpret them in the light of, Islamic prophecy and spirituality. To a large extent, this discipline maintained the goal of cultivating an ideal mode

of life that characterized Greek and Roman philosophy. The most important and influential philosopher of this tradition was Ibn Sinā (d. 1037), known as Avicenna in the medieval West, where he was influential as an interpreter of Aristotle, especially among scholars associated with the Neoplatonic “school” of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Augustine, and Johannes Scotus Eriugena, as well as that of St. Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas.⁷ However, his influence in Europe was eclipsed by that of Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (d. 1198), who ironically never had much influence in the Islamic world as a philosopher, being better known as a first-rate jurist of the Mālikī school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Because he was the last Muslim philosopher to have a significant impact on Western thought, some Western scholars (and their Muslim students) declared Islamic philosophy dead after Ibn Rushd, but the fact is that the traditions of *falsafah* and *ḥikmah* have continued to thrive and produce remarkable works and thinkers such as Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1275), Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), Sabzawarī (d. 1873), ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), down to the present day.

Since the twelfth century, however, the discipline of *falsafah/ḥikmah* became more integrated with the disciplines of *kalām*, or theology, and *taṣawwuf*, or Sufism (Islamic mysticism or spirituality). The discipline of *kalām* was primarily concerned with elucidating and defending Islamic doctrines about God, humanity, and the cosmos, and its various schools engaged in highly sophisticated arguments with each other and with schools of *falsafah* that would be considered philosophical by any measure.⁸ The figure of al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111) is perhaps the most celebrated Islamic theologian (*mutakallim*) of the Ash‘arī school, and his works (especially his later works) show the increasing convergence between Sufism, theology, and *falsafah* in Islamic philosophical thought. Sufism designates an important tradition of Islamic mysticism and thought that posited and sought a direct, experiential knowledge of God (*ma‘rifah*) through an intensive regimen of spiritual exercises. The Sufis articulated this knowledge in various forms, often borrowing from, debating, and engaging with the traditions of theology and *falsafah*, to the extent that it became difficult to distinguish the three disciplines in the works of many figures from the twelfth century onward. Prominent examples of such syntheses that came to dominate Islamic intellectual life include Suhrawardī’s “school of illumination” (*ishraq*) and the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi’s (d. 1240) school, both of which were integrated into Mullā Ṣadrā’s school of “Transcendent Philosophy” (*al-ḥikmah al-muta‘āliyah*).⁹ In the western lands of the Islamic world, even the most popular texts of theology such as the *Umm al-Barāhīn* (*Mother of Proofs*) of al-Sanūsī (d. 1486), which was and still is widely used in North and West Africa, comprise

a synthesis of ideas and terminology from Avicennan philosophy (*falsafah*), Ash'ari theology (*kalām*), and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*).¹⁰

Overall, the tradition of Islamic philosophy was and is generally characterized by a synthesis of reason, mystical insight/intuition, revelation, and the cultivation of an ideal way of life, just as it was for the philosophers of Greek and Roman antiquity.¹¹ In fact, some of most prominent schools of Islamic philosophy after the thirteenth century held that “all philosophizing which does not lead to the highest spiritual realization is but a vain and useless pastime, just as all mystical experience which is not backed by a rigorous conceptual training in philosophy is but a way to illusions and aberrations.”¹²

However, Islamic philosophy's sister tradition of Christian philosophy/theology was to go in a very different direction, especially during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. In Western Europe, from the thirteenth century onward, philosophy and theology began to drift apart, until they became completely separate and even antagonistic with the arrival of Descartes. The gradual hardening of the Catholic Church's Aristotelianism combined with the new availability of Greek and Roman texts led to the decline of Scholasticism and the rise of new forms of philosophy and new relationships between philosophy and Christianity.¹³ Most significant, however, was the gradual collapsing of the classical triad of noetic faculties—intellect (Latin: *intellectus*; Greek: *nous*), reason (*ratio*), and the senses (*sensus*)—into just reason and sense.¹⁴ In Platonic, Neoplatonic, and many Christian schools of philosophy and theology, the intellect was a faculty that allowed one to directly intuit truths of a metaphysical nature and, in some cases, was even described as being mysteriously united with God or the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Hadot illustrates the distinction between reason and intellect in Plotinus's philosophy by explaining that his philosophy was not meant “to be a discourse about objects, be they even the highest, but it wishes actually to lead the soul to a living, concrete union with the Intellect and the Good. . . . Reason, by theological methods, can raise itself to the *notion* of the Good, but only life according to Intellect can lead to the *reality* of the Good.”¹⁶

In the late Renaissance and early modern period, philosophers gradually abandoned this distinction between intellect and reason, rejecting or reducing the former to the latter and reading this rationalist tendency back into the Greek, Latin, and Arabic texts they translated. Thus, the only valid sources of knowledge became reason and the senses. As a result, the “wisdom” that was philosophy's goal became more mental and practical and less existential and divine. The conception of philosophy gradually shifted away from “a way of life” to a mode of rational discourse, or, as Hadot says, from “philosophy” to “philosophical discourse.”¹⁷

With this gradual disappearance of the intellect from Western philosophical discourse in the early modern period (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries), philosophy also became more distant from theology and mysticism. Furthermore, as the senses and reason came to be regarded as the only sources of knowledge, the “immaterial became immaterial,” and the elaborate metaphysical cosmologies of medieval Europe disappeared from mainstream intellectual life and thought. Moreover, reason replaced intellect as the *imago Dei*, the divine trace that marked mankind as being made in God’s image, and rationality rather than spirituality or conformity to the Divine became the measure of humanity.¹⁸ But because God was no longer directly perceived by the *intellectus* but instead abstracted from sensory data and the rational faculty, God’s role in Western intellectual thought became more and more vague and distant, culminating in the nineteenth-century view of the Divine as a creation of the mind of man—a god made in man’s own image.¹⁹

While the possible reasons for these related shifts are many and complex, the early modern thinkers seemed to want to create a space for themselves to think outside of the theological dominion of the church.²⁰ Thus, from its inception, the Enlightenment project of the early modern period was concerned with creating and defining itself *against* its past through categories based on the newly enthroned reason. For example, the postclassical, pre-Renaissance period became known as the “medieval” period, or Middle Ages or “Dark Ages,” based on the early modern notion that this marked a lapse in Europe’s history between two glorious ages of reason: the Greco-Roman classical period and its “rebirth” in the Renaissance. And so modern philosophy emerged as a privileged category of difference to define “reborn” or “enlightened” Western Europe against and to elevate it above its ancestral past and other civilizations.

Relatedly, the new philosophy of the Enlightenment (as opposed to the religious theology of the Middle Ages) emerged as one of a number of new categories created to define modern Europe against and above its “other,” what it considered itself not to be. For example, the medieval category “mystical” (*Mustikos*) was used to refer to three closely linked elements: a method of allegorical biblical interpretation (such as Dante’s anagogical), liturgical mysteries (such as the Eucharist), and the contemplative or experiential knowledge of God.²¹ However, the Enlightenment philosophers, especially Kant, took up the task of oppositional definition and defined the new, rational “philosophy” against “mysticism,” which was in turn defined against rationality and characterized as subjective as opposed to objective, emotive as opposed to intellectual, private as opposed to public, irrational as opposed to rational, and

so forth.²² Mystical worldviews were dismissed as backward and prerational, mystical experiences became subjective psychological states (usually described as the result of some kind of disorder), mystical practices and rituals were dismissed as superstition and magic, and mystical modes of interpretation such as allegory were largely relegated to secular literary criticism and poetry. This deeply affected modern readings of classical and medieval thinkers, as the seemingly “rational” elements, texts, and figures were emphasized and the seemingly “mystical” elements, texts, and figures were devalued. For modern thinkers such as Kant, “the mystical” was the death of philosophy, in part because the modern conception of “philosophy” was given life through its definition against “the mystical.”

