TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF PHILOSOPHIES:
FOUR TURNS, WITH REFERENCE TO THE AFRICAN CONTEXT.

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Introduction

This paper attempts to sketch out the interdisciplinary agenda of an anthropology of philosophies from within the African context. Like Collins' sociology of philosophies (Collins 1998), it is a project that can be applied globally to the various regions of the world. The central interest here is to show how the documentation of philosophical discourse relates to the larger social and cultural context that individual thinkers, as producers and participants of such discourse, are embedded in. Whether expressed orally or in writing, philosophical reflections, questions, and statements always occur within a regional intellectual history and its specific schools of thought and traditions of knowledge, and with its internal divergent understandings and debates. In short, philosophical discourse is part of social life. Explicitly acknowledging and integrating this angle into research can only be fertile for the field of African philosophy. This is especially so due to the so-called oral character of many African societies, and the lack of written historical sources from within. Practices of anthropological fieldwork, such as the participant observation of local discourses of knowledge, interviews with significant intellectuals and thinkers, and the first-hand acquisition of knowledge on the cultural and social life concerned, can help to illuminate the understanding of the local philosophical field. Testimony of this are some important works on African philosophy for which fieldwork played a crucial role (e.g. Sodipo/Hallen 1997, Oruka 1990/1991).

Necessarily, this is an interdisciplinary agenda, and thus the argument for an anthropology of philosophical discourse is made in four turns, each focusing on a different interdisciplinary angle of cooperation and its contribution to the whole project. First, I sketch out the turn from classical positions of western philosophy towards this project. Secondly, I comment on the converging interests of cultural philosophy with an intercultural interest and the African philosophical debate. Thirdly, I describe the field of the anthropology of knowledge. And fourthly, I present examples from the anthropology of religion in Africa, as they are related to the emerging project of an anthropology of philosophies.

Turn one: From philosophy

From the philosophical side as an academic discipline, placing philosophy in the African cultural context and thus dealing with African philosophical practice does not necessarily pose a problem. If it is reasonable to say that philosophy begins with wonder or puzzlement, as Plato claimed, or if it is "time put into thought" as Hegel said, we are bound to expect philosophy in any kind of society. These classic definitions are loose and flexible while still emphasizing

a particular characteristic trait of philosophy taken to be crucial - awareness of fundamental uncertainties of life as instigator for conceptual quest, for Plato, and explicit historical consciousness, for Hegel[1] -, and have often been interpreted and put into various contexts of reflection upon society. As philosophy is defined formally here, these definitions present no problem when applied to other cultures - where forms of puzzlement and categories of time and thought matter as well -, and thus both definitions could potentially be used to describe different schools of thought and traditions of reasoning, whether in intra-cultural or transcultural perspectives.

Kant has developed an understanding of philosophy which can be helpful here: he differentiated between two conceptions of philosophy, a "worldly" and a "scholarly" one ("Philosophie im Weltbegriff" and "Philosophie im Schulbegriff") which in their interrelation form the whole. Thus, he helpfully distinguished the two axis that constitute philosophy as an innovative as well as an institutionalized conservative activity, i.e. an originally reflexive and a doctrinal aspect (1930, 753-755; KrV B866-868; also 1974, 25-30). The doctrinal Schulbegriff marks philosophy as a "system of knowledge" of scientific character, aimed at the systematic unity of knowledge in an established tradition; here, the teachings and rules of a school of thought are more and more finely interpreted, and thinkers are trained ("learning" the rules). Kant characterizes this aspect of philosophical knowledge as "historical", which for him is to mark the systematization and standardization of a certain genuine approach: a philosophical school is formed by students acquiring this knowledge, this "doctrine of skill" (1974, 28) second hand.

On the other hand, the reflexive Weltbegriff, the original "basis" of the meaning of the term, refers to those fundamental areas of knowledge which are of common "necessary interest to everyone". Here, the genuinely creative philosophical work takes place, namely "philosophizing", which means that a "doctrine of wisdom" is being formulated by the thinking individual. It is specifically worldly in that here the specialist has no prevalence over the common man: philosophical questions are principally of equal concern to all of us, and crucial innovative ideas are not necessarily initiated from within the scholarly realm. Unlike the historical scholarly knowledge, philosophizing cannot really be taught since it "can be learned only through practice and the use of one's own reason". This is why Kant concludes that philosophy, in the "true sense", is never a given but always a task ("aufgegeben"). For someone following this task, the available historical doctrines within the Schulbegriff can come in helpful as thought material and points of orientation: "every philosophical thinker builds his work, so to speak, on the ruins of another". Certainly, the availability of other attempts to create a philosophy, and thus the possibility of reference to them, helps in the construction of one's own. The existence of scholarly traditions makes it easier for the philosophizing individual to specify and clarify his point. But such traditions are not the necessary precondition for the initial development of truly philosophical thought in the Weltbegriff. Such thought is rather necessitated by fundamental questions on the nature of the existence of human beings that all members of this species, via their abilities of reasoning, find themselves confronted with: what can I know?, what ought I to do?, what may I hope?, and what is man?. These questions, signifying the various realms of the philosophical sub-

disciplines of metaphysics, morality, religion, and anthropology, together cover the whole field of philosophy which, overall, is embraced by anthropology because "the first three questions are related to the last" (29).

