

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
delivered to the VIth Annual Conference of
The International Society for
African Philosophy and Studies (ISAPS)
held at the University of Nairobi,
Nairobi, Kenya, 10th - 12th March, 2000

Introduction

I would like to express my gratitude to Gail Presbey and the Local Organizing Committee for a hugely impressive programme and putting together the whole conference. It couldn't have been possible to do this without the institutional support of the University of Nairobi. The presence here of the principal academic officers capped with the attendance of the Vice Chancellor of the University is an eloquent testimony of the depth of the institutional support that this Conference has received. I would like to thank the Vice Chancellor in particular for making time to be at this opening ceremony.

Additionally, given the reputation of philosophy and its practitioners for being almost incomprehensible, a notoriety that enough of us in the profession cultivate, it is even more impressive that you will, one and all, honour us with your presence. On behalf of the Society, I wish to thank you.

In the rest of this address, I shall devote my attention to the history of this Society and why we need it more now than ever before.

History and Activities

ISAPS was founded by four of us, Tunde Bewaji, Leke Adeofe, Nkiru Nzegwu, and myself in 1995. You will soon see why the iteration of names is important. In our different ways, each one of us had been troubled by the presentation of African Philosophy in North America where we all, with the exception of Bewaji who works in Jamaica, are now earning our living. We became tired of being asked everywhere we went whether or not we had read V. Y. Mudimbe or were familiar with Anthony Appiah. For we knew then that those who asked us that question repeatedly did not know better: they thought that what they knew of African Philosophy was all that there is. We knew better because as undergraduates in Nigeria in the 1970s when the founding debates of professional university-inflected African Philosophy were unfolding, the *dramatis personae* were radically different. Some of them were our teachers; others who were not directly our teachers were vicariously so through their writings. Our direct teachers included the following: J. Olubi Sodipo, Peter Bodunrin, Robin Horton, Moses Makinde, Barry Hallen, Innocent Onyewuenyi, Olabiyi Yai. The surrogate teachers included but are by no means limited to: Henry Odera Oruka, Marcien Towa, Paulin Hountondji, Albert Mosley, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye. Certainly the founding debates occurred within the pages of *Second Order* and *Thought and Practice* where issues concerning the existence of 'African Philosophy', what it is, and how it is done, agitated some of our teachers and, by extension, us. By the 1980s, African Philosophy had moved from meta-questions

about its criteria to some serious substantive philosophizing in several African keys. It was an awareness of this important body of work that we found lacking in our country of sojourn. At the same time we were confronted with a continuing but unseemly predilection in the United States with questions of what is and what is not African Philosophy. It was against this background that we dedicated ISAPS from its inception to becoming a forum where substantive African Philosophy that is being done in Africa and other parts of the world is aired and where the contributions of our original pioneers or the continuing engagement with their work will not be an adjunct but will remain at the core of the discipline.

I am proud to say that through thick and thin, we have soldiered on these past five years with considerable success to keep the flag of the Society flying. The inaugural conference was held in Jamaica in 1995. The next one held at Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York, USA, in 1996. The University of the North, Sovenga, South Africa, hosted us in 1997, and it is a pleasure to have South African representatives at this conference. Towson State University in Towson, Maryland, USA welcomed us in 1998. I had the singular privilege of welcoming us to my home institution, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, USA, in 1999. In all these, we have been concerned to ensure that African Philosophy does not reduce into an incestuous exchange among those of us privileged to teach in North America and turning its homeland into a periphery. Nor do we ever wish to omit the recognition of Africa's Diaspora and the presence of the discipline in its communities. We hope that the opportunity to go back to the Caribbean and Central and South Africa will offer itself again soon. Hence, the critical importance of this meeting in Kenya. We have been working to expand our membership. Given that our annual conference is the only thing we do right now, it has been difficult establishing a stable membership. It is our hope that we shall soon be able to publish a newsletter detailing activities and containing the occasional piece by members.

It has also been difficult for us to complete the dialectic of presentation and dissemination of papers given at our conferences over the years.

Initially, we expected that we'd be able to put them out as special issues of the journal, *Quest*, but that has not worked out. We have decided that self-help is best help and our plans have reached advanced stages towards the launching of an online journal sponsored by the Society. Some of the materials we may now be able to put out in a special issue of another online journal with which I am involved *West Africa Review*.

Please encourage others to join us. And please volunteer to host the next annual conference.

I thank you for your attention.

Olufemi Taiwo
President.