As Emmanuel Eze’s work has demonstrated, this dynamic had profound significance for Enlightenment Europe’s understanding of itself in relation to other civilizations and peoples.²³ With the disappearance of the *intellectus/nous* and the noetic realms of reality perceivable only by it (the Divine and an angelic realm or world of Platonic forms), Western man found himself in the curious position of being at the top of the “great chain of being,” the Platonic and medieval hierarchy of the cosmos.²⁴ To be sure, God and heaven still lurked in the background or up in the clouds somewhere, but in terms of the knowable, perceivable universe of philosophers and scientists, Western, rational man was at the summit, with his newly defined rationality as the mark of his superiority. Whereas in the Middle Ages humanity was judged by participation in or proximity to a transcendent, divine ideal (Christ or God), the secularization process of the Enlightenment resulted in humanity being judged by proximity to the immanent ideal of rational, enlightened European man.²⁵

In the nineteenth century, Hegel explicitly enunciated this doctrine, declaring Western Europe “the land of the elevation of the particular to the universal,” and eighteenth-century English dissident philosopher James Beattie wrote, “That every practice and sentiment is barbarous which is not according to the usages of Modern Europe seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our critics and philosophers.”²⁶ The particular mode of reasoning that came to characterize Enlightenment thought was elevated to the level of “universal reason,” the mark and determiner of humanity. This allowed Enlightenment thinkers, and their descendants, to “speak from nowhere and for everyone.” Just as the Enlightenment thinkers defined themselves against their “dark,” “mystical,” and “irrational” past, they also defined themselves against their “dark,” mystical,” and “irrational” neighbors. Thus, membership in this elite class of humanity, “rational Europeans” (what later became “whiteness”), emerged as the transcendence of “race,” which was seen as a privation of full

humanity, an impediment to participation in that which makes one human: rationality.

Kant and Hegel also contributed to the development of a temporalization of this “great chain of being,” creating a narrative in which the rational faculty was responsible for man’s progress from “primitive” to “civilized.” Kant’s geography, on which he lectured more than any other subject, created a hierarchical, racialized map of the world. He wrote:

One can take the classification of organic and living beings further. Not only does the vegetable kingdom exist for the sake of the animal kingdom (and its increase and diversification) *but humans, as rational beings, exist for the sake of others of a different species (race). The latter stand at a higher level of humanity, either simultaneously (as, for instance, the Americans and Europeans) or sequentially . . . our earth-globe [Erglob] (having once been dissolved into chaos, but now being organized and regenerating).*²⁷

Thus, Kant argues that “lower” human beings exist for the sake and use of those at a “higher level of humanity”—of greater rationality—much as plants exist for the sake of animals. Similarly, Hegel’s evolutionary theory established a temporal continuum with evil, ignorance, darkness, the past, the “primitive,” and the nonwhite races of humanity on one end and good, knowledge, light, the future, “civilization,” progress, and the white race on the other. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel combined this teleology with environmental determinism to argue for the right and duty of the conquest, subjugation, and even elimination of the dark side of the continuum by the light.²⁸

This is the philosophy at the foundation of modern notions of progress and development. Socially and politically, the markers of “full humanity” have shifted from rationality to “liberal democracy,” “technological advancement,” and “human rights,” but the basic architecture and the complexion of the people at the top of the hierarchy generally remain the same.²⁹ Philosophy became more than just a means of rational inquiry; by exemplifying the functioning of rationality, it became an important criterion for “civilized humanity” and provided the rationale to “use” or “civilize,” often with great force, those segments of humanity deemed lacking in it. So as imperial Europe came into contact with the intellectual traditions of other civilizations, it compared them to the “mystical” thought of the European medieval period, categorized them as “irrational,” and generally considered none of them to “rise to the level of philosophy.”³⁰

This has changed in recent years as a result of careful study by Western and Western-trained scholars of Islamic, Indian, and Far Eastern (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) texts and thinkers whose sophisticated logic, dialectics, critical acumen, and well-developed theories made it difficult for scholars to categorize these traditions as “irrational.” As Garfield writes, illustrating this new approach and broader understanding of “philosophy,”

Ignoring the philosophical traditions of other cultures in fact, whether we like it or not, continues the colonial project of subordinating those cultures to our own. That project was “justified” by the white man’s burden of bringing civilization to the benighted heathen, a burden of which we can only make sense if we deny their manifestly existent intellectual traditions the epistemic status we grant ours. Giving the Western philosophical tradition pride of place as “philosophy” while marginalizing in our departments or in our individual life all other traditions . . . hence implicates us directly in institutional racism. Recognizing that we are so implicated and refraining from changing our individual practice and from working to change our institutional practice constitutes, however passive it may be, individual racism. It also constitutes a profound epistemic vice, that of willfully ignoring sources of knowledge we know to be relevant to our own activities.³¹

But what of those traditions that do not so closely resemble those of modern European philosophy, and are thus not so easily recognized? What of the intellectual traditions of the Amerinidans, of the Polynesians and Aboriginal Australians, and what of those of Africans, the ultimate racial other of the Enlightenment? In the second part of this article, we will examine a quick cross-section of some of the most influential Western attempts to grapple with African thought before concluding with our proposed approach.

Race, Rationality, and African Philosophy

Leaving aside the extensive tradition of written works of Islamic and Christian philosophy produced by sub-Saharan African thinkers (as the Western academy has done until recently), anthropologists, philosophers, social scientists, and explorers had long regarded sub-Saharan Africans as “primitives” at the back end of the bus of progress, whose “savage” mentality and thought was fundamentally different from that of modern, rational man (à la Lévy-Bruhl).³² However,

this was challenged by the British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard's 1937 study of the Azande people in the Sudan entitled *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Evans-Pritchard argued that the Azande notion of "witchcraft" differed greatly from the modern European conception of the term: it was not mere irrational superstition but actually served as a kind of reasonable "natural philosophy" by which the Azande organized and made sense of their world. He argued that the Azande were "immersed in a sea of mystical notions" that are "eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them."³³ In a now-famous example, he contrasts the "common-sense" or "scientific" understanding of an event with the "mystical" Zande understanding of the same event (a granary collapsing on top of someone), explaining how "we" might say that a granary collapsed on someone because its supports were eaten away by termites and that at the time people just so happened to be sitting underneath it to get out of the sun. Whereas these two facts (people resting under the granary and the granary falling because of termites) are unrelated from the "scientific point of view," from the perspective of "Zande philosophy" the two events are connected by witchcraft. Yes, termites ate away the support of the granary, and yes, people sat under the granary to get out of the sun, but it is witchcraft that explains the coincidence of the two events.³⁴

However, despite his careful and sympathetic construction of "Zande philosophy," Evans-Pritchard concludes that while "witchcraft has its own logic, its own rules of thought . . . that do not exclude natural causation," it "is incompatible with our ways of thought" and "there is no elaborate and consistent representation of witchcraft that will account in detail for its workings. . . . Hence the difficulty of discussing witchcraft with the Azande, for their ideas are imprisoned in action and cannot be cited to explain and justify action."³⁵ In short, Zande witchcraft makes some sense, but it is obviously neither correct nor real in the same way that empirical Western science is, and, moreover, it does not have and cannot be given an adequate theoretical explanation.

In his influential article "Understanding a Primitive Society," published in 1964, the British philosopher Peter Winch offered several profound critiques of Evans-Pritchard's account. On the latter's distinction between "mystical" Zande thought and "scientific" Western thought, Winch explains that Evans-Pritchard is doing more than simply describing two different ways of looking at the world; instead, he is also claiming that the "Western/scientific" conception corresponds with the way things are and that the "Zande/magical" conception does not. However, this claim cannot be explained by referring back to the

“Western/scientific” conception as that would beg the question. So we have to ask: On what basis is Evans-Pritchard making this claim?³⁶ That is, Winch argues that Evans-Pritchard’s assumption that the “scientific” worldview of the Western researcher is correct (and therefore that the “mystical” one of the Zande informant is incorrect) rests on a set of unarticulated philosophical assumptions beyond the realm of his scientific discourse.

