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Alterity, Dialogue & African Philosophy

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African philosophy has been consumed with the question about its own identity. Is African philosophy nothing more than *mitumba*, used ideas imported or borrowed from the West? Is it exotic local fashion? Is it creative hybridity, or perhaps utilitarian appropriation? Is there another way to characterize it? What is the relationship of African philosophy to Western philosophy, to other versions of philosophy, to its own diverse strands and fractious history, to the life-world from which it springs, to those it claims to represent, to those it fails to represent? Is there a way of conceptualizing a philosophy that is rooted in the particular, the concrete experience of social and individual life?

Philosophy based on concrete experience has, of course, been a goal of theory as long as Africa has thought of itself as having a philosophy. Some attempts at Africanizing philosophy by rooting theory in a concrete life-world have been in one way or another derived from Western fashion. For a time existentialism had its appeal to negritude because it rooted philosophy in

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a particular kind of subject. (Ironically, this ultimately turns into a kind of essentialism dictated by Western categories.) Marxism (at least in its African manifestations) had its appeal because it rooted thought in a struggle that has particular social, economic, and historical features. Freudian styles of analysis (e.g., Frantz Fanon) eschew universalizing rationalizations in favor of a particularized unmasking of power and desire. Deconstructive strains of postcolonialism (e.g., Gayatri Spivak) assert the radical diversity of perspectives, and in uncovering the metaphysics of presence and the coercive violence of its organizational strategies attempt to clear a field for the expression of the disenfranchised and the subaltern.

The problem for less subtle versions of these is that they can become nothing more than an African version of Western tools of thought. Merely Africanizing philosophy seems little better than importing mitamba. The problem arises because it is difficult to know what the particular or the concrete might be. Most attempts work not from individual experience, but from shared experience. And yet, that experience cannot simply be generalized from simpler units, because that does little more than establish a reductionist method which philosophizing from particulars is meant to overcome. The result is that particularized or concrete philosophy can look very much like universalist philosophy, only beginning from a non-European base.

The usual alternative to particularized philosophy, universalist philosophy, is also problematic. Philosophizing from particulars is spurred by deep concerns about universalism: that universalist philosophies (i.e., ones that emphasize universal metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, logic, and method—mainly those derived from the European Enlightenment, right-wing Hegelianism, or theology) ironically fail to represent all human experience, but rather generalize from one point. If the universalist philosophy does claim to represent all human experience, it is because that experience has been coerced or forced into the point from which generalization has occurred. Universalist philosophies are unable to radically critique their own presuppositions and grounding, much less recognize their own partiality; and the emancipation that universalist philosophies offer is no more than individual conformity to some ideal.

The concerns about the ability to represent and critique advocated by the universalists are legitimate. However, one might also argue that these concerns can only find articulation given the freedom and ability of the marginalized subject to understand his or her own situation. Of course, theorists may recognize that the violence of marginalization may have weakened both freedom and opportunity for the person or society that has been marginalized. In the most radical cases, the subaltern cannot speak, or at least cannot be heard.

One unintended effect of this may be that professional postcolonial voices emerge, who may have a vested interest in solidifying their own authority by removing their discourse from the possibility of access by the very marginalized for whom they are clearing a space. If the discourse is not translatable back to the lived situation and cognizance of those most directly affected, one wonders who the critic is really speaking for. More important, though, is the fact that the critique of universalism must have some basis or telos beyond the coherence imposed by strategies of domination. While this telos of coherence could look suspiciously like that of colonialist power/knowledge, the complexity of critique can also turn into a spiral of self-indulgence if not directed by the coherence implicit in the goal of emancipation. No theorist ever simply critiques for the sake of critiquing—the purpose is always greater freedom, self-representation, and equality. Even if these concepts are not taken in an essentialist or universalist manner, they represent an implicit and inevitable direction of thought. It is this tension between the coherence and the complexity of the concrete that must be investigated.

While the charge against universalist philosophizing is that it does not represent lived experience, or when it does, that it does so coercively, the charge by universalism to philosophies rooted in the particular must also be considered. In what way is the philosophy of a particular lived situation a philosophy at all, and not simply special pleading or glorified relativism? How does one know when the lived situation has been reached by the theory (and not some theoretical displacement of lived experience), and the critique has yielded a reliable sense of the situation itself? Is it not possible, so the critique goes, that there is still some moral bedrock that has not been and perhaps cannot be questioned—a commitment to freedom or equality, for example? One might argue that these must be defined in concrete terms, and that they have no meaning outside of that definition.

