



**Knowledge,  
Belief, and  
Witchcraft**

*Analytic Experiments in  
African Philosophy*

**Barry Hallen  
and J. Olubi Sodipo**

*With a New Foreword by W. V. O. Quine  
and a New Afterword by Barry Hallen*

**Mestizo Spaces**  
*Espaces Mélangés*

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 1997

## Foreword

I first met Dr Barry Hallen in 1974, when I was a consultant at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, advising on the setting up of a Department of Philosophy. I had approached this assignment with a number of unresolved questions in mind. I had no doubt that any university should have a Department of Philosophy, but what kind of courses should it offer? I had already acted for three years as external examiner in philosophy in the University of Ife, where J.O. Sodipo was head of the department. I had become aware of the intellectual sterility that can set in when students reproduce by rote learning the views of Western philosophers without seeing the problems behind them, and, worse still, without appreciating that these might also be their own problems. Professor Sodipo was well aware of this, and he was involved in starting and editing the journal *Second Order*, which was designed to provide a forum for serious discussion of philosophy in an African context. He had already worked hard and successfully to build up a good department of philosophy at Ife, and to encourage an analytic and critical approach to the discipline.

I felt that there was a need for philosophers, whether African or expatriate, who were both competent in Western philosophy and had entered deeply into a traditional African belief system, who could see how similar problems might arise in the different contexts. These might then be able to help students from a traditional background to appreciate what the problems were, to articulate their own approach, and to compare it with the approaches of Western philosophers. I thought that the kinds of problems which might be treated in this way would be likely to be in ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophical psychology of the human person—I don't think I had sufficiently seen that they might be epistemological problems.

The philosopher I found in Nigeria who saw things in a similar way was Barry Hallen, then at the University of Lagos. He was realistically aware of how much work would need to be done. One must live for a considerable time in a local community, and get the confidence of the custodians of the traditional beliefs. In the case of the Yoruba, these were the *babaláwo* ('fathers of secrets') and the *oniṣṣṣin* ('masters of medicine'). He was able to move to the University of Ife, and undertake just such a long term project in Ekiti with Professor Sodipo's participation, encouragement and support.

Since then I have had continued contacts with Barry Hallen, both on subsequent visits to Nigeria and on his visits to England, and I have

followed what he has been doing with admiration. In particular I have been impressed by how he was able to establish a colleague relationship with his informants, so that they could pursue themes of mutual interest in unhurried conversations. This book is the first – but we can hope by no means the last – outcome of the work. It leads in with a fairly long discussion of Professor Quine's thesis about the 'indeterminacy of translation'. This was the contention that a number of different theoretical statements, 'standing sentences', can interpret the same ostensibly factual material, and that even where the same concepts are used their meaning can vary in different contexts. This has the still stronger implication that the use of an abstract term in one language may not be the same as that of the term taken to translate it in another. There is thus a philosophical and not only a linguistic problem over the translation of such terms and this needs to be grasped by those who try to present an alien belief system in another language. The authors of this book grasp it tightly, and they test the thesis of indeterminacy of translation by examining the uses of the words *mò* and *gbàgbò* to see whether their usual translation as 'know' and 'believe' can be accepted unequivocally. In doing this they find they go some of the way with Quine's thesis, but do not need to go all the way into scepticism over the possibility of translation of abstract concepts. Furthermore, their examination of the uses of *mò* and *gbàgbò* bring out what might be called a Yoruba epistemology more sophisticated than is generally acknowledged in anthropological literature. Here the dominant view has been that 'knowledge' in traditional societies is something given through oral tradition and accepted as authoritative. Our authors claim, on the basis of their protracted discussions, that this is too simple a view. Oral tradition is second hand information which gives things 'one agrees to accept' – this is a better translation of *gbàgbò* than is 'belief'. But *mò* – knowledge – is something one knows at first hand, notably from sensory evidence. So tracing out these usages shows how a 'second order' concern with the meanings of words can have direct relevance to a 'first order' anthropological view. The study of usages of these particular words shows the Yoruba *oniṣẹ̀gùn* are more sophisticated epistemologically, and more critically, and indeed empirically, minded than has been generally supposed.

This has implications, not only for anthropologists, but in the very alive controversy over what constitutes 'African Philosophy'. Here there are two dominant views: on the one hand, a somewhat romantic and at times politically motivated, presentation of what is said to have been the pristine African world view before it was contaminated by Western influences. On the other hand, it is maintained that philosophy should be purely critical and

analytic, and, as this quality is absent in the traditional views, philosophy as taught by and to Africans should be something entirely distinct from 'African Philosophy'. 'African Philosophy' has perhaps been more in evidence in Francophone than in Anglophone circles. In the former there was a strong influence from P. Tempels's *La philosophie bantou*. This presented the African world view as life lived in a locally ordered hierarchical community that was also a manifestation of a world which was a total organic community, pervaded by living forces. This outlook was handed down in oral tradition, and educated Africans needed to recover and assert it against the 'scientific materialism' of the West. This programme was promoted in the journal *Présence Africaine*, whose contributors included gifted writers such as Senghor and Césaire. The latter coined the term *négritude* for this outlook. The reaction against *négritude* is under way. It was challenged politically as leading Africans into a romantic dream of their own past, and distracting them from realistic political struggles. Wole Soyinka gave it a *coup de grâce* by remarking that when a tiger is attacked it attacks back, and does not talk about its 'tigritude'. Theoretically, it has been attacked by philosophers such as K. Wiredu, P. Bodunrin, and most recently, P. J. Hountondji in his book *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Hutchinson, 1983). These all see philosophy as critical thinking, and fear that the promotion of 'African Philosophy' can hinder African students from acquiring the necessary intellectual tools. In the matter of 'unanimism', the notion that there is a universal African world view. Doubt is also thrown on this by Dr Hallen's researches. The last chapter, dealing with witchcraft, shows evidence that witchcraft is not a phenomenon with certain constant features, as has been supposed. This chapter is thus not only an essay on a particular topic, but an illustration of a general theoretical point. Moreover, the discussions reported throughout the book show that the notion that Africans are not capable of critical thinking is manifestly untrue, not only of the educated, but also of these *oniṣẹ̀gùn*.

If the remarks these make show that they are not only shrewd, but can be empirically minded, this has a bearing on the controversy among anthropologists as to the correct way of taking traditional views about matters such as spirits and occult powers. The dominant view among anthropologists has been the 'symbolist' one: these views do not express propositions purporting to be true about the world, but they are symbolic ways of expressing attitudes which can give practical direction or strengthen morale in social situations, especially those of crisis, conflict, or disaster. This, of course, is an onlooker's interpretation, not that of the

participants themselves, who surely believe that they are stating factual truths. The alternative, called, perhaps not very happily, the 'intellectualist' view, is to accept that these must be taken seriously as assertions of how people believe the world is. Robin Horton has been the best known exponent of this interpretation, and he has put it in a form that bears directly on the controversy over 'African Philosophy'. Horton says that, while making assertions about the world, these traditional views are 'closed', in that they are not laid open to criticism, empirical testing, and revision, and that they must therefore be contrasted with scientific views which are held critically and are always corrigible by further evidence. His work has generated considerable controversy, some of which went on in the journal *Second Order*. If he is right, not only over a good deal of traditional belief, but in a generalization across its whole spectrum, this would sharpen the contrast between so-called 'African Philosophy' and critical thought. But if Hallen and Sodipo are right in detecting sceptical and indeed empirical elements in their informants' view of *mó*, 'knowledge', and its distinction from *gbágbá*, what one 'agrees to accept', this bears importantly on how far the distinction is an absolute one.

