

Textures of African Thought: Analyticity and Apologia

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The power of grids

The nature of the debates regarding the origins, orientations and future of African philosophical traditions has fairly well drawn-out. But oftentimes, rather than progress beyond the conceptual impasse created by an engrossing preoccupation with definitional grids many of these debates have made a virtue of metaphilosophical casuistry. This is most noticeable within the Anglophone divide of African philosophical discourse. More so, this particular formation of contemporary African thought is often entrapped within the modalities of colonialist anthropology that seeks to maintain in discursive terms the separation between colonized and colonizer and between notions of primitivity and culture. This overarching conceptual program has cast a shadow over the deliberations of much of Anglophone African philosophical discourse. Arguably, the Francophone formations of African philosophy have been more willing to critique colonialist anthropology and this has had two broad effects; namely an invention of a practice that while being able to undertake a vigorous interrogation of colonialist anthropology is not limited by its strictures and secondly, a wide-ranging multidisciplinary within the tradition has occurred as a result of exploring the problematics of identity with a variety of discursive registers. Nonetheless, both the Francophone and Anglophone traditions of contemporary African thought are conjoined by a quest to determine the dimensions and limits of Africanity.

Polycarp Ikuenobe's *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (2006) dwells in a wearisome and repetitious manner on the possibilities of inventing an African philosophical practice. The attention to this foundational problematic of African philosophy is especially engrossing within the Anglophone divide of African philosophical discourse. In many ways, Ikuenobe has not moved beyond Peter Bodunrin's (1984) formulations on the nature and possibilities of an African philosophical practice together with the conceptual grids – ethnophilosophy, philosophical sagacity (see for instance, Imbo, 2002) the nationalist school of ideology and professional philosophy – that underpin it. Also, Ikuenobe does not address the diversity and the impressive degree of progress gained in the course of those founding debates. In this article, I address some of the trajectories of those debates as a broad discursive backdrop in order to read Ikuenobe's text. This approach is necessary because as mentioned, he does not foreground or even

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appreciate the tremendous gains made during the course of the problematizations regarding the origin, nature and future of African philosophy. Francophone traditions of African philosophical practices have made considerable gains which continue to determine many of the trajectories of contemporary African thought. I also examine some of these discursive traditions to illustrate their richness and demonstrate how they have been sometimes more fertile than Anglophone African philosophical traditions. In particular, these Francophone philosophical traditions have been more receptive to the interrogation of anthropological texts in order to determine the various forms of African subjectivity and the relations between interiority and exteriority in terms of acquiring critical agency as regards the configurations of discourse and subjectivity.

Ikuenobe makes many grave errors regarding the work of some of the philosophers – such as Wiredu, Bodunrin and Appiah – who were instrumental in defining the parameters of the various debates on which much of contemporary African philosophy is based. In many respects, Ikuenobe has not moved beyond the preoccupations of African nationalists such as Leopold Sédar Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe. For instance, he declares himself an Africanist in two senses: ‘I see myself as a researcher scholar in the area or subject matter of Africa; I see myself as a defender of an African perspective, that is, someone who takes pride in the beliefs, views, thoughts of Africa’ (ibid. 43). Here, it appears that his form of Africanism stems from having to confront an enduring history of racism. As such, much of his Africanist convictions are based on the modalities of race and how they make and unmake subjectivity.

Many of Ikuenobe’s propositions are based on the discarded assumptions of colonialist anthropology. He is consumed by an apparent preoccupation with a romantic and quite probably lost vision of communalism; a static, premodern villagization is also often inscribed within a non-descript theoretical context which remains so precisely because in philosophy, within a certain contested notion of philosophy, the normative is allowed to stand in place of the descriptive and empirical. Ikuenobe begins his explorations of communalism by stating a proverb: ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ (Ikuenobe, 2006: 1). Accordingly, he sets himself the task of analyzing ‘communalism and the communal nature of moral principles, reasoning, education, ways of life, mode of inquiry, and belief system in traditional African cultures, which have supposedly given rise to the popular saying’ (ibid. 2). He adds that his project is based on ‘a logical, systematic, and normative interpretation or analysis of the idea of communalism in African cultures’ (ibid.). On his methodology and on the metaphilosophical nature of his approach, he writes: ‘philosophy involves efforts to systematize pre-philosophical ideas, commonsense, and intuition into a coherent theory or concept, to present them as a reasonable set of stories or ideas’ (ibid. 3). He claims postmodern Westernity has a great deal to gain from imbibing the virtues of communalism. He makes this claim on the basis that communalism does not lead to ‘moral indoctrination and irrational authoritarianism’ (ibid. 4). On account of ‘some informal processes,’ he posits that communalism leads to the general well-being of society. Informalization in the era of contemporary globalization has taken dramatic turns which sociologists and urban theorists have documented with often impressive results (Emizet, 1998). Rather than chart the progress of these useful findings, Ikuenobe reverts to the metaphilosophical mode. As such, he argues that ‘the idea of communalism, various communal practices and beliefs, and the relationship between the community and individuals are exemplified in the informal structures, methods, and processes by which people acquire beliefs and learn the requisite values and principles’ (ibid. 6).

The last claim leads to an even larger proposition: ‘that an analysis or understanding of communalism as a moral basis for the political dimension of communalism in African traditions could provide the normative basis on which the idea of democracy and the process of democratization in modern African states could be anchored and engrafted’ (ibid. 4).

He then revisits the ever-present anxiety regarding the entire project of an African philosophical practice: 'I indicate that the plausibility of talking about a theme in African cultures will, in some sense, affirm the existence of an African philosophy. Such a philosophy, i.e., a cultural philosophy, many have argued, does not and cannot exist in the Western sense of *formal* philosophy. Instead, some argue that such a philosophy or philosophies only exist in the *folk* sense of philosophy. I argue that it is reasonable to talk and theoretically (re)construct philosophical themes or a dominant or common theme in African cultures, and that communalism is one such theme' (ibid.). Again, the methodological anxiety concerning the nature and potentialities of African philosophical discourse: 'The metaphilosophical and comparative issues of the nature and existence of African philosophy also raises questions about the nature of philosophy – its historical development, contents, and methodology or methodologies. These issues raise questions as to whether philosophy of African cultures could, both in content and methodology, meet the standards or criteria used to identify or characterize a system of thought as a philosophy, at least in the Western sense' (ibid. 5).