In summary then, philosophy is generally characterized by the two instances of a (possibly institutionalized) school of thought, and above all, ideas of fundamental renewal, expressed and initiated by individual thinkers, mostly in the context of and in relation to the former. Consequently, the heart of philosophical activity lies in the potential of individuals as 'self-thinkers' who are facing fundamental questions on their own existence; as such, it is principally open to all.

If convincing, this formal distinction is, in principle, applicable to any cultural context that human beings live in, in any part of the world, also to Africa. Here, as anywhere else, we might be able to identify various scholarly i.e. somehow institutionalized traditions of thought that teach 'doctrines of skill', and individual thinkers who develop their own 'doctrines of wisdom' in regard to the basic questions of human existence. Approaching African philosophical discourse in this way, the Kantian ambivalence of the concept of philosophy in its distinction between internal worldly and scholarly aspects can help as a guideline in looking for and identifying philosophical practice. Being formal, it can do this without predetermining any concrete form or shape that philosophical thought should take, i.e. it does not prescribe any content for any culturally specific practice of philosophizing. Such a non-derogatory conception of philosophy is useful for approaching existing institutionalized traditions ("systems") of knowledge in Africa, and since the historical knowledge

of this realm can be taught and learned, it might also be publically accessible or otherwise recordable by the philosophical field-worker or the philosophically minded anthropologist. On the other hand, individual reflexive people can be approached and their practice of theory observed, in cultural context (with regard to society, history, customs etc.): is it historical knowledge or genuinely innovative, is it critical or purely doctrinal? As is obvious, it is in the observation of the relation and interaction between the two spheres (or rather aspects) of scholarly and wordly conception of philosophy that a) any culturally specific tradition of knowledge can be identified, and that b) their internal discussions and further attempts by individual thinkers, to further and clarify knowledge and doctrines that have so far been evolved, can be appreciated. From a thorough or 'thick' description of the interaction of these two levels, then, an appropriate understanding of what one may call 'philosophical discourses' in African societies might be worked out.

Still, what differentiates philosophy from other forms of knowledge and experience has to be specified, and for this task I refer to Cassirer's approach of a philosophy of culture and its inherent conception of philosophy. Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms provides a fundamentally pluralistic framework for the analysis of the various symbolic cultural forms, such as myth, religion, science, and art which in their interrelation constitute culture as a whole, and for an analysis of the various empirical cultures on equal terms which is not reductive, but even calls for an awareness of specificities. Philosophy here is conceptualized as "critique and fulfilment of the symbolic forms" (Cassirer 1995, 265), marking a reflexive quality which is not a particular part of any symbolic form, but can provide insight into

each (such as philosophy of myth, religion, science, art etc.), and in its overall aim of critique focusses on the interrelations between the various symbolic forms in their constitution of culture. Thus, philosophical knowledge is not a separate form of knowledge, but is to be found in the sphere of each such form where it is self-reflexive in the sense that it conceives itself as part of the whole and in relation to all the other parts. Consequently, such self-critical and fundamentally theory-oriented knowledge, whatever symbolic form it takes as its starting-point (it cannot start from nowhere), is philosophical. This also means that there are various different but equally valid characters of philosophical thought, according to the original standpoint of symbolic formation (constitution of meaning) taken for reflection. Analogically, in regard to various cultures - which in their difference are constituted by their different internal interrelationships of symbolic forms -, it means that there are different but equally valid characters of philosophical traditions in different cultures (granted that in those cultures use is made of the human capacity of fundamental reflexivity, i.e. philosophical potential). Finally, it can therefore be observed that such an approach has the advantage of not only explaining but even expecting an internal pluralism of competing philosophical instances in every culture[2] , and also an external pluralism in regard to the various competing traditions of philosophical thought world-wide (cf. Kresse 1996).

