

## STUDY SESSION 11

### AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY



#### 11.1 Introduction

This study session will open your mind to the substance of African philosophy. To achieve this, some fundamental questions are outlined for your reflection and resolution. These are: What is African philosophy? How would the themes and topics in African philosophy improve our understanding or knowledge of the world and reality? In a nut shell, of what contemporary relevance is Africa philosophy? It is argued here that the relevance of African philosophy is inseparable from its humanistic and existential base, which is holistic and ontological. Determining the extent to which this is true shall also be our task in this study session.



#### 11.1.1 Learning Outcomes for Study Session 11

At the end of this study session, you should be able to:

1. Establish a relationship between philosophy and African thought system:
2. Identify the basic axiom of African philosophy:
3. Describe the nature of African philosophy;
4. State the problems of African philosophy: and
5. Discuss the contemporary relevance of African philosophy.

## 11.2 Clarification of Concepts

Let us begin this study session with the clarification of what philosophy entails before we now situate it within African philosophy. The conception of philosophy is crucial in determining what we take African philosophy to be. Your conception of philosophy will influence your conception of African philosophy. The history of philosophy shows that philosophy has a chequered history and that philosophy is an analogical term. Etymologically, philosophy connotes “love for wisdom or knowledge”. From the Ancient Greek perspective, “the word ‘philosophy’ originally meant curiosity, the desire for fresh experience.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the history of philosophy seems to portray that there is no universally accepted definition or conception of philosophy.

It may interest you to know that philosophy has always been the consciousness of a people at a given point in time. The concept or meaning of philosophy changes according to the challenges of a period and the type of consciousness. In fact, “philosophy is invariably tied to social reality... the mode of doing philosophy, e.g. its methods, dominant issues, questions, and schools of thought, vary as society changes.”<sup>2</sup> This is why philosophy has been idealistic, rationalistic, theological, ideological, analytical, speculative, humanistic, and scientific at various points in time. The important point to note, however, is that in all the phases, the philosophical presence is rational and or metaphysical – it is the wisdom of life that is being sought. It is with *wisdom* that the philosopher brings “together what common sense has thrown apart.”<sup>3</sup> And by *wisdom* we mean the intelligent and judicious interpretation of experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by J.A.I Bewaji, “African Philosophy; Some Comments”, *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*. (Vol. 3, No. 2, 1983), p. 71

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 42

<sup>3</sup> K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and An African Culture*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 175

Central to any account of philosophy, however, are: (i) wonder or curiosity (ii) wisdom (iii) reflections (iv) the asking of fundamental questions (v) argumentation (vi) rational and critical evaluation, (vii) clarification, (viii) scepticism, and (ix) objections: real, imagined or anticipated.

We may define philosophy from the point of view of *method* and *content*. There are two senses of the word “philosophy” from the perspective of method; the narrow and broad. In the narrow sense, philosophy is a technical enterprise, which requires formal training. Here, a philosopher is a professional thinker, who takes nothing for granted, except on rational ground. In the broad sense, philosophy is a worldview, principle, belief system and convictions, intended to govern the daily practice or life of a people. This broad sense of philosophy puts philosophy at the disposal of everyone. One may not need a formal training to acquire this sense of philosophy. Here, everybody is a “philosopher” by nature. This is philosophy from the layman’s perspective – “bear parlour philosophy”. Here, philosophy is not a theoretical enterprise, but a doctrine, a belief and an activity.

There is also the definition of philosophy from the point of view of *content*. Here, cognizance is taken that philosophy is traditionally divided into four core areas, viz. metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and logic. Within this perspective, we define philosophy as a rational and systematic study or reflection of the nature of the world, the nature of man and his position and goal in the world. Simply put philosophy deals with the question of the ultimate. It could be ultimate reality (metaphysics), ultimate truth (epistemology), ultimate value (ethics) and ultimate reason (logic).<sup>4</sup> Philosophy can also be conceived as the study of the principles underlying conduct (ethics), thought (logic), and knowledge (epistemology) and reality (metaphysics). Apart from the core areas of philosophy, philosophy also has regional

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<sup>4</sup> G. E. Azenabor, *Understanding the Problems of African Philosophy*. (Lagos: First Academy Publishers, 1988), p. 67

and cultural perspectives. Hence, we have European philosophy, Asian philosophy, American philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy and African philosophy. This write-up focuses on African philosophy.

What should be noted, however, is that philosophy, though a universal discipline, is culture bound. This is why philosophy has a chequered history and its understanding and conception depends on the time, age, culture, tradition and experience of a people or individual. This is precisely why the idea of a universal or univocal definition of philosophy is, objectively, speaking impossible.