The right note in considering 'African Philosophy', or, better, philosophy in Africa, was struck, I think, by Wiredu. (See, for example, some of the papers in his *Philosophy and an African Culture*, (C.U.P., 1980), especially 'On an African Orientation in Philosophy' and 'How not to compare African traditional thought with Western thought'). He says that Western critical philosophy developed out of a background of what he calls 'folk philosophy', namely that of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. Why should not capacities to do critical philosophy be developed in people starting from another kind of folk philosophy? To ignore this background can produce a split in the minds of those who are now getting a largely Western-type education but who also need to come to terms with their traditional beliefs. In talking to our African colleagues (and to Dr Hallen and Professor Sodipo they are indeed colleagues), we can be aware that this is also our problem in coming to terms with our own Judaeo-Christian and Hellenic heritage.

A shared concern to elicit folk philosophy can lead to a rich kind of discussion, but it depends on being able to find appropriate concepts and on not imposing alien ones. Those of us who would like to be able to carry on such discussions, but have neither the opportunities for prolonged stay nor the knowledge of the languages, will find that this book provides highly valuable material.

DOROTHY EMMET  
CAMBRIDGE, 1985

## Introduction

### 1. *The Disrepute of African Philosophy*

One of the more challenging conditions of working in the general area of cross-cultural studies is that the divisions between different disciplines are less rigorously observed. This is more because of a growing awareness that psychological, philosophical, sociological, and even medical considerations may be interrelated or relevant to one another, than to an opinion that cross-cultural studies are still in their infancy, or that in relatively 'underdeveloped' cultures such special interest divisions have yet to be consciously established. In what follows we hope to make some cross-cultural and interdisciplinary comparisons between Western culture and a particular African culture which the existent literature often refers to as 'traditional' in character.

In whatever way the domain of African philosophy may ultimately be delimited, increasing controversy is being generated by the phrase 'African traditional systems of thought' and the role they are to play in it. There are those who argue that traditional systems of thought are of marginal philosophical interest because of the lack of emphasis they place upon critical or reflective thinking. The sense of the word 'traditional' is that the reasons or explanations most commonly produced by such thought systems are little more than an appeal to tradition ('We know this is the case because the forefathers said so.'). Some therefore go so far as to argue that African philosophy in any true sense of the term began relatively recently, with a generation of African intellectuals who have deliberately chosen to transcend tradition, and who have undergone professional training in the methods of contemporary academic philosophy. The philosophical issues or problems (including that of a comparative lack of critical thinking in these belief systems) that such philosophers choose to concern themselves with may be of particular relevance to African societies, but the methodologies with which they analyse and attempt to solve them – the methodologies of contemporary academic philosophy (language analysis, Marxism, phenomenology, etc.) – are trans-cultural.

Others reject use of the word 'traditional' altogether. The word

'traditional' is pejorative if used to imply that some peoples' intellectual abilities have yet to become 'modern,' to become rigorously critical and systematic. This may indeed be true of many people in any African culture, but it is no less true of many people in any other culture (including the so-called 'developed' countries), thereby rendering use of the word redundant.

Whatever the outcome may eventually be, this controversy over the appropriateness of the word 'traditional' is indicative of a real problem that should be recognized by anyone who has some interest in African philosophy. Philosophy today has become, almost exclusively, an academic endeavour. But African philosophy, in order to be at least infused by the (oral) knowledge, beliefs and values of African cultures, needs to establish and maintain links with African society-at-large outside the university. And it is over this business of going outside the university community into African society that the philosopher must professionally come to terms with another of his academic colleagues, the social anthropologist.

Social anthropology too deserves part of the credit for the interdisciplinary nature of African studies. The social anthropologist believes that it is necessary to have some understanding of all of a culture's institutions before one is entitled to write a knowledgeable account of it. But in Africa particularly, social anthropology is today under suspicion because it, more than any other discipline, is held responsible for introducing the word 'traditional' (as a replacement for the even more pejorative 'primitive') as descriptive of African cultures and systems of thought.

To date it is anthropologists who have been professionally trained to undertake fieldwork in African communities of the sort required to make systematic studies of African systems of thought. And it is the writings of anthropologists that are primarily responsible for the image of African systems of thought as of little serious philosophical interest. Africans believe in the sorts of things they do because they are *not* scientific, because they have *no* written records, because they *fail* to make an adequate distinction between the rational and the emotional, and so forth. They are said to manifest and to 'know' world-views, which are akin to collections of mythical or religious beliefs about the nature of reality.

The influence of this picture of African thought systems has been profound and, for our purposes, has had two important consequences. Firstly, it has persuaded many philosophers (including a number who are themselves African) that the wisdom of African societies is something better left to the domains of anthropology and religion, and that 'traditional' African philosophy is not therefore an area of specialization in which they

are keen to develop a facility. Secondly, even if courses in this African pseudo-philosophy have managed to gain a place in some departments of philosophy, this is explained away as due primarily to certain contemporary social, political and historical conditions rather than to the intrinsic merit of the subject-matter.

## 2. *Methodologies for African Philosophy*

The methodologies for presenting African philosophy are as many as the above variety of opinions implies. Some, the so-called ethno-philosophers or ethnographers with some philosophical background, argue that African philosophy should consist of *descriptions* of African beliefs on topics of philosophical relevance: death, good behaviour, the supreme deity, and so forth. Others argue that African philosophy should consist of what Africans who are professionally trained as academic philosophers produce. If the majority today happen to be concerned with social philosophy, this is a reflection of the needs they are being asked to fulfil by their societies, rather than a reason to denigrate African philosophy as too narrow or ideologically motivated.

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When we first concentrated our interests upon the field of African philosophy we too found the existent, printed (ethnophilosophical) sources unsatisfactory, but it was not clear whether the reasons for this were due to the nature of the beliefs of the African peoples from whom they had been drawn or to the methodologies of the collectors. For if a collector begins his work already committed to the view that the beliefs are held on a non-critical and non-reflective basis, one could hardly expect him to be sensitive to evidence to the contrary.

With social anthropology we felt that the problem was somewhat different. The interest of this profession in the abstract thought of 'traditional' peoples developed in relatively recent times. Previously social anthropologists had tended to concentrate on a society's social *institutions* and how they, for example, contributed to its welfare and betterment. But when special attention was directed to what such peoples themselves claimed to know and how they claimed to be able to demonstrate their knowledge, the majority of the fieldworkers opted for the position that has variously come to be known as poetic-symbolism, expressionism, or emotivism. It maintains that much of the so-called knowledge of traditional cultures is magical in nature—symbolic or expressive of what their peoples would like to accomplish but which, without substantive scientific

development, they are in fact unable to do. But they derive at least some relief from (ritual) *beliefs* that tell them they are able to do something, regardless of however ultimately ineffective, when confronted by a problem.

Symbolism is by no means representative of all of social anthropology today. There are those mavericks who disagree with their colleagues in a forceful and eloquent fashion (Horton 1967). But because this is the (numerically) dominant position in the English-language tradition, researchers from other disciplines who are interested in an alternative approach to the abstract or theoretical thought of such cultures are often disappointed by what they find social anthropology has to say.

As academics with philosophical backgrounds who were interested in such an alternative methodological approach to the study of 'traditional' African thought, we found our task to be a daunting one. There appeared to be no existing suitable technique we could copy or imitate. In a series of exploratory and deliberately hypothetical articles we therefore undertook the piece-meal, gradual elaboration of a methodology that would require the academic philosopher to go outside the university confines and, as an equal, engage in *discussions* of philosophical import with his *colleagues* in African society. This single sentence alone has raised so many queries and objections that an account of and our responses to them should suffice as an introduction to our approach to African philosophy.