Thus, the initial working-hypothesis, that distinct, culturally formed traditions of philosophical discourse are likely to be found in any culture is firmly supported by Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. From a philosophical perspective, therefore, an investigation into forms of philosophical discursivity in other cultures is methodologically secured. However, the

actual existence of such forms and their traditions must not be simply presupposed in theory (as is sometimes the case with philosophers advocating a multiplicity of cultural origins of philosophical discourse), it has to be empirically established through the documentation of philosophical texts and philosophical practices in their social context. The latter can well be seen as a task for anthropology, since it is necessary to establish an appropriate understanding of the social framework and the culturally determined meaning and relevance of philosophical reflexivity.

So far, the specific question of definition of philosophy has been highlighted. Only a formal and relatively loose definition[3] which is not predetermined by cultural content can assist in laying the foundations for an anthropology of philosophies. In earlier approaches to anthropology of religion, a similarly wide conception of religion has been favoured for analogous reasons (cf. Peel 1968, 10-18). The flexibility of such a definition grants applicability to various cultures, and is needed in order not to impose conceptual categories onto the cultural sphere dealt with.

The intercultural project: recognition of philosophical traditions

A recent seminal evaluation of the impact of African studies on philosophy comes to the conclusion that the interdisciplinary study of philosophical topics - from historical, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives - in the African context "provides a model for interdisciplinary analysis in philosophical work" on the whole (Mudimbe/Appiah 1993, 133). Although it would be too much to claim that a systematic model already exists in the area of African philosophy, a multidisciplinary approach is indeed

proving to be indispensible to the project of enquiring about and presenting specific philosophical traditions of Africa. The postcolonial African "search for identity", within philosophical discourse, involves not only the reflection upon the interrelationship of the various disciplines that philosophy has historically followed[4], in terms of institutional processes of self-cleansing and reassertion in regard to what it means to be "African" (Masolo 1994, 44f). It furthermore requires reflective contributions from those other disciplines in order to make the specificities of Africa's various philosophical traditions visible and understandable.

This is true particularly for anthropology, because of its role of illuminating the internal dynamics of the constitution of meaning and the processes of human interaction in other cultures. The search for philosophical identity in Africa has to be informed by concrete observation of material culture and its contextualization to the various layers of meaning of social life - this is where anthropology would become helpful, in terms of ethnography and as systematically oriented anthropological theory. In the reconstruction of the histories of the various (especially the oral) traditions of philosophical thought in Africa, philosophy, anthropology, and history must necessarily be partners.

The relation between philosophy and cultures, as referred to above, has become a problem of continually growing importance for philosophy itself: in philosophical as well as in other literature "the empire writes back" (to use a popular phrase) and contests the imposed foreign theoretical frameworks in which the subordinated culture is mostly presented as either a surpassed early stage of or as a superfluous appendix to the dominating culture. This might have caused representatives of Western philosophy to rethink their stance, and a growing awareness that "we owe equal respect to all cultures" (Taylor 1994, 66) seems to have evolved. This claim, however, should be understood as a moral task rather than as an asserted truth, as a fair starting-point for empirical inquiries and not as a metaphysical final word in this matter. Specifically when regarding another, stronger claim which is often seen as linked to or implied in the above, i.e. that all cultures have intellectual histories and even philosophical traditions of equal rank, it is not permissible to simply accept this claim - not out of good will and not for the sake of political correctness. Instead, the concrete and complex situation in each particular case has to be investigated. What is called for, on a theoretical level, is thinking the relations between philosophy and culture as immanently pluralistic, without giving up the terminological coherence of the concepts "philosophy" and "culture" per se: comparable, but distinct and unique, cultures produce distinct and unique traditions of reflexive practices and modes of discursive expression, in which self-assertion and conceptual structurization of the cultures takes place. It is in this way that various culture-correlating philosophical traditions and philosophies come into being. But up to now, such a politics of recognition within the field of philosophy has not been established. It has to be fought and argued for, and from within the African philosophical context eminent contributions to such a cross-cultural praxis of philosophical interaction on equal terms are expected (cf. Mudimbe/Appiah 1993, 133f; Moore 1996, 3). On the way, philosophers "able to use other languages in philosophical thought, in particular, languages which are very different fom their own" are necessary proponents to establish such a praxis (Wiredu/ Kresse 1997, 42). The utilization of local

languages as central medium for philosophical fieldwork, and the usage of some methods of anthropological enquiry, can assist in approaching and achieving this intercultural goal for philosophical thought.