Furthermore, Winch explains that Evans-Pritchard’s criticism that Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a quasi-scientific theoretical system is a category mistake, writing, “This in its turn suggests that it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go—to a contradiction—who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande. The European is in fact committing a category-mistake.”³⁷ Winch points out that since modern, Western thinkers do not have a category that in any way resembles the Zande category of magic, “the onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category, rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinction between science and non-science.” He asserts that while understanding the Zande category necessarily involves seeing it in relation to local, Western categories, this does not mean “that it is right to ‘evaluate’ magic in terms of criteria belonging to those other categories.”³⁸

Drawing on his mentor Wittgenstein’s notion of language games, Winch concludes that we must therefore seek to understand notions of Zande magic within their own context and evaluate them therein, a process that requires us to consider the existence of more than one form of rationality, perhaps even multiple rationalities from multiple “alien” cultures. Anticipating the objection that these possibilities of different rationalities be limited by “certain formal requirements centering around the demand for consistency,” Winch writes, “But these formal requirements tell us nothing about what in particular is to count as consistency, just as the rules of the propositional calculus limit, but do not themselves determine, what are to be proper values of *p*, *q*, etc. We can only determine this by investigating the wider context of the life in which the activities in question are carried on.”³⁹

Thus, Winch argues not only that the meanings of the terms of “alien” discourses, such as “magic” and “witchcraft,” should be considered on their own terms but, moreover, that this implies that the governing concepts of those discourses, those ideas that play, in their discourse, a similar role to those played by “consistency” and “rationality” in ours, must also be taken on their own terms and considered independently of our own particular notions of “rationality” or “consistency.” In a passage that I believe illustrates the greatest strengths of his article, Winch concludes that these other cultures and other

potential modes of rationality constitute not just superstitious and less effective ways of doing things, but new “possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may take on for a man, trying to contemplate the sense of his life as a whole.”⁴⁰ However, even while arguing for caution in comparing Zande magic with science, Winch describes the former in another passage as “unsophisticated” and the latter as “sophisticated,” committing some of the selfsame comparative errors he warns against.⁴¹

Finally, and most importantly, throughout his article Winch maintains a strong distinction between “alien” or “foreign” discourses and the scientific discourses of the West, seemingly never considering the possibility of them coming together in a discourse, theory, or even a person. Imagine if a young Zande woman went to Oxford and read physics, incorporating this scientific discourse and its theories about physical causality into a traditional Zande cosmology and “philosophy” of metaphysical causality. What of this woman who could know both the “horizontal,” physical causes of how the granary fell (termites and gravity), and also the “vertical,” metaphysical causes of why it landed on her cousin (witchcraft)? That is, if we can consider Evans-Pritchard’s assumption that the Westerners are right and the Azande are wrong, and Winch’s argument that their being “right” and “wrong” depends on the discourse within which they operate, then can we also consider another possibility (which I suspect some of Evans-Pritchard’s interlocutors held)—namely, that the Zande perspective comprehends and surpasses that of the Westerner’s science, which is still “right,” but not as complete as that of the “Zande philosophy”? Or put another way, can we not extend Winch’s plurality of “rationality” and “coherence” to the underlying metatheories of epistemology and metaphysics? That is, can Winch’s plurality of “rationality” extend all the way down to the foundations of the “language game” model that he uses to frame the whole discussion?

These issues were taken up with much less subtlety by Robin Horton and Kwesi Wiredu in a pair of articles entitled “African Traditional Thought and Modern Science” (1967) and “How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought” (1984). In the first part of his two-part article, Horton argues that the problem anthropologists have with understanding African “traditional religious thought” stems from their lack of familiarity with its counterpart in their own culture—contemporary theoretical science—and their inability to compare the two.⁴² He then suggests that traditional African theoretical thinking (myths, divination, and the like) shares a number of features and goals with Western theoretical thinking (science), comparing a physicist’s explanation of

a mushroom cloud to a diviner's explanation of a disaster. He writes, "In both cases reference to theoretical entities is used to link events in their visible tangible world (natural effects) to their antecedents in the same world (natural causes). To say of the traditional African thinker that he is interested in super-natural rather than natural causes makes little more sense, therefore, than to say that he is interested in nuclear rather than natural causes."⁴³

These two modes of inquiry, while similar for Horton, are far from equal, as he concludes: "For the progressive acquisition of knowledge, man needs both the right kinds of theories *and* the right attitude to them. But it is only the latter which we call science."⁴⁴ In the second part of the essay, he further contrasts traditional African thought and Western science along several dimensions, developing the idea that traditional societies are closed, that is, without any "developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets," whereas scientifically oriented cultures, by contrast, are "open," aware of these alternatives. To illustrate this "lack of awareness of alternatives" he compares the way in which a scientist can relatively easily give up one theory for another to "the reaction of an Ijo man to a missionary who told him to throw away his old gods. He said: 'Does your God really want us to climb to the top of a tall palm tree, then take off our hands and let ourselves fall?'"⁴⁵ Horton thus concludes that "the questioning of the beliefs on which diving is based" is unthinkable for the "traditional thinker"—it would be equivalent to a "jump from the cosmic palm tree when there is no hope of another perch to swing to." However, the skeptical scientist has a different attitude toward beliefs, and this "essential skepticism" "distinguishes him from the traditional thinker."⁴⁶

In his response to Horton, Wiredu implicitly agrees with this distinction between "open" and "closed" thinking but argues that anthropologists should not try to elevate "folk-worldviews to the level of continental philosophy." Instead, they should compare African traditional thought with its true counterpart: what is left of Western "folk thought." He writes, "Western societies too have passed through a stage of addiction to spiritistic explanations of phenomena. What is more, significant residues of this tradition remain a basic part of the mental make-up of a large mass of the not-so-sophisticated sections of western populations."⁴⁷ While he admits that some traditional African myths may sound theoretically interesting, he asserts that the transmitters of these folk traditions simply say "this is what our ancestors said," while the Western philosopher tries to defend and explain his theories. He points out that if you want to learn about French philosophy, you do not speak to French peasants or "fetish-priests"; rather, you pick up a book or go to a philosophy department. But anthropologists do not do so because they find African philosophy

departments too derivative of the West and not “exotic enough.” But what else can the African philosopher do since, according to Wiredu, “his ancestors left him no written heritage of philosophical writings.” In conclusion, echoing the Enlightenment thinkers, Wiredu asserts that “man should link the modernization of the conditions of his life with the modernization of all aspects of his thinking. It is just the failure to do this that is responsible for the more unlovable features of life in the West.”⁴⁸

Leaving aside Wiredu’s chilling call for the elimination of traditional African religions and thought for the moment, I actually agree with Horton that many anthropologists struggle to understand traditional African thought because they lack familiarity with equivalents in the Western tradition, but I also agree with Wiredu that science is not the “theoretical thinking” with which Westerners need to acquaint themselves in order to better understand the intellectual dimensions of African religions. Rather, the premodern philosophical traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity (especially Platonism and Neoplatonism) and medieval and Eastern Orthodox Christian philosophy and theology would most benefit Western-educated scholars who wish to understand African thought. By this I do not mean the caricatures of this thought that have emerged after the Enlightenment, but any scholar familiar with Parmenides, the Pythagoreans, the Orphic mysteries, Socrates’s *daimon*, Plato’s mythology, the theurgy of the Neoplatonists, the exorcisms performed by the early church fathers, and the syntheses of critical reason, revelation, and mystical experience and exegesis found in Catholic and Orthodox theologians, philosophers, and mystics would instantly recognize parallels with traditional African rituals, modes of expression, and thought, and would be in a much better position to understand these diverse African traditions and their similarities to and differences from various Western traditions.⁴⁹ The spiritual and mystical dimensions of these philosophical traditions can no more be excised from their more “rational” elements than the racist dimensions of Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Kant, Hegel, and so forth can be excised from their more “rational” elements. My point here is not that these Enlightenment thinkers are wrong because they are racist but rather that they are racist *because they are wrong* about knowledge, its conditions, and the universality of their theories. Wiredu’s inadvertent call for the epistemicide, or elimination, of traditional African religions and thought is an excellent example of how these faulty premises inevitably lead to horribly racist conclusions.

