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HOW NOT TO COMPARE AFRICAN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT WITH WESTERN THOUGHT

From *Ch'indaba* 2 (1976)

J. E. Wiredu

Many Westerners have been puzzled by the virtual ubiquity of gods and spirits in traditional African explanations of things. Robin Horton, the Western anthropologist, has suggested that this failure of understanding is partly attributable to the fact that many Western anthropologists "have been unfamiliar with the theoretical thinking of their own culture."[1] I would like to suggest that a much more significant reason is that they have also been unfamiliar with the folk thought of their own culture.

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 makeup of a large mass of the less sophisticated sections of Western populations. More importantly still, elements of the spiritistic outlook are, in fact, deeply embedded in the philosophical thought of many contemporary Westerners: philosophers and even scientists.

Obviously, it is a matter of first-rate philosophical importance to distinguish between traditional, that is, pre-scientific, spiritistic thought and modern scientific thought by means of clearly articulated criteria. It is also of anthropological and psychological interest to try to understand how traditional modes of thought function in the total context of life in a traditional society. Since African societies are among the closest approximations in the modern world to societies in the pre-scientific stage of intellectual development, the interest anthropologists have shown in African thought is understandable.

Unfortunately, instead of seeing the non-scientific characteristics of African traditional thought as typifying traditional thought in general, Westerners have tended to take them as defining a peculiarly African way of thinking. The ill effects of this mistake have been considerable. It is the basic non-scientific, spiritistic tendencies of African thought, rather than its genuinely dis-

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tinctive features, that have been taken as a basis for contrasting Africans with Western peoples. One consequence is that many Westerners have gone about with an exaggerated notion of the differences between Africans and the peoples of the West. I do not imply that this has necessarily led to anti-African racism. Nevertheless, since traditional thought is inferior to modern science-oriented thought in some obvious and important respects, some Western liberals have apparently had to think hard in order to protect themselves against conceiving of Africans as intellectually inferior.

Another ill effect relates to the self images of Africans themselves. Partly through the influence of Western anthropology and partly through insufficient critical reflection on the contemporary African situation, many Africans are apt to identify African thought with *traditional* African thought. The result has not been beneficial to the movement for modernization, usually championed by the very same Africans. These Africans have been in the habit of calling loudly, even stridently, for the cultivation of an African authenticity or personality. True, when such a call is not merely a political slogan, it is motivated by a genuine desire to preserve the indigenous culture of peoples whose confidence in themselves has been undermined by colonialism. But the traditional and nonliterate character of this culture enabled sparse groups of Europeans to subjugate large masses of African populations and keep them in colonial subjection for many long years; even now, it makes them a prey to neocolonialism.

Unanalyzed exhortations to Africans to preserve their indigenous culture are, therefore, not particularly useful; indeed, they can be counter-productive. There is an urgent need in Africa today for the kind of analysis that would identify and separate the backward aspects of our culture—I speak as an anxious African—from those aspects that are worth keeping. That such desirable aspects exist is beyond question, and undoubtedly many African political and intellectual leaders are deeply impregnated by this consideration. Yet the analytical dimension seems to be lacking in their enthusiasm. So we have, among other distressing things, the frequent spectacle of otherwise enlightened Africans assiduously participating in the pouring of libations to the spirits of our ancestors on ceremonial occasions under the impression that in so doing they are demonstrating their faith in African culture.

Those who are tempted to see in such a thing as witchcraft the key to specifically *African* thought ought to be reminded that there are numbers of white men in today's London who proudly proclaim themselves to be witches.

In fact, many traditional African institutions and cultural practices like the one just mentioned are based on superstition. By "superstition" I mean a belief, lacking rational support, in entities of any sort. The attribute of being superstitious attaches not to the content of a belief but to its mode of entertainment. Purely in respect of content, the belief in abstract entities common

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among many Western logicians is not any more brainy than the traditional African belief in ancestor spirits. But logicians are given to arguing for their ontology. I happen to think their arguments for abstract entities wrong-headed,[2] but it is not open to me to accuse them of superstition. When, however, we come to the traditional African belief in ancestor spirits—and this, I would contend, applies to traditional spiritistic beliefs everywhere—our position is different. That our departed ancestors continue to hover around in some rarefied form ready now and then to take a sip of the ceremonial schnapps is a proposition that I have never known to be rationally defended. Indeed, if one were to ask a traditional elder, "unspoiled" by the scientific orientation, for the rational justification of such a belief, one's curiosity would be quickly put down to intellectual arrogance acquired through a Western education.

Rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West, nor is superstition a peculiarity of the African peoples.