Turn two: from the African philosophical discussion to anthropology

The earlier deadlock in African philosophy between the camps of "traditionalists" and "modernists" (cf. Bodunrin 1985) has been surmounted, or at least one can say that the opposition between these two groups no longer constitutes a fundamental obstacle to future research. The heated ideological debate between so-called "ethnophilosophers" and their critics (cf. Hountondji 1991, 1996) has sobered down, and by now it seems obvious that an either-or division between the options of describing folk wisdom and culturally based world views, or dealing with scientifically orientated written discourses does not adequately represent the relevant issues in Africa. Theoretical approaches with the character of a "third alternative" (Odera Oruka 1991, 43) between these two poles have been developed, and they seem to grant the most promising perspective for further research on the documentation and reconstruction of philosophical traditions in Africa. For instance, they investigate culturally specific African conceptions of self and world within a consciously chosen methodological framework, such as analytical philosophy (Hallen/Sodipo 1997, Gyekye 1995, Wiredu 1996), or hermeneutics, where theories of understanding in the African context have been formulated (Okere 1983, Serequeberhan 1994, Janz 1996). Or, as in Odera Oruka's sage philosophy project, they have concerned themselves with the documentation and interpretation of statements of individual sages within their

social context (Oruka 1991, Graness/ Kresse 1997).

The African philosophical discussion has now taken a pragmatic step towards anthropology, a discipline which formerly was often regarded with contempt, due to its links with colonial administration (cf. p'Bitek 1971, Asad 1973) and because of its inherent conviction of an evolutionary, hierarchical order of the various human societies, from the "primitive" (African) to the "modern" European (cf. Kuper 1993). This of course often included an a priori assertion of the impossibility of culturally immanent traditions of "real" philosophy in Africa, an assertion which was followed almost consistently, throughout the colonial period and beyond, in anthropological writings on African thought systems. It often went hand in hand with a paternalistic presentation (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937, and Tempels 1959, but also Douglas 1966), speaking "for the native" from a higher position, an attitude paradoxically taken up at times by Africans themselves, mostly missionary scholars (e.g. Kagame 1985).

The vehement insistence of many African philosophers that philosophy is a universal form of human knowledge and practice, an insistence also on common human principles underlying any observable social action in any culture, is only too understandable. This is so even if it does not coincide with the current discourse of "postmodernism", which, as Appiah has pointed out, sometimes is just a new version of the old paternalistic speaking "for the others" already inherent in colonial discourse (Appiah 1992, 137-157). On what grounds indeed should the claim of "having philosophy", which in European history has been taken as a proud indication of the complexity of culture, be denied to any other culture right from the outset? In Africa as elsewhere

reason and tradition are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, the competing traditions of reasoning should be analysed and evaluated (Hountondji 1983).

The current pragmatic tendency of African philosophy to look again at anthropology, and to refer to its ethnographic data, seems to be the outcome also of an internal differentiation in the growing discipline: the more specific the issues treated in African philosophy become, the more one accepts the necessity to use anthropological knowledge which can provide the culturally or socially specific information needed for philosophical interpretation[5].

Such a systematic need for an interdisciplinary "philosophical ethnography" (MacGaffey 1981, 262/263) had already been described years before, in a seminal interdisciplinary review of research on ideology and belief in Africa in the various disciplines of anthropology, religious studies, oriental studies, history, African political ideology, theology, and philosophy. While simplifying some issues in the discussion of African philosophy, he noted promising emerging works in this area, and progressive discussions among Africans towards it. Now that a large extent of the previous concurrence between theology and philosophy (257) has been reduced, the ethnographic shallowness of philosophical works that MacGaffey criticizes has decreased and philosophers themselves display awareness to integrate concrete cultural information into their studies (e.g. Wiredu 1996, Gyekye 1995). Overall, however, the lack of an accepted "common framework" (228) between the disciplines is still observable today. Contributing to the construction of such a framework is attempted here, while moving towards an interdisciplinary cooperation of philosophy and anthropology. This is supported by two recent newly edited

classics of African philosophy: both Hallen (1997, afterword), noting a "general lack of technical philosophical content in anthropological literature" (134), and Hountondji (1996, forword), observing a "change" within anthropology while acknowledging its potential contribution to this area (xix, viii), indicate the systematic interest and skeptical cautionsness which is necessary for a fertile interaction between the disciplines.

