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'THE FAMILIAR WITCHES' BREW' Towards an African Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract: This essay indicates how the idea of African philosophy – specifically, African philosophy of religion – can both expose the 'whiteness' of the curriculum in undergraduate philosophy programmes and offer an expanded vision of philosophy. It first highlights the Eurocentric character of the curriculum in academic degree programmes such as philosophy in the UK and beyond. Thereafter, it considers the notion of African philosophy, particularly as this has been viewed by key western philosophers to be an impossibility. The essay then outlines how postcolonial, African scholars have sought to envisage African philosophy. It is argued that the attempt to seek a pure, authentically African philosophy (*pace* the proponents of the negritude movement and early ethnophilosophers) is misguided. It deals with ways in which an African philosophy of religion might be configured before ending with some brief comments on certain problems raised in the attempt to deliver an intercultural curriculum.

Keywords: African Philosophy, Conceptual Decolonization, Curriculum, God, Religion, Whiteness

1. Introduction

"Why is my curriculum white?" is the provocatively titled film produced by University College London's (UCL) Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Network. The twenty minute film, which can be viewed on YouTube,[1] features students of colour as well as white students offering their thoughts on the all-

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[1]UCLTV, "Why Is My Curriculum White?" *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dscx4h2l-Pk> (10 December 2014).

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pervading whiteness of their degree curriculum, a whiteness so entrenched that its normative status can go unquestioned. Interestingly, the students in the film tended to be of the view that the task of addressing the Eurocentric bias of their UK based university studies would not be resolved simply by the presence of more black and ethnic minority academics. One student astutely remarks: "I'm not sure if just having a diverse staff body without changing the curriculum would make any difference." The insight informing this comment is powerfully illustrated earlier in the film when an Asian student offers the following pertinent questions:

> During my ... Masters in Development Studies at SOAS all that I was taught by a *black* professor was Foucault, Marx, Weber, Bernstein. So what about the African scholars, what about the scholars from Australasia, what about the scholars from the Americas? Is it that their views to [sic] development is unimportant?

This student's comment hit a raw nerve with me, a black (Afro-Caribbean) female philosophy lecturer teaching in a British university; it is a comment that could easily have come from one of my own students. As a discipline, philosophy raises the issue of the whiteness of the curriculum in a particularly stark way. If undergraduate, introductory textbooks are anything to go by, philosophy seems to be the sole preserve of European (and north American) males. Even as postmodern philosophy discloses at every turn the context-dependent nature of theory and lauds difference and otherness, it remains for all that largely unaffected by non-western perspectives. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, while calling for an ethical turn in philosophy, remarked: "the Greeks and the Bible are all that is serious in humanity. Everything else is dancing."[2] By virtue of the pronouncements of a number of its key figures, the construction of its canon and its institutional practice in schools

[2]Levinas cited by Robert Bernasconi, "African Philosophy v. Continental Philosophy" in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, 185.

and universities, philosophy would appear to be an entirely Eurocentric enterprise.

Although the question 'Why is my curriculum white?' can be repeatedly posed by students in the UK and across the world more widely, it is nevertheless the case that over the last twenty years or so there has been a concerted effort by educators to diversify and internationalize the curriculum in higher education.[3] This has been motivated by a number of factors ranging from the democratic impulse to create an inclusive, tolerant academy wherein a multiplicity of worldviews can be encountered, to educating for global or planetary citizenship,[4] to growing the knowledge-economy. I am both (i) suspicious of pedagogic models driven chiefly by market goals and (ii) mindful of the limits of tokenistic gestures that leave the economy of the same crushing on. Yet, despite these potential traps, my colleagues and I have been keen to design a curriculum that exposes our students to a more global, expanded vision of philosophy. Thus, students on our single honours Philosophy, Ethics, and Religion programme study aspects of Indian, Jewish, and African philosophies, as well as esoteric western thought – for we must also avoid homogenizing western philosophy.