Yet the principle that one is not entitled to accept a proposition as true without evidential support is not Western in any but an episodic sense. The Western world happens to be the place where, as of now, this principle has received its most sustained and successful application in certain spheres of thought, notably in the natural and mathematical sciences. But even in the Western world, there are some important areas of belief where the principle does not hold sway. In the West, just as anywhere else, the realms of religion, morals, and politics remain strongholds of irrationality. It is not uncommon, for example, to see a Western scientist, fully apprised of the universal reign of law in natural phenomena, praying to God, a spirit, to grant rain and a good harvest and other things besides. Those who are tempted to see in such a thing as witchcraft the key to specifically *African* thought ought to be reminded that there are numbers of white men in today's London who proudly proclaim themselves to be witches. Moreover, if they would but read, for example, Trevor-Roper's historical essay on "Witches and Witchcraft"[3] they might conceivably come to doubt whether witchcraft in Africa has ever attained the heights it reached in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It should be noted, conversely, that the principle of rational evidence is not entirely inoperative in the thinking of the traditional African. Indeed, no society could survive for any length of time without conducting a large part of its daily activities by the principle of belief according to the evidence. You cannot farm without some rationally based knowledge of soils and seeds and of meteorology, and no society can achieve any reasonable degree of harmony in human relations without a *basic* tendency to assess claims and allegations by the method of objective investigation. The truth, then, is that rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West, nor is superstition a peculiarity of the African peoples.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that Africa lags behind the West in the cultivation of rational inquiry. One illuminating (because fundamental) way of ap-

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proaching the concept of "development" is to measure it by the degree to which rational methods have penetrated thought habits. In this sense, of course, one cannot compare the development of peoples in absolute terms. The Western world is "developed," but only relatively. Technological sophistication is only an aspect of development. The conquest of the religious, moral, and political spheres by the spirit of rational inquiry remains a thing of the future, even in the West. From this point of view, the West may be said to be still underdeveloped. The quest for development, then, should be viewed as a continuing world-historical process in which all peoples, Western and non-Western alike, are engaged.

There are at least two important advantages in looking at development in this way. The first is that it becomes possible to see modernization in Africa not as a process in which Africans are unthinkingly jettisoning their own heritage in the pursuit of Western ways of life, but rather as one in which Africans, in common with all other peoples, seek to attain a specifically *human* destiny. Modernization, properly understood, is the application of the results of modern science for the improvement of human life.

People should link the modernization of the conditions of their lives with the modernization of all aspects of their thinking. It is just the failure to do this that is responsible for the more unlovable features of life in the West, a failure that also bedevils attempts at development in Africa. Rulers and leaders of opinion in Africa have tended to think of development in terms of the visible aspects of modernization—large buildings and complex machines—to the relative neglect of the more intellectual foundations of modernity. It is true that African nations spend huge sums of money on institutional education every year. But it has not been appreciated that education ought to lead to the cultivation of a rational[4] outlook on the world on the part of the educated and, through them, in the people at large. To develop in any serious sense, we in Africa must break with our old uncritical habits of thought; that is to say, we must advance past the stage of traditional thinking.

Lest these remarks appear rather abstract, let us consider a concrete situation: the institution of funerals in Ghana. Owing to all sorts of superstitions about the supposed career of the spirits of departed relatives, the mourning of the dead takes the form of elaborate—and consequently expensive and time-consuming—ceremonies. When a person dies there has first to be a burial ceremony on the third day; then, on the eighth day, there is a funeral celebration in which customary rites are performed; then, forty days afterward, there is a fortieth-day celebration (*adaduanan*). Then there are such occasions as the eightieth-day and first anniversary celebrations. All these involve large, alcohol-quaffing gatherings. Contrary to what one might be tempted to think, the embracing of Christianity by large sections of the Ghanaian population has not simplified funeral celebrations; on the contrary, it has brought new complications. Christianity, too, teaches of a whole hierarchy of spirits, from the Supreme Threefold Spirit down to the angels, both good and refractory, down further to the lesser spirits of deceased

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mortals. Besides, conversion to Christianity in our lands has generally not meant the exchange of the indigenous religion for the new one, but rather the amalgamation of both, which is made the more possible by their common spiritistic orientation. Thus, in addition to all the traditional celebrations, there is nowadays the neo-Christian Memorial Service, replete with church services and extended refreshments, a particularly expensive phase of the funeral process. The upshot is that if a close relation of a man—say, his father—dies, then, unless he happens to be rich, he is in for very hard financial times indeed. He has to take several days off work, and borrow respectable sums of money to defray the inevitable expenses.

