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African Philosophy: A Survey of Contemporary Studies

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Introduction: African and Western philosophy

"In the past three decades, philosophers -- especially African-born who are trained in Western philosophy -- have engaged in a metaphilosophical debate over whether there exists an African philosophy and, if so, what its nature is. This debate regarding the nature and existence of African philosophy has culminated in two camps, which I shall call the universalists and the particularists. Wiredu characterizes the latter as the anti-universalists or the nationalists.(1) The former camp, represented by the works of Bodunrin, Wiredu, Appiah, and Hountondji, among others, argues that the concept of 'philosophy', in terms of the methodology and subject matter of the discipline, should be the same in both the Western and African senses.(2) The latter camp, as seen in the works of Ayoade, Gyekye, Sodipo, and Onwuanibe, among others, argues that different cultures have different ways of explaining reality; hence Africans must have a philosophy that is essentially different from other philosophies. Perhaps it is along this line of trying to articulate the essential

nature of 'African philosophy', Safro Kwame argues, that the metaphilosophical approach of the Western analytic tradition is not African, and as such, it is not and should not be a legitimate approach in African philosophy.(3) Some of the people in this camp have thus questioned the use of the been characterized by African philosophers as African philosophy, and three of these have been criticized by the universalists as unphilosophical. The universalists argue that, compared to their paradigm view of the nature of philosophy -- that is, the contemporary analytic tradition of Western philosophy -- African philosophy does not have the requisite features of a tradition of writing and a rigorous and critical analytical approach to debates over universal conceptual and abstract issues that are engaged in by individuals. However, it is my view that there are both universalist and particularist elements in African philosophy. In other words, although there are culturally determined philosophical ways of constructing meaning, these ways are not incommensurable. As such, we can use the 'known' universal (?) philosophical concepts and methods of one 'culture' to analyze and make understandable the philosophical beliefs and worldviews of another culture that may 'appear' arcane -and this, in my view, is what many of the particularists have tried to do with African worldviews. This does not imply, as the universalists have claimed, that the beliefs and worldviews of one culture (Western) are comparatively superior to another philosophically, to the extent of denigrating one (African) as unphilosophical or denying its existence as a philosophical system."

(1) Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 27.

(2) This stance can be found in the following works: P. O. Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy", *Philosophy* 56 (1981), reprinted in Richard A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: University Press of America, 1984); Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*; Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); and Anthony Appiah, *Necessary Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989). (3) Safro Kwame, "How Not to Teach African Philosophy", *APA Newsletter* 91 (1) (Spring 1992): p. 29.

From: Polycarp Ikuenobe, *"The Parochial Universalist Conception of 'Philosophy' and 'African Philosophy'*, *Philosophy East and West*, 47, 1997, pp. 189-190.