

Introduction

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The articles in this issue of *African Studies Quarterly* are entirely devoted to studies of religion and philosophy in Africa. This is a wise decision at this juncture in the history of the cluster of disciplines called "African Studies". For, as it is generally admitted, African worldviews and religions inform all other aspects of African life. Consequently, African religious studies and philosophy, as second order discourses, are expected to provide conceptual tools for other disciplines. But, even before the term was invented, they have been infected by an earlier variety of "Afro-pessimism." Admittedly, the malady was not easily diagnosable, as it was often not acknowledged and, indeed, sometimes disguised as triumphalism.

Thus, the "we too have it" syndrome was rampant in African religious studies in the decades of 1960 and 1970 as a reaction to the colonial pejoration of African Traditional Religion (ATR). With due respect for their pioneering work, we must now admit that Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti, the two giants in the field, have invented a paradigm mostly characterized by what Kwasi Wiredu in this issue aptly termed "unrigorous analogies of a foreign inspiration."

African professional philosophers did not fare better. Barry Hallen, a professional philosopher, was generous in his assessment when he said: "Most of the material that has been published to date under the rubric of African Philosophy has been methodological in character" (Hallen, 1995: 377). Olufemi Taiwo, his colleague, agrees with him when he asserts in this issue that "a good part of the current mention (of African Philosophy) is preoccupied with issues of pedigree." The title of D. A. Masolo's opus says it all: *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*.

The essays in this issue constitute a marked departure from the approaches summarized above. Firmly rooted in the African philosophical traditions and armed with the sharpest critical instruments of the Western tradition, their authors engage issues in African philosophy and religion. They do *philosophize*. Of recent, what has often been advertised as "African philosophy" are ruminations of African epigones of Derrida and Foucault, with little or no African content and concerns. If truth be said, the African philosophy establishment in African Studies circles preys on the francomaniac bulimia of the American academia, resulting, sometimes, in quasi-charlatanism. The essays in this issue constitute a healthy departure from this neocolonial turn in African philosophical studies. They are all traversed by a decolonization ethos.

Taiwo meticulously deconstructs Hegel. His essay convinces one that if one philosopher ever deserved the appellation "ethno-philosopher", it was surely Hegel. Says Taiwo: "neither Hegel nor many of his successors who are quick to dismiss African religion can be said to know from the inside the phenomena they so eagerly dismiss." This is to be meditated by all of us, including our African New Hegelians.

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Wiredu's article is indeed an invitation to decolonization by example. Going against the grain of some critics of so-called ethnophilosophy who deem African oral traditions philosophically uninteresting, Wiredu affirms that "In the study of a culture ..., customs can be a veritable philosophical text", and he urges philosophers to "pursue the universal by way of the particular."

In African religious studies, he calls for a thorough critique of such unproblematic concepts as "spirit", "animism", "creation", and "supernatural" using indigenous African discourses.

In her contribution, Nkiru Nzegwu makes a compelling case for considering African art as a possible philosophical text. Her example is the celebrated Nigerian artist, Ben Enwoku. The latter, using the Igbo concept of *nka*, effectively combatted racism and colonialism "without sacrificing artistic excellence for political expediency."

With these four profound and thought-provoking essays, ASQ is proud to contribute to new directions in African philosophical and religious studies. The dialogue continues.

References

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