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The extent of the havoc that these funeral habits have wrought on the national economy of Ghana has not been exactly calculated, but it has become obvious to public leaders that it is enormous and that something urgently needs to be done about it. However, the best that these leaders have seemed capable of doing so far has been to exhort the people to reform their traditional institutions in general, and cut down on funeral expenses in particular. These appeals have gone unheeded, which is not surprising, if one recalls that these leaders themselves are often to be seen ostentatiously taking part in ceremonies, such as the pouring of libations, which are based on the same sort of beliefs as those that lie behind the funeral practices. It has apparently been lost upon our influential men that, as long as the underlying beliefs retain their hold, such verbal appeals are wasted on the populace.

The ideal way to reform backward customs in Africa must, surely, be to undermine their superstitious belief foundations by fostering in the people —at all events, in the new generation of educated Africans—the spirit of rational inquiry in all spheres of thought and belief. Even if the backward beliefs in question were *peculiarly* African, it would be necessary to work for their eradication. But my point is that they are not African in any intrinsic, inseparable sense; and the least that African philosophers and foreign well-wishers can do in this connection is to refrain, in this day and age, from serving up the usual congeries of unargued conceptions about gods, ghosts, and witches in the name of African philosophy. Such a description is highly unfortunate. If at all deserving of the name "philosophy," these ideas should be regarded not as a part of African philosophy simply, but rather as a part of traditional philosophy in Africa.

The habit of talking about African philosophy as if all African philosophy is traditional carries the implication, probably not always intended, that modern Africans have not been trying —or worse still, ought not to try— to philosophize in a manner that takes account of present-day developments in human knowledge: logical, mathematical, scientific, literary, and so on. Various causes have combined to mo-

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tivate this attitude. African nationalists in search of an African identity, Afro-Americans in search of their African roots, and Western foreigners in search of exotic diversion—all demand an African philosophy that is fundamentally different from Western philosophy, even if it means the familiar witches' brew. Obviously, the work of contemporary African philosophers trying to grapple with the modern philosophical situation cannot satisfy such a demand.

Unfortunately, African philosophers writing today have no tradition of written philosophy in their continent to draw upon.[5] Where written sources are available, folk philosophy tends not to be made much of. It remains in the background as a sort of diffused, immanent component of community thought habits. Such a fund of community thought is not the work of any specifiable set of philosophers; it is the common property of all and sundry, thinker and nonthinker alike.

As a rule, folk thought consists of bald assertions without argumentation, but philosophy requires argument and clarification. Of course, folk thought can be comprehensive and interesting on its own account. For example, on the conception of the person found among the Akan of Ghana, a person is constituted by *nipadua* (a body), as well as a combination of several entities conceived as "spiritual" substances: *okra*, whose departure means death, *sunsum*, which gives rise to character, *ntoro*, the basis of inherited characteristics, passed on from the father, and, finally, *mogya*, something passed on from the mother which determines clan identity and, at death, becomes the *saman* (ghost).[6] All this sounds more interesting, and certainly more imaginative, than the thesis of some Western philosophers that a person consists of a soul and body. But the crucial difference is that the Western philosopher tries to argue for his thesis, clarifying his meaning and answering objections, while the transmitter of folk conceptions merely says: "This is what our ancestors said." For this reason, folk conceptions tend not to develop with time. This is as true in the West as it is in Africa.

In the absence of a written African tradition in philosophy, anthropologists have fastened on our folk worldviews and elevated them to the status of a continental philosophy. They have then compared this "philosophy" with Western (written) philosophy. In other, better placed, parts of the world, if you want to know the philosophy of the given people, you do not go to aged peasants or fetish priests or court personalities; you go to the individual thinkers, in the flesh, if possible, and in print. Invariably you would find a variety of doctrines, since any set of individuals trying to think for themselves are bound to differ among themselves. Since it is only the former type of informant that anthropologists seem to have been able to find, it is not surpris-

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ing that their comparisons between African traditional thought and Western scientific thought have been misleading. My contention, which I have earlier hinted at, is that African traditional thought should in the first place only be compared with Western folk thought. For this purpose, of course, Western anthropologists will first have to learn in detail about the folk thought of their own peoples. African folk thought may be compared with Western philosophy only in the same spirit in which Western folk thought may be compared with Western philosophy, that is, only in order to find out how to distinguish folk thought in general from individualized philosophizing. Then, if there be any who are anxious to compare African philosophy with Western philosophy, they will have to look at the philosophy that Africans are producing today.