Turn three: from an anthropology of knowledge to an anthropology of philosophies

Current reflections upon the future of anthropological knowledge have led to a renewed interest in philosophical traditions of other cultures, especially in Africa (Moore 1996). It is seen as a serious shortcoming of anthropology that, even when occupying itself with extra-European "modes of thought" (e.g. Forde 1954; Horton/Finnegan 1973) or local theories, it worked under the assumption "that the theories of non-western peoples have no scope outside their context" (Moore, 2) and thus were not to be taken into account for cross-cultural evaluation and furtherance of theories of knowledge on the whole. But if anthropology does not want, ultimately, to remain entangled in a Eurocentric stance, it must begin to treat individual members of other cultures "as producers of social science theory" and not only, and per definitionem, as "producers of local knowledge" (*ibid.*, 3). In other words, in dealing with traditions of knowledge in various cultural contexts, a comparative dimension contributing to an overall theory of human knowledge and a self-critical attitude within scientific enquiry always has to be included. Indeed, in any culture "an ongoing auto-critique of concepts, notions and forms of argument" (*ibid.*, 6) might be found: if this kind of reflexivity can be taken as the constitutive trait of

modern knowledge as well as of philosophy, the conclusion is simply that these intellectual traditions must be identified and understood in their respective contexts. Thus there are also indications from within anthropological theory that something like an anthropology of philosophies has already indirectly been called for.

Such a call seems overdue and can also be confirmed from the perspective of an historical overview of anthropological theory where it has been observed that until the 1980s very "little effort has been put toward understanding how society and culture themselves are produced and reproduced through human intention and interaction" (Ortner 1994, 402). The failure to focus on the conscious shaping of culture and society by specific individual human beings has been particularly hazardous in African anthropology. The combination of European prejudices about the intellectual incapacities of Africans (cf. Hegel, Levy-Bruhl et al.) with the rigorous and immensely rich study of the African continent under the paradigm of structural functionalism had ill effects: due to its focus on collective functional dynamics of society, anthropology had little to say on individual figures (cf. Falk-Moore 1993), thus reinforcing the cliché of the African as a passive constituent of a collective social entity. Anthropology in Africa, though producing insights into the functioning of social dynamics, was partly guilty of simplifying societies; it "levelled" African societies by failing to grasp their "internal dynamics" in terms of a possible pluralism (Hountondji 1983, 137). When presenting them under the banner of the "traditional" as opposed to the "modern", as "closed" systems, i.e. without developed awareness of potential theoretical alternatives, being opposed to the "open" character of scientifically orientated

societies (Horton 1970, 153ff), the advantage of a handy typification was probably bought at the expense of being able to account for possible differences of theory within 'traditional' thought in Africa.

A concern about the conscious shaping of meaning within specific contexts and the constant creation and recreation of culture by individual actors is evidenced in "symbolic anthropology" (established by Geertz et al.), and it is from this action-orientated approach that various disciples have been working on the formulation of sub-projects, concerned with cross-cultural theories of the "person", of the "self", and of "emotions" within a general theory of culture. The relation between knowledge and practice is central to studies in this tradition, recently highlighted in Lambek's elaborations on a cross-cultural theory of trance and spirit possession based on fieldwork in Mayotte. The major principle of orientation for an anthropology of knowledge that Lambek pursues is the strict adherence to the internal cultural criteria of "knowledge" and its specific forms of social practice (1993, 9). The envisaged anthropology of philosophies would subscribe to this principle rule, but nevertheless it would not want to give up the quest for a globally applicable understanding of philosophical knowledge, as differentiated from mythical, religious, or scientific knowledge, and incorporating the internal dynamics of possibly several forms of reflexivity. As discussed above, this object seems achievable, using the framework of Cassirer's philosophy of culture which is in the background of Geertz's symbolic anthropology.

Geertz himself, though criticized for being too casual in his own ethnographic work, seems to be one of few anthropologists with both philosophical background and

interest in explicitly observing distinctly philosophical activity in the cultures they study. Vividly, Geertz described the widespread "intellectual activity" and "philosophical obsession" of Javanese people (1993b, 60), while on the other hand noting the small extent of "philosophical sophistication" in Balinese religion (1993a, 175). How far these statements are adequate cannot be judged here, the point is that a sensitivity for philosophical reflection as human activity potentially to be found in any culture is apparent in these observations. In both cases "philosophical" is used according to the definition above: it refers to a locally embedded reflection of local knowledge, a local reflexive discourse on forms of local knowledge.

Crick (1982) in a survey of anthropology of knowledge, and Asad (1979) on the analysis of ideology, make important points for such anthropological investigation of the philosophical sphere, situated in other cultures, possibly other "cultures of science" (cf. Franklin 1995). Understanding anthropology of knowledge as "a reminder of what anthropology is centrally concerned with" (287), Crick emphasises the intimate relation between anthropology of knowledge "and the needed reflexivity in the discipline as a whole" (308). Arguing from the perspective of African divination, Peek joins in with this call (1991, 10), regretting that African philosophy has so far not dealt with divination (13). Anthropology of knowledge is thus characterized as part of the philosophical core of the discipline, and I understand this call for a stronger philosophical stance in anthropology also as a call for a closer cooperation between anthropology and philosophy. While Asad points at the ideological character and context of anthropological research which is especially precarious when occupied with ideologies of other cultures, he also

highlights that "looking for and reproducing the essential meanings of another society's (...) should be problematized far more than it has been" (1979, 623), so that the particularities of the ideologies dealt with will no more be reduced to de-contextualized generalizations.