So far, it is clear that conceptual implements as well as the discursive approaches Ikenobe has adopted are unable to address some of his key themes – informalization, the tensions between tradition and modernity, nativism and cosmopolitanism, the dichotomies between the West and the rest and a whole range of postcolonial problematics (see Gilroy, 1993, on some of these problematics) – in a satisfactory manner. First, he reveals the limitations of his approach to metaphilosophy and then he confronts African forms of analytic philosophy which provide the conceptual languages and structure for his mode of writing and argumentation. In specific terms, he claims, 'Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Anthony Appiah argue that the traditional communal principles of African cultures lack the proper rational, critical, and analytic foundations that can engender scientific inquiry and technological development. They suggest that communalism in African cultures is authoritarian and irrational because people are supposedly made to accept beliefs and principles against their will and independent reasoning or judgment' (ibid. 7). This claim is not supported by sufficient evidence. Wiredu's (1980; 1996) project, in the main, consists of reading traditional Akan culture in order to clarify and refine some conceptual components within it as a way of coping with the challenges of modernity and also as a means of inventing a bona fide African philosophical practice beyond the sterility of the debates regarding the existence or non-existence of a tradition of African philosophy. Appiah (1992; 2002), who also works within most of the confines of the analytic tradition explores the problematics of race, identity, cosmopolitan existence and the conditions of postcolonial modernity. Both Wiredu and Appiah are concerned with the conundrums of modernity through different trajectories. Wiredu reads traditional culture with the aim of determining its readiness for projects of conceptual modernization. As such, his approach entails constant and direct engagements with traditional culture through conceptual [re]evaluations. Appiah, on the other hand, is concerned with how African forms of subjectivity affirm themselves in the larger world. Thus rather than trace the trajectories of the traditional in its relations with the modern as Wiredu does, he tracks how the cosmopolitan African sensibility makes a way for itself in the world at large. As such, Appiah's relation to traditional culture must be read within this context. While Wiredu undertakes an *inward* gaze in relation to traditional culture, Appiah on the other hand, adopts an *outward* gaze in order to define a universal, deterritorialized African self. In other words, Appiah challenges the subjectivities of nativism which are essentially embedded in the familiar logic of colonialism and unreconstructed archives of racism. Indeed, rather than dwell on the pervasive question of whether an African philosophical practice exists or not, Appiah avails himself with teasing out the epistemological consequences and deliberations of African literary texts as demonstrated in his readings of authors such as Wole Soyinka.

Ikuenobe constantly displays his anxiety about the presence of African philosophy and this makes his text quite repetitive. According to him, one ever-present preoccupation ‘is whether there are cultural or ethnic philosophies that qualify as African philosophy’ (Ikuenobe, 2006:19). But his thesis on what a project on African philosophy ought to be is quite perplexing. In his view, the idea of communalism ought to be tested in universal terms once it has proved workable under African conditions. He also points out that his understanding of the ‘traditional African idea of communalism is something that is being gradually lost with modernization and urbanization in Africa, especially in big cities, because people are embracing the Western modern and individualistic ways of life’ (ibid., 15). Oftentimes, he is quite critical of Western modernity: ‘There is a sense in which some Western intellectuals who do not want anything positive to be said about Africa are uncomfortable with someone making a “constructive” positive generalization about African cultures’ (ibid., 18). At several instances, the vilification of Western culture provides the occasion for what passes for thought: ‘This motivation for questioning African philosophy by some Western scholars is rooted in racist beliefs: that Africans lack intellect and rationality’ (ibid., 36). It is even more perplexing to note that Ikuenobe thinks he can change the minds of racists: ‘If racists and those who accept false and stereotypical beliefs about Africa and Africans are rational, then one can intellectually engage them and rationally change their minds by making them see that the plausibility of the analysis of the idea of communalism in African cultures as a subject matter of African philosophy that indicates a positive feature and “superior” aspect of African cultures and thought systems’ (ibid., 38). Here, it appears that Ikuenobe is placing a far greater burden on African philosophy than it can carry and also it seems that he does not fully comprehend what racism really is and how it works within societies.

And frequently, this denigration of Western culture stems from the pressures of anxiety and possibly doubts as to the questions of identity: ‘An understanding of the relevant issues and my metaphilosophical stance will substantially illuminate why what I am doing – that is, an analysis, which is a content or subject matter of African philosophy, also implies that there is, indeed, an African philosophy’ (ibid., 23). These kinds of statements affirming the existence of African philosophy within a context of anxiety and skepticism (in the non-philosophical sense) are replete in the text. More is revealed about his thesis when he writes: ‘It would appear that what I seek to do by analyzing and defending the idea of communalism in African traditions is a combination or hybrid of what is called professional philosophy and ethnophilosophy’ (ibid., 24). This remark is exceedingly significant and would later serve as part of the basis of this critique. Ikuenobe then devotes attention to the status and legitimacy of ethnophilosophy as a discursive practice: ‘Appiah and Wiredu argue that African ethnophilosophy does not have the requisite characteristics, and therefore, it is not a philosophy. According to this conception of philosophy, ethnophilosophy is not a philosophy because it is not universal but a culturally specific or relative, and it is cognitively relative and descriptive’ (ibid., 26). Again, Ikuenobe does not provide sufficient evidence to support this assertion. While Appiah is a consistent critic of most forms of nativism, Wiredu, on the other hand, has been more accepting of certain facets of traditional culture. To be sure, Wiredu advocates a professionalized practice of philosophy and constantly engages with the tensions between universalism and particularism and it is those very antagonisms that provide the basis for his theoretical practice. Indeed he interrogates traditional culture with three distinct aims in mind; 1) to unearth what is in fact philosophical within the context of pre-modernity and 2) in excavating the philosophical from premodernity, he also intends to establish a modern African practice of philosophy and 3) to formulate a form of praxis and theory to engage with the project[s] of modernity. In this sense, Wiredu’s conception of ethnophilosophy and his mode of addressing it is quite different from the notions Ikuenobe holds regarding it. Ikuenobe writes that ‘Wiredu argues that

African cultures and thought systems are characterized and plagued by three essential features: anachronism, supernaturalism and authoritarianism' (ibid. 33). But what Wiredu really points out is that certain aspects, not everything, about traditional culture need to be critiqued in order to cope with the challenges of modernity. In fact, large swathes of traditional culture provide the basis for a significant portion of his theoretical project and this is a dimension Ikuenobe completely misses. It is easier to allege that Appiah downplays the importance of ethnophilosophy and forms of nativism generally as discursive practices to be advanced for fashioning a modern sensibility. What Appiah seeks most importantly, is the de-ghettoization of the African self and the ability to speak of African experiences in universal terms. As such, his critique of nativism can be best understood within this conjuncture, that is, at the point in which a premodern culture must reform and adapt in order to engage with modernity. As V.Y. Mudimbe before him, Appiah interrogates notions of the philosophical beyond supposedly formal philosophical texts. While Mudimbe examines the aims and assumptions of colonialist anthropology and various mythological texts, Appiah reads literary texts that display evidence of nativism and the tensions between tradition and modernity in an attempt to negotiate challenging conditions of postcoloniality.