Present-day African philosophers have been trained in the Western tradition, in the Continental or Anglo-American style, depending on their colonial history. Their thinking, therefore, is unlikely to hold many peculiarly African novelties for anyone knowledgeable in Western philosophy. For this very same reason, African militants and our Afro-American brothers are often disappointed with the sort of philosophy syllabus that is taught at a typical modern department of philosophy in Africa. Why, they ask, should Africans be so engrossed in the philosophy of their erstwhile colonial oppressors?[7]

African philosophers, however, have no choice but to conduct their philosophical inquiries in relation to the philosophical writings of other peoples; for their own ancestors left them no heritage of philosophical writings. They need not—to be sure, they must not—restrict themselves to the philosophical works of their particular former colonial oppressors, but they must study the written philosophies of other lands, because it would be extremely injudicious for them to try to philosophize in self-imposed isolation from all modern currents of thought. Ideally, they must acquaint themselves with the philosophies of all the peoples of the world: compare, contrast, assess them critically and make use of whatever of value they may find in them. In this way it can be hoped that a tradition of philosophy as a discursive discipline will eventually come to be established in Africa which future Africans and others, too, can utilize. In practice, contemporary African philosophers will find that it is the philosophies of the West that will occupy them most, for it is in that part of the world that modern developments in human knowledge have gone farthest and where, consequently, philosophy is in closest touch with the conditions of the modernization that Africans desire for their continent. In my opinion, the march of modernization is destined to lead to the universalization of philosophy everywhere in the world.

Nevertheless, the African philosopher has good reason to study African folk thought. Africans are a much oppressed and disparaged people; some foreigners have not even conceded that Africans, as a traditional people, were capable of a coherent worldview. Many colonial anthropologists sought to render the actions and attitudes of our forefathers intelligible to their colonial rulers so as to facilitate governance. While some brilliant insights resulted, there were

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misinterpretations and factual errors as well. Africans cannot leave the task of correction to foreign researchers alone. Moreover, there are, particularly in the field of morality, conceptions not based on superstition; the Westerner may well have something to learn from them. The exposition of these aspects of African traditional thought especially befits the contemporary African philosopher. But African philosophers should approach this material critically: all peoples who have made any breakthrough in the quest for modernization have done so by going beyond folk thinking. Sifting through the elements of our traditional thought and culture will require a good measure of analytical circumspection. Otherwise, we might exchange the good as well as the bad in our traditional ways of life for dubious cultural imports.

Notes

1. Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," reprinted in *Rationality*, edited by Bryan Wilson (Oxford, Basil Blackwell) from *Africa*, vol. 37, nos. 1–2 (1967).

2. My reasons for this remark will be found in my series of articles on "Logic and Ontology" in *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 2, nos. 1–2 (January, July 1973).

3. *Encounter*, vol. 28, nos. 5–6 (May, June 1967).

4. I am aware that my insistence on the overriding value of rationality will be found jarring by those Westerners who feel that the claims of rationality have been pushed too far in their countries, and that the time is overdue for a return to "Nature" and the exultation in feeling, intuition, and immediacy. No doubt the harsh individualism of Western living might seem to lend support to this point of view. But, in my opinion, the trouble is due to too little, rather than too much, rationality in social organization. This, however, is too large a topic to enter into here.

5. Ethiopia and the Arab parts of Africa are, of course, exceptions.

6. See, for example, W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962).

7. The African philosopher cannot take the sort of cultural pride in the philosophical achievements of Aristotle or Hume or Kant or Hegel or Marx or Frege or Husserl in which the Western student of philosophy may indulge himself. Indeed, an African needs a certain level-headedness to touch some of these thinkers at all. Hume, for example, had absolutely no respect for black men: he was able to say, in his essay on "National Characters": "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion nor ever any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. . . . In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely that he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly." Nor was Marx, to give another example, particularly progressive in this respect: he is known once, in a burst of personal abuse of Lassalle in a letter to Engels, to have animadverted: "This combination of Jewry and Germany with a fundamental Negro streak. . . . The fellow's self-assertiveness is Negro, too." It is sometimes understandable for a man to chide his own origins, but to condemn a downtrodden people like this is more serious. Would that black men everywhere had more of the self-assertiveness that Marx here deprecates! The Akan of Ghana have a proverb, which says: "If the truth happens to lie in the most private part of your own mother's anatomy, it is no sin to extract it with your corresponding organ." African enthusiasts of Marx (or of Hume, for that matter) may perhaps console themselves with the following less delicate adaptation of this proverb:. "If the truth happens to lie in the mouth of your racial traducer, it is no pusillanimity to take it from there."

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