

Introduction

What lies within the pages of this book is a revolutionary moment in African philosophy: the first multilingual collection of African philosophy in indigenous African languages. The seven essays collected here are in six different languages from five different countries. Each has been translated into English by a scholar or scholars who are native speakers of the essay's tongue; the translations are included here on facing pages. In this introduction, I will first contextualize this achievement and then introduce and discuss the anthology's contents.

In *Moving the Centre*, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that there have been three types of literary traditions in Africa. The first is oral literature (or "orature").¹ The songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles, and sayings that constitute this tradition represent a rich and ancient heritage. The tradition is also a living one: through it, Ngũgĩ claims, African languages have been kept alive "in their most magical form."² The second tradition is that of Africans writing in European languages (generally the languages of their now former colonizers). Though he does not announce this in the present context, Ngũgĩ is extremely important to the development of this tradition: his first novel, *Weep Not Child* (1964), published under the name James Ngugi, was the first novel in English by an East African. Since then, however, Ngũgĩ has undergone one of the most remarkable transformations in modern literature: by the 1980s, he renounced English as a language for creative writing and vowed to publish all such work in an African language, particularly Gĩkũyũ (the language of his people).

Thus, in *Moving the Centre*, Ngũgĩ articulates a sharp critique of the Europhone tradition, arguing that while it has performed the anti-Eurocentric function of "re-drawing the images of the world as previously drawn by the literature of Europe," it has at the same time "continued and even aided in that Eurocentrism by its very choice of languages."³ The third tradition, then, Afrophone writing, is the stream of African literature of which Ngũgĩ

has become the greatest champion. Despite problems associated with literacy levels, opportunities to publish, the existence of literary criticism, orthographical confusion, the multilingual nature of most African countries, hostile governments, and the concentration of genius in the Europhone stream, Ngũgĩ believes that “writing in African languages still holds the key for the positive development of new and vital traditions in African literature as we face the twenty-first century.”⁴

The debate surrounding the use of African languages has not remained an issue for novelists, playwrights, and poets alone. Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, one of the most celebrated African philosophers, writes in his book *Cultural Universals and Particulars* that his profession must eventually begin contributing to the third tradition: “Sooner or later . . . African philosophy will have to be done in an African language or African languages.”⁵ Wiredu associates the fact that the philosophical education of professional African philosophers has generally been in the languages of the colonizers with the danger of what is known as “colonial mentality.”⁶ An undisturbed colonial mentality is the fate of any African philosopher who never critically interrogates the conceptual frameworks inherited through this education and who never makes any effort to explore the resources inherent in indigenous African conceptual schemes. To do both of these things, on the other hand, is to participate in the fight for what Wiredu calls “conceptual decolonization.”⁷

Wiredu demonstrates this by looking at the concept of truth, arguing that trying to translate controversies surrounding the relation between *truth* and *fact* into his native Akan runs into the difficulty that the same phrase expresses both concepts (“*nea te saa*” = “that which is so”).⁸ He concludes that debates in English about truth versus fact constitute an example of a philosophical problem that is “tongue-dependent.”⁹ He does not claim that such problems are therefore not real problems, but they are therefore less fundamental than more universal problems—such as the question of what it means for something to be so.

Until now, Wiredu’s championing of philosophizing by means of African languages has remained in the above form: utilizing Akan translations of terminology to explore philosophical problems. He has not, however, made “the Ngũgĩ switch,” as we might call it: he has not switched to publishing all of his work in Akan. Asked about this in an interview, Wiredu responds: “I fear that I am not as important as Ngũgĩ, so that if I wrote texts in Akan I do not think anybody would be going to translate them.”¹⁰ Going beyond this humility, he mentions the issue of the number of languages in Ghana alone, making the decision to write only in Akan something that would cut him off from many readers in his own country, to say nothing of the rest of Africa and the world. He concludes that “it is just not practicable now for us to work exclusively in our own languages.”¹¹

This is a claim with which I agree, and the following collection of essays is *not* an attempt to set up intellectual walls of division, forcing African philosophers to write only for the tiny audiences that would result from working *exclusively*

in their own languages. Not making the move to exclusivity, however, does not preclude inaugurating a new and vibrant tradition of publication in indigenous African languages by professional African philosophers. This is exactly what this anthology aims to do: its collection and translation of African language work in philosophy serves to (1) advocate and exemplify the value of mining the linguistic and conceptual resources which Africa's languages have to offer Africa's philosophers, and (2) normalize what ought to at least be an option for African philosophers of the future.¹² This anthology seeks, in other words, to take the next step in the development of African philosophy as an institution: going beyond talking about the use of African languages to actually producing compelling work in those languages, along with translations so that the wider world will benefit as well.