Since a project of this sort would evidently require some sort of fieldwork, whereby academic philosophers would go out into African societies and meet with their wise men and collect information, we were asked whether we had ever undergone any professional training about how to do this sort of thing. We were cautioned about the misrepresentations and excesses that may be engendered by leading questions, browbeating, and selective quotation.

We were asked to be more precise about what we meant by 'discussions'. Was the basis to be questionnaires which would 'lead' the conversation in certain directions? Were they to involve genuine *exchanges* of information to which, as the word 'discussion' implies, all parties would contribute equally? Or were we not in fact primarily out to pick the brains of our wise men in a manner very much akin to that of the ethnographer?

How and where would we find our wise men? Is someone who is knowledgeable or wise about, for example, agriculture thereby entitled to be regarded as a colleague by a university philosophy teacher? Is each wise man to be treated as an individual, potentially eccentric thinker, or are opinions to be somehow collated and presented as shared and communal?

And what of the relationship between the thoughts of the wise men and those of the more ordinary and average members of the community? Are the latter not to be taken into account and the former to be treated as their official intellectual interpreters and, if so, can any convincing justification or proof for this be given?

And, finally is it representative to refer to these wise men as our 'colleagues'? We might choose to regard them as such, but would they care to look upon us as *their* colleagues? They play a vital, active, and therefore different role in their societies, while the university and its academic 'doctors' represent a foreign, closed and ludicrously luxurious educational system whose avowed ideology, to some degree, is to be isolated from the society at large and to make few direct practical contributions to it.

These are important and serious questions, and frankly we cannot adequately answer them all. Nevertheless out of the story of the research project which we are about to tell we believe that we can provide answers to at least some and indicate a line of future research along which the answers to those remaining will lie.

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Contact with a particular African society eventually grew out of a voluntary, non-credit, student study group on African philosophy first established in 1973 at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Members of the group came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds from the south and middle-belt of Nigeria. One means for increasing communication between the university community and society at large was for the students to establish face-to-face fieldwork relationships with the elders and wise men of their family compounds, villages and towns, but the only occasions on which they were able to meet with these people were during the university vacations, which were relatively few and far between. Despite this limitation some progress was made once agreement had been reached about a topic for discussion. This had to be something that was of academic, philosophical relevance and which would also be meaningful to the elders and wise men. After lengthy discussions the topic chosen was the concept of the 'person'. Its limits were rather loosely defined, but they were understood to extend to such things as the various (physical and/or spiritual) parts of the person, the interrelations between them, the various types of persons or personalities, and the more important forces to which a person may be subject and which he may exercise.

The information that came back from a particular village, Ijan, in the Yoruba area of southwestern Nigeria known as Ekiti, was so stimulating that eventually the study group coordinator decided to concentrate

exclusively upon that village and to establish a fully-fledged, university sponsored research project on the Yoruba concept of 'eniyàn' (usually translated into English as 'person'). This was a fortunate choice, as one of the co-authors of this book is Yoruba and the other has spent his entire Nigerian university career in the Yoruba areas.

The majority of the persons in this village whom we chose to concern ourselves with are those the Yoruba refer to as *onísẹ̀gùn*. In times past Europeans erroneously stigmatized them as 'witch doctors', but the name may be rendered literally as 'master of medicine'. In English they are also sometimes referred to as 'herbalists' or as 'native doctors'. We chose them for several reasons. The *onísẹ̀gùn* represent and exercise a level of understanding and analysis of Yoruba life and thought that is more critically sophisticated than that of the ordinary person. In fact it is the ordinary person that they spend much of their time advising. And a comparable study of another suitable, knowledgeable group in Yoruba society, the *Ifá babaláwo*, was already well underway (Abimbola 1975; 1976; 1977).

As we wanted to relate to the *onísẹ̀gùn* more as colleagues than as informants, data was collected in the context of guided, sometimes cross-cultural, discussions rather than in question and answer sessions. But it proved one thing to have such discussions, and quite another to put them into a form that would communicate itself to academic philosophers. We did not want to tell the 'story' of another world-view, as we have said before.

In 1975 the research project moved to the University of Ife, Nigeria. Still trying to find a way to present the discussions in a philosophically acceptable form, we flirted with phenomenology but found it a more difficult methodology to practise than to preach. This methodological quandary continued until the day, when reading through the English translations of some of the discussions, we noticed that certain Yoruba words had throughout unquestioningly been translated into English as 'true', 'false', 'know', 'believe', etc. As the philosophical criteria governing the usage of these English terms are often strictly defined, and as we had never bothered to make specific enquiries about the criteria governing their supposed Yoruba equivalents, this seemed a wise comparison to undertake in order to discover whether our translations were justified. This enquiry led to the second chapter of this book.

In working out the comparison we have adopted a methodology that borrows heavily from the philosophical tradition known as conceptual analysis. Making reference to several standard philosophical works and a bit of common sense, we endeavour to summarize the conditions or criteria

governing usage of 'know' and 'believe' in the English language. Making use of the examples, explanations, and analyses of the *onísẹ̀gùn*, we then endeavour to sum up the conditions or criteria governing their supposed Yoruba equivalents, 'mọ̀' and 'gbagbọ̀', and finally to compare the two systems.

One point of controversy arising out of this chapter will be whether the *onísẹ̀gùn* are competent to undertake the kinds of linguistic analyses which will entitle them to be considered, in this regard, satisfactory equivalents of the academic philosopher. Are they competent to discuss the ordinary usage of theoretical concepts and are they capable of reflecting upon and explaining such usage to a degree that exceeds that of the ordinary person? As we have made an effort to quote them directly whenever possible, we feel that the material serves as its own justification. Nevertheless, if it is even part of the professional task of the *onísẹ̀gùn* to offer his clients explanations that are connected to and yet exceed the ordinary, it is reasonable to expect that their understanding of the theoretical concepts involved will also be connected to and exceed the ordinary.

The academic philosopher is expected to produce a *systematic* account, whether of ordinary usage or his own alternative theory. Is the same to be found in the explanations of the *onísẹ̀gùn*? Our answer is a qualified 'yes'. Certainly the system revealed by their remarks is not as deliberately and therefore obviously structured as the epistemological theories of academic philosophy. Who would expect it to be? They are men of practice as well as theory. But by concentrating upon those passages in which structural relationships are clearly implied, and by carefully collating and comparing statements made by all the *onísẹ̀gùn* over the entire nine year period, we are reasonably confident that the end-product is representative of an important and provocative theoretical statement from the Yoruba conceptual system. No doubt it may be possible to provide other examples, derived from the conceptual system, that diverge from this outline. No language system is entirely consistent. Our general practice, we hope, has been to prefer the ordinary to the extraordinary.

### 3. Translating Abstract Ideas and Translation Indeterminacy

Philosophy is well-known for examining its presuppositions before it actually begins to argue for something. Often this is for the good, because the philosopher is thereby made aware of things he is taking for granted that may cause trouble later on. Better to build a house on a sound foundation than to have it fall apart before completed. But sometimes people both in



and outside of philosophy become frustrated and then bored by what they regard as excessive nit-picking, as an almost sick fascination with the anticipation of trivial objections before they have even been raised.