Ikuenobe states that he is 'also speaking to African intellectuals who argue against or doubt the existence of African philosophy' (ibid., 43). But as we have observed, his understanding of some major African thinkers such as Wiredu and Appiah is quite misleading. Also, his general methodological grid is not altogether satisfactory. In this manner, his espousal of a discourse of normativity for a project that is essentially both sociological and anthropological is far from convincing. Accordingly, he writes: 'We must bear in mind that my analysis of communalism as a common feature of African cultures is not a factual description of a feature of each and every African culture. The normative conception of community and its place in African people's normative conceptual scheme' (ibid., 53). Again, Ikuenobe does not offer any explanations for the cultural and discursive impetus behind this discourse of normativity. However, it is clear that this discourse is derived from the canon of analytic philosophy. He never interrogates the ideological dimensions of this discourse which have largely Western antecedents and in not attempting to address, criticize and move beyond this problematic, his entire project becomes vitiated. The language and logic of his formulations are embedded in a discourse that purports to denounce Westernity but are in fact granted impetus and mobility by the Western intellectual tradition. This is a serious contradiction that Ikuenobe fails to notice, let alone rectify.

Similarly, Ikuenobe constantly foregrounds a same/other dichotomy without also acknowledging the considerable literature that addresses this tension: 'instead of defining the individual self in terms of Descartes' "thinking I" (*cogito*) and using it as the basis for individual identity, we find in the African culture an affirmation of the existing community ("we are") as a basis for defining the identity of the existent and thinking self ("I am")' (ibid., 55). Undoubtedly, there is a Senghorian dimension to this formulation in essentializing a supposedly Western self on the one hand, and an African self on the other. Senghor has been criticized for his essentializations and yet Ikuenobe re-presents a primarily Senghorian idea without an acknowledgement of, or an engagement with, the thought of Senghor. Postcolonial theory, in particular the notion of ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994), demonstrates the exceedingly problematic nature of not only colonial relations but also the non-linear, fragmentary dynamics of postcolonial self-making.

Ikuenobe's discourse is entrapped within a framework of classical colonial relations, away from the multiple trajectories of postcoloniality and this makes his schemata not only rather reductive but also inaccurate. It is not surprising that Ikuenobe seems to agree with Senghor's essentializations together with those who support him: 'Thus, Senghor argues: "As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, every thing – be it only a grain

of sand – radiates a life force, a sort of wave-particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfillment.” This is an idea also captured by Innocent Onyewuenyi’s description of African ontology and the African conception of the nature of “reality” or “being” as a dynamic force’ (ibid., 63). It is also not surprising that Ikuenobe has very little to commend about Appiah’s project. On the other hand, it is not likely that Appiah would have much to respect about his own work. The notion of an African ontology – in a philosophical sense – is another name for unanimism. Paulin J. Hountondji borrowed the term ‘unanimism’ from the French author Jules Romains to denounce any conceptual maneuver that collapses diverse African cultures into a singularity. Appiah has also criticized unanimism within African philosophical discourse and also within African literary texts. If there exists a form of unanimism in relation to the African subject, I would posit that unanimism exists not only as a branch of African philosophy but also in some instances, in the way in which the entire discipline of African philosophy is conceptualized. As such, unanimism within the discourse of African philosophy leads to the marginalization of the discipline. Ikuenobe’s own conception of an African philosophical practice is made even more suspect by his rather uncritical reading of Placide Tempels’ project. Tempels is a founder of ethnophilosophy, the branch of African philosophy that gave birth to modern African thought by providing the basis for powerful counter-discourses to a tradition of colonialist anthropology. Ethnophilosophy obviously is a highly denigrated discourse but its formation as a founding moment in modern African thought serves as the basis for which, for instance, much of Hountondji’s project as counter-discourse rests. Perhaps Ikuenobe does not contest the unanimism of ethnophilosophy because the branch together with what he assumes to be “professional philosophy” forms much of his theoretical arsenal.

Ikuenobe also employs Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to elaborate on what he regards as the ethos of communalism. Indeed, Achebe’s landmark novel does more than just portray an idyllic communal ethos. Its cultural and political reverberations are more sophisticated than this reductive reading would allow. It is also essentially a description of a traditional society in the throes of violent sociopolitical and cultural permutations in addition to being an eloquent critique of colonialism. In other words, Achebe’s work is not merely a celebration of a romantic African past and its state of stasis. Instead, it is primarily concerned with the transformation and movement that mark the beginnings of intimate relations between a traditional culture and modern frames of reference. As an analysis of a traditional society experiencing a wave of transformations, movement and therefore not stasis is the key register. Achebe’s novel compels us to ponder the complexities involved in the moment in which colonial relations bring about radical changes in a traditional locus. As such, Ikuenobe misses these subtle points in Achebe’s work.

In returning to Ikuenobe’s project, he mentions that he intends to adopt an alternative view of philosophy that ‘seeks to draw on the non-individualistic, informal, communal, religious, existential, practical, and discursive traditions of ancient and medieval periods of Western philosophy, and the non-analytic continental traditions of hermeneutics, phenomenology, and existentialism’ (ibid. 105). This is a general statement that remains unredeemed within the entirety of his text and acts, in this instance, as a metaphilosophical drawback. At several moments within the text, there is often no correlation between stated intentions and actual results.

However, Ikuenobe continues to advance his problematic notion of authoritarianism. First, he makes some questionable assertions: ‘Wiredu argues that the communal structures of traditional African societies are characterized by a kind of moral and epistemic authoritarianism. In his view, many African beliefs in African cultures that provide the basis for moral values, principles, practices, and ways of life are accepted and held not on the basis of adequate evidence, but on the authoritarian dictates of tradition, and elders who are seen as repositories of knowledge’ (ibid.,

175). Also, 'The epistemic, political, and moral authoritarianism in African communal cultures, Wiredu and Appiah argue, discourages the attitudes and processes of critical inquiry, questioning, and curiosity, which are necessary to have a rational set of justified beliefs, values, and moral principles. As such, both Wiredu and Appiah doubt whether the use of reason is truly allowed to flourish in African traditions given its authoritarian tendencies' (ibid., 177). This is yet another misreading of both philosophers, particularly Wiredu. Indeed Wiredu critiques traditional culture in order to make it more resilient. Criticism is an essential feature of the analytic tradition and indeed the entire philosophical quest and Wiredu just as Achebe is concerned with the permutations wrought by the effects of modernity on a traditional culture. Wiredu does not embark on an outright denunciation of traditional culture. Instead he critiques it as a way of delineating an alternative course of modernity. On the other hand, Ikuenobe's whole idea about a centered African identity and ethos is framed within a context of stasis and his project acts as a denial of movement, transformation, and in some respects, epistemic contestation.