The problem is given form in the tension between the hermeneutic of trust and the hermeneutic of suspicion. A simple attempt to explicate a tradition or any culture does not come to terms with the subliminal aspects of power; on the other hand, a simple critique of power in Western categories does not come to terms with the specific local heritage of the African contexts, not to mention its inability to articulate a viable historical destiny. In fact, a truly African critical theory must also be self-critical at a deep level, or it becomes no better than the universalism that it attempts to overcome. That self-critique, I will argue, will not result in nihilism, but it will also not take refuge in foundationalism or essentialism.

This tension is one which some thinkers have tried to address by using another philosophical perspective, that of hermeneutics. The earliest investigation of hermeneutics in African philosophy was Theophilus Okere's African Philosophy: A Historico-hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility, and has its most recent expression in Tsenay Serequeberhan's The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse. I wish to critically analyze the use that Okere and Serequeberhan make of hermeneutics, and suggest further possibilities for its use, both in conceptualizing African philosophy itself, and also in working through particular issues within African
philosophy. Both Okere and Serequeberhan have identified important features of African philosophy, but also overlook certain aspects of hermeneutics that would be useful in theorizing African philosophy (in particular, the details of the tension between coherence and complexity). This oversight is part of the development of African philosophy itself, and needs to be accounted for. Dealing with both the continuities and the cracks in their accounts of coherence and complexity opens up a more nuanced explication of the traditions and peoples that African philosophy represents (and, perhaps, fails to represent), and the (self-)critical capacity of this philosophy.

1 Theophilus Okere and the Ontology of Non-philosophy

In *African Philosophy*, Okere appropriates hermeneutics by arguing that all philosophies must spring from and deal with non-philosophy. Hermeneutic philosophy is both the interpretive tool and the result of mediating and rationalizing lived experience. Most of Okere's work is an overview of the Western tradition of hermeneutics; it is only in the final chapter and conclusion that Okere explicates what he thinks is the hermeneutic nature of philosophy in general, and African philosophy in particular. It is this: philosophy must always deal with the non-philosophical features of lived experience and its expression, whether that be religion, culture, or even the irrationality of certain presuppositions.4

Okere is somewhat unclear about the nature of non-philosophy; sometimes, it is the irrational, sometimes the prerational, sometimes the transcendent. His definition is his interpretation of Gadamer's *Vorurteile*, or prejudgments: "non-philosophy must stand for the non-reflected, that unreflected baggage of cultural background . . . ." This definition, however, leaves open the question of the status of non-philosophy. Is it a necessary evil (he calls it "baggage," after all)? Is it the ur-thought, the inchoate beginning of Hegel's dialectic? Is he suggesting that ethnophilosophy simply requires another step, that of reflection and rationalization? Or, is it simply the Enlightenment hope made African, that the irrationality of religion or culture will finally be overcome by the rationality of philosophy?

For Okere, at any rate, the philosophical and hermeneutic moment is the appropriation or repetition of these non-philosophical roots without negating them. But why should Okere appeal to hermeneutics at all? The most likely explanation is that he wants to ensure that African philosophy has a unique starting point, since it is rooted in a particular tradition of non-philosophy. This means that African philosophy can be unique, not reducible to other philosophical systems, and at the same time can make use of all the rational tools that any other philosophical tradition assumes as essential. In other words, hermeneutics allows the ontological moment of self-understanding to emerge through repetition for African philosophy.

But the essential problem that Okere does not come to terms with is that he assumes that hermeneutics is nothing more than a method for uncovering meanings that are latent within the patterns of objectification that a culture employs. As such, two questions are not answered: (1) How does one find a method that can reflect on itself, so as to foreground its own prejudices? (2) How does one deal with meanings that are not simply there to be uncovered, but are the result of some violence that does not want itself to be named?

Of course, hermeneutic theory is well aware of the necessity of foregrounding its own prejudices, but in fact in Okere's case that theory has been worked out in a relatively limited context. The bulk of his work is taken up giving an account of the history of hermeneutics, with the barest of allusions to its applicability to the African situation.6 As mentioned, the applicability only becomes evident in the argument that hermeneutics is the bridge between culture (non-philosophy) and philosophy. But what culture? Does he suggest that we can intuit this pure culture (and it must be pure, or it would not be an African philosophy that emerged), and that it can somehow provide the basis of a truly African philosophy? Or is the philosophy nothing more than the covert articulation of (neo)colonialism? Okere's problematic category of non-philosophy renders the possibility of philosophy into little more than the sketch of existing conditions, with no theoretical apparatus for their critique, for the conceptualization of the possibility of alternate conditions, or for proposing a philosophy of action that affirms what is important in the life-world while also working for change.