From a Eurocentric perspective there is something quite impossible about the idea of African philosophy. After all, who are the key African philosophers? What are the central texts of African philosophy? What are the salient moments in the tradition of African philosophy? When such questions are directed to the context of pre-colonial Africa, no answers are forthcoming. This is because African traditions are primarily oral and the high regard for communal life (including the life of thought) in traditional African cultures typically resist the canonization of individual thinkers. The seeming impossibility of African philosophy is implied by Heidegger who is unable to

[3]In the UK context, it is possible to trace the inclusive curriculum agenda to the Access and Widening Participation movement in the 1970s.

[4]See Martin Haige, "Internationalization, Planetary Citizenship and Higher Education Inc," *Compare* 38, 4 (2008), 427-440.

entertain the very idea of African philosophy even in order to deny its existence, as he would deny the existence of Chinese or Indian philosophy.[5] The picture is little better when, as late as 1989, one philosopher would declare that "Philosophy has really arisen only twice in civilization, once in Greece and once in India."[6]

Questioning the very possibility of an *African* philosophy is at once to question the very notion of philosophy itself. That philosophy must be characterized by written presentation and refutation of arguments, expounded by individual thinkers committed to the authority of secular reason alone, turns out to be merely a purported necessity. For such a vision of philosophy is a historically contingent one, reflecting the predominant characteristics of western tradition that, given the impact of colonialism, has come to acquire a normative position. When we begin to analyse the ways in which the parameters of what is deemed to be 'properly philosophical' is set, its methodologies, values and basic assumptions, we begin to recognise philosophy as a social practice implicated in relations of power and complex histories. This has an important upshot for teaching non-western philosophies, particularly those based on African traditions, which, by Eurocentric lights, stand at the very outer limits of whatever might count as philosophy. It is not simply a matter of introducing students to exotic new theories and ideas but to philosophy reconfigured in radically new ways.

In what follows I expand on some of the points raised above. While leery of the idea that there is a pure, discrete African philosophy, I nevertheless maintain that it can be viewed as a determinable phenomenon even while it can never be completely determinate, not least because it is, as Peter

[5]See reference to Heidegger by Bernasconi in "African Philosophy v. Continental Philosophy," 184.

[6]Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, "Introduction" in *From Africa to Zen: An Invitation to World Philosophy*, Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, eds., Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, x.

Gratton puts it, always 'in the making'.[7] I then go on to consider the prospect of an African philosophy of religion, paying particular attention to conceptual issues surrounding how the terms 'religion' and 'God' may be understood before indicating how African philosophy of religion might inflect questions and debates on religion in western philosophy. The paper ends with a short reflection on some of the difficulties that might attend teaching African philosophy in the context of British higher education.

2. Contra Authenticity: African Philosophy in the Making

Until around the mid-twentieth century, the term African philosophy would have been considered an oxymoron. For example, in his anthropological writings, Kant is one of the first thinkers to develop an essentialist account of racial difference based on biology. Agreeing with Hume's claims, in his "Essay on National Character," Kant maintained that black Africans are incapable of anything "great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality."[8] Moreover, he held that the difference between whites and blacks is so *fundamental* that it "appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour."[9] Some decades later, Hegel would write in his *Philosophy of History* that sub-Saharan Africa is "the unhistorical, undeveloped Spirit still involved in the conditions of mere nature."[10] Modern philosophy, thus, developed and perpetuated a racist ideology that served to justify slavery and European colonialism. Central to this ideology is the view that Africans are mentally inferior.

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[7]Peter Gratton, "What's in a Name? African Philosophy in the Making," *Philosophia Africana* 26, 2 (August 2003), 76.

[8]Kant cited in Emmanuel C. Eze, "The Colour of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology" in *The African Philosophy Reader*, P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J Roux, eds., London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 2nd ed., 447. When I use the term "Africans" in this essay, it is to be understood as shorthand for 'black Africans', i.e., peoples of sub-Saharan Africa.