Ikuenobe continues to attack Wiredu on his reading (which appears rather complicated for Ikuenobe on account of his constant misinterpretations) of traditional culture. According to Ikuenobe, what is regarded as authoritarianism in traditional African cultures can be equated with a 'notion of epistemic dependence and deference' (ibid., 185). It is his view that 'the positive aspects of communalism or authoritarianism in African cultures have not been appreciated' (ibid., 186). In addition, he states that 'epistemic authoritarianism is not as insidious or bad as Wiredu and Appiah suggests [sic]. Perhaps, the critics of epistemic authoritarianism in African cultures have simply overstated their case or criticism' (ibid., 191). Apart from making a case for authoritarianism within the context of modern Africa, he also advocates an indistinct form of 'indoctrination' while arguing that it could be employed as a means of enforcing a moral philosophy and regime in contemporary society. He concludes his text by stating; 'African communal values are fundamentally humanistic, and they are founded on a naturalistic view of ontology, where human beings, community, ancestors, deities, and spirits are in natural harmony' (ibid., 291).

What are the theoretical implications of Ikuenobe's text? They are quite a few and are not altogether new. First, it ought to be situated within a particular conjuncture of Anglophone African philosophy and colonialist anthropology. As mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, Anglophone African philosophy operated (and to a large extent it still does) within conceptual grids that defined ethnophilosophy, philosophical sagacity, nationalist ideology and professional philosophy as approaches (although the branches of ethnophilosophy and philosophical sagacity are usually denigrated) to inventing a modern African philosophical practice. Ikuenobe's text not only unfolds within these grids but also never strays beyond them. Second, without explicitly affirming it, the text validates the main discursive preoccupations of colonialist anthropology which his particular notion of Africanity really ought to contest and debunk and yet does not. Third, the text operates within a logic of classical colonial relations and as such is an anachronism given the multiple transformations wrought by modernity and postcoloniality that much of contemporary critical theory has done a great deal to explicate. Fourth, the notion of Africanity and ethos of communalism enshrined in the text necessitate far more sophisticated analyses and problematizations which Ikuenobe simply does not address. Fifth, the very practice of philosophy as a meta-discourse cannot sufficiently explain some of the phenomena, concepts and discourses that Ikuenobe makes his central concerns. Finally, his text invites a contemplation of the tensions between a notion of cultural stasis and the dynamics of contemporary sociopolitical mobility. I shall return to some of these points at the end of the discussion. Before then I will delineate a different trajectory – and of course there are others – of the evolution of modern African philosophical discourse in order to problematize a notion of Africanity and the disciplinary engagement with it.

Also, Ikuenobe misreads significant portions in the projects of Wiredu and Appiah and it is necessary to address these misrepresentations.

Private revelations

The different formations of African thought are informed by factors of history, geography and various experiences of colonialism. There are formations of thought inflected by the Graeco-Egyptian civilization and the Arabo-Moorish experience. Also, there have been significant contributions in older configurations of African thought that drew from neo-Platonism and medieval philosophy which shaped post-Pharaonic modes of conceptualization in fields such as ethics, jurisprudence, logic and sociopolitical philosophy (Keita, 2004). However, this part of the discussion is not concerned with these important contributions and influences. Rather, it addresses a few strains in modern African thought according to the Anglophone/Francophone dichotomy as part of a much broader and fertile field of African forms of philosophical discourse. As mentioned, the earlier confluences of ancient Greek and Egyptian thought are not taken as a point of departure. More specifically, the events of colonization and subsequent decolonization (in the wake of colonial rule) provide a rough historical expanse for this part of the discussion.

In a recent essay, V.Y. Mudimbe revisits the origins of modern African philosophical discourse without really dispelling the widespread confusions as to its foundations. His contribution, however, reveals the intellectual discourses and existential circumstances that combined in the making of his philosophical outlook. Mudimbe does not intend to locate the nucleus of African philosophy. Rather, he suggests that the discourse ought to be perceived as part of a perpetual search, an unraveling without an end and a quest for the universal in spite of the encroachments of the particular. He writes ‘in their diversity and variety, and beyond the sterile debate on the ‘existence’ or the ‘inexistence’ of an African philosophy, what affirms itself amazingly remains, simply, the vocation of something called philosophy, about which I, personally, have no convincing definition, and which, in Africa and elsewhere, actualizes itself as a perpetual recommencement’ (2005: 33). In a different sense, philosophy then, would amount to a kind of writing (Rorty, 1982).

Mudimbe is willing to explore his existential antecedents to determine how his philosophical practice emerged: ‘A surprised child of multiple memories, at the intersection of at least two philosophical traditions, I was stating my consciousness as being caught by its own self-reflections in, at least, two historicities, two languages, two cultures, and a multiplicity of *tradita*, givens, handed-downs, inheritances’ (2005: 32). Indeed, the inheritances of which he speaks are many. Obviously, many are drawn from African shores and also a considerable number are lifted from the Western intellectual tradition. Accordingly, Mudimbe makes an important point by asserting that ‘within the interplay of cross-cultural networks in Central Africa, assuredly in the first fifty years of the 20th century, something simple, yet generally overlooked, imposed itself and massively, the enormous influence that some European intellectuals, bathed in a Germanic cultural atmosphere, had at the genesis, in the construction, and elaboration of debates on African philosophy, scientific projects, as well as programs for acculturation and conversion’ (2005: 31).

This argument is usually excluded in the debates concerning the origins of African philosophy for several reasons. The colonial project was not merely a seizure of alien lands and subject peoples. It also entailed a transformation (a conversion as Mudimbe puts it) of mental attitudes and collective consciousness. In this way, the epistemology of the colonizer was not only an epistemology of the universal, it was also an epistemology of the political conqueror. Consequently, ideologies of universalism could not disguise their hegemonic intent. Thus a practice of African philosophy by Africans had to confront this apparent dilemma in which the purported universalism

of a conqueror's philosophy presented itself as impartial truth. Furthermore, the construction of a modern African philosophical practice within a volatile context of decolonization became doubly politicized; it became a quest against the pressures of ideological and cultural erasure. However, Mudimbe makes some other revelations about his intellectual itinerary that are quite noteworthy. For instance, he mentions his indebtedness to phenomenology which leads him to ponder 'difficult conjunctions of meditation and liturgy, inside and outside, solitude and community, free will and obedience, difference and structure, spontaneity and rule' (2005: 23).