And yet, Okere recognizes that, for philosophy to be African, it must have some expression of the African life-world. His attempt to characterize African philosophy as hermeneutic comes shortly after Hountondji's seminal essay critiquing ethnophenomenology,7 and he works toward a similar conclusion: that African philosophy will not be constructed out of nothing more than customs - it requires some apparatus for reflection. In fact, Okere takes a step beyond Hountondji, in that he also recognizes that universal method is as problematic a starting point as particular experience. One wishes that he had followed that insight further, and actually questioned hermeneutics itself, instead of just imposing it on an African life-world, as well as providing the possibility for critical reflection, rather than just explication.

2 Tsenay Serequeberhan and the Hermeneutics of Resistance

Tsenay Serequeberhan is clearly familiar with the implications of the argument to this point. In *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, he argues that the
ethnosophists and the professional philosophers have both succumbed to a universalism which would simply reinforce Africa's position as Europe's Other. In ignoring the particular African historical life-world, those attempting to appropriate Marxism as well as those attempting to argue for an African essentialism end up philosophizing on non-African terms. He maintains that this debate has been stultifying, and has not come to terms with the "failed actuality of the promise of African independence."18

The answer to these latent and insidious universalisms is to "make one's philosophic reflections sensitive to the historicity out of which they originate - that is, to resuscitate and explore the concerns grounded in our own lived historical existence."19 Specifically, this means coming to terms with the violence inherent in imperialist and colonialist projects of the past, in terms of both description and emancipatory possibilities. If this is done, Serequeberhan thinks, it should be possible to finally extricate Africa from the status of Europe's "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

Serequeberhan's work implicitly attempts to come to terms with the deficiencies in Okere's version of hermeneutics (although, interestingly, he has nothing but good to say about Okere's work). Okere employed what Paul Ricoeur called the hermeneutics of trust - the belief that there is something present in the African experience that must be explicated, and it is our job to uncover it. Serequeberhan is not so optimistic. Hermeneutics misses something if it simply assumes that there is a coherent tradition that can be accessed. False consciousness has its roots in the experiences of marginalization, slavery, colonial oppression, the exploitation of resources, and the division of Africans against Africans to serve the desires of the oppressor. This is not to suggest some utopian existence before the encroachment of "civilization," of course; it is simply to say that it is quite possible that the glowing face which appears in the hermeneutics of trust is nothing other than the mask of the torturer.

Serequeberhan addresses this by proposing a horizon of discourse which radically questions the construction of the self and society in African philosophy. Taking his cue from Marxian theory (while at the same time being deeply critical of its universalist espousers in Africa), and also from Mudimbe's The Invention of Africa,10 Serequeberhan tries to mitigate the possibly conservative aspects of hermeneutic philosophy by giving the grounds for a philosophy of action. This philosophy of action has its roots in, but is different from, Fanon's psychoanalytic Marxism, in that it continues the dialectic between theory and practice rather than supposing that right theory can give rise to right practice in any linear manner.

Unlike Okere, Serequeberhan does not feel the need to give an outline of Western hermeneutic theory. This is more than a difference of style. Okere wants a hermeneutic method (he says as much in taking Ricoeur's path) which will apply to the African situation. Serequeberhan wants a hermeneutic that grows from lived African experience. It is not simply that hermeneutic theory exists as a universal, and the variables simply need to be filled in (the way a doctrinaire Marxist might simply look for the means of production, labor market, level of technology, and so forth). Hermeneutic theory itself must be shaped by lived conditions.

While the project is by far the best attempt to theorize African experience through hermeneutics, it has its limits. These can best be summed up in an examination of Serequeberhan's use of two fundamental hermeneutical concepts: the concreteness of historicity and the fusion of horizons.

The limitation on the description of violence becomes evident in chapter 3, when Serequeberhan proposes to describe the neocolonial situation in its specific historicity. Fanon's work forms the basis of this, but Serequeberhan attempts to avoid the force of Hannah Arendt's criticisms of Fanon (that he advocated violence for violence's sake) by claiming that Fanon was merely describing an existing historical situation. Serequeberhan's appropriation of this description becomes one which has a Hegelian/ Marxist ring to it, at it shows the necessary outcome of the history of violence implicit in the original colonial enterprises. Since that violence is necessarily present, and since the oppressor only understands the language of violence, the conclusion is that counter-violence is necessary, and anyone who denies this is in complicity with the original violence.11

The problem with this line of argument is that Serequeberhan takes seriously the need for the historical specificity of an account (although this is still generalized), but ignores the partiality of that account. All interpretation is closed down, as one description of the nature of history becomes the correct one, and the dissent is implicated with an ad hominem argument. Violence is not a choice, but the choice, forced on the colonized by the colonizer, and therefore the only legitimate response.12 It is the only route to existential release, and the only emancipation.