Ironically, Wiredu is partially right in suggesting folk traditions as more apt comparisons with African thought because the folk thought of the West largely derives from old medieval and pagan theologies, philosophies, and

mythologies of which they are but remnants. These folk traditions are not just superstitions to be purged; some of them (like “knocking on wood”) undoubtedly are clues and keys to the cosmologies of the intellectual ancestors of the modern West. But black cats and broken mirrors aside, Wiredu’s embarrassing call to “modernize” and “purge” Africa and the West of this heritage is a perfect example of the destructive potential of these Enlightenment ideals. Moreover, as scholars such as Ousmane Kane and Barry Hallen have clearly demonstrated, precolonial African intellectuals left behind copious written works of philosophy (mostly in Arabic) and even oral traditions (such as Ifa) that are not just blindly transmitted but are met with critical engagement.⁵⁰

As for Horton’s distinction between “open” and “closed,” Barry Hallen has already argued convincingly against the rather silly notion that African societies were more “closed-off” than European ones. By all accounts, they were and remain more ethnically and religiously diverse than their European counterparts have ever been since the fall of the Roman Empire.⁵¹ But perhaps more importantly, Horton makes a crucial category mistake in his illustration of the poor man who could not imagine giving up his ancestral gods. The Western equivalent would not be giving up a particular theory, but rather *the entire enterprise of modern science*. Imagine if some aliens conquered MIT and told the professors and students there that they had to give up their labs, scientific methods, and entire way of understanding and relating to the world (or locked them in a room with nothing but Feyerabend’s books). It would similarly be an unimaginable possibility, a leap off the MIT dome with no other perch to land on. Western scientists, like traditional African ritual specialists, and like Horton himself, also have their fundamental operational assumptions, which often go unquestioned.⁵²

Appiah

One of the most popular academic works dealing with issues of Africa and philosophy in recent times has been Andrew Appiah’s 1992 book, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. In this work, Appiah tackles a number of issues with his characteristic nuance and subtlety, dismantling essentialist notions of race and the concomitant self-defeating nature of the quest to discover or create a “Black” or “African” philosophy. He argues for a cosmopolitan, humanist future for critical thought about Africa and taking place on the continent, concluding that “we will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation, and we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike

others.”⁵³ However, as Ousmane Kane has pointed out, Appiah demonstrates a significant Europhone bias, essentially assuming that all relevant African intellectuals, indeed all intellectuals of the “third world,” are products of the encounter with the West.⁵⁴ While in this book Appiah does acknowledge the existence of the Islamic tradition of philosophical writing on the continent, he also asserts, “For many of its most important cultural purposes, most African intellectuals south of the Sahara are what we can call ‘europhone,’” and “literature, by and large, in Sub-Saharan Africa means Europhone literature (except in the Swahili culture area).”⁵⁵ While it is not clear what exactly these “cultural purposes” are, it must be added that for other “cultural purposes,” especially among the Muslim communities on the continent, most African intellectuals south of the Sahara are non-Europhone or not-just-Europhone. Furthermore, this characterization of African literature—in addition to ignoring the literary significance of orature, music, radio, and films—completely ignores the vast bodies of literature written and still being produced in Arabic and ‘*Ajami* (African languages in Arabic script), not to mention the widespread and growing body of African-language literatures in Roman script. Moreover, the context of Appiah’s reference to the Islamic tradition is itself somewhat problematic:

The worth [for African societies] of any formal philosophy is especially hard to see outside the Islamized regions, because there is no indigenous formal tradition. Muslims have a long history of philosophical writing, much of it written in Africa, so that the study of philosophy can be seen as traditional (and therefore holy) and endogenous (and therefore nationalistic). But in much of black Africa there is no Islamic tradition, indeed no written tradition at all. The sense in which there is a philosophical tradition is, as I suggested earlier, that there is an oral folk philosophy, whose authority lies largely in its purported antiquity, not in the quality of the reasoning—or the evidence—that sustains it.⁵⁶

While the definition of “formal tradition” is not precise in this passage, the predominantly oral tradition of Ifa possesses a great many “formal” features in both the extensive training and professional practice of its practitioners (known as *babalawo*) and in the hermeneutics of the tradition, as my own work illustrates.⁵⁷ Moreover, as Hallen has previously demonstrated, *babalawo* and other “indigenous,” non-Europhone, Yoruba intellectuals have a critical approach to knowledge that does not fit Appiah’s characterization of “folk philosophy.”⁵⁸

As Ousmane Kane points out, these kinds of mistakes are the characteristic result of two “barriers” in academia: “[The first is that] there is no conversation between intellectual historians of Sub-Saharan Islam . . . and Europhone social scientists concerned with the sociology of knowledge, such as Mudimbe or Appiah. . . . The other kind of barrier is linguistic, and it separates the Europhone from the non-Europhone intellectual.”⁵⁹ Kane concludes, “It is time to rethink the quasi-monopoly claimed by Western languages and epistemological order in the process of making African reality intelligible.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, despite certain other shortcomings in this work, Appiah insightfully draws attention to the reason that discussions about Africa and philosophy are often so fraught, noting that “philosophy is the highest status label of Western humanism.”⁶¹

Mudimbe, Hountondji, Apter

Similar concerns about the nature and function of African philosophy are raised by Valetin Mudimbe and Paulin Hountondji in their respective books, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* and *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Largely in reaction to the missionary and colonial anthropological accounts of indigenous African thought (epitomized by Father Placide Tempels’s *La Philosophie Bantoue* and Marcel Griaule’s *Conversations with Ogotemmelli*, respectively), both Mudimbe and Hountondji begin by identifying African philosophy as “the Western texts and imaginations that have configured African thought.”

Mudimbe’s project is to uncover the “conditions of possibility” and political agendas of the discourse about the philosophy of Africa in a manner reminiscent of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. He criticizes the “missionary” brand of ethnophilosophy epitomized by Tempels’s account of Bantu philosophy, arguing that its presentation of African thought is distorted by its ultimate motive of conversion and implicit belief that Christianity alone is “the Way, the Truth, and the Light.” Mudimbe goes on to criticize the sympathetic colonial ethnophilosophy of Marcel Griaule, characterizing such attempts as “philosophies of conquest” that impose Western categories of knowledge that mask relations of domination. He explains that by interpreting and describing African worldviews and “traditional systems of thought,” both Western and African scholars “have been using categories and conceptual systems dependent on a Western epistemological order.”⁶² Thus Mudimbe laments, “Modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West.”⁶³ In a move that echoes Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Mudimbe asks, “Is not this reality

distorted in the expression of African modalities in non-African languages? Is it not inverted, modified by anthropological and philosophical categories used by specialists of dominant discourses?"⁶⁴

Mudimbe's basic argument is that discourse about Africa, even by Africans, takes place firmly within dominant Western discourses and philosophies, and thus tells us more about the Western training of the author than it does about anything "African." The vast imbalance in political and epistemic power between Western discourse about Africa and the reality of Africa itself prevents "Africa" from becoming anything more than a product of Western theory and imagination. Mudimbe terms this secret "knowledge" that experts claim to represent in their books and articles about Africa "gnosis." In summary, he attempts to describe the state of the field of African studies by answering Foucault's three questions: "Who is speaking? From which institutional sites? And, according to which grids are his questions pertinent and in which sense?"⁶⁵ In answering these questions, he concludes that the real African "gnosis," if it exists at all, remains beyond the reach of Western discourse.

Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* also attacks the discipline of ethnophilosophy, again epitomized by Placide Tempels and Marcel Griaule, for confusing its portrayals of "uncritical" metaphysics and ontology of the Bantu and the Dogon with the critical history of the philosophy of the West, and by claiming to speak for the former to the latter. He writes, "Africans are, as usual, excluded from the discussion, and Bantu philosophy is a mere pretext for the learned disquisitions among Europeans. The black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse."⁶⁶ Hountondji further attacks the ethnophilosophical "myth of unanimity": that everyone in "traditional Africa" agreed with everyone else and there were no individual beliefs or philosophies. Reacting strongly against this ethnographic portrayal of African philosophy, Hountondji redefines African philosophy as "a set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by the authors themselves." From this definition he agrees that ethnically African philosophers of the school of Tempels and Griaule (such as Paul Kagame) are philosophers, but he argues that their claim of reviving traditional African philosophy is invalid because "we have produced a radically new definition of African philosophy, the criterion being the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content."⁶⁷ That is, according to Hountondji's definition, these African scholars are not "reviving" anything since they are the first to do African philosophy. Furthermore, Tempels and Griaule were not doing African philosophy because

they were not African. However, following his mentor Althusser, Hountondji stresses that philosophy must be understood as “a philosophical reflection on discourse which [is itself] overtly and consciously philosophical.” Hountondji’s (and Althusser’s) philosophy is not a system, but “a history, essentially an open process, a restless unfinished quest” in which all views are subjected to critical examination, refutation, and reformulation. Writing and literacy are also essential to such a philosophy because only transcribed philosophy is open and free for critical evaluation, he argues. Thus, Hountondji concludes that the “precritical” Africa portrayed by the ethnophilosophers has produced nothing that can be called philosophy. Andrew Apter sums up his contention well, “For Hountondji, African traditional wisdom is wisdom, but it is not philosophy. It may have transient critical moments, but it lacks a critical tradition. To call it philosophy is paternalistic and wrong.”⁶⁸ For Hountondji, real African philosophy is “yet to come.”⁶⁹

The anthropologist Andrew Apter takes on both of these works in his 1992 article, “‘Que Faire?’: Reconsidering Inventions of Africa,” suggesting the “deep knowledge” (*imọ ijinlẹ*) of Yoruba ritual as an alternative “vernacular” model to describe the work of those African scholars writing in the tradition of Griaule and Tempels. After giving several examples from Yoruba history in which ritual performance and the deployment of subversive mythologies were used to rewrite and revise official orthodoxies, overthrow dynasties, unseat governors, and so on, Apter suggests that perhaps the work of African “ethnophilosophers” can be understood in the same way: as ritual contestations of official consensus, as deployments of new myths that have very real political and social consequences. Thus, even if these “ethnophilosophers” are producing works that resemble Tempels’s *Bantu Philosophy*, by investigating and representing the “gnosis” or deep knowledge of African ritual and mythology, these philosophers are doing something very much akin to what Yoruba specialists do all the time, drawing on “hidden knowledge” and deploying it ritually to revise and rewrite official accounts and consensuses.⁷⁰

However, Apter concludes this article on a more cautious, self-critical note, writing,

Indeed, the argument for indigenous critical traditions can be attacked as the newest species of liberal pluralism, deftly neutralized by the charge of . . . “appropriating the other by assimilation,” of reading critical theory into gnosis itself. . . . Here I can only call into question the foundations of this discourse, which effectively silences the very people—their voices—whose condition it purports to demystify. Does

not this most “radical” of critical positions in fact recapitulate the logic of colonial conquest—the negation of the Other by a magisterial discourse that today masquerades as its antithesis?⁷¹

Or, in simpler English, “Isn’t even this attempt to use Yoruba ritual as a theory, as a way of understanding and doing ‘African philosophy,’ ultimately just another form of the appropriation and misrepresentation that Tempels and Griaule were guilty of?”

While the critiques these works offer of academic discourse about Africa and each other are insightful, by limiting themselves to texts written in European languages by Western-trained scholars Mudimbe and Hountondji often fall into the same errors they point out. For example, Hountondji criticizes the “myth of unanimity,” but then sweepingly declares all traditional African thought “pre-critical.” Similarly, as he sometimes self-referentially points out, much of Mudimbe’s handwringing over the possibility of “Africa” ever speaking for itself or being understood is simply the result of situating himself in and limiting his study to discourse about Africa in European languages coming from Western-trained scholars. Of course “African thought” will seem basically to be a product of the West if you limit “African thought” to that produced in and for Europhone Western traditions. Although somewhat outside of the defined scope of his project, had Mudimbe seriously considered the non-Europhone discourses of Islamic and indigenous African intellectuals (and not just their academic representations) he might have caught a whiff of the “gnosis” of which he writes.

However, Mudimbe does have a point about the seemingly inevitable and often severe distortions that occur when creating representations of African thought for Western-educated audiences. Nevertheless, I argue that the situation is not as dire as he seems to suggest because these African traditions have robust lives of their own, independent of any Western representations of them, and, moreover, the main difficulties in representation are epistemological and not sociopolitical, although the two are not entirely separate. But first I wish to return to Hountondji’s definition of “African philosophy” as “a set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by the authors themselves.”

By defining African philosophy by the geographical origin of the authors rather than by content, Hountondji has created a nondefinition. If I spilled stew on my trousers and called it philosophy, then according to Hountondji it would be African philosophy. A definition that does not refer to content is not a definition: it is a superficial categorization. A Nigerian violinist playing Wagner note for note is still playing German (or at least European) classical music.

An African doing Continental European philosophy is still doing Continental European philosophy regardless of how strong his accent is. Hountondji implicitly recognizes the weakness of this definition in his content-specific claims that philosophy must be written, self-conscious, and self-critical and must be a historical process, not a system. Here I agree with Apter: had Hountondji engaged the corpus of orature, literature, and ritual practice produced and performed by indigenous living African intellectual traditions, he would have found traditions that are dynamic, some that are written, and many that are critical.

Most of the debates about what should and should not be called African philosophy appear to boil down to arguments either over the worth or status of the tradition in question, and thus whether it is worthy of the privileged category of “philosophy,” or over the authenticity of the tradition, and thus whether it is worthy of the appellation “African.” Because such concerns are foreign to the traditions I have studied (most *babalawo* and *Sufis* do not care whether people call them “African philosophers”), this issue is not urgent for my work, but were I to suggest a definition of philosophy, it would emphasize the original Socratic or Pythagorean sense of the term, “the love of wisdom,” the love and pursuit of that *Sophia* (Greek), *Sapientia* (Latin), *Hikmah* (Arabic), *ogbṣṣṣ* (Yoruba) that is at once knowledge and an ideal mode of being. Defining the “African” half of “African philosophy” is more tricky—largely because “African” is largely an arbitrary, imaginary, and originally exogenous demarcation of a landmass.⁷² But were I forced to do so, I would reserve it for those continuous “indigenous” (a term equally problematic for the reasons just stated), Jewish, Christian, or Islamic traditions that have shaped and been shaped by people living on the continent for many generations. So, for example, a Russian man initiated into Ifa and practicing in England would qualify as a member of an African philosophical tradition, while a Yoruba woman living in Lagos who is a student of Buddhist *Madhyamika* philosophy would not. The work of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora in various traditions of Western philosophy may be insightful, incisive, and interesting philosophical discourse, but in this definition would not qualify as “traditional African philosophy.”

The following contrasting historical examples should help to clarify this point. Anton Wilhem Amo (c. 1703–c. 1759) was an Akan man from the Axim region of present-day Ghana who as a child was brought to Germany, where he was raised as a member of the family of the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. He studied at the Universities of Helmstedt and Jalle, and received his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Wittenberg in 1734 for his dissertation

entitled “On the Absence of Sensation in the Human Mind and its Presence in our Organic and Living Body,” an argument against Cartesian dualism in favor of a more materialist conception of the person. He lectured at the Universities of Halle and Jena, but after his patron, the duke, died, life in Germany became more difficult for him. In 1747, Amo decided to go back to Ghana, and little is known about his life thereafter, save that he died around 1759.⁷³

Susanne Wenger (1915–2009) was an Austrian artist who married the German scholar Ulli Beier and moved with him to Nigeria in 1949, when the latter accepted a post at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She was attracted to the traditional Yoruba religious ceremonies she heard going on down the street, and after a bout with tuberculosis she was initiated by the priest Ajagemo into the mysteries of the *orisha* *Ọbatala* (a Yoruba deity). She became a respected and important priestess of traditional Yoruba religion, and eventually settled in the town of *Oṣogbo* where she revived the worship at the town’s Sacred Grove of *Ọṣun* (the Yoruba goddess of beauty, love, and magic), built shrines for the *orisha* (Yoruba deities), and fostered a whole “school” of traditional worshippers and artists. In large part thanks to her efforts, the Sacred Grove was declared a UNESCO world heritage site in 2005. Upon her death in 2009, one of her students is reported to have offered the following tribute: “Her internment completes Susan Wenger’s transformation into a spirit, as devotees will henceforth make supplications to her, too.”⁷⁴ In this definition, Susanne Wenger (and any who have followed in her footsteps) could be considered a traditional African philosopher, whereas Anton Amo (and those who have followed in his footsteps) would not.