During the last two decades anthropology has moved towards these directions. Some dense and cautiously written ethnographies which use local terminology and systematic explanation of fundamental understandings of society as central guidelines have been produced[6]; and anthropological theory is meanwhile stressing "relationality" and "positionality" as key concepts for anthropological enquiry[7], indicating a definite shift away from strict and essentialist categories. An anthropology of philosophies could take off from here, taking advantage of the fact that relationality is of central concern to Cassirer's cultural philosophy. Strathern understands culture to be "a relational term" (1995, 157) - just as Cassirer (1995, 245) -, thus "the explicitness of (...) relational premises" (Strathern 1995, 166) of anthropological enquiry is shared. For this interdisciplinary project such a common premise is crucial: it methodologically unifies and forms a basis for the agenda. Since "philosophy" is defined in relation to "culture", philosophical discourse and inquiry are understood as culture-relational activities.

Turn four: from anthropology of religion to anthropology of philosophies, in Africa

In 1971, Okot p'Bitek was to some extent justified in his general reproach of Western anthropological studies of African religions, saying the latter had "never been the object of study in their own right"

(102). Today, however, he would probably not insist on his verdict anymore, for, as another formerly fierce critic has observed, "anthropology is not what it used to be" (Hountondji 1996, xix). In the field of research on traditions and current practices of African thought and belief systems several particularly sensitive approaches have evolved which strive to present African religious practices and institutions "as they really are", i.e. conceived and experienced from within society (p'Bitek 1971, 7). In this section, I shall present some such examples. They are related to my interest in philosophical discourse and will be taken as methodological and ethnographic reference points.

Religion and philosophy, as fundamental forms of knowledge and of practice, have always been closely interrelated. This can be seen in the European history of philosophy which was basically linked to and embedded in religious discourse, until a fundamental "secular" break during the 17th and 18th centuries separated the two. Similarly, this can be shown for other reflective traditions which are always determined by the cultural framework within which this takes place. In the European context it seems relatively easy to differentiate between the two forms, religion being defined with reference to an ultimate fundamental belief projected toward another, separate and divine world, and philosophy, being characterized by the lack of such a belief, and by its questioning attitude in reasoning and striving to make sense of a reality that often seemed irreconcilable with rationality. However, in other cultural regions the differentiation might not be made with the same clarity. A famous example is Buddhism: even specialists find it hard to agree whether it is philosophy or religion, both, or neither— here, the question whether the notion of 'God' is necessary to call a fundamental doctrine a religion, is a crucial matter.

In Africa, things are again different since "there is no other-wordliness in African religious thought" (p'Bitek, 109) in the sense of an aspiration to paradise in the afterlife, and there is often no High-God. Generally speaking, African religious practice is oriented towards this world and the here and now while utilizing mediating capacities of religious specialists in order to communicate with and invoke help from another, spiritual but ever-present sphere, from which the ancestors and other spirits would participate in the life of the living community.

Although Islam is one of the dominant and pervasive religious forms in African societies, it very often "did not supersede (...) indigenous ceremonial" life, as Trimingham says for East Africa (1964, 180) but remained a constitutive part of it. What I would like to put across is that although religious practices and beliefs in various cultures apparently differ, they are still open to a common theoretical framework which can supply a comparative basis for a philosophical quest in the different cultures. An explicit, critical explanation of the bases of practices by the way of conceptual reasoning always constitutes a philosophical praxis. Some ethnographies, when engaging in explicit discursive interaction with interpreting members of the society in question in order to find out about the set-up and the reasons for the set-up of religious practices, can already be seen as starting point for an anthropology of philosophies as I understand it. The reflexive mechanisms of (a certain aspect of) social life are being examined. In attempting to understand the basis of specific forms of ritual, ethnographers necessarily have to discuss with individual specialists in the theory of the religious praxis of the culture concerned, and here, the process of reasonable explanation constitutes a philosophical discourse while illuminating

religious practice. Now, although this already points at the philosophical potential of some religious experts in (potentially) every community, the foremost interest for an anthropology of philosophies does not lie in the philosophical statement instigated by the inquisitive provocation of the anthropologist, but in a culturally internal practice of philosophical discourse between members of the community itself.

