African Philosophy
PHI 307

University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre
Open and Distance Learning Course Series Development

General Editor: Prof. Bayo Okunade

Vice-Chancellor's Message

The Distance Learning Centre is building on a solid tradition of over two decades of service in the provision of External Studies Programme and now Distance Learning Education in Nigeria and beyond. The Distance Learning mode to which we are committed is providing access to many deserving Nigerians in having access to higher education especially those who by the nature of their engagement do not have the luxury of full time education. Recently, it is contributing in no small measure to providing places for teeming Nigerian youths who for one reason or the other could not get admission into the conventional universities.

These course materials have been written by writers specially trained in ODL course delivery. The writers have made great efforts to provide up to date information, knowledge and skills in the different disciplines and ensure that the materials are user-friendly.

In addition to provision of course materials in print and e-format, a lot of Information Technology input has also gone into the deployment of course materials. Most of them can be downloaded from the DLC website and are available in audio format which you can also download into your mobile phones, IPod, MP3 among other devices to allow you listen to the audio study sessions. Some of the study session materials have been scripted and are being broadcast on the university's Diamond Radio FM 101.1, while others have been delivered and captured in audio-visual format in a classroom environment for use by our students. Detailed information on availability and access is available on the website. We will continue in our efforts to provide and review course materials for our courses.

However, for you to take advantage of these formats, you will need to improve on your I.T. skills and develop requisite distance learning Culture. It is well known that, for efficient and effective provision of Distance learning education, availability of appropriate and relevant course materials is a *sine qua non*. So also, is the availability of multiple plat form for the convenience of our students. It is in fulfilment of this, that series of course materials are being written to enable our students study at their own pace and convenience.

It is our hope that you will put these course materials to the best use.

Prof. Abel Idowu Olayinka
Vice-Chancellor

Foreword

As part of its vision of providing education for "Liberty and Development" for Nigerians and the International Community, the University of Ibadan, Distance Learning Centre has recently embarked on a vigorous repositioning agenda which aimed at embracing a holistic and all encompassing approach to the delivery of its Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. Thus we are committed to global best practices in distance learning provision. Apart from providing an efficient administrative and academic support for our students, we are committed to providing educational resource materials for the use of our students. We are convinced that, without an up-to-date, learner-friendly and distance learning compliant course materials, there cannot be any basis to lay claim to being a provider of distance learning education. Indeed, availability of appropriate course materials in multiple formats is the hub of any distance learning provision worldwide.

In view of the above, we are vigorously pursuing as a matter of priority, the provision of credible, learner-friendly and interactive course materials for all our courses. We commissioned the authoring of, and review of course materials to teams of experts and their outputs were subjected to rigorous peer review to ensure standard. The approach not only emphasizes cognitive knowledge, but also skills and humane values which are at the core of education, even in an ICT age.

The development of the materials which is on-going also had input from experienced editors and illustrators who have ensured that they are accurate, current and learner-friendly. They are specially written with distance learners in mind. This is very important because, distance learning involves non-residential students who can often feel isolated from the community of learners.

It is important to note that, for a distance learner to excel there is the need to source and read relevant materials apart from this course material. Therefore, adequate supplementary reading materials as well as other information sources are suggested in the course materials.
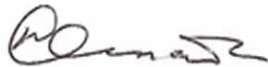
Apart from the responsibility for you to read this course material with others, you are also advised to seek assistance from your course facilitators especially academic advisors during your study even before the interactive session which is by design for revision. Your academic advisors will assist you using convenient technology including Google Hang Out, You Tube, Talk Fusion, etc. but you have to take advantage of these. It is also going to be of immense advantage if you complete assignments as at when due so as to have necessary feedbacks as a guide.

The implication of the above is that, a distance learner has a responsibility to develop requisite distance learning culture which includes diligent and disciplined self-study, seeking available administrative and academic support and acquisition of basic information technology skills. This is why you are encouraged to develop your computer skills by availing yourself the opportunity of training that the Centre's provide and put these into use.

