

African Meanings, Western Words*

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African studies are often characterized as interdisciplinary in nature. One wonders whether, as time passes and specific disciplinary studies become distinguished by ever more technical methodologies, this will be less true. However, since the objects of study are entire cultures that are for the most part alien to the researchers who study them, this interdisciplinary spirit may well endure.

With regard to the inventory of sub-disciplines within the general field of African studies, two relative late-comers are *African art history* and *African philosophy*. Previously the fields of interest that constitute their special concern were significantly influenced by anthropology. But when sufficient, relevant, fieldwork studies had accumulated to initiate the type of specialized inter-cultural understanding that is distinctive of these two sub-disciplines, there was reason to license them in their own right.

As African art history and African philosophy labored to accredit themselves these past decades, there are a number of expressed concerns which became common to the two disciplines. The aim of this paper is to reflect upon some of these, as expressed by African art historians,¹ from the standpoint of students of African philosophy in the hope that their respective insights and problems may overlap, coalesce and perhaps prove mutually beneficial.

The 'worst-case' scenario for the cross-cultural futures of the two disciplines would have been for professionals to conclude that, in indigenous African cultures, there was *little to compare* with "art" or "philosophy" as defined in Western intellectual terms.² In fact something like this was suggested initially by those who saw Africa as a place where aesthetic sensitivities or powers of theoretical reflection remained comparatively undeveloped.³

As time passed, more fruitfully comparative studies did relate art and philosophy to African cultures, if only on a *collectivized* or '*tribal*' scale. In African philosophy this resulted in what came to be labeled "ethnophilosophy." A corpus of beliefs is extrapolated from diverse social practices and literary sources and then presented as *the* 'philosophy' of an African 'tribe' (Tempels 1959; Mbiti 1969). In African art history this led to a notion of 'tribal art'—certain stylistic,

formal criteria are stipulated as definitive of an ethnic group and presented as paradigmatic (Fagg 1965; 1968).

Perhaps some kind of disciplinary parallel, as well, may be drawn with art historians' controversial distinction between "art" and "artifact" and philosophers' controversial distinction between "philosophy" and "world-views." In both cases the former ('art' and 'philosophy') were said to be arrived at via some kind of Western intellectual transformation of the latter ('artifacts' and 'world-views').⁴ If "artifact" may be defined as something merely 'made', bereft of the "fine" in fine arts, then certainly a comparably 'rough' status was assigned to African proverbs, parables and divination verses as constitutive of philosophy.⁵

In African philosophy this rather unusual, collectivized use of the term "philosophy" as deriving from entire ethnic groups provoked vigorous protests. It was condemned for being based upon a *derogatory double-standard* that denied African cultures an acumen that compared with that of the West (Hountondji 1983; 1995). In African art history comparable debate seems to have come later or was more prolonged, or perhaps both. Supposed peculiarities of African cultures, epitomized by characterizing them as 'traditional', were responsible for a de-emphasis upon 'history' in a discipline that named itself 'African art history'. 'Tribal' cultures and art were somehow a-historical.⁶ The 'one tribe, one style?' discussion apparently marked a kind of watershed in the direction of future research with a renewed historical interest. It has effectively concretized the alternative of approaching African art as products of distinctive individuals as well as of *diverse* and changing interests and ethnic groups (Bravmann 1973; Kasfir 1984).⁷

Both African art history and philosophy are having to come to terms with *anthropology*.⁸ One positive aspect of those relationships is the innovation of undertaking *fieldwork*. While it is not clear how much of a novelty this option of doing fieldwork represents in art historical circles generally, in academic philosophy it produced a reaction verging on astonishment (Bodunrin 1981).

What is remarkable about the role of fieldwork in African art history is that, while many professionals agree it is an indispensable part of their professional training, others complain that *the viewpoints of Africans themselves* on their art go under-reported, and are not given the attention they deserve (Abiodun 1990; Lawal 1995). This leads one to wonder precisely what it is that the African art historian is doing during the course of fieldwork, if not also learning about an African point-of-view?

It is difficult to identify a consensus about this issue in current African art history publications. Perhaps this is where the philosopher's status as a relative outsider gets in the way. Or perhaps it is because, as of now, no such consensus has been arrived at, and a

number of alternatives are being debated. One relevant consideration is the *methodological techniques* that determine how one connects with African cultures. Once again it is important to take into account the initial preponderant influence of anthropology as a disciplinary agent of the *social sciences*.