In this respect, the anthropology of religion has always had philosophical flavours once it could claim to give an adequate contextual account of the basic ideas of a society. In this sense, one might speak of a "hidden tradition" of anthropology of philosophies in anthropology itself. For instance, Levi-Strauss's characterization of Boas' Quesalid, the Kwakiutl healer as not a healer but a "free thinker" (1993, 178), sceptical of the healing practices that he performed and his folk believed in, and not himself part of the "social consensus" (180) on healing procedures which he himself transformed, can be understood as hinting at the neglect of a potentially fruitful investigation. And although Levi-Strauss himself takes interest and pleasure in a socio-psychological reflection on the constitution of Quesalid's status as an accepted and admired healer, for me this also seems to be a hint at the neglected category of individual free thinkers in anthropological research - and free thinking has been taken as a characteristic criterion of philosophical enquiry, whether by Kant or Odera Oruka.

More explicitly, Victor Turner's "Muchona the Hornet, interpreter of religion" (1967, 131-150) gives us, without actually emphasizing this, a personal portrait of a "true philosopher" (132) who was a knowledgeable outsider in his own society and also at the same time a major source and central discussant for Turner's theory of Ndembu ritual. Not only do we in this text obtain a vivid impression of the social status of a local intellectual, "philosophy don" who seems destined to be permanently misconceived as a "witchdoctor" within his own society (150), but the discursive process of intensive discussions between specialists and anthropologist is revealed, which led to Turner's rather sober and objective-sounding interpretations of Ndembu ritual which he presented in other, more famous texts.

In the West African context, Fardon (1990) places, what for Turner remains more of a noteworthy anecdote, into central focus of attention in regard to how his ethnography on Chamba ritual and religion came into being. He introduces the two main 'informants', both sages of considerable caliber, right at the beginning, before presenting his interpretations which were largely dependent on mediation by and discussion with those informants. But he also elaborates on the specific task of the ethnographer to be aware and come to terms with various forms of mis-stated, understated, and unstatable knowledge in regard to what informants present to the anthropologist. Apart from the methodological value, this manner of presentation shows a sensitivity for both the vulnerable and fertile intermingling of philosophical frameworks of the anthropologist and local intellectuals. Fardon is rightfully anxious to convey the conditions of the constitution of anthropological knowledge and aware of the inherent possible shortcomings (i.e. misunderstandings, simplifications or distortions) these could lead to. The fact that the process of the problematic constitution of ethnographic knowledge, partly due to overlapping or even clashing basic frameworks of understanding, is explicitly integrated into its presentation secures a kind of ethnographic integrity.

Fardon presents various central aspects of a common philosophical anthropology of the Chamba, fundamental self-conceptions of human life as expressed in ritual practice.

These, as it is with Turner's, stay linked to a communal wordview, and the wisdom and sensitivity of the individual thinkers who inspired the ethnographer and served as his sources in the ethnography inevitably become irretraceable and inaccessible for the reader (as Fardon himself points out in his introductory chapter). In contradistinction, the documentation of the exact phrasing of the reasonings and statements of such individuals, whenever possible, could characterize an anthropology of philosophies. The goal would be to provide texts of indigenous reflexive discourse - as Maupoil (1943), Janzen and MacGaffey (1974), and Brenner (1984) did - which can be further interpreted and discussed. The ethnographer's interpretation can be principally followed, approved of or dismissed by the reader who himself develops his own interpretation of the individual's reflexive interpretation of a certain aspect of life.

In this respect, Wyatt McGaffey's ethnography on "Religion and society in Central Africa" (1986) is stimulating, since he relates religion in Bakongo society in a very detailed manner. Its three constitutive parts are a description of social structure and its fundamentals in cosmology, the "conscious elaboration" that no society can do without (3), a description of the religious practices evolved in this context and finally constituting "religion as a political system" (169ff), and an account on the historical continuities and changes of religious movements in Bakongo society which pays explicit, systematic tribute to the recognition of the historically grown categories of religious sages and their communal functions in modern conditions (189ff). An internal dualism of Bakongo-cosmology is carefully depicted. MacGaffey uses extensive quotes of the Bakongo to illustrate and prove his points from within the social perspective he observes, and overall his way of relating fundamental structures of religious knowledge and practice to social life provides important marks for orientation. The same can be said of Lambek's ethnography of knowledge and healing practices on Mayotte (1993). His study exemplifies plastically how practices of spirit possession do not only not oppose rational enquiry but might sometimes even enhance it, as when the healer consults a spirit for further information about adequate treatment, or when a conversation or discussion takes place between spirit and spouse of the possessed. In both cases, the communication with the 'spirit' is believed to lead to a fuller, more complete understanding not only of the patient or 'possessed', but also of the nature of healing and human beings in general. The acceptance of spirits as unquestioned part of cultural reality is similarly observeable in many other African cultures, such as for example Swahili culture (cf. Caplan 1997, Middleton 1992), and Lambek's work might provide useful guidelines as to strategies for dealing with healers and their knowledge, even within the framework of an anthropology of philosophies.