This seems to me to be a hermeneutics of convenience, which takes what is useful and ignores what is not. Historicity must come to terms with the concrete (and the meaning of "concrete" is very difficult to pin down in Serequeberhan's work, even though the word is ubiquitous), and that means not only avoiding universalist rationalization, but also highlighting the discontinuities in experience. None of this suggests that the history of violence should be downplayed; it simply means that the disease cannot be so easily scripted, or the cure so easily prescribed.

One might reply by saying that hermeneutic philosophy (the uncovering of the possible) must be preceded by hermeneutic method (the clearing-away of misunderstanding), and the critique of violence simply clears the space for true hermeneutic philosophy to happen. The problem is that the two moments cannot be separated so easily. Space is not cleared by simply maintaining that an unequal power relationship be rectified before dialogue and discovery can happen. That unequal power relationship must be addressed within the
harmeneutic philosophy itself, or there really is no harmeneutics at all, but simply a modernist project of revolution founded on the uninterpretable given.

The closure that Serequeberhan invokes does not stop here. The fusion of horizons, the place where interpretation happens in all its complexity and coherence, is closely defined as the horizon between two and only two specific groups: the Westernized African, who has access to the education provided by the colonizer (the “urban”), and the non-Westernized African, who has access to tradition (the “rural”). These categories are created by the colonizer, and must be bridged if true liberation is to occur. The entirety of chapter 4, “The liberation struggle: existence and historicity,” is meant to show forth some of the possibilities of the practice of freedom.

Again, Serequeberhan has used particular harmeneutic concepts to his own ends, without being very clear on them. The fusion of horizons is not just a mixing of the strengths of two groups. The fusion is a complex one in which each finds its own identity in finding the points of dialogue with the other. If harmeneutics is the process of finding out what is compelling in the claim of the Other in order to come to better Self- and Other-understanding, it is unclear how this goal can be achieved here. Fragmentation is overcome, which is a positive aspect of this process, but the possibilities of dialogue have been narrowly constrained to identify the only two legitimate groups, and their only legitimate topic of conversation. The rural must discover her African roots, or it is not authentic; the urban must philosophize about violence, or it is not authentic. Despite his comments to the contrary, it seems that this conversation does not open up as many possibilities of self-understanding as it could or should.

Now, it may be objected that an African harmeneutic can adjust traditional Western harmeneutic concepts to fit its own needs. Indeed, if it does not, it is not yet African, but still European, and still bears the marks of its own history. While I have been arguing all along that theory bears the marks of its own history, the answer is not to adjust the parts of the theory that are inconvenient. This is to regard harmeneutics as a method, with a particular set of assumptions and outcome. But if Gadamer is right, harmeneutic philosophy begins exactly where method ends. Serequeberhan’s harmeneutics seems to be an attempt at description, explanation, and correction of a situation, but this attempt does not allow the complexity of the situation to show itself (because closure has been invoked), and does not allow the creative dialogue with the Other (because the Other has been defined, and the terms of the conversation have been laid down).

The problem for Ocol is that he is caught between worlds. He wants to reject *mitumba*, and yet his wife Lawino is felt at pointing out the incongruity of his position – while he vocally rejects “second-hand things” from his own culture, he has raised the collection of *mitumba* ways from Europe almost to an art form. The result has been that he has marginalized himself not only from his traditional ways, but also from his family and friends.