This is what I think I was looking for all those years ago in the bookshop, and why the piece by the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob was the one that spoke to me the most of all of the articles in Eze’s anthology. Now, as with any definition, the one I am suggesting becomes fuzzier the more one investigates it. It is possible and increasingly common for someone to be a member of and have training in several different intellectual traditions, both traditional “African” and modern “Western” ones. Moreover, given the strong influence some of these traditions still exert on the general cultures of their societies (such as those of the Yoruba, Akan, or Dogon-speaking peoples, among others), it is often difficult to say who belongs to a tradition and who does not. However, these traditions often draw their own boundaries through rites of initiation. Nevertheless, this provisional definition differs most strongly from those discussed above not by the way it defines “African,” but by the way it defines “philosophy,” distinguishing “philosophical discourse” from “philosophy itself,” which is envisioned as a way of life, a love and pursuit of wisdom.

Within this definition, some African philosophers may engage in written philosophical discourse, some (like Socrates) may engage only in oral philosophical discourse, and others may not engage in philosophical discourse at all. It is not the discourse but rather the practice of philosophy as a “preparation for death” that is of greatest significance. The critiques that these traditions should not be called philosophical because they are not “critical” or “written” or “discursive” would thus be irrelevant. It would be like arguing that Genghis Khan should not be called a “world conqueror” because he did not play the video game of the same name; the two definitions of philosophy deal with two different domains.

There is something of an inferiority complex that drives many scholars on the African continent and in the major centers of learning abroad to beg for these traditions (and/or their own work) to be recognized and accepted into the privileged category of philosophy by trying to emphasize their similarities with contemporary academic philosophical theories. This has not been terribly successful, and with good reason, since what should be of interest is not simply that precolonial Africans learned Aristotelian logic but the distinct ideas, theories, perspectives, and modes of life developed by these African thinkers and their students (for example, why they learned Aristotelian logic and what they did with it). Musicians do not go to West Africa to hear local symphonies play Beethoven and Bartók; they go to appreciate, learn from, and be inspired by the region’s many incredible indigenous musical traditions.⁷⁵ Moreover, these musical traditions do not rely on Western approval for their continued relevance, popularity, and success, and neither do the traditional African intellectual traditions. While traditional African philosophies may be of interest to non-Africans and Africans alike for the alternative perspectives they offer to recently dominant ways of life and knowing, I argue that, like traditional African musical traditions, they should be of interest because they are good—because their accounts of reality, the self, virtue, knowledge, and so on and the ways of life they exemplify are compelling—not because they are African.

The facts, as I see them, are these:

1. The African continent has been and currently is home to a number of intellectual traditions, including some of the earliest to bear the name “philosophy” (North African Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, and so forth).
2. Some of these traditions are relatively recent importations from modern Europe, take place primarily in European languages, are taught in modern universities, and are primarily based on modern Western European world-views, philosophies, pedagogies, and so forth.

3. Some of these traditions have a longer history on the continent, primarily take place in non-European languages, and are primarily based on traditional worldviews, philosophies, and pedagogies that are distinct from those of modern, Western Europe.
4. Many of these traditions have long written traditions of discursive, rational argument (in Greek, Latin, Ge'ez, Arabic, Swahili, and so on) in addition to their oral traditions, while others, still critical and dynamic, are "unlettered."⁷⁶
5. Virtually all of these older, traditional, non-Europhone traditions are religious and bear a family resemblance to the Ancient Greco-Roman schools of philosophy in terms of methods and goals: ritual practice and exercises leading to the cultivation of "wisdom," an ideal mode of life. In contrast, virtually all of the newer, modern, Europhone traditions do not share in this family resemblance and focus instead on philosophical, academic, or modern scientific discourse.
6. The members of these older, non-Europhone traditions have done and are doing sophisticated, compelling, and profound intellectual work that is worthy of academic attention.
7. Virtually all of these traditional, non-Europhone traditions exist quite independently of the modern academic traditions, they have their own names for their traditions and categories of thought, and many, if not most, of their members are completely unconcerned with whether or not what they are doing is called "philosophy" by those outside of the tradition.

Given these facts, the question now becomes how one engages with these traditional, primarily non-Europhone traditions. This brings us back to Mudimbe.

Mudimbe's *Invention of Africa* convincingly demonstrates many of the dangers and pitfalls involved in trying to represent "Africa" in Western discourses. As the discussions above demonstrate, academia has inherited an unfortunate tradition of ignorance and arrogance when it comes to other intellectual traditions, especially those of Africa. This has provoked the problematic reactions of negritude, Afrocentrism, and certain New Age movements, which (like other colonized nationalisms—such as Arab, Turkish, Persian, and Hindu nationalism) accept the basic categories of the "oppressive" discourse (such as "race," "mystical," "philosophical," "civilization," and the like) they seek to counter in their representations of Africa. In their many forms, these reactionary movements describe an imaginary Manichean dichotomy in which nearly everything "African" is natural, wise, and spiritual in contrast to the artificial,

foolish, and materialist West. While such reactions are understandable, they are unfortunate and ill-equipped to deal with reality.

Similarly, as some of the discussions above demonstrate, Western attempts to understand and engage with traditional African worldviews and philosophies are fraught with the difficulties inherent in trying to learn and then represent a particular tradition from the perspective, and in the language of, another tradition. “Traduttori traditori,” the Italian saying goes, “translators, traitors.” And yet, translation, or at least something like it, does happen.

Following other postmodern thinkers, Mudimbe seems to claim that the representation of “Africa” will never be the thing itself, and will thus always be the product of Western imagination, a mental construction of Western discourse. To use a linguistic analogy, when writing a translation of an Arabic text in English, one has to obey the conventions and rules of English prose, punctuation, and capitalization (which are not shared by Arabic), and when reading (especially for a nonnative speaker), one brings one’s own categories of thought, deeply shaped by one’s mother tongue, to bear on the text. Similarly, when presenting African traditions in Western academic discourse one must follow the academic conventions of logic, argument, genre, and even theory that are often not shared by the “translated” tradition. Moreover, one often brings one’s own theoretical assumptions, often unshared by the tradition, to bear upon one’s study of it.

Thus, for Mudimbe, as for many poststructuralist and postmodern theorists, the task of representation and translation seems to be an impossible one. What one produces is a work “inspired” by the object of inquiry, but it is not an “accurate” representation. Some accounts may be better than others, but this superiority can only be relative and fallibilist since one can never access the truth or reality of the original, which is located “outside of the text,” the discourse, and the self. This account of representation is based on something akin to the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal, “things as they really are” and “things as they appear to us.” Ironically, this distinction is not universally held and is certainly not absolute in many traditions I would classify as “African philosophies.” For example, in Sufism and some schools of Islamic philosophy (like other Neoplatonic philosophies) the Intellect (*al-‘aql*), especially in its highest form—the universal intellect (*al-‘aql al-kullī*) or the divine intellect (*al-‘aql al-rabbānī*)—can know things directly, “as they are,” because it is identical with their ontological root. The resulting knowledge, coincidentally, is also known as “gnosis” (*ma‘rifah*). Thus, Mudimbe’s “problem of translation” derives from the very fact that he situates himself within a particular Western (primarily Foucauldian) epistemology in which such “gnosis” is not a real possibility.⁷⁷

Returning to the metaphor of translation, Walter Benjamin, in his essay the “The Task of the Translator,” quotes a passage by the German philosopher Rudolph Pannwitz that I believe both elegantly describes and points the way out of this impasse:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect. However, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly.⁷⁸

Similarly, I would argue that many, if not most attempts at engaging with, describing, or performing African philosophies (and other intellectual traditions from around the world) have tried to turn them into contemporary Western philosophies and theories. Especially when dealing with intellectual traditions that differ greatly from those of the (post)modern West, it behooves scholars to go back into the historical and philosophical origins of their own discourses to examine those traditions where categories such as “reason,” “mysticism,” “religion,” “practice,” and “theory” converge and emerge.