Mudimbe's revelations reaffirm the relevance of the debates on the origins of African philosophy. He mentions the significance of cultural intersections and influences. He also mentions the importance of European contributions to the debates. Furthermore, he suggests the significance of individual agency as part of the entire process. And finally, he concludes that the project of African philosophy ought to be viewed as an ever-recurrent quest, in other words, a 'recommencement.' Convincing as this view might be, it downplays a few vital political dimensions involved in the construction of African philosophy. In what follows, I highlight some of these political aspects of the debates on the origins of African philosophy using two broad classifications: Anglophone African philosophy and Francophone African philosophy. Whilst parts of the discussion might suggest the limitations inherent in Mudimbe's views, others will support his formulations on individual agency, the complexities of identities and the attractions of universalism. Indeed, while Mudimbe valorizes these specific attributes, many other African philosophical discourses (with the exception of Kwame Anthony Appiah's work) exclude them. In other words, the political project of the construction of African philosophy in its intimate involvement with the project of ideological decolonization undermines the politics of the private.

The relationship between the universal and the particular in African philosophical discourse has been explored in different ways. Kwasi Wiredu (1996) interrogates this relationship by foregrounding the viability of an African philosophical practice based on a series of conceptual revisitations, reversals and reconstructions between the polarities of Westernity and Africanity and between the North Atlantic *episteme* and an indigenous African *Weltanschauung*. In so doing, the violence of colonialist subjugation is ultimately unmasked and a process of indigenous identity construction is initiated (Osha, 2005a; 2005b). V.Y. Mudimbe's (1988) approach is somewhat more complicated in that 1) he undertakes an extensive archaeological deconstruction of the Western relationship to African otherness via a multiplicity of intellectual discourses – history, philosophy, religious studies and anthropology; 2) he also explores African philosophical responses to these Western constructions of otherness and the ways in which they determine discursive agency; 3) he suggests the ways in which the contingencies of the private inform the constitution of broader philosophical projects; 4) in between these various preoccupations he demonstrates that ultimately, the philosophical subject is continually transgressive, perpetually [re]constituted beyond the bounds of philosophy.

Collective visions

The orientations of Anglophone and Francophone African philosophies, inasmuch as they are both similarly marked by the event of colonization, evince a number of differences. V.Y. Mudimbe, who was trained in the Francophone tradition of philosophy, argues that the origins of African philosophical practice lie within the terrains of Western epistemology and anthropology (1988; 1991; 1994; 2005). Paulin J. Hountondji (1983; 2002), another African philosopher trained within the Francophone context, does not make the quest to locate the origins of African philosophy his primary concern. Rather, his project attempts to establish an African practice of philosophy through a

systematic critique of ethnophilosophy. More recently, Achille Mbembe has argued that African forms of intellectual discourse – many of which are derived from philosophical discourses – are marred by the dead-ends of developmentalism, nativism and Marxism (2001a; 2001b; 2002). These three different strains of thought are quite prominent within the Francophone mode of philosophizing. Indeed, there are other important discourses such as Negritude, advocated by Leopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire (Soyinka, 1999). These various Francophone thinkers explore the question of African identities in aesthetically and ideologically intriguing ways.

Anglophone African philosophy was also very much concerned with the search for identity (Masolo, 1994). And in the preoccupation with this search, figures such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, who came from the Danish island of St Thomas, are important. Blyden attempted to fashion a philosophy of subjectivity based on an ideology of Africanity. Afterwards, African intellectuals who were also nationalist politicians – for instance, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Nnamdi Azikwe – drew from Blyden's philosophy of subjectivity in the struggle against colonialism and also within the context of a quest to imbibe some of the imperatives of modernity. So in this regard, the invention of an Anglophone African philosophical practice depended on a quest to establish modern African modes of *being* on the one hand, and the project of dismantling the edifice of colonialism on the other. Thus the emergence of Anglophone African philosophy cannot merely be ascribed to purely technicalist or academic stimuli. The beginnings of Anglophone African discourse were inflected with deep ideological impulses. However, as processes of decolonization began to gain hold all over the African continent, the thrust for the professionalization of African philosophy intensified. Instead of problematizing questions such as 'who is an African?', the overriding epistemological problems became 'does African philosophy exist?' 'what is African philosophy?' As such, a new understanding of disciplinarity and its strictures came to the fore. The theoretical problems posed by this new conception of disciplinarity prevailed for decades. Other sub-themes emerged from the attempt to grapple with this conceptual impasse. Apart from the usual preoccupations with the conceptual status of Africanity and philosophy itself, there was a struggle to confront the conundrums of modernity and postcoloniality in which a seemingly intractable logic incessantly posed a dualism framed by a modernity-versus-tradition problematic. This is a problematic that continues to resonate throughout the context of African postcoloniality.

It is possible to view the preoccupations of Anglophone African philosophical discourse within two historical epochs: the colonial period and the eras after colonialism. The project of Anglophone African philosophy during the colonial era was largely a political one. On the one hand, it sought to advance the imperatives of political decolonization, and on the other hand, it sought to reclaim a distorted precolonial epistemological heritage for the reconstruction of collective African identities. Within the context of actual and ongoing decolonization, the project of Anglophone African philosophy became enmeshed in questions pertaining to ontology and the possible avenues meant for its professionalization according to the standards of the academy. However, in the quest for the professionalization of the disciplinary status of Anglophone African philosophy, many of its practitioners ran into a conceptual impasse. Here, the problems of reconciling the contradictions between modernity and tradition, and between Westernity and Africanity emerged with especial force (Gyekye, 1997). Also, in the postcolonial era, the political project of decolonization that preoccupied African thinkers during the colonial period was transformed into a search for disciplinary and ideological relevance within the wider sociopolitical context of the nation-building project.

In the terrain of African metaphysics, many Anglophone African philosophers focused on the phenomenon of witchcraft (Sogolo, 1993). This orientation in African metaphysics attempted to grapple with some common perceptions regarding collective theories of evil. It also demanded an

ethnographic engagement with the issue which most philosophers, either through lack of adequate training or due to some innate disciplinary inhibitions, were unable to undertake. Arguably, it can be admitted that some of the most productive interrogations of the phenomenon of witchcraft occurred within the field of Africanist anthropological studies (van Binsbergen, 2003).

If there have been Francophone attempts at anthropologizing African philosophy as well as critiques debunking the project of ethnophilosophy, Anglophone African philosophy, on its own part, has not been primarily concerned with these two tendencies. The lack of concerted focus on anthropology and ethnophilosophy resulted in a partial de-historicization of Anglophone African philosophy by shifting attention from the ravages of intellectual colonization to the necessity for a professionalized philosophical practice. This is where the differences between British and French modes of philosophical training come to the fore. Within the French tradition of training, emphasis was placed on multidisciplinary and the uses of history. However, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of training much dominated by analytic philosophy stressed the virtues of empiricism and Spartan argumentative rigor. After posing questions such as 'is there an African philosophy?' 'and if so, what is it?,' a number of approaches were adopted to surmount them. Indigenous systems of thought became important in the search for modern forms of philosophical discourse.