### **The Concept of African Philosophy**

Various definitions have been proffered as answers to the question, what is African philosophy? J. S. Mbiti maintains that African philosophy is “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic, perception, behind the manner in which African people think, act, or speak in different situations of life.”<sup>5</sup> Mbiti’s definition is a little too generalized.

F. William Abraham went further to recommend that we must also investigate “the environment in which the thinking, acting, and speaking are situated.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, there is need to situate African philosophy within a socio-cultural paradigm. For K. C. Anyawu, African philosophy is African cultures, religions and traditions. This conception is anthropological. It also fails to take into consideration a proper understanding of contemporary African experience. P. O. Bodunrin and P. Hountondji believe that “African philosophy” is the philosophy done by African philosophers. This is a radically new sense of African philosophy. We must, by this conception extend the concept of African philosophy to

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<sup>5</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophies*. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1969), p. 2

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by T.U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*. (Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985)

include all the researches into western philosophy carried out by Africans. But is every work by an African philosopher African philosophy?

C. S. Momoh, holds that African philosophy is the African doctrine on the spiritual, “which is the culture of harnessing the spirit of the whole and the communality to enhance and transform the spirit, interest, aspirations and ambitions of the parts and the individual”<sup>7</sup>. If Momoh’s conception of African philosophy is right, then one will suppose that even the writings of David Hume would qualify as being within the tradition of African philosophy! Definitely, Momoh’s definition is too general. Also it admits everything, anything as African philosophy! Momoh, however, gives a more acceptable definition of African philosophy when he describes African philosophy as simply the African doctrine or theories on the universe, the creator, the elements, the institutions, beliefs and concepts in it.<sup>8</sup>

Against the inadequacies of these definitions and conceptions of African philosophy we want you to consider Odera Oruka’s view. Oruka defines African philosophy as the work dealing with specific African issues formulated by indigenous African thinker or by a thinker versed in African cultural and intellectual life.<sup>9</sup> On our part, we define African philosophy as the reflection of an African or non-African on how Africans make sense of their existence and the world in which they live, based on the African cultural experience and reality. African philosophy, (just as its western counterpart or any other philosophy) has its metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, and even science. The concept of African philosophy is better understood against schools of thought in African philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> C. S. Momoh, “The Nature, Issues and Substance of African Philosophy.” In Jim Unah, ed., *Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy*. (Ibadan: Hope Publishers, 1996), p. 318

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Odera Oruka, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*. (Nairobi, Kenya: Shirikan Publishers, 1990), p. 112

<sup>10</sup> See Godwin Azenabor, “Schools of Thoughts in Contemporary African Philosophy”. In C. S. Momoh, ed. *The Substance of African Philosophy*. (Auchi: African Philosophy Projects Publication, 2000), pp. 23-56



### 11.2.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

- Name the different modes of interpreting African philosophy as experienced at different times?
- What is Odera Oruka's view on African philosophy?



### 11.2.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

- The modes include: idealistic, rationalistic, theological, ideological, analytical, speculative, humanistic, and scientific.
- Odera Oruka conceives African philosophy as the work dealing with specific African issues formulated by indigenous African thinker or by a thinker versed in African cultural and intellectual life

## 11.3 The Nature of African Philosophy

The nature of African philosophy refers to the features in philosophy that give it its peculiar African character. The nature of African philosophy is found in the African philosophical tradition. Philosophy is rooted in a tradition. In fact, “the philosophy of a people is always a tradition, and a tradition pre-supposes a certain minimum of organic relationships among (at least some of) its elements.”<sup>11</sup> Any philosophy or “thought system that is not part of its traditions does not constitute experience”<sup>12</sup>. The nature of a philosophy is the tradition of that philosophy and the tradition of a philosophy is the *spirit* and *style* of that philosophy, the *persistent and dominant orientation of a people's philosophy*, which can be seen as primary.

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<sup>11</sup>Cited by D. A. Masolo, op. cit, p. 245

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 248

The question of African philosophical tradition must be determined in the way in which British philosophy, for example, is seen as empiricism, American as pragmatism, French as rationalism, German as idealism, Russian as materialism, Indian as spiritualism and Chinese as humanism.<sup>13</sup> A tradition of philosophy is identifiable in terms of the innermost essence of the intellectual pulse within which it is produced.<sup>14</sup> The development of knowledge anywhere is cultural and historical. It is determined to a great extent, by the social context. And understanding comes from interaction with our environment. Even though philosophers propound their philosophies in their individual capacities, they do not diverge from the prevailing experience, the philosophical spirit of their age, the challenges of their time and the influences of their culture. For example, Dewey's philosophy is in conformity with the spirit of American philosophy of the time, which was pragmatism. Hume's philosophy was in line with the prevailing philosophy in Britain, which was empiricism. Descartes was in conformity with French philosophy, which was rationalism. Hegel's philosophy was within the spirit of German philosophy which was idealism. So, the nature of African philosophical tradition is in its innermost essence which is rooted in and nourished within the context of African culture, history and experience. The nature of African philosophy is more metaphysical and spiritual. "It is more of co-existence with nature, rather than conquest, more of collectivism, rather than individualism, more of holism, rather than atomism, more of synthesis, rather than analysis"<sup>15</sup>.

