

# **A QUEST UNDAUNTED: EXCURSION INTO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

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**My title is taken from Dr. Donald Wacome's remarks at a faculty dinner on the occasion of my departure from my previous academic position several years ago. Summing up the meanderings of my philosophical interests over several decades, he noted in conclusion my "long excursion into African philosophy, a quest undaunted by the possible non-existence of its prey." A friend and valued colleague, Wacome had nonetheless taken a somewhat skeptical view of this excursion, a skeptical attitude common among American philosophers. Indeed, the questions I have been asked most frequently whenever the topic of African Philosophy comes up are: first, "Is there such a thing, and if there is, what is it?", and second: "How did you get into this anyway?" In this paper I shall pass on Wacome's suggestion that the "prey," namely, African philosophy, may not exist after all. To review the interminable discussions of the last thirty years about whether there is such a thing as philosophy in Africa would be a tedious and unwelcome endeavor for those present here. But I shall take a look at the question what African philosophy is and the more autobiographical question as to how I got into it. I shall look at the second question first, because it has considerable bearing on how I think about the nature of African philosophy.**

So, then, how did I get into the pursuit of African philosophy? I might note in passing that my first two encounters with Africa were occasioned by visits to daughters serving at different times in the Peace Corps in Africa during the late 80's and early 90's—one in Chad, the other in Cameroon. These visits aroused my curiosity about and interest in things African, but they were not in themselves especially philosophical.

I might also note in passing the very great encouragement received, early in my quest, from the now late Odera Oruka of Kenya who published a paper I had sent him intended only for his comments and from Jameson Kurasha of Zimbabwe who, ironically, invited me to Harare to bring African philosophy to Zimbabwe as his own department was occupied by Britishers doing Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Without the encouragement of Africans like these, I would have soon given up the quest as inappropriate for one who, like me, is not African.

But to get at the initial philosophical impulse, it may prove helpful to return to Professor Wacome's comments. Prior to the comment quoted above he spoke of my "readiness to forgo the accoutrements of philosophical conformity" and my "sensitivity to the prophetic voices on the edges of respectability," among them, "Richard Rorty and Jack Caputo." I mention this only because I've come to realize it that I never would have ventured into African Philosophy had I not

already been seriously influenced by certain strands of Postmodernism and Deconstruction as found in people like Rorty and Caputo. (I actually read Caputo's book, *Against Ethics* during an extended stay in Harare, Zimbabwe, and led a colloquium on the book for the University of Zimbabwe philosophy faculty shortly before my departure.)

Rorty argues, among other things, for the ethical priority of sensitivity over principles, and for the importance of widening the circle of "us" to include those who before were "them." He urges us to take an ironical view of our chosen vocabularies and warns us not to presume that they are closer to Reality than others; and he observes that we can make most anything look good or bad through re-description.

Caputo emphasizes the importance of looking to the margins, to the unnoticed and forgotten "others;" and to the urgent task of de-centering the power centers in order to re-center those of no account, of "those who have no voice or vote, who are muted, silent, and invisible." [AGAINST ETHICS, p. 115]. And it becomes immediately apparent upon examining the centers of power of Euro-American philosophy, that none are more out, more marginalized than African philosophers. Here then, if anywhere, was a field ripe for deconstruction.

**Thus I saw African Philosophy as compatible with my anti-Anglo-analytic and pro-Americanized continentalist biases. This is very evident in three of my published articles, especially “African Philosophy and the Universal Thesis” published in *Metaphilosophy* where I argue against a “universalist” conception of philosophy that allows the West to dictate the terms of philosophical discourse for all and where I suggest that African philosophers would do well to avoid the Western urge to think that philosophy ought to be scientific. My excursion into African philosophy accounts for my orientation within the field, while at the same time recognizing that African philosophy has itself become very diverse and pluralistic.**

**Like Lucius Outlaw, I think that African philosophy, considering the post-colonial context in which it has developed, is and must be essentially deconstructive, that is, it requires the de-centering of Western logocentrism in order to create an opening, a space for the African other, so as to be able to re-center the marginalized other. There is, of course, a paradoxical twist to all of this; for it may be argued that deconstruction is but another version of Western philosophy. As Outlaw states it: “To deconstruct these concepts [vis. Those of Western metaphysics and epistemology] is to displace them into the fabric of historicity out of which they have been shaped and in which we, too, have our being; it is to become involved in ‘the unmaking of a construct.’ Thus, in**

**drawing on the practices from within Western philosophy, the attempt here is to borrow from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself.” The heritage of which Outlaw speaks is more than just accidentally racist. His evidence for this judgment includes the racist views of such “enlightened” philosophers as Hume, Kant, and Hegel, but also the long silence of the Western philosophical establishment in the face of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism.**

**The use of a Western philosophical tradition such as deconstruction does raise another frequently discussed question during the past thirty years: namely: What is it for a philosophy to be “African” or in what does its “African-ness consist? The answer to this question is not obvious. Must African philosophy be done by natives or residents of Africa? If so, why do we consider the Austrian Wittgenstein part of British philosophy? Can Europeans and Americans contribute to African philosophy? Must there be something uniquely “African” in method or content? If an African philosopher writes a book on Kant, is that African or European philosophy? In an article, “African Culture and Inter-Cultural Dialogue,” [published in QUEST, 1997.] Professor Wiredu gives a hypothetical example along the following lines: Suppose an African philosopher devoted his career to Western style Phenomenology. We might not consider his work “African philosophy” because as Wiredu puts it, “he was too lonely.” But**

if an overwhelming majority of African philosophers were to practice philosophical phenomenology over many generations, that would simply become what African philosophy is. As I have observed elsewhere, the issue of the African-ness of philosophy is more visible than that of the Western-ness of philosophy because dominant and marginal philosophical traditions are neither as clear nor as firmly established in Africa as they are in the West. And Wiredu also goes on to suggest that it is to be hoped and expected that as African philosophy develops, it will “come up with philosophical options that are in some respects different from those . . . of the Western cultures. . . .” [QUEST, vol. xi, #s 1&2, 1997] But Prof. Wiredu has also stressed in his recent work, the importance of cultural borrowing. So it seems to me that there is no apriori objection to the use of elements of the philosophical orientations of one culture for purposes related to another.

In admitting my own preference for a deconstructive orientation and emphasis for African philosophy, I do not mean to suggest that it should be the only one. And to the extent that African philosophy is prepared to move beyond deconstruction, it should be free to draw from its own diverse traditions and to borrow from others. African philosophy need not go out of its way either to be entirely different from or to conform itself to Western norms merely to gain respectability.

**Already several decades ago, Odera Oruka described his well-known typology of four major orientations in African philosophy: “ethnophilosophy”; his own project in Kenya that he referred to as “sage philosophy;” “political thought;” and finally, “professional philosophy.” He later identified “hermeneutical philosophy” as a fifth type although I’m not aware that he developed this idea with any clarity. Other philosophers like Serequeberhan and Janz have contributed to this type. All of these types, and many others, are still represented in the current work of those engaged in African philosophy. Further, the current emphasis on the importance of uniting thought and practice, the theme of a recent conference of the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies, is a good antidote to the tendency of philosophy towards over-professionalization and irrelevance to society.**

**Symposium in Africana Cultural Philosophy**

**University of Central Florida**

**February 26, 2005**