[9]Kant cited in Eze, "The Colour of Reason," 521.

[10]Hegel cited in Gratton, "African Philosophy in the Making," 77, n. 1.

As the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl notoriously put it in the early-twentieth century, Africans have a 'primitive' or 'pre-logical' mind in contrast to the white Europeans' 'civilized' mind.[11] Given such racist views, it must follow that the lofty discipline of philosophy – with its systematic, logical reasoning and a plethora of abstract concepts – is wholly inaccessible to the stunted intellect of Africans.

The colonialist enterprise in Africa included what renowned Ghanian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu calls "a systematic program of de-Africanization."[12] This sought to efface indigenous African languages, cultures, and religions, which were considered defective and backward. With many African countries finally winning independence from European colonists in the 1960s, the dawning of a post-colonial era was underway. In their newly established universities, African academics at this time were preoccupied with the question of African identity. Motivating this question was the belief that an original, unadulterated African identity had been buried under the impact of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and racism but could be excavated and reclaimed, affording Africans the dignity of self-determination and, indeed, national pride.

It is worth noting that, while the scientific rationality of the Enlightenment was valorised over the so-called irrationality of Africans (and other colonised peoples), nineteenth century romanticism disputed the privileging of reason and the quest for objective truths, appealing instead to passions, imagination, and subjective perspectives. Romanticism paved the way for an alternative image of Africans in European discourse, namely, as the exotic other, the noble savage, who is glorified as 'living closer to nature', innocent and gentle, uncorrupted by civilization. This romantic re-imagining of Africans and their traditional cultures helped to fuel attempts by African intellectuals (they existed!) to resist the white supremacist racism of colonialists. A number of nationalistic movements

[11]Jacqueline Trimier, "African Philosophy" in *From Africa to Zen*, 184.

[12]Kwasi Wiredu, "Introduction" in *Blackwell Companion to African Philosophy*, Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 1.

emerged with the aim of restoring African culture as that which expressed a newly recovered African identity. As Jacqueline Trimier observes, this nationalist spirit included an intellectual dimension that permeated all academic disciplines and insisted that the production of knowledge about Africa and its people should be undertaken by Africans for Africans. [13]

Whereas Plato and Aristotle claimed that philosophy begins with wonder, Jonathan Chimakonam suggests that African philosophy begins with frustration instead[14] – the same frustration with the legacy of colonialism, and with the European Enlightenment philosophy theoretically underpinning it, that produced the spirit of nationalism just noted. One of the earliest attempts to articulate a self-consciously African philosophy occurred among a group of Francophone African and African diaspora writers in the 1930s – Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and Léon Damas (French Guiana) – who were at the forefront of what they called the negritude movement.

For Senghor in particular, the retrieval of an authentic African identity is at once the retrieval of a distinctly African philosophy, one that may be traced "in the cultural products of Africa; and above all in African religions."[15] Although Senghor appreciated regional differences in African cultures and religions, he nevertheless postulated, on the basis of ethnographic evidence, a vitalist ontology common to all. In a lecture "On Negritiude," he explained that African ontology "is founded on the notion of vital force. Pre-existing, anterior to being, it constitutes being. God has given vital force not only to men, but also to animals, vegetables, even minerals. By which

[13]Trimier, "African Philosophy," 185.

[14]Jonathan Chimakonam, "History of African Philosophy" in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/afric-hi/> (21 December 2014).