In both the Anglophone and Francophone systems of intellectual training, the theme of mental alienation was recurrent. How was the African philosopher supposed to evolve a mode of philosophizing that confronted the professional demands of Western philosophy on the one hand, and the problem of espousing an African identity on the other? It was a theoretical problem that resonated at the minutest existential level. Paulin J. Hountondji mounted a critique against ethnophilosophy and also carried out examinations of the discourse of ideological decolonization through his critiques of Nkrumah in a bid to establish an authentic African philosophical practice. Kwasi Wiredu (1980; 1996) addressed the issue by projects of conceptual decolonization. In East Africa, an orientation known as sage philosophy with practitioners such as Henry Oruka emerged. These various debates about the conceptual and professional status of African philosophical discourse eventually led to the formulation of theoretical grids regarding the discipline.

Peter Bodunrin (1984), a Nigerian philosopher, identified some of the most prominent orientations in the emerging discourse. They included professional philosophy (and thinkers such as Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin J. Hountondji and Bodunrin himself are named as pioneers of this discursive trend); sage philosophy; the discourse of ethnophilosophy as advanced by Placide Temples, Alexis Kagame and their disciples; and finally the nationalist/ideological orientation in which figures such as Nkrumah and Nyerere were prominent. This conceptual grid had a particularly broad impact within the West African region for several years. Unfortunately, Bodunrin did not demonstrate the extent to which his grid was feasible. In the attempt to professionalize his philosophical practice, he neglected to interrogate the problem of identity which Kwasi Wiredu succeeded in doing according to Bodunrin's mode of classification. Masolo's study (1994) is a more comprehensive exposition of this grid from a historical perspective and its relations to the problem of identity. Even though a number of other philosophers (Oladipo, 1991) addressed the predominant orientations in Anglophone African philosophical practice, it remained to be seen how the foundational conceptual grid could be transcended.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) influenced the momentum and orientation of Anglophone African philosophy in multiple ways. Although Appiah was trained in Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition of philosophy, he broadened the scope of discursive interests within the field to include a number of areas that had previously been the preserve of Continental philosophy and postmodern studies. In order to accomplish this disciplinary transformation, Appiah, in a manner similar to V.Y. Mudimbe's project, addressed the legacy of Blyden and other central figures of panafricanism. In

this way, history which had hitherto been excluded from the analytic tradition of Anglophone African philosophy became a prominent site of inquiry. Other discourses interrogated by Appiah included postcolonialism, postmodernism, race, literature and cosmopolitanism. The key intention in the examination of these various categories was to unravel the problematic nature of African identities. In this way, Appiah's project contained a powerful critique of unanimism and cultural homogeneity. This particular aspect of his project extended the preoccupations of Hountondji. In addition, Appiah's critique included a reformulation of the modernity/tradition problematic as it affected the functioning of authorial agency. Finally, Appiah's entire project can be seen as bridging the divide that had separated Anglophone African philosophy from its Francophone counterpart. It was a project that stressed the importance of transnationality, liminality and the subjectivities of difference. By raising these kinds of questions and also addressing them, Appiah changed the course and parameters of Anglophone African philosophy in radical terms. In doing so, he had moved beyond Bodunrin's conceptual grid by his attempts at de-ghettoizing the African continent and conceiving it as a universal category of thought. Significantly, Appiah has had a tremendous impact on Francophone orders of thought as can be seen in the work of Achille Mbembe (2001a; 2001b; 2002). However, contemporary Anglophone African philosophers trained in the analytic tradition are yet to explore the full potentials of these discoveries. For instance, Appiah's (2004) considerable focus on race, while imminently suitable within the sociocultural context of the United States, is only immediately useful in South Africa and not West Africa or perhaps even East Africa for that matter. Also, Appiah's explorations of the politics of transnationality and cosmopolitan notions of difference are far removed from the politics of survivalism that characterizes much of the African continent. Thus the categories of race and class (undoubtedly, his cosmopolitanism stems from his postindustrial location) might be what in the short term limited the spread of his ideas. In addition, the full impact of his discoveries might not have been perceived due to lingering conceptions of identity (which owe much to conventional notions of place, belonging and citizenship) that have not yet learnt to cope with the complexities of transnationality, liminality and the politics of difference. Furthermore, because Appiah's project questioned in a radical manner the traditional boundaries of analytic forms of African philosophy, his project encountered a measure of indifference when not outright resistance.

Nonetheless, Appiah's project as mentioned is multi-layered. It is an important attempt to move beyond the creative impasse of the analytic tendency of Anglophone African philosophy and also highlight the numerous difficulties involved in unraveling the nature of contemporary African identities and their conditions of possibility.

Currently, Anglophone African philosophy confronts an impasse that ultimately leads to a number of options; it could continue along the paths identified by Bodunrin in his conceptual grid; or it could shake off the drawbacks of the analytic tradition in order to explore more systematically the discoveries made by Francophone African philosophy and the key proponents of this orientation such as Mudimbe and Hountondji. There is also the issue of relevance to consider. In other contexts, it has been termed a crisis (Oladipo, 1991). The crisis of ideological relevance, in part, stems from the emergence and growing pertinence of other intellectual domains within the African academy that produced literary, historical, political, sociological discourses of considerable accomplishment. Indeed, there is pressure on African philosophers to match the gains made in those other areas of intellectual production.

Understandably, the problematics of identity, modernity, language and contemporary governance that confront African philosophers also emerged in other disciplines. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981; 1993), the Kenyan novelist and theorist of culture, addressed the problem of intellectual and ideological decolonization by foregrounding the question of knowledge. For him, decolonization

did not merely entail a dismantling of the political institutions of colonialism. The colonial legacy led to a far-reaching transformation of mental consciousness of colonized African subjects and Ngugi wa Thiong'o argued that the quest for liberation ought to begin with the being of language. As such, Africans were encouraged to reclaim their identities through the adoption of indigenous languages since the language of the colonizer was also an instrument of subjugation and cultural erasure.