It seems that this African-inspired complaint can only be explicitly summarized if several *adjectival qualifiers* are introduced. It is not just the 'African point-of-view' that is said to be underestimated (Abiodun 1990, 64). It is the *conscious, articulated* points-of-view of relevant members of the African culture concerned that are said to be under-represented. The seminal work in this regard of scholars like Victor Turner (1970) and his intellectual descendants cannot be ignored.⁹ But it is still the case that the social sciences' concern with modes-of-thought that *transcend* any individual consciousness does *tend* to divert attention from the artistic or philosophical consciousness as *individualized*.¹⁰

As African philosophy has struggled to establish some sort of methodological self-identity it too has been concerned with distinguishing itself from anthropology. One important tactic in this process has been a progressive *disconnection* from much of anthropology's theoretical superstructure.¹¹ Philosophers had to embrace a *methodological skepticism* that distanced itself from interpretations of African cognition that regard traditions as substitutes for reasons;¹² that take cross-cultural symbolization patterns as semantically fundamental;¹³ that type modes-of-thought according to articulated expressions for thinking about thinking.¹⁴ One consequence of disconnecting from this theoretical superstructure was the suspension of specific presumptions about the African intellect as a qualitative 'other' (Fabian 1983; Mudimbe 1988; 1994).

The query that immediately comes to mind is, in the *absence* of such characterizations of African modes-of-thought, what takes their place? One methodological alternative may be characterized as a '*common denominator*'¹⁵ approach. This means *beginning from* methodological presumptions that differences in modes-of-thought have yet to be identified; that common-sense may be common; and that African meanings, beliefs and social practices may *overlap* significantly with those of the West.¹⁶

The reaction of some professionals to this kind of proposal may be: 'How naive can you get?' But the justification for this line of thought is meant to be a bit more subtle than first impressions may suggest. It is *not* humanitarian, grounded upon some sort of *moral appeal* to natural rights—that all peoples are created equal, etc.

It is methodological, and the underlying justification may be summarized here as follows. If African art historical fieldworkers wish to divest themselves of established, sometimes controversial,

sometimes restrictive, *preconceptions* about African attitudes towards art and artistic creation that are implicit in certain methodological approaches, how then are they to approach these cultures?

The philosopher can suggest that, in the conventional fieldwork scenario, too much attention is directed to the *African* half of a cultural *dia*-logue. Western fieldworkers bring to any situation of artistic interpolation a good deal of their own *cultural* intellectual baggage as well. To disconnect them from this intellectual 'baggage' some notion of *objectivity* is invoked. This means that fieldworkers are professionally trained to be sensitive to the dangers inherent in confusing their native cultural standards with those of Africans, what has come to be labeled *ethnocentrism*.

In this postmodern age disciplinary standards of objectivity are under attack for privileging certain cultures and discriminating against others. But this paper would prefer to avoid that kind of *deconstructive* critique. What is important is that the point of being objective is to be *careful*—to not misrepresent African meanings and attitudes.

To understand African cultures African art historians who come from a Western background have to *begin* from something. Their minds cannot be the proverbial 'blank tablet,' sensitive exclusively to distortion-free 'recordings' of African meanings. Then why not allow them to begin from their own background with reference to the *interpretation* of the arts and art history of another culture?

The argument is not advocating that the most careful way to interpret African meanings with reference to the arts is to *impose* Western ones on them. The argument is suggesting that, if we *cannot* presume some sort of overlap between Western and African meanings, it is difficult to foresee how we will ever be able to express the one *by means* of the other.¹⁷ It is to suggest that, in the present predicament in which African art history and philosophy find themselves, there is no agreed upon 'objective' theoretical *model* of the character of African art and aesthetic meanings. In the absence of such a model, and in the absence of an articulated, precise *methodology* which will reliably lead to such a model, why not embrace *experimenting* with the cross-cultural relevance of perspectives and problems endemic to art historical and artisanal research and analysis from one's own culture?