It would be nice if *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* could be read straightforwardly, the first as a robust defense of tradition, the second as a somewhat unbelievable valorization of modernity. If that was the case, of course, Lawino would win the argument. But things are rarely as straightforward as they seem, when it comes to *mitumba*. The either/or of African tradition vs Western modernity cannot be solved simply by reversing the binary opposition and favoring tradition over modernity. Lawino knows that, too. At times she rails against all things European, but at other times she seems to be saying that, while she wants to hold on to her ways, different ways are appropriate for different people. Lawino casts Europe as the Other, and in this way is able to bring her own tradition into sharp focus. Lawino herself is well able to see some implications of her own tradition that are brought into focus by the European Other (while seemingly either unaware of or accepting of others, such as gender roles and hierarchy). This is an important and necessary function of the Other in all cases, although it is a short path from defining yourself against the backdrop of the Other, to allowing the Other to define you. At some point, *mitumba* must cease being an external imposition, and start being a creative means of repetition and criticism. But how can the Other become one’s own without simply succumbing to its coercive power? Can *mitumba* ever be one’s own, or is it always borrowed, to be returned with interest?
4 The Self-image of African Philosophy

Philosophy can have a number of different methodological tropes for itself. It can regard itself as on a journey of discovery—laying bare what is already present, but latent. It can think of itself as the archaeologist, uncovering that which is hidden. It can see itself as inventor rather than discoverer, making the world in its image. It may be the midwife, the one who enables the birth of philosophy out of the stuff of culture and tradition. It might think of itself as the collector, the one that appropriates and adapts for its own use. Or it could be the interpreter, that which mediates, explicates, and translates what is significant in the claim of the other, and in the process discovers its own claim on itself.

Each of these models, or tropes, can be found in the recent history of African philosophy. One might argue that African philosophy has always been around, and simply needed to be “discovered,” or foregrounded. In a way, this was the conviction of the ethnophilosophers. Cheikh Anta Diop, Isaac Osabutey-Aguedze, and others could be considered the archaeologists, uncovering the traces of the influence of African philosophy on world philosophy. One might suggest that African philosophy is a recent invention, and exists in the historical conditions of oppression out of which arises the slave-consciousness (in the master–slave relationship), a kind of post-Hegelian position. Fourth, one might suggest that the philosopher is the one who fosters an authentic African philosophy—sage philosophy is a case in point. Fifth, the philosopher might be the collector of useful philosophical tools, wherever they originated—professional philosophy. Or, finally, one might suggest that the philosopher’s task is to interpret a tradition—this is the place of hermeneuticists such as Okere and Serequeberhan.

Instead of trying to decide which of these is “real” philosophy, it might be more useful to think of philosophy as the self-interpretive, self-critical, and self-emancipatory dialogue that emerges out of all these. In this sense, and along with Okere and Serequeberhan, I would like to suggest that hermeneutics describes not only the interpretation of existing conditions, but also the understanding of the rationalizations of those conditions. In fact, then, I would like to suggest that hermeneutics brings with it the capacity to make African philosophy into a process, instead of a group of positions on issues or a method. So, the call to stop talking about African philosophy and start doing it is a bit misleading, for African philosophy comes to self-understanding through the self-interpretation of dialogue about its own activities and traditions.

What tradition are we talking about? Clearly, in a culture whose traditions have been based on oral literature until recently, the recovery and repetition (in Kierkegaard’s sense of the term) of that tradition must have a broad notion of the text. In that case, ethnophilsophy seems to be an ever-present possibility. But in a broader sense, African philosophy has its own tradition, which it also draws on to understand its own identity.

Perhaps more important, what is the goal of that interpretation? Are we laying bare a tradition to come to some sense of self-identity? For what purpose? Are we, on the other hand, explicating a tradition to come to some sense of explanation? Again, for what purpose? The answer to this problem is straightforward in Gadamerian hermeneutics—understanding supersedes explanation. However, most African hermeneuticists (other than Serequeberhan) rely on the work of Paul Ricoeur, for whom both explanation and understanding are important. Ricoeur recognizes early on that the Diltheyan split between explanation and understanding cannot simply be recombined by fiat. His background in structuralism remains with him throughout his life, and accounts for his conviction that meaning can reside in structure of texts. But he also recognizes Gadamer’s claim, that meaning is an ontological moment.

Traditionally, these two positions have undercut each other. Indeed, it is still the case—witness the debate between the poststructuralist Derrida and the hermeneuticist Gadamer. But what is the real conflict between the two? It is that structuralism makes possible a publicly criticizable account that can ideally form the basis of societal action (although the more radical the poststructuralist critique, the less likelihood there is of action), while hermeneutics makes possible the construction of an account of the self in society (although the greater the focus on this, the more likely it is that radical critique will undercut it).

This is the core of the problem for Okere and Serequeberhan: each only takes half of the understanding/explanation tension. Okere wants to understand, but there is little place for explanation here, or the consequent basis for change. Serequeberhan wants to explain (and therefore to change), but there is little place for understanding because the nature of the horizon has been predetermined by the need to change.