After outlining our proposed methodology in much the same form as in the preceding subsection, our attention was drawn to a presupposition underlying it that did seem to deserve some attention: the ease or difficulty of expressing the abstract or theoretical ideas of one culture in the language of another. Human beings generally presuppose that they all share certain feelings, states of mind, and experiences in common simply (somehow) by virtue of being human. The word for one of these basic states or experiences or things in one language may be spelled differently and sound differently from the word meaning the same thing in another language. This is part of the colourful cultural diversity of mankind. But what is more important is that the *meanings* of the two different words are the same. This is why we can construct bilingual dictionaries, learn one another's languages and, in short, communicate. We may occasionally encounter a rather bizarre word in a foreign language for which we can find no one-to-one equivalent. In this case we may have to write a short paragraph, a monograph, or even a whole book in order adequately to explain it. But the important thing is that we can explain it, and afterwards be confident that we have done so correctly.

Much of this commonsense approach to communication between cultures, and therefore to the possibilities of expressing the abstract ideas of an African culture in, for example, the English language (something our own methodology presumed it was possible to do), has been challenged by a contemporary analytic philosopher, W.V.O. Quine. Quine's argument, known as the *indeterminacy thesis of radical translation*, is therefore the subject of our first chapter. For if one is not able to be confident of expressing the meanings of one culture with the language of another, the entire edifice of cross-cultural studies and of African philosophy written in anything other than African languages is threatened.

So as not to misrepresent Quine and to make it seem as if the *practical* consequences of his argument are more momentous than he means them to be, we must constantly remind ourselves of the kind of argument he is making. Quine is arguing as a philosopher, as someone who *imagines* (he calls it a 'thought experiment') what the conditions governing a unique translation situation *might* be and the problems that *could* follow from them. He is not writing as a linguist, as a social anthropologist, or as a fieldworker because he never has been one. Therefore he cautions us in the strongest terms against taking the problems he does identify or the recommendations he does make as guidelines for the practising linguist or fieldworker.

Nevertheless, without erring to that extreme, without rewriting Quine's arguments into a field guide for linguists, it is still possible to derive certain practical precautions, sensitivities, and insights about language that may prevent (or at least curtail) semantic misrepresentations of other cultures. This is the point of the third chapter, in which we demonstrate that a basic confusion about the nature of language, of meaning, and of theory has produced a thoroughly muddled, but generally assumed theory of witchcraft, and a misrepresentation and misunderstanding of its supposed equivalent in Yoruba culture.

#### 4. Before We Begin

The *oníségún* with whom we are working are more than simply masters of medicine. Otherwise one could question their being assigned a knowledge status any higher than that of a master of agriculture or a master of weaving. Knowing medicine entails knowing the force and powers of the ingredients of a medicine, and knowing these entails knowing the forces and powers of the natural world in which they are found, of the spiritual realm that lies behind and engenders that natural world, and of the human beings by whom they are made and to whom many of them are applied. One therefore finds the *oníségún* being asked to give advice and counsel about business dealings, family problems, unhappy personal situations, religious problems, and the future, as well as about physical and mental illness. Such a wide breadth of learning and experience entitles the best of them to be regarded as more than ordinary, even though they are exceedingly modest and maintain a deliberately low profile in the community.

But how is one to determine who among them are the best? In Ijan there are approximately forty full-fledged *oníségún*, supplemented by perhaps another twenty people who have some partial knowledge of medicine that enables them to be of help with specific problems. Of the forty perhaps a dozen are regarded as men of exceptional ability. This is determined in two ways: by the villagers who are their clients and who carefully monitor and gauge the records of their successes and failures, and by their own professional colleagues. In the community the *oníségún* comprise, and monitor their own activities by means of, an *egbé* or professional society. This society acts as the institutional guardian of the knowledge that is at the heart of the profession. It judges every individual member in terms of his competence and character. It reprimands and disciplines. It determines whether an individual has demonstrated that he is sufficiently responsible to advance, to be entrusted with greater knowledge and powers. And it invokes

the pledge of secrecy upon all its members to ensure that neither the knowledge nor powers of medicine should fall into non-professional or irresponsible hands.

Because of the above social and professional constraints, before the dozen or so with whom we are working would agree to enter into discussions with us there are certain conditions with which we have been asked to comply. The first is that we talk with them only on an individual basis (to a point where we are even discouraged from mentioning the name of one in the house of another). The second is that we never tell or repeat to one what we have learned from another. The third is that in anything we publish we must not reveal their names. If we violate any of these three conditions, their participation in the project will be subject to termination.

## 1. Indeterminacy and the Translation of Alien Behaviour

In the long run, however, an ethnographer is bound to triumph. Armed with preliminary knowledge nothing can prevent him from driving deeper and deeper the wedge if he is interested and persistent.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937)

### 1. Introduction

Philosophers would regard the absolute terms with which Evans-Pritchard embraces cross-cultural understanding in the above quotation as unrealistic. Philosophy is interested, in particular, in abstract conceptual meanings. Concepts have often been found difficult to make clear (and define) within the language that uses them. English-language philosophers are consequently responsible for countless conflicting 'philosophies' – attempts to define the meanings – of causation, beauty, good, truth, the person and so forth.

Contemporary philosophy is developing an increasingly serious interest in the work of social anthropologists who write about ideas like these in non-Western societies. This is motivated more by a concern with the problems of *translation* than by the possibility of the alien concepts generating alternative philosophies. For it is only when satisfied that the former have been adequately dealt with that philosophers will allow that the latter can be reported in a different language.

Semantics is the discipline most obviously concerned with theory of language and the problems of translation, on both theoretical and practical levels. Nevertheless, the *philosopher* of language, with his critically speculative approach and *gedanken* experiments, is also in a position to develop fundamentally new theoretical perspectives on the old problems that serve to increase our understanding of what is taking place on the level of practice.

Usually anthropologists write up their expositions and analyses of the alien ideas in non-alien languages. Though they may on occasion confess to certain misgivings, the fact that anthropologists continue to produce such translations attests, if nothing else, to a continuing conviction on their part that it can be done. We are sympathetic to the explanation made by some

## Afterword: Indeterminacy, Ethnophilosophy, Linguistic Philosophy, African Philosophy

*Barry Hallen*

The discussion that follows concerns philosophical methodology or, better, methodologies. Most of the material that has been published to date under the rubric of African philosophy has been methodological in character. One reason for this is the conflicts that sometimes arise when philosophers in Africa attempt to reconcile their relationships with both academic philosophy and so-called African 'traditional' systems of thought. A further complication is that the studies of traditional African thought systems that become involved in these conflicts are themselves products of academia – of disciplinary methodologies.

Because of the emphasis placed upon these methodological ruminations, many of the methodological approaches to African philosophy that have been proposed have remained hypothetical or speculative – they have yet to be applied. One relevant difference about the methodology to be discussed below is that it has been 'tried and tested'. Whether it has also been proved 'true' is a subject still very much under discussion, and likely to remain so for some time.

### *1. Indeterminacy*

The indeterminacy thesis was first proposed by W.V.O. Quine in 1960.<sup>1</sup> Over the years it has remained one of the more fiercely debated major-minor issues of contemporary philosophy. Its critics are numerous, and the critical interpretations and attempted refutations it has engendered compose a substantial body of literature.<sup>2</sup> Today its controversial status en-

Originally published in *Philosophy* 70 (1995): 377–393, and reprinted here by kind permission of the Royal Institute of Philosophy. The author is grateful to K. Anthony Appiah, Dorothy Emmet, Robin Horton, Valentin Mudimbe, W.V.O. Quine, and Olabiyi Xai for their comments on drafts of the original paper.