The first piece in the volume is by Souleymane Bachir Diagne of Senegal, proclaimed one of the world's twenty-five most notable thinkers by the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. He addresses in Wolof the very issue I mentioned in relation to Wiredu: truth. When thinking about the topic, Diagne found himself drawn to the same format as Plato: the philosophical dialogue. He therefore presents us with an exchange between a woman named Soxna and her male friend Ngóór in which they interrogate the concept of truth and its relation to tradition. Is truth to be identified with tradition, that is, with what the ancestors taught? What is the opposite of truth? What is the relationship between the truth of Islam and the traditional beliefs of non-Islamic ancestors? Soxna and Ngóór seek and find reasonable answers to these three questions.

The second essay is by Ethiopian philosopher Messay Kebede, acclaimed author of *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization*. Writing in Amharic, Kebede explores the relationship between conceptions of time and the process of modernization. After connecting the question of time to the question of the meaning of life, he describes the unique combination in the Ethiopian tradition of cyclical and teleological conceptions of time: while the observance of the natural world produced a cyclical view of life, Ethiopia's Orthodox Christian tradition provided the country with a goal-oriented eschatological outlook. Kebede turns to the sacred text of the *Kebra Negast* to explain how these seemingly opposing conceptions of time were reconciled in such a way as to place Ethiopia at the center of history. He argues that, in the modern period, Ethiopia's failure to prosper has been intimately related to its rejection of the traditional combination of conceptions in favor of a Eurocentric teleological understanding of history and time.

Three of this anthology's essays are by philosophers from Kenya, and two of those are in the Luo language (also known as Dholuo)—which is, incidentally, the ancestral language of the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama. The first essay in Luo is by D. A. Masolo, whose *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* is among the most thorough and insightful overviews of the field. Here, Masolo examines the nature of proverbs as linguistic phenomena. He argues that they are not propositions, as they do not make claims about the world that are true or false. Offering a wide variety of

examples of Luo proverbs and differentiating between simple and complex types of proverbs, Masolo aims to show how they are general impressions and reflections that transmit wisdom that is useful to the community, rather than case-specific statements that could be disproven by pointing out discrepancies between their literal meaning and events in the world.

The second essay in Luo is by F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo, who has previously written on topics such as sage philosophy (a unique form of African philosophy involving interviews with wise people, which originates in Kenya). He turns his eye here to traditional naming practices among the Luo, in an effort to delineate the philosophical stance on language and personhood that underlies these practices. The Luo tradition rejects a conception of naming according to which names serve only to pick out individuals; a name is meant, rather, to express significant information about the name-holder. Ochieng'-Odhiambo describes four levels of naming: naming at birth, which is determined by the circumstances of birth; naming children after dead relatives, often on the basis of dreams; naming that displays kinship relations among the living; and praise names, acquired over the course of life, which Ochieng'-Odhiambo compares to proverbs and riddles. It is interesting to note the many points of connection between this essay and Masolo's, perhaps signaling a common sense of direction for Luo philosophy.

The third essay by a Kenyan philosopher is significant for at least two reasons: it is in Gĩkũyũ (also known as Gĩgĩkũyũ), the same language in which Ngũgĩ has been writing his Afrophone work, and it is by a woman, which is important because women are severely underrepresented in African philosophy. Betty Wambui's essay is a contribution to the philosophy of gender. The impetus for her reflections was an assertion by a friend that, among the Gĩkũyũ people, women, children, goats, and land are regarded as one and the same thing. Wambui attempts to investigate the validity of this claim by tracking the life experiences from birth to adulthood of women and men in traditional Gĩkũyũ society, carefully noting similarities and differences in the treatment of the two sexes and seriously considering arguments both for and against the perception of inequality. She gives special consideration to traditional society's categories of exceptional women, such as barren women who were allowed to marry other women and women who did not get married at all. Her conclusion is nuanced and resists simplification.