This distinction does not map directly on to the earlier distinction between coherence and complexity. Both positions strive for coherence, and the price they pay is the minimization of the range and contradictory nature of possibilities opened up by dialogue.

What is needed is a reminder of the multifaceted and contradictory nature of alterity. Understanding the Self through understanding the Other lies behind the tension between coherence and complexity. The Other both disrupts understanding and makes understanding possible. It is tempting to cast the Other in only one manner—Africa has been Europe’s “Other” (meaning inferior), and must now extricate itself, making Europe the Other (meaning the hostile oppressor). But Otherness has many faces:

- **Fascination.** The Other can be the exotic, the foreign. It could be the object of idle curiosity, of collection, of pride.
• Repulsion. The Other can be the thing to be avoided, the leper. It could be that which reminds me of my own corrigibility, or that which just turns my stomach.

• Desire. The Other can be the thing to be owned or controlled. It is that which I believe fulfills a lack in my existence.

• Dependence. The Other can be the thing which makes my own existence possible. According to Karl Barth and Rudolph Otto (to use an analogy from theology), it is the Otherness of God that is the real point of religion. It could be the ground of my being, or it could be the transcendence of my being; either way, it is what I am not, but what makes me possible.

• Smugness. The Other could be the primitive (Levy-Bruhl), the ones not like us because they lack Culture. They could be valorized (Rousseau) or vilified (Hegel), but they are always easily forgotten.

• Appropriation/subsumption. The Other could be that which is absorbed, that which is assimilated into my being, giving up its own being on my behalf.

• Marginalization. The Other is often that which is left out after coherent meaning is arrived at. It is that which makes no sense, from the point of view of the coherent center.

• Horizon. The Other might be that which holds the possibility of understanding by being the place where tradition and prejudice can be uncovered, at least in part.

• Domination. The Other could be that which is my servant, that which relieves me from the drudgery of my own existence by taking that drudgery on him-, her-, or it-self. The machine and the slave are both the Other.

• Foil. The Other could be that against which I test myself, or that against which I measure myself.

• Mirror. The Other could be that in which I find myself again and meet myself anew, the familiar in the alien, and the alien in the familiar.

• Body. The Other could be that part of me that is always subordinate, if I believe Descartes and hold that I am a thinking thing. It may simply reduce to a tool that I can use to control other thinking things, or it could be the thing that keeps me from true Enlightenment (Plato, Gnostics). It could also be that which requires interpretation, as it is my expression in the world and the world's interaction with me (Merleau-Ponty).

There are probably many more tropes which can be used for alterity. The point is that African philosophy is defined by its ability to set for itself Others for it to understand. The Other of (neo)colonialism is an important one, but not the only one. There is the Other of culture, as Okere argues. There is the Other of its own tradition, of other world traditions of philosophy, of religion. The Other may be relatively benign, as the trope of the mirror or the foil may suggest, or it may be insidious, as the trope of domination may suggest. It will always come with moral as well as epistemic and ontological implications, for the tropes do not exist in isolation. And, of course, there is the position of oneself as the Other of something else (a position African philosophy knows all too well). The Other may be insidious, but to assume that it is only that (just as to assume it is only benign) is to close down interpretive possibilities and flatten the possibilities of self-understanding.

The Other serves the function of making oneself coherent, either by mirroring or by alienating, and serves as the locus of complexity in any narrative of coherence. It establishes noetic possibilities through the making of distinctions, while unmasking the machinations of power behind knowledge through the questioning of the motives of those distinctions. The result is a move to the construction of coherence with the realization of complexity, the hope of repetition with the realization of power/knowledge, and the possibility of action with the realization of fallibility.

5 African Philosophical Hermeneutics?

Perhaps mitumba has had a bad rap. It may be nothing more than an attempt to deny one's heritage for another. On the other hand, it may be creatively used and appropriated to unfold new meanings and new understandings. Okere is right about at least one thing: hermeneutic philosophy is the process of understanding concrete prereflective practice. And Serequeberhan is right about at least one thing: hermeneutic philosophy must be transformative, or it is not true to its understanding of concrete experience.

The real value of hermeneutics for African philosophy is in pushing the issue of self-understanding to a new level. The conversation about the nature of African philosophy has tended to focus on certain specific kinds of question: What is the true object of African philosophy? Is there a unique method? Is there a unique methodology? What is the true object of African philosophy, or is it not true to its understanding of concrete experience?