In *Word and Object* (Quine 1960), Ch. 2 ('Translation and Meaning').

<sup>2</sup>A comprehensive bibliography of major interpretations, criticisms, elaborations, and defences of the indeterminacy thesis can be found in Kirk 1986: 259–265. For a much-quoted

dures, in no small part because of Quine's sustained efforts over the years to elaborate the thesis in a continuing dialogue with his critics.

Recasting the technical philosophical arguments of Quine's thesis into severely shortened, summary form can become a very masochistic undertaking. As the existing literature demonstrates, amply, this kind of strategy promotes caricature. The issues involved become more simplistic than in the case, and this tends to dramatize disproportionately some of the paradoxical, counterintuitive consequences of the thesis.<sup>3</sup>

I would prefer to concentrate here upon some of Quine's formative insights about the nature of language, the nature of meaning, and the relationships between languages that arise from the indeterminacy thesis. They too are controversial, and at best I hope to persuade you to 'try them on' as alternatives to our more conventional views of language and then to consider some of the interesting consequences that might follow for the translation of African 'beliefs' and abstract ideas.

1. Let us begin by regarding each natural language (English, Chinese, Yoruba, etc.) as a *unique* human creation that has its own intricate conceptual network(s) – ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, etc. – with distinctive semantic predispositions. Our immediate experience of the world is not self-explanatory or neatly categorized. It is humankind, by means of its creative genius, that invents languages and imposes empirical and theoretical order on that experience.

2. Let us also suspend our tendency to assume that in their heart of hearts all of our languages share a common group of *universal meanings*

'informal' discussion of Quine's thesis by many of the principals involved (including Quine), remarkable for its plain talk about complex philosophical issues, see Davidson et al., 1974.

<sup>3</sup>In the literature on African philosophy, the earliest reference to the indeterminacy thesis that I have been able to identify occurs in a footnote to Henri Maurier, 'Do We Have an African Philosophy?' in the 2nd edition, published in 1979, of *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, see Wright (ed.) 1984. Interestingly, the footnote is editorial—i.e., it was added by Wright—and contains an explicit recommendation that the issues raised by Quine's thesis should warrant the special interest of African philosophers. More generally, one of the earliest analytic philosophers to recognise and enunciate clearly the theoretical potential of African languages for African philosophy, a position he has continued to refine up to the present day, is Kwasi Wiredu. See Wiredu 1972: 11.

I am indebted to Robin Horton for first drawing my attention to Quine's indeterminacy thesis and for many valuable conversations about translation. For his collected thoughts on the subject, which should by no means be treated as his final word, see Horton 1993.

There was substantial discussion of the indeterminacy thesis in the philosophy of the social sciences and in anthropology before it became an issue for African philosophy. A particularly informative interdisciplinary collection can be found in Hollis and Lukes (eds.) 1982.

or *propositions*. By 'universal propositions' Quine refers to the belief that while the word for 'destiny' may be different in Yoruba from what it is in English, the underlying meaning is the same. Quine's view is not, specifically, a defense of relativism. It is a critique of the idea that we have any direct 'experience' of universal meanings.<sup>4</sup>

3. A belief in the universality of meanings may be of empathic value to someone who is a stranger to another language-culture, or of heuristic value to the lexicographer devising a bilingual dictionary, but it tends to negate the possibility of uniqueness that we began with. It can also be said to promote a form of *ethnocentrism*, in that translators who believe in universal propositions, or do translation between two languages as if there were universal propositions, will likely favour the meanings of their own natural language (English, for example), effectively universalizing them into propositions, and then proceed to impose English meanings upon other languages via the process of translation.

4. Let us also suspend our conventional notion of 'meaning'. When an English-language translator sets out to communicate with an alien, the psychological predispositions of her own language may subliminally persuade her to conceive of the 'inner' alien person as a mind, as a consciousness inhabiting a body. They may also persuade her to presume that consciousness contains the meanings she needs to 'reach' and to 'study' in order to formulate accurate translations of the alien language. Worse still, she may be deceived into thinking that the translations of alien meanings that she eventually does propose derive their accuracy from the fact that they really do *correspond* to 'meanings' in the alien mind.

In fact, we never have direct access to another consciousness. What we do have direct access to are alien words coming out of alien mouths. Strictly from a *methodological* point of view, therefore, it is deceptive for the translator to operate in anything other than a *behaviouristic* universe.<sup>5</sup>

5. Familiarity with an alien language on the relatively empirical level is not sufficient to enable us to predict the nature of *alien theoretical or abstract beliefs*. The gap between the accidental spilling of salt and the beliefs that interpret it as bad luck is vast.

6. The hopes for objectivity, for proof of *accuracy in translation*, dif-

41. Katz compares the effects of Quine's critique of meaning to those of Hume's sceptical analysis of causality in 'The Refutation of Indeterminacy' (Katz 1988).

<sup>5</sup>For the purpose of this discussion it is enough to say that the form of behaviourism being introduced is *methodological*, as opposed to the reductive psychological species enunciated by Skinner and Co. Quine is not denying the existence of the conscious 'mental' self, of personal feelings, or of introspection. But these experiences are private to each individual rather than public.

fer substantially between the relatively empirical ('It is raining') and the abstract ('Truth is beauty'). Translations of empirical statements are susceptible to a degree of public, verifiable testing of meaning. Theoretical abstractions are relatively immaterial in character. Translation on the abstract level is accordingly much more difficult to control or to verify.

7. The translator who is *bilingual* is not excepted from these problems. She may be perfectly fluent in each of the languages that are targeted by a particular bilingual translation. But when she begins to affirm that a certain term 'extracted' from one of the languages means precisely the same as a certain term in the other language, she is still imposing the meanings of the one language's conceptual network upon the other in hypothetical fashion.

8. Any extended translation process between two languages – as found, for example, in a work of cultural anthropology or a bilingual dictionary – is an elaborate, interrelated network constructed of innumerable hypotheses that stipulate the meanings of English-language words as equivalent to alien-language words. Each definition of an alien word becomes, in effect, an *interpretation* rather than a translation, a working hypothesis, a rendering based upon a network of other translated renderings. Looking at things from this perspective makes manifest the approximate nature of the entire process. It also raises the possibility that another translator could come along who would disagree with the schema worked out by her predecessor and introduce an alternative schema, an alternative interpretation, that differed in important respects, and therefore would produce a different version of the 'African beliefs' in translation.

9. What *objective criteria* can one appeal to in order to determine which alternative translation is determinate – is closest to the 'true' (alien) meanings? There are none that would be sufficient. This, admittedly in castrated form, is the point of the indeterminacy thesis.

Quine is *not* advocating a ban on translation, nor is he implying that published studies of African abstract beliefs that are based upon translations of African languages are false. Quine is advocating a degree of *scepticism* about *purportedly* rigorous, objective, detailed analyses of alien abstract ideas in translation. Once one recognizes the weakness of the empirical constraints placed upon the communication of meanings between two languages that may historically have no cause to share a single common cogitate, what exactly is the *objective* basis upon which we assign virtually literal accuracy to theoretical translations?

From the standpoint of indeterminacy, studies of African abstract meanings in translation are built upon a more fragile basis of interpretation than their rhetoric implies. This needs to be recognized more widely than it is

– especially when such studies serve as an empirical basis for attributing oddities in reasoning and/or theoretical understanding to an African conceptual system. A prelogical mentality *could be* the creation of a prelogical translation. One who is persuaded by the possibility of indeterminacy would prefer that we be more flexible, more open to the possibilities of misrepresentation, of approximation by translation, especially on the level of abstract thought. On this level there may be no such thing as literal translation. Everything becomes free translation, interpretation.