The nature and tradition of African philosophy could also be found in its basic assumptions about reality and the theoretical schemes or explanatory models, which are epistemological and metaphysico-religious in nature. Within this framework, spirit, life force or vital forces

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<sup>13</sup> C. S. Momoh (ed.) op. cit., p. 59

<sup>14</sup> W. T. Stace. "The Place of Philosophy in Human Culture." In *Philosophy: The Regional Institute of Philosophy*. (Vol. 12, 1957), p. 312.

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Momoh, op. cit., p. 59.

are the primary axioms. Here, the material has meaning and purpose only through the lenses of the spiritual – spiritual empiricism.

In African philosophy, the nature of reality is beyond space and time. Every existing reality is charged with life forces, that is, everything is alive. Here, even “nothing” becomes “something”, especially when we utilize the right spiritual apparatus. What force is to Africans is what being is to the West. Placid Tempels tells us about the nature of life forces in Bantu philosophy. Life forces are in hierarchical order. The highest of the forces is God, followed by divinities, ancestors, spirits, man, animals, plants and minerals. Superior or higher forces can directly influence the lower, while the lower can only indirectly influence the higher or superior. Nothing moves without affecting another, there is a constant interaction, no isolation in the universe of life-forces. Life forces are active and can be communicated with. Life forces can be good or bad, friendly or hostile, benevolent or malevolent. Secret, unknown or unforeseen forces can intervene in the course of events, even in those consciously planned.

Given this framework, things are understood in relations, holistically, rather than in isolation or atomistically. All elements of knowledge are interdependent. There is unity in diversity. In identifying the nature of African philosophy we make a case for holism, which acknowledges the fact that knowledge or truth is not one but many. Holism is a pluralistic theory based on the idea that the fundamental principle of the universe is the creation of wholes, of a complete and self-contained system. D. A. Masolo informs us that the holistic value is built around an ontology that accepts diversity or otherness without hierarchical judgments of human worth.<sup>16</sup> It is with this holistic mode of thought that we are able to establish a synthesis of human knowledge. The nature of African philosophy is therefore that of holistic ontology.

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<sup>16</sup> Cited by G. E. Azenabor, in *Understanding the Problems of African Philosophy*. (Lagos: First Academic Publisher, 1998), p. 156



The point to underscore is that every philosophy has an existential base. The ideal life in Asian philosophy is to flee from the illusions of life process in this world, that of western philosophy is to conquer the world and nature, but that of African philosophy is to co-exist with nature and the world. A deep-seated need exists in the mind of the African, the need to feel at home in the universe. Consequently, existence-in-relation, being-for-self-and-others, sums up the African conception of reality.<sup>17</sup> This is precisely why there is more of tolerance and peaceful co-existence in African belief systems and indigenous religions, compared to that imported from the West where we have intolerance, antagonism and endless vendetta, in the course of lording one idea or position over all others.

Another crucial factor which makes a philosophy African is when a philosophy is applied to the conceptual problem(s) of African life. The other characteristic of African philosophy, which marks it off from western philosophy, is the drawing from a common pool; the African traditional past. This drawing from the traditional source of African philosophy is yet another difference between African philosophy and any other philosophy. This is precisely why Kwesi Wiredu remarks that it is necessary to develop a sympathetic reflective understanding of traditional modes of thought; and to a large extent our modes of thought remain much closer to traditional ideas than many are willing to acknowledge.<sup>18</sup> The point is that a philosophy is African if it draws from African experience and reality. It is with this mode of understanding in African philosophy that we can now understand and explain other philosophical ideas about God, mind-body, causality, freedom and determinism, etc., within an African cultural setting.

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<sup>17</sup> Innocent Onyewuenyi, "Traditional African Aesthetics: A Philosophical Perspective." In Albert G. Mosley, ed. *African Philosophy, Selected Readings*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), p. 424.

<sup>18</sup> Cited by G. E. Azenabor, in "The Idea of African Philosophy in African Language", in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*. (Vol. xxviii, No. 3, July 2000), p. 326-327

On a critical note, the question may be raised: is our characterization of African philosophical system not generalizing? How for example, does the life force of the Igbo affect, interact or, interpenetrate with that of the Yoruba or Ethiopian? A point is missed by this question. Our characterization is really culturally anchored. The framework or basic assumptions are to be understood within a given socio-cultural paradigm of a people; their trans-cultural nature is only to an extent.