In conclusion, it is envisaged that the course materials would also be useful for the regular students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria who are faced with a dearth of high quality textbooks. We are therefore, delighted to present these titles to both our distance learning students and the university's regular students. We are confident that the materials will be an invaluable resource to all.

We would like to thank all our authors, reviewers and production staff for the high quality of work.

Best wishes.

Professor Bayo Okunade
Director

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Study Session 1: Rationality in Traditional African Thought

Introduction

The question of rationality is not limited to African culture alone, but to other so-called primitive cultures throughout the globe. In other words, the question of rationality is extended to all traditional thoughts or primitive cultures like the Australian aborigines, India's traditional conception about magic, and so on.

In this study, you shall show that the inability of white missionaries and anthropologists to have adequate and comprehensive understanding of traditional African beliefs and practices made them to label these beliefs and practices as irrational.

More importantly, the contextual contrast between Western and African thought systems which gives preference to the former as the only suitable material for philosophical reflection is baseless and that African traditional thought passes for philosophy.

Learning Outcomes for Study Session 1

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:
1.1 Explain better the positions of the Universalists and the Traditionalists on the question of African philosophy (SAQ 1.1)
1.2 Discuss the term "rationality" (SAQ 1.2)
1.3 Differentiate between "epistemic rationality" and "practical rationality" (SAQ 1.3)
1.4 Explain why traditional African thought is or is not rational (SAQ 1.4)

1.1 Traditional African Thought

In his contribution to cross-cultural debate, **Kwasi Wiredu** points out that all that traditional African thought offers now is folk thought, and not philosophy in the real sense. Interestingly, however, he adds that the situation is not peculiar to Africa alone. He says:

> *Every traditional philosophy is essentially pre-scientific; and every people has its own traditional philosophy, a stock of originally unwritten proverbs, maxims, usages, etc., passed on through successive generations...(**Wiredu 1980:29**).*

Thus, it can be suggested that any attempt to compare folk philosophy (which is mostly oral and uncritical) with Western philosophy (which is written and critical) is not acceptable. Incidentally, the above observation stems from the two ways in which**Wiredu** views African philosophy;
- He sees it as folk thought preserved in oral traditions and,
- As a critical, individual reflection, using modern logic and conceptual techniques

But he affirms the indispensability of the latter. According to him: *"It is enough simply to collect information about what our ancestors said or thought, we must try to interpret, clarify, analyze*

and where appropriate and after critical evaluation, assimilate and develop the resulting body of thought" (**Ibid**, 47).

Wiredu's claim is no doubt in support of the universalist conception of philosophy. **P.O. Bodunrin**, for one, is vehemently opposed to some sort of cultural relativism in philosophical thinking. According to **Bodunrin**, a conception of philosophy should be independent of any particular culture or thought system as **Oruka's** trends (especially, ethno-philosophy and sage philosophy) seem to vociferate.

To express African folk thought as philosophy, **Bodunrin** warns, is *"to portray the Africans as radically different from the rest of mankind in their conceptual system and in being immune to laws of logic"* (**Bodunrin** *1981: 176).* Asserting a similar universalist look of philosophy, **Oruka** writes more elaborately:

> *"...the truths of philosophy can be proved by methods which are independent of any personal, national or racial values and feelings. In other words, philosophy must be a discipline which employs principle that are objectively granted, or else that are rationally (logically) warrantable. And these principles, if true, are true regardless of the person or place from which they originate..."* (**Oruka** *1975:46).*

In a simple language, the above reflection emphasizes that any subject matter of philosophy is necessarily a topic for all philosophers in general, regardless of their national or racial affiliations. From this, it can be inferred that African philosophy is philosophy in the exact sense only if it employs the idea of synthesis and reconstruction which is well-rooted in philosophy as a discipline.