[15]Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "Negritude" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/negritude/> (21 December 2014).

they are. But it is the purpose of this force to increase."[16] Senghor also maintained that Africans have a unique way of knowing by virtue of their distinctive psychological and physiological constitution. In contrast to western ways of knowing – which, according to Senghor, proceeds by way of analysis, that is, breaking down the object of knowledge into its basic elements – African mentation 'embraces' the object enabling thought to experience "the lived identity of knowledge and the known, the lived and the thought, the lived and the real."[17] Of course, the split between subject and object that is the hallmark of Cartesian-Kantian epistemology would be challenged in European philosophy by phenomenologists from Husserl to Deleuze. Interestingly, Senghor often referred to the work of Henri Bergson whose notions of intuition and the *élan vital* (the life force preceding all cognition and indeed making cognition possible) mirrored in important ways in African ontology and epistemology, as understood by Senghor. In a pithy yet contentious statement, Senghor summarized the crucial difference between African and western philosophy thus: "Emotion is Negro as Reason is Hellenic."[18] While it is important to appreciate exactly what Senghor understood by the term 'emotion',[19] what is of interest to me in this essay is his belief (later criticized by some African thinkers) that African philosophy, and the culture through which it is expressed, is effectively determined by some primordial black African essence. In other words, African philosophy has its roots in an essentialist account of race.

The next generation of African philosophers writing in the late 1960s and 1970s responded to the conception of African philosophy advanced by the negritude movement in two main ways. The first affirmed the attempt by those such as Senghor to reconstruct and systematize a truly African philosophy using materials excavated from traditional African culture. These

[16]Diagne, "Negritude."
[17]Diagne, "Negritude."
[18]Senghor cited in Trimier, "African Philosophy," 186.
[19]Diagne, "Negritude."

included thinkers such as Innocent Onyewuenyi, Henry Olela, and, to some extent, Kwame Gyeke. The second levelled criticisms at the work of those who, informed by the negritude movement, could be labelled traditionalists. Thinkers adopting this critical stance include Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, and V. Y. Mudimbe. Here I would like to highlight two main problems that second wave African philosophers identified. The first concerns the idea that race is determinant of culture. This is highly controversial principally because it presupposes a concept of race based upon a fixed set of biological properties constitutive of essential racial differences between groups of human beings. However, critical race theorists argue that there is no convincing biological basis to the idea of unchanging racial essences. Rather, race is a socio-historical construction reflecting western fear of otherness and justifying its oppression of non-white others. When traditionalists invoke the idea of a recoverable black African identity from which emanates an authentic black African culture, they may rightly be charged with homogenizing all people of African descent. But, as V. Y. Mudimbe argues, 'Africa' is a western invention. Indeed, the classifications 'African' and 'western' are abstractions that impose identity on dynamic, diverse phenomena.

In seeking to unearth and avow an authentic (i.e., pre-colonial) African culture, the negritude movement and the traditionalists that followed them, sought to exalt those qualities that Enlightenment thought denigrated (e.g., emotion and intuition) and projected onto Africans. But this move simply reverses the colonialist discourse without challenging its dualistic framework and assumptions regarding race. Thus, Wiredu writes: "African nationalists in search of an African identity, Afro-Americans [and Afro-Caribbeans] in search of their African roots, and Western foreigners in search of exotic

diversion – all demand an African philosophy different from Western philosophy, *even if it means the familiar witches' brew*."[20]

The dream of an authentic, unspoiled African culture is animated by what I would argue, with Wiredu, an understandable yet ultimately uncritical response to the baleful legacy of colonialism. The romantic longing for a lost, idealized past fails to engage with contemporary problems in Africa in the wake of its encounter with Europe, and establishes an African philosophy that can only reproduce the colonialist terms in an ultimately conservative gesture.

The second problem affecting the traditionalist approach is explained by Hountondji. Briefly, he argues that the ethnographic and anthropological findings used to recreate traditional African philosophies renders African philosophy indistinguishable from traditional African culture and religions. The trouble with this, Hountondji contends, is that what is produced is an *ethno-philosophy*,[21] which seeks to make explicit latent philosophical content embedded "in the proverbs, myths and folk-tales, folk-songs, rituals, beliefs, customs, and traditions of the people."[22] According to Hountondji, ethno-philosophy not only mythologizes African culture, it fails to be adequately systematic and philosophically robust. He thus recommends a definition of African philosophy based simply on 'the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content', such that African philosophy can be understood as "a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world."[23]

The dispute over ethno-philosophy produced two camps in African philosophy: the particularists (or traditionalists) who

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[20]Kwasi Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought," *Transition* 75/76 (1997), 325, my emphasis.