Can the above ontological framework find meaning in a plural society, with a multi-lingual and multi-cultural background? Why not? Every sophisticated society or multi-lingual culture still has its roots and lineage, especially if it is African.



### 11.3.1 **In-Text Questions (ITQs)**

Where can we locate the nature and tradition of African philosophy?



### 11.3.2 **In-Text Answers (ITAs)**

The nature of African philosophy is located in the African philosophical tradition.

## 11.4 Problems in African Philosophy

African philosophy has given rise to many problems. We can identify at least seven problems in African philosophy, namely: (i) the problem of definition, (ii) the problem of documentation or undocumented knowledge, (iii) the problem of the History of African philosophy (iv) the problem of language (v) the problem of logic and critical question (vi) the

problem of methodology (vii) the problem of an African philosophical tradition.<sup>19</sup> It is instructive to note that the most crucial of these problems is that of definition. Other problems are offshoots of the problem of definition; they take their roots from here. The way the other problems and questions are tackled or addressed depends on what one takes African philosophy to be. Most of the other problems are merely as a result of the different concepts of the understanding of the nature of philosophy in general and African philosophy in particular.



#### 11.4.1 **In-Text Questions (ITQs)**

Identify any five problems of African Philosophy.



#### 11.4.2 **In-Text Answers (ITAs)**

(i) The problem of definition, (ii) the problem of documentation or undocumented knowledge, (iii) the problem of the History of African philosophy (iv) the problem of language (v) the problem of logic and critical question (vi) the problem of methodology (vii) the problem of an African philosophical tradition.

### 11.5 Issues in African Philosophy

One of the main problems in western philosophy is the problem of how to resolve the contradiction of experience; there is a contradiction between mind and body, good and evil,

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<sup>19</sup> See G. E. Azenabor, *Understanding the Problems of African Philosophy*.

freedom and determinism, one and many, living and non-living, space and time; the way this problem is resolved depends on people's basic assumptions about reality.

Issues like God, mind-body, witchcraft, reincarnation, causality human destiny, etc., would be briefly discussed in relation to African philosophy.

### **A. God in African Philosophy**

There is no universally accepted conception of God. Largely, the word "God" has similarity in usage, not in meaning. The aspect of the concept of God that we are concerned with is three fold: (i) God's attribute and the ways in which He can be known (ii) God's relation to the world and (iii) The idea of God and the problem of evil in the world.

In most systems of philosophy and religion, God is endowed with certain attributes that distinguish Him from other beings. In Africa, especially Nigeria, God is known as 'Osanobua' 'Olodumare', 'Oghene', 'Chineke', 'Abasi', etc., depending on the language, all of which means the creator and source of the world, the sustainer of the universe, the Supreme Being, who is over and above all deities, excelling them in power, honour and majesty.

In the Africa conception, God is conceived to be beyond man's knowledge, understanding and imagination God's attributes remain a great mystery and marvel. The African conception of God is not anthropomorphic; that is, human attributes are not ascribed to God. But the Christian and Jewish conceptions, (where God hears, sees, feels, argues, regrets, speaks, loves, hates, is jealous and merciful) are anthropomorphic. God is not given gender characteristics in most Africa languages.

What are the grounds of proof of God's existence? To an African, no one teaches the child about God – there is the natural instinct to know God – one is born with the knowledge of

God. Moreover, God manifests himself in everything in the world. You take a look at the sky, stars, moon, clouds, raindrops, night and day, animals, insects, plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, wind etc., and their movements and ask if it is man who is responsible for them. Look at the influence of all these and the helplessness and shortness of human life on earth and tell us who has control. We have witnessed the processes of birth and death, growth and decay. We have felt the agonies of hunger and thirst, emotion and joy, fear and love. Now, have we asked ourselves what is the mechanism behind all this phenomena and influences? If we do, then we will discover that a powerful being must be the ultimate source and symbol of all these influences. It is this power that the African refers to as God. So the African conception of God's existence appeals to experience. This is similar to its western counterparts, especially the teleological argument, that also appeals to experience. But wait a minute: A sceptic might argue that all the above phenomena are natural sequence and self-caused: they do not have transcendental basis, but natural basis. But then, one fact remains manifestly clear; it seems logical and meaningful to assert that if man is not responsible for the phenomena, someone or even something else might be responsible.