Moreover, continuing the analogy of translation, African traditions can and should “powerfully affect,” expand, and deepen Western conceptions of philosophy and theory—and also reshape their discourses—but this can only happen if they are approached with reverence and taken seriously. To give a concrete linguistic example, this expansion and reshaping can be seen in the influence of Arabic on languages as diverse as Wolof, Hausa, Swahili, Persian, and Malay, many of whose speakers have learned Arabic and many more of whom interact with the Arabic language through daily religious rites, all of which has had a deep and lasting influence on the vocabulary, categories, and in some cases even grammatical structures of these languages. Or,

to give an example a bit closer to home, in describing Wole Soyinka's "Big English" (*Igilango Gẹ̀ṣi*) Biḡdun Jeyifo remarked, "When you use language in the *Igilango Gẹ̀ṣi* manner, you are transforming the English language, you are doing things with it and in it that the owners of the language themselves had not thought imaginable."⁷⁹

As scholars of African religious and intellectual traditions, we must do the same with Western theories and the philosophies on which they are based: we must allow them to be transformed, reshaped, expanded, deepened, or even discarded by their encounter with African traditions. But this can happen only if we allow ourselves to take these traditions seriously, not only as anthropological curiosities or as historical data, but also as serious "philosophical" accounts of knowledge and knowing—if we take them "on their own terms"—much as we are trained to do with Western theorists and philosophers. Such serious consideration does not require that we blindly embrace these African traditions or accept all of their claims, but it does involve acknowledging the possibility that our difficulties in understanding them may have more to do with our history and training than with the particularities of the traditions themselves. As Amadou Hampaté Bâ writes,

To discover a new world, one must be able to forget one's own; otherwise one merely carries that along with one and does not "keep one's ears open." The Africa of the old initiates warns the young researcher, through the mouth of Tierno Bokar, the sage of Bandiagara: "If you wish to know who I am, If you wish me to teach you what I know, cease for a while to be what you are, and forget what you know."⁸⁰

Western-trained scholars of African intellectual traditions would do well to familiarize themselves with ancient philosophy (and perhaps it would behoove scholars of antiquity to visit diviners) and to understand the history and the provinciality of their own categories of thought and inquiry in order to better train themselves in and appreciate African and other non-Western intellectual traditions. Furthermore, these African intellectual traditions should not be treated as mere *objects* of inquiry to be learned about and subjected to exogenous categories, theories, and methods of inquiry, but should be approached as *subjects* of study to be learned or learned from—much as one learns math, biology, the French language, or Western philosophy in the contemporary academy. If we can achieve this, perhaps the next young kid to pick up an anthology of African philosophy in the bookstore will have a different experience than I did all those years ago. Perhaps she will not even feel the need to look for "African philosophy" in a bookstore at all.

Notes

1. Quoted in Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 189.
2. The only articles that piqued my interest and sincere appreciation at the time were Chinua Achebe's articles on Igbo cosmology and art, Wole Soyinka's article "The Fourth Stage," Kwame Gyeyke's article on the Akan conception of the "self," and my favorite reading of the book, the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob's reflections on "God, Faith, and the Nature of Knowledge."
3. Amadou Hampaté Bâ, *Amkoullel, L'enfant Peul: Memoires* (Artes: Actes Sud, 1991), 197.
4. See Algis Uždavinys and John Finamore, *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004).
5. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 266.
6. Ibid., 128–29.
7. See Soheil Muhsin Afnan, *Avicenna: His Life and Works* (Oxford: Allen & Unwin, 1958).
8. For example, Ash'arī theologians' arguments for occasionalism preceded Hume's similar arguments, which were probably indirectly influenced by theirs.
9. Suhrawardī's work remains influential in the Islamic world to this day, even in the West, thanks to the work of Henri Corbin. Before this, his work was largely unknown in the West although its influence did extend beyond the Islamic world. His magnum opus, the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (Wisdom of the Orient / Philosophy of Illumination), was translated into Hebrew and Sanskrit and inspired an "Illuminationist" school of Zoroastrian philosophy. See Mehdi Aminrazavi and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia* (Routledge, 2013), 146.
10. See Walter James Skellie, "A Translation of As Sanusi's Creed Umm Al Barahin, and a Comparison of It with the Creeds of Al Fadali and An Nasafi" (Master's thesis, Hartford Seminary, 1930). This work was also widely used in the Malay world.
11. The Islamic philosophers saw themselves and their discipline as directly descending from these figures such as Plato, known in the tradition as "The Divine Plato" (*Aflātūn al-ilāhī*). For more on this orientation in Islamic philosophy, see W. Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal Al-Dīn Kāshānī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
12. Izutsu, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari* (Delmar: Caravan, 1977), 8. Similarly, Nasr writes, "The Islamic intellectual tradition has usually not seen a dichotomy between intellect and intuition but has created a hierarchy of knowledge and methods of attaining knowledge according to which degrees of both intellection and intuition become harmonized in an order encompassing all the means available to man to know, from sensual knowledge and reason to intellection and inner vision or the 'knowledge of the heart.' If there have appeared from time to time thinkers who confined knowledge to what can be attained by reason (*istidlāl*) alone and who have denied both revelation and intuition as sources of knowledge, they have for that

very reason remained peripheral within the integral Islamic intellectual tradition.” S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 95.

13. One could draw a comparison with the contemporary situation in which the incredible wealth of translated texts and practicing communities from the different philosophical traditions around the world is now leading to new understandings of philosophy. Moreover, the efforts to create space to think and work outside the dominion of modern and postmodern Western thought are somewhat reminiscent of those employed by the early humanists to create a space to think outside of the dominion of the church.
14. In *De Anima* (III.3–5), Aristotle divides the soul (*psyche* in Greek and *anima* in Latin) into the vegetative soul, which has the capacity for self-nourishment and reproduction, the animal soul, which has the capacity for sensory perception and self-movement, and the intellect (*nous* in Greek and *intellectus* in Latin), which unlike the other two souls can exist apart from a body and has the capacity for intuition, rational thought, and memory. Aristotle further divides the *nous* into an active intellect (*nous poietikos / intellectus agens*), which is separate, immortal, and eternal, and a passive intellect (*nous pathetikos / intellectus possibilis*), a term whose meaning has been subject to extensive debate since the time of Aristotle himself but which is generally held to be associated with the rational and mental faculties, which are affected by knowledge. In medieval Scholasticism this view was combined with Neoplatonic doctrines to produce the distinct concepts of the intellect (*intellectus*), a divine, sometimes uncreated faculty of human beings through which they directly perceive God and divine truths, and the rational faculty (*ratio*), the seat of reason and discursive thought (*dianoia*), ranked lower than the intellect.
15. Such as Meister Eckhart’s saying, “There is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreateable; if the whole soul were such it would be uncreated and uncreateable, and this is the Intellect.” See C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
16. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 28–29.
17. *Ibid.*, 26–30.
18. In medieval Neoplatonic Christian thought, the participation of the nature of the Good in man is accomplished through the intellect (*nous*), often identified with the immanent Holy Spirit, and it is the degree to which the soul is governed by and identified with the intellect that determines man’s place on the hierarchy. Aquinas provides a summary of the more Aristotelian version of this view, “While in all creatures there is some kind of likeness to God, in the rational creature alone we find a likeness of ‘image’ as we have explained above (1,2); whereas in other creatures we find a likeness by way of a ‘trace.’ Now the intellect or mind is that whereby the rational creature excels other creatures; wherefore this image of God is not found even in the rational creature except in the mind.” *Summa Theologiae* I, 93.6.
19. Such as in Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*.

20. Among the reasons for the shifts are reactions to the bloody internecine wars between Protestant and Catholic polities and certain trends in late Scholasticism, replacing Avicennan doctrines of the individual passive intellect with Averroean doctrines of a more distant universal intellect. See Gilbert Durand, *On the Disfiguration of the Image of Man in the West* (Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1977).
21. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999), 15.
22. *Ibid.*, 29–30.
23. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997). See also "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," chapter 2 of Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008.)
24. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950).
25. Thus, the elaborate angelologies of medieval Europe were replaced by the elaborate racial hierarchies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This also had profound implications for the understanding of gender since not man as human but man as male was put atop the Great Chain of Being. See Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), for an introduction to the influence of the Enlightenment on conceptions of gender.
26. G. W. F. Hegel, "Lectures on the Philosophy of World History," in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 122; James Beattie, "An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Skepticism," in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 36.
27. Quoted in Stuart Elden, *Reading Kant's Geography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 1; emphasis mine.
28. Hegel, "Lectures," 112–53. In which Hegel infamously writes, "Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained—for all intents and purposes of connection with the rest of the World—shut up. . . . [I]t is the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night." He continues, "The peculiar African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law. . . . We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character." And he then concludes with this: "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. . . . Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand

by Africa is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History."