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The real value of hermeneutics for African philosophy is in pushing the issue of self-understanding to a new level. The conversation about the nature of African philosophy has tended to focus on certain specific kinds of question: What is the true object of African philosophy? Is there a unique method? Is there a unique methodology? What is the true object of African philosophy, or is it not true to its understanding of concrete experience?
about the place of Africans in the world and the nature of African rationality. In any method, what you look for is what you will find.

The reverse of this, the search for a universal method, is found in so-called professional philosophy, which in most cases is little more than philosophy which happens to be done in Africa. If the method is Anglo-American analytic philosophy, African philosophy already comes subordinated to it, because it refers to another tradition as its arbiter. The same applies to Continental philosophy, more prevalent in Francophone Africa. This is why I have been at pains to distance hermeneutic philosophy from hermeneutic method, because that would be equally subordinationist. To require African philosophy to come up with a new and unique method in order to be called philosophy is an unfair requirement. In that case, African philosophers seem to have only two choices: recover Western method by showing that it was really African all along (the tactic of Cheikh Anta Diop and others who argue that European thought is really rooted in African thought), or find a new method (the tactic of H. Odera Oruka and others, who champion sage philosophy). Each case has its problems: in the first, one might ask what relevance the fact of history has, if it is a fact at all; and in the second, one might ask whether the knife-edge between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy has really been walked successfully.

There is another way to think about the place of hermeneutics in African philosophy, and that is to implicate all theory in its own tradition. Consider the notion of freedom, for example. For a universalist philosopher such as Plato or various Enlightenment thinkers, freedom is a concept that has a single definition and is applicable everywhere. The critique leveled by both the structuralists and Wittgenstein is that freedom has no universal meaning, but refers either to other parts of a language, or to the background of meaning. While for the United States freedom has something to do with the Constitution and individual rights, and for Canada it has something to do with the tension between group and individual rights, for Africa it refers to the struggles in Liberia and South Africa, to the Mau Mau and to Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru*, and to many other concrete historical events.23 And, it takes seriously the fact that the English word "freedom" may hold a different place in the language than "Uhuru" does in Kiswahili.

The poststructuralist will argue that keying a term to its own history is better than supposing that it refers to a universal ideal, but then will point out how that history itself is not an unbroken web of definition and reference for the term. There can be no romantic notion of the good old days; nor can the deceit be maintained that a term such as freedom has any unequivocal meaning for those sharing a culture. The complexity of the subject, the culture, and the idea itself prevent meaning from taking hold. Indeed, that is the way it should be, because as soon as meaning takes hold, it becomes coercive, and always necessarily leaves someone out.

Of course, there are various strategies at this point for unmasking the complicity of theory with oppression, beginning with deconstruction, Freudian analysis, and feminism. These critiques are important and necessary, but they themselves need to be considered in light of their own histories. Each arises in the context of Western frustration with the hegemony of Western scientific reasoning and totalizing world-views. While each may be critical of traditional canons, each has its own canon. Indeed, each makes sense only in light of its own tradition. Terms, as well as other tools of meaning, are implicated in their own histories. The poststructuralist argument that there is fissure in all structures does not invalidate the observation that terms (and philosophies) are implicated in both the continuities and the cracks of tradition.

Most theorists realize this, which is why poscolonial theory is not just the simple-minded application of another Western method of thought. But the very fact that this application is not made betrays the fact that tradition cannot be deconstructed, bracketed, or dismissed so easily. In other words, for there to be a truly African philosophy, and not simply a series of used Western ideas adapted for an occasion, any appropriated theory must critique its own tradition, and to do that, it must admit that it has one.

For African philosophy, this means two things: first, that appropriation of the Other is possible, but only with the realization of the factual conditions of the emergence of what is appropriated; and second, that African philosophy itself can become self-aware through the uncovering of its own tradition seen in the analysis of the Other. This is the true fusion of horizons, for this process is an ongoing creative one on both sides. African philosophy has it within itself to critically appraise the Other as well as itself, and in so doing can contribute something unique to world philosophy while coming to self-understanding.

I am not suggesting that we replace one theory with another. Rather, I am suggesting that a truly African philosophy is not one which ignores outside influences, but one which is able to root them in its own soil. The Kierkegaardian notion of repetition is relevant here. The repetition is not recollection, but posing anew the question of what is significant, and how it can be remanifest in a different historical space. The plea is not to get caught up in the debate about what kind of philosophy is not truly African philosophy, but rather to transform the intuitions into African philosophy.