■ Is African philosophy a philosophy?
□ Yes, African philosophy is philosophy in the exact sense only if it employs the idea of synthesis and reconstruction which is well-rooted in philosophy as a discipline.

In other words, any alternative method of practicing it will result in quasi-philosophy, and not "real" philosophy. Here you shall do well by considering whether the question of African philosophy is trivial, otiose, nonsensical and void of any determinable meaning. Hence, you are faced with the task of explicating what really constitutes philosophy.

Or, to put it differently, you are faced with the task of clarifying or establishing whether philosophy carries with it a universal connotation or whether it is culturally-determined. Indeed, that philosophy – its universality – is synonymous with Western philosophy is not a case of controversy. In this sense, philosophy is understood as a system of;
- Comparative criticism
- Constructive arguments
- Critical analysis
- Synthesized thought

This is to say that the method of philosophy is definite and cannot be compromised. It follows again that philosophy is expected to have "pre-suppositions and arguments justified by some reputable principles of reasoning" (**Ibid**, 53). Thus, in providing answers to certain puzzles, the practice of philosophy should take into cognizance some laid-down rules or method.

As **Hountondji** would say, philosophy, like science, should have a universal look, not be culture-bound. It must deduce, verify, confirm and make assertions. From this standpoint, we can as well say that the rationality of any thought system and its recognizability as being philosophical depend largely on the aforementioned recommendations.

In fact, the whole controversy regarding the existence of African philosophy emanated from these recommendations in which the issue of rationality is implicitly emphasized. **D.A. Masolo** corroborates this view:

> *To a large extent, the debate about African philosophy can be*
> *summarized as a significant contribution to the discussion and definition*
> *of reason... Indeed, it is commonly referred to as the "Rationality debate*
> *(**Masolo 1994:1**).*

British social anthropologists began their study of Africa by concentrating primarily on appropriately social elements such as *kinship* and *social institutions*. They soon became interested in such issues regarding the beliefs and values of the Africans. Sadly, their assertions about African belief and values turned out to evince their biases and prejudices, positing that Africans cannot infer the rationale of their beliefs and values.

In fact, two peculiar disciplines, namely, **religious studies** and **social anthropology**, both served as a medium through which these anthropologists reviled Africa's indigenous culture as essentially "traditional". **Barry Hallen** states that:

Social anthropology and religious studies were one in claiming that Africa's
cultures are essentially traditional… in character and that when it comes to
characterizing the African intellect, mentality, or modes of thought, the most
appropriate terms are "precritical," "prereflective," "protocritical,"
*"prescientific," "emotive," "expressive," "poetic," and so forth (**Hallen***
*2002:17**).*

Subscribing to the above view is not quite different from admitting or saying that African modes of thought are *"diametrically opposed to those most clearly valued and enunciated by philosophy as an intellectual exercise" (**Ibid.**).*

Thus, it is not surprising that hundreds of critical volumes have been written by African intellectuals (including philosophers) to contest the works of such personages as **Robin Horton, Charles Taylor, Bronislaw Malinowski**, and others who have argued for and itemized certain standards of rationality applicable across cultures.

1.2 The Question of Rationality in African "Traditional" Thought

In short, it makes sense to say that the debate concerning the cross-cultural comparison of thought systems centers on the question, "What sort of criteria should be employed in determining the rationality of a thought system?" This in turn points to the fact that the question of rationality in African "traditional" thought system is markedly controversial. But first, what is "rationality"?

The word "**rationality**" comes from the Latin word "ratio", which means "reason" in the English language. The word "reason" can mean "motive", "cause" or "justification." *It can also be taken to mean the intellectual faculty by which conclusions are drawn from premises.* The concept "rationality" is often used to describe a conscious manner of rejecting what is unreasonable or what cannot be tested by reason, especially in religion or custom.

■ What is rationality?
□ Rationality is a conscious manner of rejecting what is unreasonable or what cannot be tested by reason, especially in religion or custom.