[21]Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, 34.

[22]Kwame Gyeke, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, 51.

[23]Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, 66.

affirm ethno-philosophy and the universalists (or modernists) who wished to 'modernize' traditional African philosophies by drawing on western philosophical categories and methods. I suspect that the distinctions establishing these two camps are not as entrenched as they may first appear and, so, I will not attempt here to defend one approach against the other. While I do not think that 'authenticity' ought to be the target of contemporary African philosophy, I concur with Wiredu's view that "one can be both sympathetic to traditional ... thinking and sensitive to the imperatives of modern existence."[24] To the extent that African philosophy draws upon the western philosophical tradition, it must remain vigilant not to do so in a way that blots out the particularities of the African socio-historical context.

3. Towards an African Philosophy of Religion

How, then, might an African philosophy of religion may be configured? One key point worth noting is the triple heritage of Africa with respect to religion: tradition, Christianity, and Islam. It may be tempting to ask, "Which of these three heritages is most authentically African?"[25] However, given the previous discussion, I do not believe it is helpful (or indeed even feasible) to insist on authenticity as an essential requirement for an African philosophy. That said, African philosophers such as Wiredu, Olusegun Oladipo, and Okot p'Bitek maintain that one of the most central tasks facing contemporary philosophical reflection on traditional African religion is "conceptual decolonization."[26] However, this process of seeking to disentangle traditional African religious concepts from western concepts (imposed on African ones) draws upon methodologies from western philosophy (say hermeneutics or

[24]Wiredu "Introduction," 4.

[25]Segun Gbadegesin, "African Religions" in *Routledge Companion to Theism*, Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harris and Stewart Goetz, eds., New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2013, 1.

[26]Kwasi Wiredu, "On Decolonizing African Religions" in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 21.

phenomenology) such that the intertwining of African and western approaches persists. Two concepts that demand clarification in the effort to articulate an African philosophy of religion are (i) the very category of 'religion' itself and (ii) 'God'. Let us consider each in turn.

The word 'religion' is absent in most African languages.[27] However, for thinkers such as the Kenyan theologian and philosopher John S. Mbiti, this does not mean that there is no such phenomenon in Africa. Indeed, it could be said that religion is so pervasive in traditional African culture that it cannot be demarcated as something separate from the activities of everyday life. As Mbiti explains, for most African peoples there is no formal distinction between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material aspects of life, to the extent that "Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony, and so forth."[28]

Yet is it prudent to use the term 'religion' with respect to traditional African ways of life? The word has been used to translate African terms for 'ritual', 'ceremony', 'service', or 'paying homage'. For example, Harvey Sindima tells us that in Chichewa (the national language of Malawi) the word '*chipembezo*' is used to refer to religion, and is derived from the root word '*pembedza*' meaning to pacify or quieten (for example, a child being put to bed), to worship or adore, or to pay homage.[29] Consequently, to ask "What is your religion?" in Chichewa is to ask "What is your worship?" which makes little sense. Similarly, insofar as 'religion' translates words referring

[27]Kwasi Wiredu, "African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View" in *Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper and Philip L. Quinn, eds., Oxford: Blackwell, 2010, 34-43.

[28]John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1969, 2.

[29]Harvey J. Sindimba, *Introduction to Religious Studies*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009, 26.

to ritual and adoration, how can claims along the lines of Mbiti's assertion that 'religion is in their [African's] whole system of being'[30] avoid dissolving into incoherence?