In the domain of social science, the problematics of modernity and governance within the ongoing processes of decolonization were equally central. Peter Ekeh (1975; 1990), a prominent African political scientist, attempted to grapple with the various implications of the problems by proffering that the typical African public sphere was marked by a contestation between the primordial domain and the modern, civic sphere. The conceptual split between these two disparate domains created confusion in projects and institutions of African governance. Mahmood Mamdani (1996), another political scientist from Uganda, builds upon Ekeh's blueprint by exploring broader terrains in most of the regions of contemporary Africa, notably East Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa. Mamdani's contribution, though, is not largely theoretical. His study of the Rwandan tragedy of 1994 (2001) explores the construction of political identities as enforced by the colonial imperative and how it affects notions of ethnicity. In this way, he suggests that postcoloniality is always marked by competing modalities some of which are modern while others are premodern. Mamdani's theoretical insights are reinforced by gains derived from practical fieldwork. Mamdani's ability to combine the strengths of theory and praxis puts him ahead of many Anglophone African philosophers who in dealing with the problems of modernity and identity have only theory on which to rely.

In South Africa, the picture is slightly different. Here, the main issue is the question of deapartheidization. And within this equation, race features prominently. Of course, questions pertaining to ethnicity, Africanization and postmodernity are also prominent (see Barnard and Farred, 2004). All these various questions are leading to diverse interrogations as to what Africanity means. In many instances, the figure of Frantz Fanon (1963; 1967) is evoked to amalgamate the differences between colonizer and colonized, modernity and premodernity and also for critiques of the age of neoliberalism. In this way, Fanon transcends the original colonial context and becomes an omnipresent agent of postmodernity (Bhabha, 1994). Indeed, his work is often deployed to reconcile the sociopolitical divisions caused by understandings of competing notions of race, conceptions of identity and citizenship, and various readings of the colonial legacy. Indeed Fanon's work is seen to straddle these diverse domains.

The anxiety of relevance

As the ravages of the neoliberal age are more keenly felt within African shores, African governments who fund universities and their academic programs exert pressure on philosophy departments to demonstrate more directly their sociopolitical relevance. As such Anglophone philosophers are being compelled to revisit topics such as democracy, the construction of civil society, human rights, environmental awareness, urban security, gender, arts and culture. Of course, some of these topics have long been central in ancient philosophy but the contemporary treatment of them requires research skills drawn from ethnography and many philosophers are not trained in this regard. This particular kind of pressure is increasingly thrusting Anglophone African philosophers into the domain of social science in the bid to access research grants. In this way, a multidisciplinary that is essentially market-driven is being enforced. This development is occurring in conjunction with the pressures of multidisciplinary generated by internal debates within the field.

Clearly, the strictures of analytic philosophy are not meant to confront these challenges. The analytic divide of Anglophone African philosophy requires different conceptual schemes to cope with these disciplinary limitations and pressures. There is a need to transform the field according to internally-generated pressures towards multidisciplinary on the one hand, and the external pressures exerted by the changing demands of the neoliberal age. The ability to evolve the necessary implements to overcome them has a direct bearing on the future orientations of the domain.

Also, we must note that Anglophone and Francophone African philosophers are confronted by the same set of theoretical problems even when separated by factors of language, geography, ideology and intellectual training. The apparent divisions that had separated the two modes of philosophical practice within the context of late colonialism and the subsequent era of decolonization are no longer tenable in all circumstances. In other words, instances of overlapping do occur and more of them are likely as the twin factors of continuing decolonization and processes of contemporary globalization are strengthened. Within the African continent, these factors are in turn linked to differing scenarios of postcoloniality on the one hand, and uneven integration into global modes of organization on the other, both of which are likely to influence theoretical ways of speaking about Africa. This is a way of reading a certain trajectory of African philosophical discourse and its deliberations on Africanity and modernity. It is necessary to re-frame the question of what indeed amounts to the philosophical and how it relates to notions of Africanity. Are there new discursive practices that reformulate conceptions of the philosophical in conjunction with more problematized notions of Africanity that move beyond the foundational conceptual grids of African philosophical discourse? Indeed there is a diversity of discourses on these topics which in its tumultuousness affirms the existence of various forms of philosophical discourse and competing notions of Africanity.

Alternative textures and the end of a grid

Ikuenobe keeps reiterating that he is concerned with the re-validation of a normative African social order. In so doing, he makes a case for a form of epistemic authoritarianism. However, the advent of colonialism – in spite of the brutality of its tactics, modes of governmentality and many of its legacies – ushered in a transformation of the precolonial *nomos*¹ by the introduction of the modern ethos. It is important to probe the implications of this transformation and what it meant for traditional African cultures. Such an analysis is absent from Ikuenobe's deliberations. In his advocacy of a premodern social order, he neglects the fact that the social imaginary to which he provides support is in violent transition and it is in many ways lodged within the problematic march of modernity in Africa. It is essentially a conceptual space in which the modern and premodern are in fervent contestation and in which the latter is likely to become even more enfeebled by the ongoing transformations being wrought by the compelling signposts and components of modernity.

At this juncture, I ought to present a key concept to tie up the various strands of this critique. A short while ago, I used the term 'social imaginary' which Charles Taylor states is related to 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (2002: 106). Social imaginaries get transformed when cultures experience economic growth and when new technologies are introduced into everyday life. Indeed there are many reasons for the transformation of social imaginaries. Even the processes of modernization are agents of change in relation to the social imaginary. This is because modernity entails a 'historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new

ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)' (ibid., 91).² Western modernity as we know it is based on three main components: the public domain, the market and the sovereignty of the people.³ In the Western experience, Taylor points out that two types of premodern moral order can be isolated. The first 'is based on the idea of a *law* of the people, a law that has existed "time out of mind," and which in a sense defines a group as a people' (ibid., 94), and the second 'is organized around a notion of a hierarchy in society that expresses and corresponds to a hierarchy in the cosmos' (ibid.). Implicit in the idea of contemporary communalism is the belief that (post)modern forms of complementarity do not exist. For instance, Ikenobe suggests that the notion of communalism that he advances possesses a more humane sociomoral order than the relentless individualism found within the postmodern context. However, it is important to note that 'the inevitable flip side of the new understanding of the individual is a new understanding of sociality: the society of mutual benefit, whose functional differentiations are ultimately contingent and whose members are fundamentally equal' (ibid., 99). Taylor concludes by stating that the impact of the Grotian-Lockean conception of moral order has led not only to the transformation of the social imaginary of Western societies but also that of non-Western cultures.

The premodern moral order of societies based on ideals of communalism has been transformed by the introduction of capitalism. Accordingly, it has been noted that 'the category of culture now seems to be playing catch-up to the economic processes that go beyond it. Economics owes its present appeal partly to the sense that it, as a discipline, has grasped that it is dynamics of circulation that are driving globalization – and thereby challenging traditional notions of language, culture, and nation' (Lee and LiPuma, 2002: 191). Another key concept for understanding traditional cultures in the (post)modern era is the 'cultures of circulation' that refer to 'an expanded notion of performativity' that is necessary 'for developing a cultural account of economic processes' (ibid., 192). In a similar manner, analyses of contemporary culture need to examine 'the performative construction of capital as a self-reflexive temporal agency that, in concert with mutually created/creating sociocultural phenomena, motivates the circulation of social forms characteristic of the modern' (ibid., 193).