According to **Simon Blackburn's** *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*:
To accept something as rational is to accept it as making sense, as appropriate, or required, or in accordance with some acknowledged goal, such as aiming at truth or aiming at the good…(**Blackburn** 1996:319).

Box 1.1: Rationality
It is the intellectual faculty by which conclusions are drawn from premises. It is also a conscious manner of rejecting what is unreasonable or what cannot be tested by reason, especially in religion or custom.

Thus, if an action or a belief is not rational, we can use such terms as "crude", "unintelligible", "barbaric", to describe it. Unfortunately, the social and the religious expressions of the Africans have been damaged by the use of these derogatory terms. Africans have been identified with such derogatory names as "barbaric", "savage", "illogical", and so on.

Accordingly, missionary evangelism, blindly seeing the Africa continent as vested with mystical and mythical beliefs and dogmas, has reviled especially the traditional African religion as sheer idolatry, fetishism, heathenism, polytheism and odious ancestor veneration.
This has continued to affect the concept of rationality and its arbitrary usages by white scholars. It is the case that scholars have had to use the concept either in a strong sense or a weak sense.

1.3 Epistemic Rationality

The strong accounts of rationality are often referred to as "epistemic rationality". Epistemic rationality is basically concerned with proving a thought system or belief, based on valid inferences drawn from true propositions. And, contending that theory cannot be divorced from the notion of rationality, **Charles Taylor** is regarded as a staunch exponent of "epistemic rationality."

Taylor asserts his position that the demands of rationality are to go for theoretical understanding. He admonishes us to aim at understanding issues from a disengaged perspective. He writes:

> *We are not trying to understand things merely as they impinge on us or are relevant to the purposes we are pursuing, but rather to grasp them as they are outside the immediate perspective of our goals and desires and activities (**Hollis** and **Lukes** 1982:90).*

■ What do you understand by Epistemic rationality?
□ Epistemic rationality is concerned with proving a thought system or belief, based on valid inferences drawn from true propositions.

Taylor's view, we can say, is asserting that rationality cannot be divorced from theoretical understanding. **Taylor** is most probably convinced that there exists a strong dichotomy between the traditional society and the modern (Western) society. He sees the former as atheoretical and the latter as theoretical. He contends that the Western society has "this activity of theoretical understanding which seems to have no counterpart" (**Ibid**.).
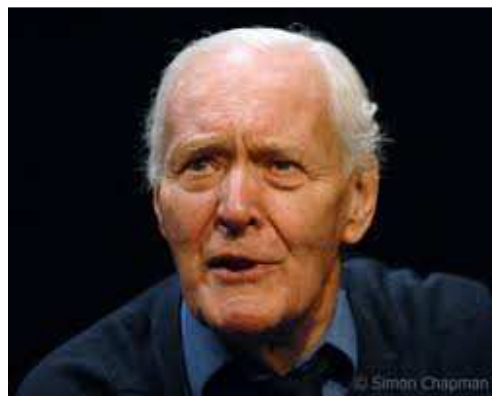
Figure 1.1: Benn
Source:https://encryptedtbn3.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcTQNLeLkijzYRxWwax8ACo
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The above is in clear way saying that the atheoretical cultures do not merit the concept "rationality". Obviously, again, the view rests on the assumption that there is a universal standard for determining the rationality of the beliefs of all peoples in the world. It is argued, however, that the strong accounts of rationality "set up an ideal type to which actual condition may approximate but which they never fully instantiate" (**Benn** and **Mortimore** 1976:1).

"Practical rationality" or the weak accounts of rationality, as the antithesis of "epistemic rationality", acknowledges that rationality is relative since there are "universes" of discourse. Hence, each cultural group is found to engage in its own unique universe of discourse and, as such, there cannot be culturally-independent standards of rationality.