29. Similarly, Uday Singh Mehta has compellingly argued and demonstrated an imperialistic urge inherent in the liberal project and ideology. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
30. Nor could they, since European rationality and philosophy were so narrowly and self-referentially defined, and yet paradoxically proclaimed as a universal. The only way to qualify as a philosopher would be to already be a European philosopher.
31. Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 260.
32. Philosophy is meant here in the broad sense of the term, including works of theology, *falsafa*, *kalām*, and Sufism. It is also important to note that these traditions extend through the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods of African history.
33. E. E. Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), 319.
34. *Ibid.*, 70.
35. *Ibid.*, 79–83.
36. Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (October 1964): 308–9.
37. *Ibid.*, 315.
38. *Ibid.*, 319.
39. *Ibid.*, 318.
40. *Ibid.*, 321. The passage in full reads, "What we may learn by studying other cultures are not merely possibilities of different ways of doing things, other techniques. More importantly we may learn different possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may take on for a man, trying to contemplate the sense of his life as a whole. This dimension of the matter is precisely what MacIntyre misses in his treatment of Zande magic: he can see in it only a (misguided) technique for producing consumer goods. But a Zande's crops are not just potential objects of consumption: the life he lives, his relations with his fellows, his chances for acting decently or doing evil, may all spring from his relation to his crops. Magical rites constitute a form of expression in which these possibilities and dangers may be contemplated and reflected on and perhaps also thereby transformed and deepened."
41. "It is of interest to us to understand how Zande magic is related to science; the concept of such a comparison is a very sophisticated one; but this does not mean that we have to see the unsophisticated Zande practice in the light of more sophisticated practices in our own culture, like science—as perhaps a more primitive form of it." *Ibid.*, 319.
42. Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," *Africa* 37, no. 1 (January 1967): 50.

43. Ibid., 54.
44. Ibid., 71.
45. Ibid., 156.
46. Ibid., 168.
47. J. E. Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought," in Eze, *African Philosophy*, 193.
48. Ibid., 195.
49. See Peter Kingsley's *Reality* and the works of Algis Uzdavynis and Pierre Hadot for a fuller account of the spiritual and religious dimensions of the Greco-Roman philosophical traditions mentioned here.
50. See Oumar Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2012); and Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Šodipo, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (London: Ethnographica, 1986).
51. For comparison, the modern nation of Nigeria is believed to be home to over five hundred distinct languages and as many ethnic groups, each of which seems to have had (and many of which still do have) a plurality of religious traditions.
52. In fact, given the remarkable density of different esoteric ritual traditions in West Africa it is likely that the contemporary African ritual specialists are a part of a more "open" milieu—that is, they are surrounded by several other distinct, "alternative" ritual traditions and specialists—than the more "closed" milieu of the often reductionist and totalizing claims of modern scientific discourse. For example, in Nigeria, babalawo are aware of and sometimes refer clients to a variety of other indigenous Yoruba ritual specialists, as well as Islamic and Christian ritual specialists and the ritual specialists at local hospitals (that is, Western-trained doctors). In contrast, in Cambridge few chemists are aware of other traditions and philosophies of science (Islamic, Chinese, Indian, Ancient Greek, and so forth), and even fewer still regard them as valid alternatives to their own disciplines and not merely primitive and crude approximations of it.
53. Antony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 135–36.
54. Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals*; Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 68.
55. Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 4, 55.
56. Ibid., 91.
57. Oludamini Ogunnaike, "Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015).
58. See Hallen and Šodipo, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*; and Barry Hallen, *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
59. Kane, *Non-Europhone intellectuals*, 57.
60. Ibid., 3.
61. With regard to the shortcomings, for example, when considering mysticism, Appiah writes, "But even in these traditions the class of such mysteries is restricted, and their truth and intelligibility have the sanction not of evidence and argument, it

- is true, but in the one case, of divine revelation, and, in the other, of a certain kind of contemplative experience." Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 97. He betrays the same assumption of the incommensurability of reason and "mystical" or "contemplative" experience that characterizes post-Enlightenment thought. The theories of many "mystics" from a variety of traditions, such as Dignaga, Nagarjuna, Sri Harṣa, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā, "have the sanction" of both evidence and argument, as well as revelation and contemplative experience; Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 93.
62. V. Y. Mudimbe, "African Gnosis Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge: An Introduction," *African Studies Review* 28, nos. 2–3 (1985): 150.
 63. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 185.
 64. *Ibid.*, 186.
 65. Mudimbe, "African Gnosis Philosophy," 166.
 66. Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 34.
 67. *Ibid.*, 66.
 68. Andrew Apter, "'Que Faire?': Reconsidering Inventions of Africa," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (1992): 96.
 69. *Ibid.*, 53.
 70. *Ibid.*, 102.
 71. *Ibid.*, 104. What I will suggest in this article is not that we "read critical theory into gnosis" as Apter says, but rather "read gnosis into critical theory." That is, we should not try to translate these "gnostic" traditions into critical theory, but allow them to transform, reshape, and even supersede academic theories.
 72. The various peoples who have populated what we now call the African continent have had a variety of different ways of demarcating geographical boundaries, and it was not until very recently that many of them began to think of themselves as "Africans."
 73. William E. Abraham, "Amo," in *A Companion to the Philosophers*, by Robert L. Arrington (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
 74. Gbemisola Olujobi, "Austrian Artist Becomes Nigerian Ancestor," *Truthdig*, May 21, 2009, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20090522_austrian_artist_becomes_nigerian_ancestor.
 75. Like traditional African philosophies, traditional African musical traditions usually had ritual functions and psycho-spiritual dimensions beyond those commonly theorized for their modern counterparts in the West. Neither Copeland's nor Chopin's music is understood to speak to spirits or bring rain.
 76. I use this term, a translation of the honorific Arabic term (*ummi*), used to describe the Prophet of Islam, who neither read nor wrote, instead of the terms "illiterate" or "nonliterate," which imply a privation or lack, or "oral," which implies that the spoken word is the tradition's only means of representation. For all of the benefits of writing, the distinction between a "literate" and an "unlettered" society or tradition is not simply the subtraction of writing; "unlettered" societies and traditions

have many features and qualities seldom found in their literate counterparts. See Coomaraswamy's excellent article "The Bugbear of Literacy" in his *The Bugbear of Literacy* (London: Dobson, 1947). Moreover, many "unlettered" African traditions employ forms of symbolic representation other than writing (such as adinkra, nsibidi, and others) to encode ideas and principles.

77. For those having difficulty imagining this, or any other, alternative to the Kantian divide between noumena and phenomena, I offer the following story of Zhuangzi as a key:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, "The minnows swim about so freely, following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish."

Huizi said, "You are not a fish, so whence do you know the happiness of fish?"

Zhuangzi said, "You are not I, so whence do you know I don't know the happiness of fish?"

Huizi said, "I am not you, to be sure, so I don't know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact."

Zhuangzi said, "Let's go back to the starting point. You said, 'Whence do you know the happiness of fish?' Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know it, I must have known it from here, up above the Hao River."

Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 76.

78. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 261–62.
79. Biodun Jeyifo, Wole Soyinka Seventieth Birthday Lecture, Lagos, Nigeria, July 5, 2004.
80. Amadou Hampaté Bâ, "The Living Tradition," in *General History of Africa*, vol. 1, *Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 202–3. It should be noted that while this may naïvely appear to resemble Husserlian phenomenology and the notion of "bracketing," what Hampaté Bâ and I are suggesting is something much more radical: putting phenomenology on the same level as these African intellectual traditions and thus forgetting or "bracketing" phenomenology itself along with its many metaphysical assumptions.