Thus two concepts – social imaginary and cultures of circulation – provide valuable insights into the nature of possibilities relating to traditional cultures in the contemporary age. This is not to establish that there aren't others but in the foundationalist terms set by conventions of Anglophone African philosophy and to which much of Ikenobe's discussions subscribe, the conceptual inadequacies of the notion of communalism in the era of globalization become even more noticeable.

Indeed there are many other factors that undermine Ikenobe's text. First, he tackles a problem that lies beyond the capabilities of the mode of African philosophical practice he has adopted. Perhaps what is required for his particular kind of project is a sociological and anthropological critique, indeed, a vigorous multidisciplinary is necessary (see Derrida, 1978; Rorty, 1980; 1988 on the nature of this *problematique*). As such, part of the limitations of the text stem from the reductiveness of its methodological assumptions. Moreover, many of the issues Ikenobe tackles are improperly addressed because they lie beyond his presuppositions about his particular kind of philosophical practice. Just as Appiah criticizes Chinweizu et al., Ikenobe fails to understand that the terms in which his criticisms of Western culture are set are not only complicit in it but are also granted conceptual space by the very culture he sets out to debunk.

The idea of communalism (and by extension, Africanity) that Ikenobe describes is inexorably frozen, and removed from the circuits of capital and its cosmopolitan culture and ultimately amounts to a rejection of the complex permutations of modernity. In adopting what has been

demonstrated to be a conceptual dead end as a mode of philosophy, he does a considerable degree of disservice to an already discredited branch of the discipline. Ikuenobe's project serves the assumptions of colonialist anthropology; in essence, his epistemological practice is linked to a dislocated and alienating colonial paradigm. Yet the marginal form of colonialist anthropology on which his practice is based cannot partake of the metanarrative of formal anthropology because it is devoid of ethnography.

In not wanting to conceive modernity as a challenge (I do not mean uncritical regurgitations of Western models), Ikuenobe's project can only encourage an intensification of the mentalities of the victim. Within his discourse, Africa remains in a state of stasis, immobile in its own monologue which is directed at both itself and the external world. Ultimately, he makes a case for an exceptionalism without end in advancing a pre-capitalist conception of culture.

Ikuenobe's partial and inaccurate interpretations of Wiredu and Appiah denigrate a mode of philosophical discourse that frames some of his central preoccupations. These two African theorists that he misreads in a rather disconcerting manner are in fact crucial for his unrealized project as both have indicated ways in which African philosophers who work within the analytic tradition can surmount the theoretical impasse created by the counter-productive elaboration of the foundational discursive grids.

At this juncture, we might as well ask, how do the components of contemporary modernity – the public sphere, the nation-state and the market – influence the production of subjectivity in Ikuenobe's understanding of culture? Indeed they do not feature at all in his conceptualization of culture. Also absent in his account of African philosophy is how processes of mimicry by the colonized – so well explicated in most discourses of postcolonial theory – mirror and reproduce the inherent violence of the old colonial order.

Ikuenobe grants tacit approval to authoritarianism in traditional culture. But authoritarianism within the modern context often gets transformed to something more sinister. It breeds cults of personality around elected rulers and public officials. In postcolonial contexts, it often leads to corruption and nepotism. It abolishes the public–private distinction that is required in the functioning of modern systems. It also leads to the pervasion and vulgarization of the democratic ethos and its ideals. Finally, authoritarianism causes the ossification of culture by promoting gerontocracy thus making culture unable to transform and adapt where necessary. And so with all these drawbacks in relation to authoritarianism, political leaders in postcolonial contexts are able to employ it as an excuse to be unaccountable to their citizen-subjects. Furthermore, under contemporary forms of political authoritarianism, the chancere of ethnicity has worsened (Lemarchand, 1995; 1998; Newbury, 1998). In other words, the politicization of ethnicity under the auspices of the nation-state has undermined the project of modern nation-building (Osaghae, 1995; 1998a; 1998b; 2002). Authoritarianism, barely disguised as ethnicity, has been deployed by many African demagogues for the purpose of subverting democratic practices, procedures for gaining greater personal autonomy, the development of new cultural forms and institutions to cope with the contemporary world, the project[s] of the modern nation-state and the de-secularization of the public domain.

It is important to note that this critique is not merely directed at Ikuenobe's project. It indeed addresses the entire tradition of Anglophone African philosophy that employs founding analytical grids that were fabricated during the debates about the nature and aims of African philosophy to illustrate and analyze social formations that both resist and transcend those grids. And indeed there are other grids apart from those fashioned by Anglophone African philosophers. As V.Y. Mubimbe avers: 'The notion of African philosophy has been ambiguous since it was first used in the 1910s. The pervasiveness of primitivist ideologies marks the conditions of its possibility and implies references to prelogism in thinking, paganism in belief, and primitiveness with regard to the

Weltanschauung. Furthermore, there is a more general reason for this ambiguity, and it depends on the particular status of philosophy and its meanings. As a discipline, philosophy defines itself as essentially a critical, explicit, self-critical discourse focusing on human experience, its signs and symbols' (1991: 32–33). Mudimbe also reminds us that the first scholars to publish texts which they themselves described as philosophical were the clerical heirs of the Belgian missionary, Placide F. Tempels. In that era, it became possible to conceive of a discourse centered on Africa that elaborated 'a typology of otherness' (ibid., 35). This particular strand of conceptualization has had two consequences: on the one hand, it has actually re-affirmed a form of discourse and discipline known as African philosophy. On the other hand, it has fostered ideologies and discourses of nativism even when it elaborated a politics of identity as a counter-maneuver to a history of racial denigration. Ikuenobe's project is affected by the dual implications of this foundational grid, albeit from an Anglophone perspective. Indeed the impact of this grid has been quite decisive. In many respects, it has proved to be a hindrance and in some other instances, it has demonstrated some ways in which it can be transcended. Ikuenobe does not avail himself of the opportunities to transcend the limitations of this grid. Rather he situates his project at the moments when the first questionings on African philosophical practices began and then proceeds to address a theoretical field that has shifted beyond those times. And while the arsenal of theoretical appraisal remains generally unresponsive, the social texts and forms of sociality that demand urgent conceptual attention morph into other formations.

Notes

1. See Schmitt (2003).
2. See also, Gaonkar (ed.) (2001).
3. See Anderson (1991); Habermas (1989); Warner (1990).

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