In light of these comments, it is not unreasonable to suspect that describing traditional African modes of life and thought in terms of religion is to impose western terminology in ways that can only distort, for both African and western scholars, those very modes of life and thought. Indeed, 'religion' (understood in a generic sense) and 'the religions' (denoting particular expressions of religious beliefs and practices) are modern, inherently western categories emerging from Enlightenment debates about the relationship between biblical revelation and reason, as well as the European encounter with peoples and cultures from remote corners of the world.[31]

How, then, to respond to the problems arising from applying the word 'religion' to the context of traditional African cultures? One way might be to reject the term 'religion' altogether in favour of 'spirituality', which captures how black Africans traditionally regard the world as teeming with invisible, extra-human powers. But a rejoinder to this might be that the term spiritual presupposes a Cartesian conceptual framework whereby the spiritual and the material are held to be distinct realms, which is quite at odds with traditional African worldviews. Alternatively, it could be maintained that the practices and cosmological beliefs that appear to resonate with the idea of religion actually flows from the ethical life of people in traditional African cultures. On observing that traditionally the ethics of the Akan (a people residing in what today are the countries of Ghana and the Ivory Coast) are not based on God or any other deity, Gyekye suggests: "rather than saying that Akan morality is grounded in religion, *one should say that Akan religion is moral*; that is, it is founded upon

[30]Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3.

[31]Prior to its modern generic usage, the Latin term 'religion' was taken up by Patristic scholars in order to refer to Christianity alone, as captured by Augustine's claim that Christianity is *de vera religion* ("the one true religion").

morality."[32] Thus, the notion of religion in the traditional African context would (at least, in some instances) have to be understood as *dependent* on African ethics, on a certain ethos, rather than vice versa. To be sure, the non-institutional and the non-revealed character of what might be deemed 'religion' in indigenous African cultures could be attributed to its being fundamentally deriving from a people's ethos.

The dispute concerning the extent to which the word 'religion' is an appropriate descriptor for particular aspects (no matter how pervasive) of traditional African life inevitably bears upon the idea of an African philosophy of religion. If 'religion' is essentially held to be a western category, then formulating an African philosophy of religion would be woefully misguided, serving only to mystify the structures of pre-colonial African life by shoehorning them into ill-fitting conceptual forms. However, it is well-known that in western discourse the term 'religion' escapes easy definition. That being said, it is possible to hazard a working definition of religion that is wide enough to apply to non-Abrahamic and non-western cultures while capable of discriminating something significant about those cultures. In this regard, Andrew Eshleman offers the following definition:

> By means of an interwoven set of symbols, narratives, doctrines, rituals, ethical prescriptions, and social institutions, a religion aims to provide an appropriate way of being related cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally [sic] (both individually and collectively) to that which is conceived of as Ultimate Sacred Reality.[33]

Baldly put, religion is the formation of human life (practices and beliefs) in ways that accord with that Ultimate Sacred Reality regarded as our most 'ultimate concern', to borrow famous Paul Tillich's expression. While African languages

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[32]Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 138, my emphasis.

[33]Andrew Eshleman, "What Is Philosophy of Religion?" in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion*, Andrew Eshleman, ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, 4.

generally do not have a word for 'religion', there are words that articulate a conception of Ultimate Sacred Reality. I, therefore, agree with Wiredu when he writes that "we can speak of religion in African life only because of the widespread belief and trust in a Supreme Being who is the author of the world order."[34] Even though the idea of a Supreme Being may seem to equate straightforwardly to that of God as understood in western theology and philosophy, this would be a hasty assumption. Let us now turn to 'God' as a concept that also requires 'conceptual decolonization'.

In his book *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being of the Yoruba (a people residing in present day Nigeria and Benin in West Africa), E. Bolaji Idowu lists attributes such as Creator, omnipotence, omniscience, and immortal as belonging to Olodumare.[35] Such attributes just so happen to map exactly onto those of the classic account of God in western monotheism. Of course, such a neat fit across traditions should set alarm bells ringing. Christian African writers such as Idowu were keen to dispel the idea that African peoples were incapable of arriving at the idea of one God unaided by foreign influences. The trouble is there are cosmological and linguistic factors that importantly inform the ways in which the concept of a Supreme Being, almost ubiquitous in African cultures, may be understood.