In the *absence* of secure objective criteria for determining which translation schema is more accurate, Quine proposes several translation guidelines that he thinks may at least reduce the risks of producing translations of African meanings that are offensive as well as indeterminate.<sup>6</sup>

Some consequences of these alternative criteria would be as follows. One would become suspicious of translations of African meanings that propose to assign a *plurality of meanings* to the same term in an African conceptual system. A translator might justify such a practice by saying that these are dependent upon the circumstances or the context in which the term is used. Given indeterminacy, an alternative reason *could be* that translators have tactical recourse to context-dependent meanings because they – perhaps unwittingly/unknowingly – have been *unsuccessful* in coming up with a *determinate* meaning. In effect, then, the translator attributes her own confusion to the alien conceptual system. This makes the aliens appear somehow exotic or bizarre when in fact the real culprit is the translation.

Suspicion should also be focused upon cases in which the African is made to mean something empirically bizarre and inappropriate to a situation's common-sense circumstances. This may indicate a situation in which inadequate translation results in Africans apparently affirming transparently false statements and therefore becoming less than rational. Given indeterminacy, an alternative explanation could be that there are problems in the conceptual translation network that cause African meanings to take on apparent absurdity in the language of translation.

To conclude: Quine is not saying that people are always rational. His *scepticism* about the entire process of translating the meanings from one language into another moves him to caution us that we have *as good reason* to suspect our systems of translation as we do to suspect the African of being responsible for apparently exotic, bizarre, or irrational statements in any given context.

<sup>6</sup>Quine 1960: 73–79; see also pp. 30–34, above.

## 2. Ethnophilosophy

'Ethnophilosophy' is a four-letter word, an intellectual's invective. I don't know of anyone in African philosophy today who voluntarily identifies themselves as an 'ethnophilosopher'. It is a category invoked by a critic when he wants to express disapproval of the work of someone in African philosophy.

The term was originally coined in 1970 by Paulin Hountondji, a philosopher from the Republic of Bénin.<sup>7</sup> He uses it to characterize the work of people like Placide Tempels (1959), Alexis Kagame (1956), Léopold Sédar Senghor (1964), Marcel Griaule (1965), and Germain Dieterlen (1951). His intention is to condemn the intellectual injustice that he believes to be enshrined in publications purporting to be African *philosophy* when they display the following characteristics:

(1) Ethnophilosophy presents itself as a philosophy of *peoples* rather than of *individuals*. In Africa one is therefore given the impression that there can be no equivalents to Socratic philosophy or Kantian philosophy. Ethnophilosophy speaks only of Bantu philosophy, Dogon philosophy, Yoruba philosophy; as such its scope is collective, of the world-view variety.

(2) Ethnophilosophy's *sources* are in the past, in what is described as authentic, *traditional* African culture of the *pre-colonial* variety, of the Africa prior to 'modernity'. These can be found primarily in products of *language*: parables, proverbs, poetry, songs, myths – oral literature generally.

(3) From a *methodological* point of view ethnophilosophy therefore tends to present African beliefs as things that do not change, that are somehow timeless. Disputes between ethnophilosophers arise primarily over how to arrive at a correct *interpretation* of historical traditions.<sup>8</sup> African systems of thought are portrayed as placing minimal emphasis upon rigorous argumentation and criticism in a search for truth that provides for

<sup>7</sup>Remarques sur la philosophie africaine contemporaine', *Diogenes* 71 (1970); revised and translated in Hountondji 1983, Ch. 1 ('An Alienated Literature').

<sup>8</sup>There is anticipation of *indeterminacy* in the following remarks from Hountondji, in which he derides the usually unspecified methods used by these ethnophilosophers to induce African philosophy from oral literature: 'The discourse of ethnophilosophers, be they European or African, offers us the baffling spectacle of an imaginary interpretation with no textual support, of a genuinely "free" interpretation, inebriated and entirely at the mercy of the interpreter, a dizzy and unconscious freedom which takes itself to be *translating* a text which does not actually exist and which is therefore unaware of its own *creativity*. By this action the interpreter disqualifies himself from reaching any *truth* whatsoever, since truth requires that freedom be limited, that it bow to an order that is not purely imaginary and that it be aware both of this order *and* of its own margin of creativity' (1983: 189, in note 16).

discarding the old and creating the new. Tradition somehow becomes antithetical to innovation.

If this material had been presented as cultural anthropology or as ethnology Hountondji would have no objection to it. But when it is introduced as philosophy, as *African* philosophy, a demeaning and subversive double standard is introduced that excuses African philosophy from having critical, reflective (it becomes, in effect, *prereflective*), rational, scientific, and progressive content in any significantly cross-culturally comparative sense.

Hountondji does not hold these perpetrators of an unauthentic African philosophy *personally* responsible for their crimes. In their day in their own intellectual circles they believed they were doing something revolutionary, something genuinely radical and progressive, by daring to link the word 'philosophy' directly to African systems of thought.

Also, Hountondji appreciates the difficult circumstances of Africa's intellectual history during the colonial period. Academic philosophers – African or expatriate – were a rare species. The principal initiatives for serious scholarly studies of African cultures came from ethnography and anthropology. Given the holistic parameters of the social sciences, it is understandable – if still not ideologically acceptable – that these early ethnophilosophers began to approach the subject of African philosophy on such a collectivized, tribalized scale.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Linguistic Philosophy

As an academic philosopher who had become interested in the translation of abstract African meanings, I was naturally drawn to some of the promising work that has been done this century in the *philosophy of language*. Since a good deal of philosophy is devoted to the study of problems for which no standardized solution has been found, the philosophical perspectives on problems of translation are diverse. Quine's indeterminacy thesis is only one example of this diversity.

There is a cluster of philosophers and of philosophical 'movements' in twentieth-century academic philosophy that, by prescription or example, place a premium on *description*.<sup>10</sup> Although many of these philosophers

<sup>9</sup>For a postmodern defense of ethnophilosophy, see Salehahmed 1983. For a more recent, comparatively strident condemnation of virtually the whole of 'African philosophy' as *non-philosophy*, as too culturally specific and descriptive (in other words, as ethnophilosophy yet again), see Pearce 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Most prominently the phenomenological movement. For a discussion of phenomenological description and African philosophy, see Hallen 1976.

preferred the terms 'analysis' or 'analytic philosophy' for describing their efforts, in effect that meant a form of minute, painstaking description. For some it was the description of language usage (as in the cases of the later Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin). For others it was the beliefs and the conceptual contents of common sense (Gilbert Ryle). These efforts were approaching a kind of intellectual crescendo in 1959 with the publication of Sir Peter Strawson's book, *Individuals* (1959). This was said to be an exercise in 'descriptive metaphysics', which meant something like detailed analyses of the meanings of primordial concepts in the English language, such as 'bodies' and 'persons'.

It is possibly unfair to characterize these traditions in contemporary philosophy as a Western species of *ethnophilosophy* – if for nothing else because of the very specific terms of reference Hountondji has in mind for his criticisms. But the emphasis placed upon 'mere description' as an alternative to critical argumentation, and the concentration upon *language* (as assimilated by written rather than oral cultures) as used and *everyday meanings* and *beliefs* indicate that certain essential attributes are held in common.

\* \* \*

My own primary concerns were *methodological*, instrumental. I was in need of practical techniques for the study of concepts or abstract meanings. The most important criterion for adoption was that they might be useful in the African context.