A further illuminating example of a combined study of mediumship, its social function of mediating and balancing power dynamics, and how contemporary revolutionary struggles for political independence in Zimbabwe were integrated into such mechanisms is given by David Lan (1985). Other important studies of African religious practice can be made fertile for the current project in regard to the ethnographic tasks of

illuminating the nature of the complex historical background of the school of thought under observation (Fernandez 1982), or of "making the hidden seen" while relating ritual practices of knowledge to their theoretical consideration (Werbner 1989).

With the focus on the intellectual discourse among Tanzanian peasants rather than on religion Feiermann, following Gramsci's definition of intellectual activity, supports the point that "all people are intellectuals" but only some people have a leading, organizational function as intellectuals (Feiermann 1990, 18). With this, he brings us back to Kant's conception of philosophy *im Weltbegriff* referred to above. Everyone is regarded as a potential philosopher but in a fully socially accepted sense only those who also take part in the institutionally founded *Schulbegriff*-tradition. I agree with Feiermann's conviction that "the study of intellectuals and their discourse", in whatever society they are dealt with, constitutes "a strategy for writing" about people of other societies without being in danger of reducing them to ethnographic objects, samples of otherness (38).

All of the studies mentioned and possibly many more, I suggest, are open to explicitly philosophical readings. And such readings themselves can contribute to root the study of African philosophical discourse in the culturally specific intellectual and religious discourse that has been portrayed in depth for some regions. Studies departing from here will extend the boundaries of anthropological research, on African discourses of knowledge and religion in their relation to practice. With emphasis on individual thinkers in their social contexts, such an anthropological outlook can also be made fertile for research on African philosophical discourse, then and now. While in my own

recent research and fieldwork, I have been approaching philosophical discourse in the East African Swahili context - where the studies of Parkin (e.g. 1984, 1989, 1995a and 1995b), el-Zein (1974), Pouwels (1987), amongst others, provide orientation - that concrete project will be elaborated upon elsewhere. Here, the main task was to make an argument for the interdisciplinary project of an anthropology of philosophies, but also, to present an existing body of literature in the study of Africa which can provide fertile stimulation, and some points of departure for research in this vein.

Conclusion

Following the suggestions of this paper, the perspective for research on living philosophical discourses in African societies opens up in several directions. The social relevance of thinkers and their (philosophical) statements can be adequately assessed and documented only with reference to the complex totality of social contexts, and in establishing such references, the utilization of anthropological methods can be crucial. Furthermore, investigating historically given cultural forms of discourse that are potential mediators of local philosophical enquiry, and thus crucial to its character, can be directed along these lines, by philosophically and anthropologically informed studies. In this way, culturally specific genres of reflexive and critical discourse can be approached as possible forms of philosophical expression. Claims have very often been made offhand that proverbs, riddles, and certain forms of poetry "contain" or mediate philosophical statements. But, if such claims should mean more than the simple illustration of a common social knowledge or the simplistic ethnophilosophical assumption of "collective philosophies", few studies have seriously attempted to work out the

philosophical character or the philosophical potential of very specific African genres of socially embedded discourse. And even if the possibility of the mediation of criticism and philosophical critique in such forms has been approached in different ways, as, for example, for Akan proverbs (Gyekye 1995) or Zulu praise-poetry (Kresse 1998), its real documentation would still require one step further. If this is to be achieved, that is, studied and discussed in detail, the results would also provide guidelines and clues for the reconstruction of the various philosophical traditions and histories in oral societies of Africa.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Which he, as is widely known, claimed Africans did not have (cf. Hegel 1928, pp 135-145).

2. For 'internal pluralism' as central feature to philosophical thought in relation to social life, also see Hountondji 1996 (especially chapter 7), and 1983.

3. However, still exact enough to distinguish philosophy from religion, science, art, and myth.

4. Namely history, literature, political science and sociology, in that order.

5. It is, however, ironic that those anthropologists who refrained from using any contemporary approach of political philosophy as a foundation for their own studies on political systems in Africa (Evans-Pritchard/Fortes 1940, introduction) are now among the first sources of a philosophical article dealing with an evaluation of the consensus-principle in African societies (Wiredu 1996, pp 182-190).

6. E.g. Rosaldo 1980, Valentine 1984, Beidelmann 1993.

7. Cf. introductions to Fardon 1995, Moore 1996, Strathern 1995, here also pp 153-170.

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