The major cosmological issue that must be faced by the African people such as Idowu and Mbiti is that traditional African cultures invoke a plurality of entities populating the invisible 'spiritual' and divine realms. There are a plethora of divinities, impersonal spirits, and ancestral spirits in addition to the Supreme Being who presides over all that is. Such a cosmological picture does not coincide with that of monotheism or, for that matter, polytheism. Idowu cannot overlook this picture and, thus, must qualify the theism he

[34]Wiredu, "African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View," 41.

[35]E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Elmont, NY: African Tree Press, 2011, 38-47.

wishes to argue as characteristic of African religions by describing it as an 'implicit' or 'diffuse monotheism'.[36] A potential task for an African philosophy of religion would be to explore not only how to think the relationship between the Supreme Being and the plurality of other spiritual powers but why it may be argued that explaining this relationship is unnecessary (for it simply is not a problem) or even impossible. When Emmanuel Lartey asked an Akan traditional healer-priestess, "How many gods are there?" he received the following reply: '"Do you think counting is relevant? Can you count in spiritual terms?"'[37] The anxiety surrounding number, measurement, and quantitative comparison may be something peculiarly burdensome to western minds, an effect of various socio-cultural circumstances, but need not (and perhaps should not) dominate all fields of intellectual enquiry, such as theology or philosophy of religion.

An example of terminological and conceptual perils tied to the idea of the Supreme Being in African thought concerns the concept of 'creator'. The Ugandan scholar Okot p'Bitek warns against what he famously calls 'intellectual smuggling', that is, covertly importing foreign or western ideas and principles by seeming to discover them in indigenous African cultures. He tells the following story to illustrate his point.

In 1911, Italian Catholic priests put before a group of Acoli elders the question "Who created you?" and because the Luo language does not have an independent concept of *create* or *creation*, the question was rendered to mean, "Who moulded you?" But this was still meaningless, because human beings are born of their mothers. The elders told the visitors that they did not know. One of the elders [after more questioning by the missionaries] remembered that, although a person may be born

[36]E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London: SCM Press, 1973, 136.

[37]Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2013, 106. Of course, it should be noted that western theology and philosophy have also challenged quantitative measurement. An example of this is Trinitarian theology.

normally, when he is afflicted with tuberculosis of the spine, then he loses his normal figure, he gets 'moulded'. So, he said: "*Rubanga* is the one who moulds people." This is the name of the hostile spirit, which the Acoli believe causes the hunch or hump on the back. The representatives of Jesus Christ, then, began to preach that *rubanga* was the Holy Father who created the Acoli.[38]

For P'Bitek, this rather amusing tale carries an important insight. It reveals how the study of African religion can all too easily, even if unwittingly, end up 'Hellenizing' African deities. The Acoli language has no word to capture the theistic idea of 'creator'. Moreover, as Wiredu explains, even when an African people do have a concept for creator God, e.g., the Akan, this is usually not in the sense of a God who creates *ex nihilo* but something approaching a cosmic designer, not too dissimilar to Plato's demiurge in the *Timaeus*.[39] Against the 'intellectual smuggling' of Greek metaphysical concepts, thinkers such as P'Bitek argue that "African peoples may describe their deities as 'strong' but not 'omnipotent'; 'wise' not 'omniscient'; 'old' not 'eternal'; 'great' not 'omnipresent'."[40] For P'Bitek, such conceptual vigilance enables better expression of the beliefs of ordinary Africans (rather than African scholars trained in the western tradition). In addition, I suggest that such conceptual elucidation can offer exciting new perspectives for the philosophical discussion of African traditional religions. The theistic problem of evil, for example, at one level recedes in the African context but the question of evil and suffering might well re-emerge insofar as human destiny is bound up with deity.