The second question is on God's relation with the world. The African does not worship God directly. There are no shrines, no temples, no feast days or celebration dedicated to God. There are no sacrifices to Him. The African does not worship God directly because he cannot conceive an image of Him. Moreover, God is not a local or personal God; He is for the whole universe, spreading over the earth. So we cannot confine Him within our temple or locality, or approach a deity concerned with the whole universe and say; "my own will be done", the way it is said of a personal deity. Furthermore, God who created everything, who is self-sufficient, does not need sacrifices made up of the thing he has made – God is such a majestic being that cannot be adequately satisfied. One more vital point – an African world is that of

hierarchical order of relationships. To approach a being in the highest hierarchy, like God, one cannot go directly; one has to pass through the intermediaries, which are the lesser Gods.

This African conception of God is a reflection of African social pattern and respect for vital ranks. This is why God is inactive in the day-to-day activities of the African people. Although God is withdrawn from the world and man, Africans, in what could be called the “the public aspect of their philosophy”; still believe that God is the ultimate recipient of all sacrifices offered to the lesser Gods; who are expressions of His powers. People, however, still appeal to God in cases of extreme despair or distress. One logical conclusion that one can easily draw from the withdrawal of God from man, is that man refuses to hold God responsible for any evil in the world. Since God remains inactive after creation, evil cannot be attributed to Him.

## **B. The Problem of Evil in African Philosophy**

A formidable objection to the existence of God in philosophy is perhaps, the problem of evil. The problem of evil, so often discussed in western philosophy and Christian theology, does not arise in an African conception of God. For, “it is when a God who is not only powerful and omniscient but also perfect and all loving is postulated that the problem of the existence of evil becomes an intellectual and philosophical hurdle”<sup>20</sup>. In African philosophy, evil is due to the spiritual beings endowed with extra-ordinary powers (like witches, sorcerers, etc.). Since God remains inactive after creation, evil cannot be attributed to Him. Between God and man lie many powers and principalities – both good and evil forces – which account for the happenings in the world. Consequently, in the African conception of God, evil can exist side by side with God without constituting a problem.

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<sup>20</sup> Cited by G. E. Azenabor, “ An African and Western Conception of God and the Traditional Problem of Evil.” In *Journal of African Philosophy and Ideas*. (Vol. 2, No. 3, 1999), p. 23

The next question is what purpose does evil serve, or how can it be justified? Evil exists to punish bad acts. The reality of evil is ultimately a part of justice, done by spiritual beings. Another justification for evil could be seen in the doctrine of retribution; a person must reap the consequence of his or her bad deeds or misdeeds. So evil exists, to serve as an evidence of a distinction between moral uprightness and moral decadence. This is why we have moral evil. The physical evil is due to the activities and anger of the spiritual beings.

From the above, it follows that the presence of evil in the world is not sufficient to assert that there is no God. Evil can be explained, depending on the worldview prevalent in each culture.

### **C. Mind-Body Problem**

The question of the relationship between mind and body has long been a very difficult one in western philosophy. The fundamental questions in the philosophy of mind are:

- (1) Does the mind exist?
- (2) If the mind exists, what is the nature?
- (3) What is the relationship between mind and body?

In African thought, the mind does not only exist, it is superior to the body. No clear-cut distinction exists between the mind and body – they are interrelated, connected and are different aspects or manifestations of the same reality, which is undifferentiated.<sup>21</sup> So mind and body are two qualities in one thing. The mind and the body are partners, inasmuch as none can exist without the other. There is a symbolic (rather than a casual) relationship between mind and body. The benefits are mutual. To really understand an African conception of the relationship between mind and body, we allude to D.E. Idoniboye's distinction between the "active principle" and the "quiescent counterpart" of the mind.

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<sup>21</sup> Godwin Azenabor, "An African Theory of Mind-Body: An Esan Cultural Paradigm" in *African Quarterly*, (Vol. 39, No. 4, 1999), p. 125

David Idoniboye states that it is the “active principle” that departs the mind, when someone becomes absent-minded or goes into a coma or sleeps. One can only return to full consciousness at the return into the body of the “active principle”. There are also the disembodied and unembodied states of the mind. The mind, unembodied, can inhabit anybody it chooses. The mind can exist in *unembodied* and *disembodied* states. The aspect of the mind that has this character is the soul.

The soul is not absolutely, but relatively immortal – there is a maximum period of time the soul can take on the body to reincarnate; thereafter, the soul perishes and disintegrates completely, joining the ancestors.

The African theory of mind-body compares to that of the West, in that Western dualism asserts that mind and body are two different entities that are real. And Western monism asserts that mind or matter is the only reality, not both. But an Africa theory does not take on a dualistic or monistic countenance; rather it asserts pluralism with a leaning on a peculiar kind of monistic duality. The African theory can easily accommodate other African traditional beliefs, like witchcraft, reincarnation, cultism, etc. So the African theory portrays mind and body as logically and functionally distinct but not ontologically distinct, hence the body can affect the mind and the mind can affect the body. And this history is as a matter of fact the whole basis of spiritual or physical healing. “There are certain diseases which are believed to be ‘spiritual diseases’ and cannot be healed by the application of the physical therapy. In such diseases, attention is paid to both physiological and spiritual aspects of the person. Unless the soul is healed, the body will not respond to any physical treatment”<sup>22</sup>.