This does not imply accepting these things *carte blanche* as culturally universal. In many cases the point of a comparison may be to demonstrate that a perspective should *not* apply. But as the relevance and irrelevance, the similarities and differences, of various perspectives are detailed, African points-of-view may become better understood and appreciated.¹⁸

Perhaps it is possible to see increasing *evidence* of the influence of a 'common denominator' attitude in some recent publications of African art historians. Those who advocate a stronger *interdisciplinary*

emphasis in African art historical work—and now make specific reference to the fundamental relevance of disciplines like philosophy, psychology, and literary criticism for better understanding African cultures¹⁹—are thereby proposing *revised* perspectives upon the constitution of African meanings and beliefs that move them *closer* to their Western counterparts. Those who are now emphasizing research themes that involve: individual creativity, innovation/invention, change, the names of artists and workshops, the dating of works, informants as collaborators, certain aspects of performance studies²⁰—one important ramification of all of these is the shifting of perspectives upon African art *towards* (not *to*!) a ‘common denominator’ perspective.

Another dimension of research in African art history that is currently being emphasized, and which at first impression might seem to clash with the cross-cultural pretensions of a ‘common denominator’ approach, is epitomized as ‘*like-they-see-it*’ or ‘*the insiders’ view*’ (H. Drewal 35). From its inception this has been an obsession of African philosophy, but professionals have come to appreciate the limits as well as the benefits to be derived from this as a methodological priority.

It is relevant to again stress the importance of the *methodological* because what both unites and distinguishes academic professionals in African studies is the scholarship *formalized* by their disciplinary methodologies. This means that ‘*letting-African-cultures-speak-for-themselves*’ about things artistic or philosophical is a matter of *relative* emphasis, an *ideal*, that can only happen subject to the application of a disciplinary methodology.

To introduce an African viewpoint into philosophy, one must arrive at it on the basis of the application of *techniques* derived from a specific philosophical tradition. One approach in this regard, that African art history and African philosophy have come to share, is known to philosophers as *conceptual analysis* (Hallen 1979). This involves identifying concepts internal to an African language that are of aesthetic prepossession and then, on the basis of textual analysis, specifying their meanings and the criteria which govern their usage (Abiodun 1990; Fernandez 1977; Lawal 1974; McNaughton 1988; Thompson 1973; Vogel 1980).

While there is no need to tout any one discipline’s patrimony in this regard, conceptual analysis is something that philosophers have been involved with for several millennia.²¹ However in African philosophy this kind of approach has run into one of the same problems it has engendered in the *classical* philosophical corpus, namely, that *conflicting* interpretations of the *same* concept are produced by *different* scholars.²²

To understand the meaning of a particular concept in an African language it is rarely sufficient to quote passages from oral literature in which it occurs. Those passages must themselves be *analyzed*, and more specific meanings thereby attached to the concept. Again, all of this involves *interpretation* via the application of a disciplinary *methodology*. And when different scholars who analyze the same concept arrive at interpretations of its meaning which *differ* in important respects, how is the matter to be resolved?

How sweet it would be to finally settle this question! The more realistic alternative is to face up to the fact that it would be possible virtually to fill an encyclopedia with the cumulative ruminations of academic philosophy about the 'meaning' of a single concept like, for example, "beauty."

One remedial measure that professionals in African philosophy have adopted is to study relevant African *discourse* more carefully (Hallen 1995). By "discourse" is meant *talk, conversation, language usage*. For exclusive reliance upon conceptual analysis tends to treat individual concepts *in relative isolation from other terms*. At best one ends up with a kind of *list or inventory of criteria*.²³ With greater emphasis on discourse it is easier to discern *relationships between concepts or criteria*, so that a kind of *vital semantic network* begins to emerge.

Like 'semantic network', *field of discourse* is another figure-of-speech from the philosophy of language that expresses a related point, as also does Wittgenstein's notion of *language game*. The underlying idea is that the vocabulary of a language may be subdivided according to the functions it performs: for example in English-language culture one might specify the aesthetic, culinary, epistemic, psychological, scientific, etc.

Art historians who study African aesthetic vocabularies would probably agree with this. However problems arise when the divisions between the fields of discourse or language games of one language culture (Western) are not replicated by those of another (African). (Here we are back with the perils and pluses of a 'common denominator' approach.) The priorities imposed by a scholar whose *only* interest is in the aesthetic should not be allowed to uproot individual concepts so that they are treated in artificial isolation from the contexts in which they normally occur in their language of origin.