The anthology's penultimate essay is by the late Nigerian philosopher Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, best known for having edited a number of classic anthologies in African philosophy and philosophy of race as well as the journal *Philosophia Africana*. We are proud to be able to honor Eze's memory by including this essay in Igbo, which is one of the last things he wrote before joining the ancestors. Eze's metaphysical piece concerns itself with the relationship between language and thought. He frames the discussion by raising the question of why it might be useful to do philosophy in Igbo, which leads him to make use of the anthology's titular reference to the idea of *listening to ourselves*. Exploring the ways in which philosophy can listen to itself in

the Igbo language, Eze makes use of idiomatic Igbo expressions to produce insights concerning topics such as the dialogical form of thought, the concept of intellectual property, the importance of cultivating an open culture, and the presence of unity and diversity within and across persons and cultures.

Finally, it is very fitting that we close with a contribution from Kwasi Wiredu, whose calls for conceptual decolonization played a large part in inspiring this anthology. Wiredu's essay in Akan (also known as Twi) is an exercise in ethical theory. He aims to build an account of good and evil that properly incorporates the importance of both consequences and intentions and that captures both the universal and culturally variable aspects of morality. He specifies what we call the Golden Rule as the "First Law" of human conduct and examines how it provides the foundation for morality by serving to harmonize individual and community interests. Then, looking at what determines the goodness or badness of acts that do not contravene the First Law, he offers a standard of promoting well-being which he compares and contrasts with John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism. Turning to the importance of cultural context, Wiredu discusses the variability of custom and gives special attention to the Akan notion of *musuo*, which has sometimes been translated as "taboo." Wiredu argues that the word should not be translated in this way, which leads him to discuss the role of religion in morality.

It may help prepare the reader for what follows to embark upon a brief discussion of some notable tendencies within the anthology's essays that we can, I think, see as directly linked to the fact that they are written in indigenous languages. These tendencies, I would argue, emerge as a result of the perspectival shift engendered by leaving behind English or French and attempting to philosophize in the language of one's ancestors and kin. One is likely to find these tendencies present and prominent in the anthology in ways that make it differ from other anthologies in African philosophy and, more importantly, from other works by the same philosophers whose work is collected here.

I will begin with the tendency, arguably present to some degree in every essay, toward an attitude of *deference to tradition*. Deference need not be understood here as total and uncritical submission, although uncharitable readings of some essays would perhaps charge them with displaying that extreme. Deference, when not taken so far, can be understood as a form of deep respect that commits one to giving at least the first word to the object of deference, if not always the last word. This is precisely what we find in the essays within this volume. There is a palpable sense of the need for humility before tradition, of the need for some recognition of tradition's authority, in the work collected here. This is entirely appropriate for an anthology motivated by the goal of demonstrating how philosophy looks and sounds when articulated in indigenous African languages, the tongues within which African traditions appear and gain shape most naturally not as caricatured barbarisms or exotic curiosities but as the necessary background and grounding for habitual forms of thought, expression, and action.

And yet, as I have said, tradition's authority need not be seen as total and unquestionable. Tradition is the starting point for discussion, and in many of the essays, we find that the discussion develops in ways that include raising suspicions about and offering criticisms of certain aspects of tradition or common ways of understanding those aspects. I firmly believe that this represents one of the most important and fruitful methodologies for African philosophy as a discipline: the investigation and articulation of ideas drawn from what is seen as traditional, followed by the application of a critical eye that aims to praise and keep what is best while criticizing and rejecting that which is unacceptable.

Related to the theme of deference to tradition is the *religiosity* that features prominently in a number of essays. The first two essays, for example, can each be read as in some sense taking for granted a background commitment to Islam and Christianity, respectively. The foregrounding of these two religions may strike some readers as ironic and as contrary to the volume's commitment to upholding the value of African traditions, but it is important to remember the presence of Islam in West Africa is many centuries old and Christianity has been a dominant religion in Ethiopia for nearly two millennia. We should therefore be careful and flexible with how we define what is and what is not traditional in Africa. The important point to note here, however, is that the treatment of these religions as part of the necessary background for philosophizing in Wolof and Amharic is best understood as part of what is involved in depicting the arising of philosophical discourse in these linguistic contexts as authentically as possible. It is not simply a language that is at stake in any of the essays in this volume, but rather an entire culture and the way that culture structures the world. Religious commitments are central to many worlds in Africa, and they are therefore the most natural starting points for asking the fundamental questions to which philosophy seeks answers. Once again, though, we need not worry that the authority of religion is such that these starting points are shielded from the questions they inspire being subsequently turned back upon them. Diagne's piece, for example, is masterful in its subtle encouragement of questioning and its discouragement of an uncritical, fundamentalist approach to Islamic faith.