#### **D. Freedom and Determinism**

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,



The question of whether man is free or determined is one of the fundamental questions and problems in Western Metaphysics. African culture and belief system accommodate the idea of human destiny, which is a version of determinism. Determinism is the view that asserts that given certain sets of conditions nothing else could happen apart from the way it happened. Everything has antecedent causes and effects are determined by their causes. The Yoruba, for example believes in “Ori”, the Igbo in “Chi” and the Esan in “Ehi”, as the determinant of human destiny, or purpose. This means that to do otherwise would not have been possible. Everything has antecedents, which renders unavoidable their causes.

The question arise, if human life is directed by destiny, are human beings still free? If not, can we be held responsible for our actions or inactions?

Freedom, which is the ability to do otherwise, the absence of compulsion and availability of alternatives, in the history of philosophical thought, has moral implementations. This is because human beings are said to be responsible for the ways they chose to use their freedom. Since the African conceives the world as comprising of physical and spiritual elements, human freedom may be difficult to accomplish. But even then, human destiny, or determinism can be altered through the right sacrifices and worship of the appropriate God(s). So, to this extent, man is free. Another exercise of freedom in the face of Determinism is through our behavioural pattern. Moreover, both Freedom and Determinism are compatible in the idea of casualty – actions in both are caused – in the case of freedom by oneself and in the case of determinism by factors external to one.

Another similar position is found in *Mystical* and *Ethical Casualty*. Mystical casualty has to do with the interaction of the spiritual, mystical and human actions in the course of events. Ethical causality relates to one’s own behavioural pattern. In mystical casualty, appropriate manipulation of things, words, gestures, or even thoughts can influence the behaviour of

other objects, even at a distance. It is these mystical factors that obstruct human freedom and render its exercise difficult, if not impossible, hence man is determined, to this extent. Ethical casualty has to do with one's moral conduct and is the derivative of the principles of retribution. The underlying conception is that effect follows cause as reward or punishment follows good or evil action. A person's past actions have bearing on, and determine his or her present. This is backward looking causation. Whatever happens to a person is an inevitable outcome of what he or she is, and is a necessary consequence of his or her past actions, which are now the cause of his or her predicament.

Actions have to do with choice and choice entails freedom; freedom from compulsion. Hence man is free to make or unmake his life by his life style. Since man is free, he is responsible for his or her action or inaction. So, responsibility is inseparable from freedom.

#### **E. Reincarnation**

Reincarnation is an aspect of human Freedom and Destiny or Determinism. Reincarnation could be said to be "the successive animation of different human bodies by one human mind"<sup>23</sup>. Reincarnation also means that at death, a person passes into another living creature; man, animal or plant. Usually, reincarnation can only take place within a people of the same clan.

Reasons for reincarnation include: Atonement for previous deeds or misdeeds, family resemblance and behavioural pattern, memory transfer or retrocognition and divination.

Reincarnation synchronizes with human destiny and determinism because we have to explain the problem of unfulfilled destiny. Again, reincarnation gives the individual succeeding chances to fulfill his or her original destiny. In fact human beings are ruled inexorably by

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Geach, *Reincarnation in God and the Soul*, (New York: Schocken Books, Inc. 1969), p. 1

cause and effect, hence our actions have been conditioned by our past life – our action(s) or inaction(s) in our past lives will determine the future<sup>24</sup>.



### 11.5.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

- What is the hierarchical relationship between the mind and the body in African thought system?
- Which principle, according to African thought system leaves the body when someone goes into comma?



### 11.5.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

- The mind is superior to the body.
- Active principle.

## 11.6 The Relevance of African Philosophy

We shall now direct our attention to the relevance of African philosophy. African philosophy provides a rational method for tackling the question of human existence, and the universe with the African cultural lenses.

There is also the relevance of African philosophy in its “love of wisdom”. Wisdom is essential in progress and civilization, especially within a socio-cultural perspective. This is precisely why the wisdom of today may become folly tomorrow.