In English-language culture 'belief' begins where 'knowledge' leaves off. In Yoruba '*igbagbo*' (putative 'belief') begins where '*imo*' (putative 'knowledge') leaves off. The extent of one can only be understood by interrelating it with the other. But what is more interesting is that the *criteria* in these two languages that determine or define where one leaves off and the other begins (and therefore how the two interrelate) themselves *differ* substantially.²⁴

To reconsider that potential methodological antipathy between the cross-cultural pretensions of a 'common denominator' approach and the more culturally specific 'insiders' view' as alternative forms of interpretation: the history of the dialogue between African and Western cultures sometimes suggests the *analog* of a conversation between two total strangers from the same language-culture meeting for the first time. Both are likely to misinterpret certain aspects of the other's behavior. Both are likely to find that the other sometimes speaks in an unusual or even bizarre manner. But as the conversation evolves, both come to understand better the reasons and similarities underlying one another's peculiarities, and discover in the end that they share a good deal more in common than at first seemed to be the case.

Analogously, the arguments of this paper are meant to suggest that professionals reconsider the notion of *overlapping* meanings between languages as a *basis* from which to work. We cannot erase the linguistic and cultural backgrounds that are so fundamentally *formative* of our intellects. Harking back to Evans-Pritchard's musings about anthropology as more *art* than science,²⁵ rather than trying to *transcend* cultural origins via a methodology that purports to introduce the intellect to a new level of understanding, it is *dialogue* based upon language fluency that will best enable researchers to see where attitudes and beliefs overlap and where they diverge.

Notes

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1. The two comprehensive studies most frequently cited are by Monni Adams, 1989 and Paula Ben-Amos, 1989. Footnote references generally are meant to be representative rather than definitive.
2. "Although the term *primitive art* was eradicated from thoughtful anthropological enquiry forty years ago, it is still very much a part of contemporary art historical writing and thinking (Blier 1990, 95)." With respect to art history see, for example, Janson, 1986. The anthropological typing of African cultures as 'primitive' effectively classified them below the reflective minimum required for philosophical thought. Ironically the Western intellectual figure most frequently damned for this unfortunate evaluation, Lucien Levy-Bruhl was, in fact, a philosopher. The reality of the primitive African mentality or mode(s)-of-thought is still defended by developmental psychologists such as C.R. Hallpike, 1979.
3. Anthony Appiah's recent critique (1995) of the Western terms "Africa(n)" and "art" as irrelevant to many African 'art' objects when appreciated in *their* indigenous cultural contexts also is relevant.
4. "The acceptance of African art within the discipline of art history—that is, the acceptance of African works as art rather than as artifact—is rare (Blier 94)." Susan Vogel's archetypal discussion (1990) of the terms "art" and "artifact," as representing,

respectively, the favored (methodological) perspectives of the art historian and the anthropologist towards the same objects, also is relevant.