I was not concerned – at this initial stage – to become involved in the more profound disputes over the nature of language, of meaning, of reference, or of language's role in the posing of philosophical problems. Given the disrepute of ethnophilosophy and the general lack of technical philosophical content in anthropological literature,<sup>11</sup> there was an obvious need for some *first-order* work – collection, analysis, and systematization of African conceptual meanings – by scholars with philosophical sensitivities.

In the course of my methodological borrowings, in a thoroughly eclectic manner, I intermixed insights and techniques from different 'schools' of thought that are normally not regarded as compatible – from positivism (Quine) and from ordinary-language philosophy (J.L. Austin) for example. I found some of Austin's procedures for the collection and analysis of meanings<sup>12</sup> plausibly practical for the African context. Deliberately adapted rather than merely adopted, and as amended, they may be summarized as follows:

<sup>11</sup>Anthony Appiah makes a similar observation about anthropology in *In My Father's House* (1992: 94). Robin Horton is, of course, one distinguished exception.  
<sup>12</sup>As reconstructed with greater technical precision by J.O. Urmson (1969).

- (1) Select a *field of discourse* in an African language to concentrate analysis upon, preferably one that is related to the concerns of academic philosophy.
  - (2) Collect all *vocabulary* that may be relevant to this subject-area.
  - (3) For collecting such information it is better to work with a *group* of indigenes, more or less as colleagues, rather than as an independent researcher:
    - this is particularly helpful when dealing with a culture that is significantly oral;
    - it is also helpful to any principal researcher who is targeting a language that is not their own first language.
  - (4) The different members of the group must somehow all agree to accept the *same general methodological approach* to the research.
  - (5) Collect and/or construct '*paradigm cases*' or examples of situations where this vocabulary is used in the correct way.
  - (6) Also pay attention to examples of *wrong usage* – where the terms should not apply.
  - (7) Again with reference to the examples of usage, amplify the *meanings* of key terms on the basis of *extensive discussions* with one's indigenous colleagues (this point might pain Austin).
  - (8) As much as possible, pay special attention to the empirical conditions, criteria, and content of each term. In some cases these may be sufficient to make one alternative translation of a theoretical term preferable to another (even if, according to Quine, this 'preferable' translation ultimately also remains indeterminate).
  - (9) Do *library research* on what other scholars (philosophers, anthropologists, linguists, ethnologists) may have had to say about this specific field of discourse in whatever African language you have chosen. Also enquire about directly comparable studies in the same or some other natural language.
  - (10) Resist *wholesale importation* of academic philosophical theories as vehicles for the explication of African meanings. Careless application of a technical vocabulary can skew sensitivities and create confusion.<sup>13</sup>
- I suppose a good deal of this might seem carelessly informal to the trained professional linguist. The most I can say to justify this approach is that it seems to have produced some interesting results. For example, in connection with Yoruba-language translations, one area of discourse that proved of interest was what in academic philosophy corresponds to epistemology, or the theory of knowledge.<sup>14</sup> In plain talk this would encompass the vocabulary and the criteria used by the Yoruba to evaluate and to grade any type of information – as from less to more credible.

<sup>13</sup>Appiah gives an example of this with reference to Cartesian dualism (1992: 100), a theoretical parallel frequently drawn in contemporary African philosophy.  
<sup>14</sup>See Ch. 2, above.

#### 4. African Philosophy

In 1975 no philosophy department syllabus in Nigeria listed a course in African philosophy. At the University of Ife the department did, however, offer a course in African Traditional Thought. This nomenclature – ‘traditional thought’ rather than ‘philosophy’ – reflects the indirect but fundamental influence that anthropology for long exerted upon the relationship between academic philosophy and Africa.

My aim is neither to criticise nor to censure my ethnographic colleagues. It was never a part of anthropology’s brief to suppress African philosophy. Nevertheless, the assessments made of African ‘modes of thought’ in anthropological studies did not encourage the interest of academic philosophers in their theoretical intellectual potential. Characteristics such as non-critical, prereflective (associated with being ‘traditional’), non-reasoned (associated with being ‘emotive’, ‘symbolic’), non-individualized (associated with being ‘tribal’) are symptomatic. This assessment was a further formative influence upon *ethnophilosophy*. The reported relative absence of an articulate and analytically reflective intellectual tradition in African systems of thought inclined those in search of African philosophy to seek it in alternative sources, such as myths and proverbs.

The stereotype of the African intellect that arose from these anthropological studies created serious problems for linking a philosophy syllabus to Africa’s indigenous cultural base. For Africa was not introduced to academic philosophy as an unknown: the problem was not simply a lack of information about African traditional modes of thought. The problem was that the subcontinent’s indigenous intellectual attributes appeared to be virtually diametrically opposed to critical thought as defined by academic philosophical tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Some African philosophers have responded to this apparent dilemma by arguing, astutely, that it was based upon an *unfair comparison* between widespread popular beliefs (so-called ‘folk philosophy’) in Africa and theories that were the product of deliberately intense and highly sophisticated research (science, philosophy) in the West. Western cultures were gradually coming to terms with negative elements of their own folk philosophies (superstitions, etc.) on the basis of reasoned assessments and consensus. The more practical course for Africa would be for her peoples to deal with their popular beliefs in an analogous fashion.<sup>16</sup> The problem

<sup>15</sup>An opinion that unfortunately is still all too common. This same sentiment is echoed by Appiah: ‘That African philosophy just is ethnophilosophy has been largely assumed by those who have thought about what African philosophers should study’ (1992: 94).

<sup>16</sup>The original debate about this issue may be found in Horton 1967 (reprinted in Horton

with this response is that it does not effectively counter the claim,<sup>17</sup> supposedly itself scientific, that on a more primordial level than popular beliefs Africa’s intellectual predispositions – including those underlying the conceptual networks used to articulate African abstract or theoretical ideas – are quintessentially symbolic, emotive, and prereflective in nature.

When my colleague Olubi Sodipo and I agreed to join forces for a philosophical investigation of Yoruba epistemological discourse, using the indeterminacy thesis as a foil, we anticipated complaints from our colleagues in both anthropology and philosophy. We expected them to accuse us of behaving too much like anthropologists – doing something very like fieldwork – when professionally we were qualified only as academic philosophers.

What we did not anticipate was that, because of our extensive efforts to re-present Yoruba meanings in analytic, systematic, and somewhat determinate form, they would be characterized by several critics as ‘mere description’ or ‘merely descriptive’ and thus branded a further example of *ethnophilosophy*.<sup>18</sup>

Such labelling is misguided, and is only made possible by yanking the Yoruba material out of its wider context and treating it in isolation from the discussion about meaning and problems of translation. For the point of the entire Hallen-Sodipo translation exercise is to test Quine’s thesis by *exploring the limits of determinate translation* (into English) with reference to a cluster of reasonably abstract concepts (from Yoruba) that are relevant to the theory of knowledge.

<sup>17</sup>‘The real difficulty encountered in the understanding of primitive thought is not, as some philosophers suppose, that its ‘supernatural’ beliefs are refractory to rational understanding, but that symbolism is linguistically untranslatable and its ideas encapsulated in action, ritual, and social institutions; that is, they exist at a sub-verbal level’ (Hallpike 1979: 485). See also McClean 1994.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Bodunin, in an article that remains controversial among both friends and foes of African philosophy, was the first to criticise my work for its ethnophilosophical tendencies. But as this early criticism was made of a paper entitled, with deliberate precaution, ‘A Philosopher’s Approach to Traditional Culture’ – rather than ‘Traditional Philosophy’ – I think it was premature (although valuable nonetheless). See Hallen 1975; Bodunin 1981.