Ethnophilosophy may not be true philosophy, but it does have one useful observation – that African philosophy must be rooted in Africa, and not simply philosophy that happens to be done in Africa. The problem is that ethnosophers have assumed that the object of study must be African traditions. In fact, African traditions must inform African philosophy, but the object of study must be human experience as it manifests itself and as it comes to self-understanding. Philosophy, whether African or not, is the understanding of understanding in its specific historical and material conditions, in its hope and in its doubt.
The same applies to justifying African thought by arguing that it is the ultimate basis of European thought. The intuition that history is important is good, but causal lines of influence do not necessarily support the contention that Africa has a philosophical life. The real question is: are those lines of influence more than historical curiosities? Is repetition possible?

Professional philosophy holds the intuition that philosophy must be transferable outside of cultural boundaries, and must be able to critique a culture rather than simply reflecting the views of that culture. This observation is important as well, but does not necessarily need to result in universalism. It could mean that philosophy is irreducibly dialogical. Philosophies will have some points of contact outside of themselves, and philosophers can build on the rootedness in a particular culture to dialogue with and critique the philosophies that arise in other cultures.

One way to frame the hermeneutic project is that it raises the question of what is compelling in the claim of the Other. This “Other” has many forms, as postcolonial theory has pointed out. The question remains, though: how do we get past the tyranny of the Other constructing African philosophy, and allow African philosophy to construct itself in dialogue with its own Other? Hermeneutics does not offer a simple answer to this, and certainly does not want to minimize the masks of power and domination. It does, however, offer the possibility that the dialogue between different orientations of African philosophy is not a prelude to philosophy, but is philosophy itself, and is the process of repetition.

And this, I would suggest, is the other side of mitumba. African philosophy is not just cast-off or recycled ideas from the West. It is the appropriated, the stitched-together, altered, and tie-dyed, Africa in a new dress that seems somehow familiar, or perhaps in old clothes that take on new meaning in a new appropriation. At the same time, it is not derivative, for the meaning is not somehow familiar, or perhaps in old clothes that take on new meaning in a new appropriation of Africa itself, and also the subversion of any simple recollection.

Notes
4 Okere, African Philosophy, pp. 82ff.
5 Ibid., p. 88.
6 It is only in the conclusion, pp. 114–31, that Okere directly addresses the applicability of hermeneutic theory to the African situation. His application seems very close to ethno-philosophy, in that his example of the Igbo culture of Nigeria consists in the philosophical interpretation of symbols from the culture. If this is hermeneutics, it seems to be fraught with all the questions that can be leveled at ethnophilosophy.
9 Ibid., p. 53.
11 Serequeberhan, Hermeneutics of African Philosophy, p. 78.
12 Ibid.
14 Okot p’Bitek, Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol, p. 121.
15 Serequeberhan cites Cornel West’s comment in Prophesy Deliverance! (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1982), p. 24: “In fact, ironically, the attempt by black intellectuals to escape from their Americanness and even go beyond Western thought is itself very American.” Serequeberhan comments: “In the context of contemporary African philosophy, one needs only to substitute ‘European’ for ‘American’ and ‘African intellectuals’ for ‘black intellectuals’ to see the relevance of this sentence” (Hermeneutics of African Philosophy, p. 127, n. 28).
16 Many examples could be cited. The ones most often given are Placide Tempels, Bantu Philosophy, trans. Rev. Colin King (Présence Africaine, Paris 1939, 1969); M. Griaule, Conversations with Ogotemméli (Oxford University Press, for the International African Institute, London, 1965); John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (Heinemann, Nairobi, 1969).
rejected as a master's thesis ("The rationale for African religious rites") by Syracuse University.

19 V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1988) has some characteristics of this.


21 Many have taken this name for themselves, or had it applied to them. Included in this list are Paulin Hountondji, P. O. Bodunrin and Kwasi Wiredu.


23 Okot p'Bitek says it nicely, in the mouth of Lawino:

He says
They are fighting for Uhuru
He says
They want Independence and Peace
And when they meet
They shout "Uhuru! Uhuru!"
But what is the meaning
Of Uhuru?

... Ocol dislikes his brother fiercely,
His mother's son's hatred
Resembles boiling oil!
The new parties have split the homestead
As the battle axe splits the skull!
My husband has sternly warned me
Never to joke
With my husband-in-law:
Not that joking may cause pregnancy,
Not that I am a loose woman,
But that the strong gum of the joke
Will reconnect the snapped string
Of brotherhood
Between him and his brother!

Is this the unity of Uhuru?
Is this the Peace
That Independence brings?

(Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino*, pp. 103, 104–5)