5. The intellectual merit of proverbs, etc. is again being defended by those interpreters of oral literature who argue that the triviality associated with the proverb as a form of expression in contemporary Western culture has been unceremoniously and unjustifiably transferred to the African context without due consideration of their alternative theoretical content and function. Form has been allowed to humble content. The writings of Olabiyi Yai introduce some interesting methodological perspectives on the interpretation of African oral literature. See, for example, Yai, 1989; 1994.
6. "Our field lacks concerted or systematic studies of the history of Art in Africa...our aversion to historical thinking; I believe, derives...from our affinity and alignment with anthropological thinking (H. Drewal 1990, 38)." Also "we [African art historians] have often been too quick to fall into the myth that the arts have changed little over time (Blier 96)." The issue of the 'traditional' is both reviewed and raised anew in Denis Dutton 1995.
7. "We have moved decisively beyond the initial efforts to identify African art with ethnicity (H. Drewal 33)."
8. "As we think more about the future of African art, we also need to think more about methodology. In the past our methodology has been drawn from anthropology, but I think this practice needs to be reexamined (Blier 103)"; and "art historians now far outnumber anthropologists among the younger generation of African art scholars (Blier 91-2)."
9. Even if it is more than twenty years old, the Victor Turner 'tradition' and other subsequent alternatives are nicely detailed and evaluated in d'Azevedo, 1973.
10. "In its search for the norm and for structure, anthropology has tended to ignore the impact and importance of individuals in creating art and culture (H. Drewal 36)."
11. "The stereotype of the uncritical, unreflective, 'closed' nature of African systems of thought has proved extraordinarily resilient and resistant to criticism. One obvious reason for this is that most of the evidence available supports it. To a limited extent we would agree. However, on the basis of the evidence we have collected, we are arguing that (at least) not all of Yoruba society fits the stereotype. And that we have 'discovered' this, leads us to suspect that our methodological approach differs in some important respects from those of other academic and professional disciplines that have a similar interest. We also believe that further applications of our methodological approach, by philosophers, may lead to other interesting discoveries, not only about the Yoruba thought system but about those of other African ethnic groups as well (Hallen and Sodipo 1986, 121)."
12. Traditions are said to resemble rules that are enforced in a relatively uncritical manner (Gellner, 1974 for philosophy; Goody, 1971 for anthropology).
13. This would apply to Levy-Bruhl (1926) and to structuralism generally.
14. See, for example, some of the selections in Horton and Finnegan, 1973.
15. Though it won't win the award for euphonious terminology, "common denominator" is extrapolated from its grammar school antecedents and preferred here because it is less likely to be associated with other conventional methodological approaches. This does not imply that it marks the introduction of something entirely new, either. The point is to suggest a *notion* rather than a refined concept. The notion is that common human 'somethings' (deliberately left unspecified) *may* create rough correspondences, overlapping meanings, between cultures that can be explored and exploited for purposes of theoretical translations. A comparable, deliberate fuzziness of meaning is essential to Wittgenstein's celebrated notion of 'family resemblance'.
16. This line of thought is adapted from Donald Davidson. See, for example, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Evans-Pritchard used the same 'key' word and posed a similar thesis years before: "We may go further and say

that if there were not a broad *overlap* between our present culture and all cultures, and also a basic psychology which is common to all peoples, neither the historians of peoples of distant times and places nor the anthropologists living among primitive peoples would be able to understand them at all" (1962, 61) [my italics]. Also W.V.O. Quine: "I have suggested that our lexicographer's obvious first moves in picking up some initial Kalaba vocabulary are at bottom a matter of exploiting the *overlap* of our cultures (1953, 62)" [my italics]. Duerr, 1985 argues that Davidson's principle of charity is ethnocentrism in disguise because forms of experience and understanding that are discounted or ignored by the language-culture of translation fail to convert.

17. Duerr's protests notwithstanding, such a presumed semantic overlap is therefore a necessary prerequisite to any technical translation exercise between African and Western languages.
18. An example of this kind of translation exercise may be found in Hallen and Sodipo: Ch. 2 ("The Knowledge-Belief Distinction and Yoruba Discourse"). For the methodology involved see Hallen, 1995.
19. "We also need to become familiar with other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, literary criticism, performance studies, religion, psychology, music, linguistics, political science, feminist studies, and African-American studies (Blier 103)."
20. "The West is moving towards a greater equality between the researcher and the researched—a dialogue of equals in its fieldwork (Ottenberg 1990, 126)." Kasfir 1992 and M. Drewal, 1992 are representative.
21. In anthropology Victor Turner's work with Ndembu discourse (1970) is also relevant.
22. See, for example, the interchange between Kwasi Wiredu and J.T. Bedu-Addo in Bodunrin, 1985.
23. This is now characteristic of an entire genre of comparatively recent African art historical (ahistorical, actually) writings, stretching from Robert Farris Thompson's earliest work on the Yoruba in the 70's through Rowland Abiodun's explorations of the relations between the verbal and the visual at the present time.
24. See Hallen and Sodipo 1986, ch. 2. For an interpretation that draws upon these kinds of differences to argue for the relativity of cognitive (and, by implication, aesthetic) systems generally see Stich 1990, 92; 166 fn. 28.
25. "The thesis I have put before you, that social anthropology is a kind of historiography, and therefore ultimately of philosophy or art, implies that it studies societies as moral systems and not as natural systems, that it is interested in design rather than in process, and that it therefore seeks patterns and not scientific laws, and interprets rather than explains (Evans-Pritchard 1962, 26).

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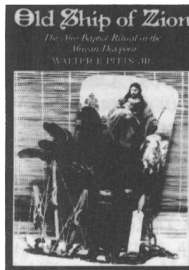
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