The task of 'conceptual decolonization' – whereby those concepts shaping the traditional beliefs of various African peoples are extricated (as far as possible) from western

[38]Okot P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship*, New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011, 30.

[39]Wiredu, "African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View," 41.

[40]P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religion*, 42.

frameworks of understanding – must be the first step towards an African philosophy of religion. But what should be the next? It might be tempting to construct an African philosophy of religion that addresses the same set of questions preoccupying analytic and/or (European) continental philosophy of religion – for example, questions concerning the existence of God, the problem of evil, the immortality of the soul, the rationality of religious belief, the problem of ontotheology, the (im)possibility of forgiveness or the gift, etc. But, as Richard King points out, comparative approaches to the philosophy of religion cannot simply be a matter of "extending the range of religions to be examined philosophically," for this is to presume what counts as philosophy and religion, which inevitably slides into treating western accounts of these as normative.[41] If we are to take the sort of 'conceptual decolonization' indicated above seriously, then the very topography of philosophy of religion must be transformed. In both the analytic and continental traditions, philosophy of religion typically focuses on abstract, theoretical matters concerning religious beliefs and metaphysical commitments. However, as Lartey reminds us, African religion is less oriented around beliefs, dogmas and creeds, emphasizing instead "the performance of powerful rituals and the expression of communal solidarity through participation in such rituals."[42] Given this, an African philosophy of religion would direct its attention to the concrete practices of traditional African religions.

At this point, it may be feared that philosophy of religion will be 'reduced' to religious studies or anthropology. Yet, I think that King is right when he maintains that the wish to protect disciplinary borders is a "*peculiarly* western way of

[41]Richard King, "Philosophy of Religion as Border Control: Globalization and the Decolonization of the 'Love of Wisdom' (*philosophia*)" in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, Purushottama Bilimoria, Andrew B. Irvine, and Dordrecht, eds., London: Springer, 2009, 46.

[42]Lartey, *Postcolonializing God*, 28.

dividing up the world."[43] However, it is my view that an African philosophy of religion is necessarily a cross-cultural philosophy; thus, it is not the mapping of wholly virgin territory but rather reorienting philosophy of religion as a modern and western enterprise so that it may witness its own entanglement with colonized peoples who offer alternative perspectives that can reframe and renew it in profound ways.

4. Conclusion

Introducing students to African philosophy is just one way in which curriculum design in undergraduate philosophy can address its prevailing whiteness. Indeed, African philosophy may be most revelatory of the whiteness of philosophy as a discipline, for in representing that which has long been held to be a contradiction in terms, it highlights the very setting of those terms according to the mandates of racist and colonialist ideologies. However, in this essay, I wanted to avoid the idea of an authentic African philosophy that risks romanticizing and essentializing African thought. The trouble is that the attempt to challenge the endemic Eurocentrism in philosophy, which is reflected in undergraduate philosophy curricula, is fraught with pedagogical questions regarding *how* that which has been figured as other by the (historically) dominant discourse may be construed and taught. Are non-western philosophical traditions to be presented as supplementary (read 'tokenistic') material that simply offers different answers to the same set of questions and methods characteristic of western philosophy? Or, are they to be presented as exotic modes of thought held up as emblematic of a more enchanted or primal way of life; or, as expressing an authentic precolonial reality? The various dangers faced here – subordination, assimilation, idealisation, homogenization – are precisely the ongoing aftershocks of the colonialist project. The work of 'conceptual decolonization' can be undertaken not in order to uncover pristine, precolonial truths but to trace the discontinuities, impasses, and intersections of traditions historically embroiled with each

[43]King, "Philosophy of Religion as Border Control," 45.

other along lines of power and conflict. In this essay, I hope to have begun to show how 'conceptual decolonization' with respect to African traditional religions can enable practising philosophy of religion differently in ways that do not orbit the same old problematics but invite a renegotiation of the field altogether. Such a renegotiation need not precipitate the collapse of philosophy of religion but rather is the occasion of its very renewal.