The last notable feature upon which I would like to comment in anticipation of any consternation on the part of the reader is the discourse of *race*, or, more precisely, of *African-European difference*. It should surprise no one that explicit or implicit comparisons between Africans and those who colonized them are common in these essays, as they are in discussions of African philosophy generally. And yet, such comparisons can sometimes be jarring to those who are extra-sensitive to the need to avoid generalizations, especially when the comparisons present themselves as comments on the differences between "races"—take, for example, the talk of black people and white people, their initial encounter and their different approaches to naming, in Ochieng'-Odhiambo's essay. But one would be quite clearly mistaken if one took Ochieng'-Odhiambo to be simply essentializing and homogenizing

people according to racial classifications, as his essay is tightly focused on communicating the specificities of naming practices among his particular people, the Luo. His talk of black-white difference is resonant, then, of the larger context within which his investigation of the customs of a single ethnicity takes place: a world shaped and indelibly marked by the colonial encounter. The figure of the European looms here, as elsewhere, as a sort of challenge to self-knowledge: what matters is not what can be said about the entire history of the European subcontinent and those descended from its inhabitants but rather what to make of the lasting effects in Africa itself of the presence of the *mzungu*, the *toubab*, the *oyinbo*, the *obruni* (to use just a few of the names in African languages for *white people*).¹³ The struggle for self-knowledge necessarily includes attempts to distinguish African and European characteristics, although carefulness in doing so is of course warranted.

In closing, I want to note the significance of this anthology's being published as part of a series on "Living Indigenous Philosophies." The essays within it bear a special relationship to the genre of African philosophy known as "ethnophilosophy," a term closely associated with Paulin Hountondji of Benin, whose negative use of it to describe works claiming to express the philosophy behind traditional African cultures deeply impacted the direction of the field. One of Hountondji's objections to ethnophilosophy is that he sees it as an "extraverted discourse": a case of attempting to intervene in a Western conversation by setting oneself up as a spokesperson for a people already presumed to not be part of the conversation.¹⁴ The essays in this volume, no matter how ethnophilosophical they might be by virtue of excavating the philosophical content of traditional cultures, automatically evade this particular criticism by addressing themselves first and foremost, by virtue of the languages in which they are written, to an African public. They are thus prime examples of *living indigenous African philosophy*: they participate in and aim to enrich a tradition of thinking deeply in African languages that has hitherto been primarily oral. In this manner, they communicate on a number of levels, to all Africans who are interested in philosophy, a vital anti-Eurocentric message: let us listen to ourselves!

NOTES

1. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (London: James Currey Ltd, 1993), 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 19.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 21.

5. Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 4.

7. Ibid., 136.

8. Ibid., 107.

9. Ibid., 101.

10. “Decolonization, Multilingualism, and African Languages in the Making of African Philosophy: Kwasi Wiredu in Dialogue with Kai Kresse,” <<http://them.polylog.org/2/dwk-en.htm>>.

11. Ibid.

12. It is worth noting at this point the sad irony that while all of this anthology’s contributors are African philosophers in the sense that they are philosophers from Africa, none of them currently hold positions at African universities. All except one work (or, in the cases of the deceased and the retired, worked) at universities in the United States, and the exception works at a university in the Caribbean. A majority of them have, however, held positions at African universities at some point in the past, and their moves to the United States and elsewhere thus form part of the unfortunate brain drain Africa has experienced as its institutions of higher education have been affected by structural adjustment and other detrimental factors.

13. “*Mzungu*” is Kiswahili, “*toubab*” is used in Wolof and a number of other West African languages, “*oyinbo*” is Yoruba, and “*obrui*” is Akan.

14. Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa*, trans. John Conteh-Morgan (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002), 95.