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<sup>24</sup> G. E. Azenabor, “Reincarnation in an African Metaphysics”, in Jim Unah (ed.) *Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy*. (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1996), p. 359

By wisdom, we mean the intelligent conduct of human affairs with experience and in relation to concrete life situations, in which confronted by alternation of actions, we shall be able to make the most relevant choice(s). African philosophy seeks the wisdom of life and living by trying to understand the African in his or her concrete historical and personal condition of existence in order to make sense of the world of his or her experience. The essence of African philosophy is metaphysical – the metaphysical urge to penetrate reality and delve into ontological wonder. This better situates issues, problems, and questions in African philosophy, especially within the changes that have taken place in our cultures, tradition and environment, be it physical, spiritual and social. So, we will have to make African philosophy relevant to our existential situation, experience and problems, leaning heavily on the metaphysical, because any ultimate standpoint, if it is reasonable, is metaphysics.

African philosophy has to be relevant in the area of cultural authenticity and value orientation. African philosophy will have to be applied to our educational, socio-political, ethical and even medical orientations. African philosophy in the next millennium must be made relevant to the African societies. It should not be abstract but must be seen in the context of societal and human relevance. It should be an instrument of social and material change. Philosophy, whether western or African, must be at the service of man, African philosophy must grapple with the African problems and experience.

To make African philosophy relevant, we are enjoined to go beyond the elucidation of African ideas and delve into the critical examination, clarification and exposition of the changes these ideas have undergone and the conditions that make these changes possible<sup>25</sup>. We must avoid any attempt to describe and defend our cultures and traditions without taking

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<sup>25</sup> C. S Momoh, "African Philosophy: Past, Present and Future" in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*. (Vol. 11, No. 2, 1991), p. 18

into consideration the changes that have taken place in our environment; both physical and social.

African philosophy has been and will continue to be relevant to the existential experience of Africans. In African societies there had been, and will continue to be, the need for cultural authenticity and development. This is where African philosophy has been useful. With African philosophy, we are able to evolve a cultural philosophy, an African ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and even African medicine.

In the area of ethics, for example, we can in the next century evolve a value system that we can truly call our own, a value system that will produce meaningful and practical solutions to our moral problems. This we can do by building from our roots and culture, taking into consideration our conditions, historical background and realities. There is need for authentic existence. We do not want to be “African Europeans”. Hence, we do not need to “fry” our hair or bleach our skins in order to look like the European. Everything has an adaptation to life. We really need moral development and a better perspective of the meaning of life.

In the political sphere, a dose of African philosophy is necessary to enable us appreciate our political heritage. Basically political life in traditional African society centres around the Chiefs, Obas and Emirs, whose authority are religious, administrative and judicial. The African traditional culture is an organic whole. In other words, it is impossible to separate religion from politics, politics from economy, economy from moral values. The concentration of powers notwithstanding, the Oba, Chief or Emir is not a despot. There are traditional restrictions to his powers. Subjects could demand for his removal, if he failed them, and a king could even commit suicide for failure. There is also the fear of ancestral vengeance and sanctions from constitutional deities. Furthermore, “the ability of families to move or migrate from an abusive and despotic chief, Oba or Emir and join another chiefdom restricted the

Chief's powers, for he could lose manpower and tribute. So the Oba or Emir embraces his office with a mixed feeling of joy and fear; joy for having been elevated to an office that will confer on him, if he performs his duty successfully, the title of ancestor, and fear of weakening the bond between God, spirit, man and the whole universe, should he grossly abuse his office or be found unworthy”<sup>26</sup>.

The relevance of this, therefore, in contemporary African set-up, is that in order for us to have a truly indigenous and nationalistic political order, we should restructure the country (Nigeria) into its different political units. In order to achieve this effectively in modern times, a confederation or regionalism would be an ideal form of government for Nigeria. This is a situation where the government of the whole surrenders greater power to the government of the parts. But a common organization could be set up to regulate matters of common concern.

Another relevance of African philosophy in the political sphere is ideological. This is the idea or principle that Africans should develop their own personality and ideologies; hence ideologies like Pan-Africanism and Negritude should be reinvigorated.

Pan-Africanism is a response to western disparaging comments and discourse on African thought. Pan-Africanism is an attempt to define, characterize and establish African cultural identity. It was a political movement launched in London in 1893, initiated by Henry Sylvester William and later W. E. B. Dubios, an African-American activist scholar and champion of the interest of Africans. The movement manifested in a series of conferences and congresses in Paris, London, Lisbon, New York, Manchester and Tanzania in the 1900s. Pan-Africanism is meant to help towards characterizing a uniquely African personality and identity.

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<sup>26</sup>K. C. Anyanwu and E. A. Ruch, *Introduction to African Philosophy* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981), p. 373

Thereafter, came Negritude, which though is often associated with Leopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal, the first person who actually coined the term “Negritude” was Aimie Cesaire of Martinique in his poem, “Return to my Native Land” in 1937. However, it was Senghor who later popularized, politicized and ideologized the concept<sup>27</sup>.