Hallen and Sodipo, individually and collectively, are explicitly associated with ethnophilosophy in Bello 1988; Oruka, ‘Philosophic Sagacity in African Philosophy’, in Oruka (ed.) 1990; and Oseghare 1992. Four reviews of the original edition of *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft* that discuss its wider philosophical horizons (Quine, indeterminacy, translation, etc.) in a comprehensive manner are Byrne 1987; Cordwell 1987; Jorion 1987; and Mundimbe 1987.



When viewed from such a perspective, the exercise is certainly of philosophical substance. It is also crucial to the entire enterprise of African philosophy. For African philosophy, insofar as it may deal with the *analysis* of African languages (or meanings) and the *evaluation* of African beliefs expressed in these languages, will not even be in a position to *begin* until we are assured that such meanings can be correctly understood and translated in a reasonably determinate manner.

A second argued consequence of this translation enterprise concerns the *challenge posed to the evidential status* of that troublesome stereotype of traditional African systems of thought that has been inherited via ethnography, and that has for long obstructed the academic philosopher's dialogue with African cognitive systems. I can only summarize here in a most unsatisfactory manner, but the first results of the Hallen-Sodipo approach<sup>19</sup> began from the knowledge-belief distinction as portrayed in English-language philosophical analysis and explicitly set out to investigate whether there was anything comparable to it in Yoruba discourse. Initiating our topical study of Yoruba discourse from this special interest of Western epistemology was deliberate. The characterisation of traditional discourse, as defined by the West, effectively portrays it as lacking critical epistemological content. Yet the conceptual network that emerges from our analyses of Yoruba meanings is by comparison markedly critical, sceptical, and empirical in character. In fact, it proved so out of line with what one was led to expect by the stereotype of 'traditional thought' that initially we queried our own conclusions and searched anew for possible underlying *mis-translations*, *mis-representations*. That there do indeed prove to be a selection of subtle, different, yet interestingly comparable Yoruba epistemic criteria introduces a viable way of doing analytic philosophy into Africa.

Quine's remonstrances about re-fashioning alien thought systems according to one's own cultural 'images' was one source of caution here. The Western academic philosopher has been schooled in very specific traditions of 'rationalism' and, at the same time, conditioned to place a high value upon aspects of empirical testing and verification. The two combined could influence him to inflate approximate references in Yoruba discourse to anything resembling either far beyond their true significance.

Indeed, it was a continuing awareness of the pitfalls of indeterminacy and possible *mis-interpretations* that persuaded us not to treat our English-language translations of Yoruba meanings *immediately* as reliably repre-

<sup>19</sup>As published in the original edition of the present work; see Ch. 2, above.

sentative. In the original edition of *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, we made an appeal for corrective criticisms from other Yoruba scholars.<sup>20</sup> It seemed advisable to do this lest these meanings be consolidated into a further false orthodoxy that would further mislead people about the nature of African 'thought'.

I now think sufficient time has passed that we can be assured of a reasonable consensus. Our model of the conceptual network has passed some kind of test. The general structure remains intact.<sup>21</sup> It is time to move on.

To what, one may ask? The task embraced by academic philosophy is two-fold: to *understand* (let it serve here as another expression for 'to describe') and to assess. Philosophy is not a science, and the solutions it offers may not be so convincing that a targeted problem is finally resolved. But that does not absolve the academic philosopher from a responsibility to consider the *evidence* and *argumentation* in favour of each of the various alternative systems of understanding – for example, of each of the conceptual networks constitutive of the various natural languages in our world – and then try to determine which among them are the better instruments for understanding, the more empirically convincing or (to put it most impossibly) true.

Another alternative would be to opt for relativism – the relativity of truth – and argue that because what the Yoruba find true may not be what the English find true, there are many truths and there the matter rests. Accurate *descriptions* or the cataloguing of the various systems of conceptual understanding in the world would then become all that is required. This might also seem to be a consequence of indeterminacy, but, as the thesis is presented here, it does not follow. The problems in capturing the meanings of one conceptual system with the meanings of another need not imply that both may be true.

Judging the truth of the conceptual systems of the world's various *natural* languages in terms of any absolute criterion (which itself would have to be expressed in language) might seem a preposterous enterprise.<sup>22</sup> But if reduced to more manageable proportions – such as, for example, the relative merits and demerits of different systems of epistemological concepts

<sup>20</sup>See p. 83, above: 'We would be pleased if the response to this chapter generates information about additional empirical content that may lead to even more determinate translations'.  
<sup>21</sup>Reviewing the earlier edition of the present work, A.G.A. Bello (1988) made a number of suggestions for revisions of our Yoruba translations, which we have taken note of.

<sup>22</sup>A great deal has been done in this regard with artificial languages, but the connection between artificial and natural languages remains a subject of dispute. For an early but still seminal analysis of this debate, see Katz and Fodor 1962.

and criteria when judged as instrumental tools – it does not seem so impossible.<sup>23</sup>

At this point I would opt for, as a further step towards responsible cross-cultural comparative research in African philosophy, aiming at a better understanding of *why* a specific conceptual network with its peculiar (possibly unique) conceptual components may be suited to a particular African cultural context. The conceptual network of any natural language does not explain or justify itself in the didactic argumentative manner that has become conventional to academic philosophy. Such reasons must be deduced from a language by sifting it<sup>24</sup> in its wider cultural and social contexts. Some may object that this sounds more like the sociology of language than philosophy, but it is another facet of that comprehensive understanding academic philosophers are obliged to attempt before they pass comparative judgements.<sup>25</sup>

### 5. Conclusion

I appreciate that many of the suggestions and admonitions I have expressed may already be incorporated into the methodologies and research activities of other disciplines involved with African studies. Nevertheless, one role of the indeterminacy thesis in African *philosophy* can be to sensitize those committed to dealing with the translation and assessment of abstract ideas on the basis of cross-cultural comparisons to the limitations of conceptual networks generally for the representation and analysis of alien meanings. And this caution should extend as much to African interpretations of Western meanings as to Western interpretations of African meanings.

One of Hountondji's complaints about ethnophilosophy is that its focus is collective, tribalized rather than defined in terms of the views of individual African thinkers. Adapting linguistic philosophy as a methodological basis for African philosophy should qualify it as an exception to this criticism. Linguistic philosophy is concerned with the study of languages,

<sup>23</sup>In *Belief, Language, and Experience*, Rodney Needham discusses the limitations of the English-language concept 'belief' as a vehicle for cross-cultural translations. See Needham 1972.

<sup>24</sup>Possibly imaginatively, as Quine does in the radical translation experiment he uses to introduce the indeterminacy thesis.

<sup>25</sup>J. T. Bedu-Addo makes a perceptive cross-cultural comparison of the significance of knowledge via direct experience (what has become known as 'knowledge by acquaintance' in academic philosophy) and its roots in orality in the Greek, Akan, Yoruba, and Latin languages. See Bedu-Addo 1983: 232–233, especially note 13. See also Appiah 1992: 98.

and languages function as means of communication on the basis of shared meanings.

The technical, philosophical analysis of African conceptual networks can hopefully be of a more rigorous methodological order than the classic studies that somehow 'extract' a so-called traditional system of thought from the oral literature of an African culture. Whether, interior to an African language, there is a special vocabulary; a unique form of conceptual network, or a particular form of discourse that is somehow peculiar to whatever is defined as the 'traditional' is a possibility that invites further – what else? – philosophical analysis.