Negritude attempted to re-construe the distinctive characteristics of African personality, complimented by an African mode of knowledge. Senghor places greater emphasis on traditional African cultural values. Negritude constitutes an authentic African identity, a distinctive mode of being and existence. These ideologies help Africans to fight colonialism, oppression and neo-colonialism.

The African wants to become modern but not westernized. It is against this background that we understand Momoh’s recommendation of an active oath taking as an authentic part of Africanism. Momoh recommends that “every public office holder should be made to swear on juju, specifically prepared for that purpose, spelling out what should befall the oath taker if he willfully and deliberately enriches himself, friends or relation. It is irrelevant whether a swearer believes in juju or not... the efficacy of juju is not a matter of belief, it is real”<sup>28</sup>. This active oath taking is based on the beliefs, culture and values of the traditional African. This recommendation becomes relevant in this modern day Nigeria, where heads of state or government, government agents, parastatals etc., are treasury looters, where most Nigerians in public offices no longer have conscience, where there is large scale corruption, abuse of office, mismanagement and embezzlement.

African philosophy is relevant even in the medical realm – no one today doubts the efficacy of African traditional medicine or alternative medicine. There is also African science which is

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<sup>27</sup> See A. G. Mosley, *African Philosophy: Selected Readings*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1995), p. 222

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Momoh, “African Philosophy; Past, Present and Future” in *The Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 11, No. 2, 1992) p. 132

moral and mystical in its causal explanation. The moral or ethical has to do with man's conduct and is a derivative of the principle of retribution. There is an essential connection between past and present actions. The mystical is related to the actions of the gods, ancestors, fellow human beings, etc. Here, reality is beyond space and time, causal explanation is beyond the physical and mechanical – knowledge is not just empirical, there is mystical and spiritual knowledge. In fact, modern science has come to terms with African science, especially in the context of the present state of scientific research with the Relativity and Quantum theories and post-modern developments in science. “We are now living at a time when science at its highest power has entered the spiritual world”<sup>29</sup>. Today, in science, non-physical dimensions, like spiritual entities are now accommodated.

There is also the technological dimension to African science. The application of science is technology. For example, we can put water in the calabash, having performed necessary incantations; we call the name of whoever we want to deal with or expose and he or she appears and he or she confesses the crime or we strike the person dead – technology. There is also “Afeiri” – where you place your back or one foot on the wall and disappear. There is also the causing and stoppage of rainfall for human benefit, i.e. the power to manipulate nature etc. We also have action-at-a-distance, “Utagba”, missiles in Esan culture. All these can be harnessed to make African philosophy relevant in the next millennium.

We need to re-orient the African mind as it relates to development and human personhood through positive African philosophy. We need a reconstruction and deconstruction of our traditional and colonial ideas, beliefs and practices in order to make them relevant to contemporary period.

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<sup>29</sup>K. C. Anyanwu, “The African Experience” in *American Market Place* (New York: Exposition Press, 1983), p. 16





### 11.6.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What is Pan-Africanism?



### 11.6.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Pan-Africanism is an attempt to define, characterize and establish African cultural identity

## 11.7 Summary of Study Session 11

A critic might argue that philosophy, in the West, is essentially individualistic. Along this line of thought, William Abraham opined in his book, *The Mind of Africa*, that we need to make a distinction between private (individual) and public (communal) views or aspect of African philosophy. Every philosophy has an orientation. The orientation in Western Philosophy is predominantly individualistic but in African philosophy, the orientation tilts towards the communal and the holistic. Consequently, it may be possible to draw a water-tight distinction between private and public aspects of philosophy in the western tradition, especially because the frameworks of their culture and worldview are essentially individualistic and atomic. But in Africa, the line between private and public is difficult, if not impossible or unnecessary to draw. This is because the individual and the whole are fused together. One finds it difficult, if not impossible, to present an individual philosophy without relating it to the whole. Again, what we have discussed are common and perennial themes in African philosophy, capable of general recognition and acceptance. So in spite of the diversity of forms, there is still unity of thought. There is always a prevailing philosophical spirit of any age and time – there is always a tradition and a common denominator in philosophy. In African philosophy, it is a metaphysical and spiritual orientation, which is

more of co-existence with nature, rather than conquest, more of collectivism rather than individualism, more of holism, rather than atomism, more of synthesis rather than analysis, more of relations rather than separation, unity rather than division, monism, duality than dualism, interdependence rather than dependence.

African philosophy is a philosophy founded upon observation of reality and deduction drawn from human experience – it is, therefore, a critical and rational philosophy. It must be noted, however, that criticism is a meta-activity and only a tool in philosophy; it is not the essence of philosophy – the essence of philosophy is the metaphysical urge to penetrate reality.

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