The distinction between the strong sense of rationality and the "practical" or weak sense of the concept is crucial to any debate arising from cross-cultural comparison. We must admit that Western anthropologists have been found to carry out their researches in terms of "epistemic

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*rationality." This speaks for why they have erroneously seen the African, to use the popular **Hegelian** phrase, as "the other".*

It is also true that "epistemic rationality" has put the non-scientific cultures under strain because its demands are tailored for beliefs in the scientific or Western cultures. Therefore, it becomes an exigent task for us to establish that the so-called a-theoretical cultures need not satisfy the criteria of rationality developed or meant for beliefs within the scientific or Western cultures.

If this goal is achieved, then the traditional thought system will enjoy the credence of being addressed as rational and as most probably constituting philosophy in its own right. A thought system or belief is irrational, scholars have argued, if it is illogical, inconsistent or self-contradictory. In contrast, an action is rational if, in **Talcott Parson's** words:

*…it pursues ends possible within the conditions of the situation, and by the means which, among those available to the actor, are intrinsically adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science (**Parson** 1973:58).*

Figure 1.2: Talcott Parson
Source:https://encryptedtbn3.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcSsTMi1 EXOGFBvzWqgmBslH5D7wrRqSWQDRWXq4cewoHzXsmD1j

Parson's view advocates a universally applicable criterion for rationality. His view is shared by **Charles Taylor** who asserts that rationality can be seen as logical consistency. Thus, as we have pointed out earlier, a belief is taken to be irrational if it involves the affirmation of both "p" and "not p" (-p). **Taylor's** view can be understood as emanating from the assertion that theory and rationality are connected.

In other words, **Taylor's** criterion of rationality depends on whether a particular thought system can be proved empirically. If we share this view, therefore, it means that only beliefs or thought systems that satisfy the criteria of rationality employed in science-oriented cultures are rational.

Figure 1.3: Steven Lukes
Source: http://www.fantascienza.com/catalogo/imgbank/foto/7669.jpg

However, **Steven Lukes** argues against **Taylor's** universalist standpoint that it is mistaken to assume that there is a standard set of criteria which is applicable across cultures. He specifies the criteria of rationality as rules that would count as reasons for believing something or practicing it. According to him, some criteria are "relevantly applicable to beliefs in any context while others are context-dependent" (**Wilson** 1970:208).

1.4 A Two-Way Understanding of the Criteria of Rationality

Lukes' view obviously recognizes a two-way understanding of the criteria of rationality. In other words, **Lukes** takes both the criteria of rationality in general and the context-dependent criteria into consideration. There are, in **Lukes'** view, basic rules of thought which all societies follow, implying that there is a common ground upon which beliefs and practices in all societies can be examined in our quest for their rationality.

This seems to imply again that there are some classes of beliefs within some societies whose rationality can only be determined by the *use of context-dependent criteria*. For such beliefs, it would be wrong to use the universal criteria for determining their rationality or truth-values. *It follows that certain classes of beliefs are rational only by employing the criteria developed within their own contexts, thus, emphasizing a plurality of standards of rationality.*

Such an overview, you must agree, tends to give cognizance to the rationality of the beliefs of the so-called a-theoretical societies. **Lukes'** "two-way perusal" of the criteria of rationality incites in us the propensity to grasp the truth-condition of certain beliefs and their interrelations.

To understand such beliefs and their interrelations, **Lukes** contends that both criteria are "equally necessary to the explanation of why they are held, and how they operate and what their social consequences are" (**Ibid**.). **Godwin Sogolo**, an African philosopher of relativist persuasion, is almost certainly approving of **Lukes'** position when he asserts that all men share in common certain "universal" traits.

He points out more elaborately that: *Pre-eminent among these universal traits of humans is the ability for self-reflection and rational thought governed essentially by certain principles of reasoning. It is important to add that this unique human quality, like others, has its own local colour and peculiar mode of manifestation, all depending on the contingencies of the intervening culture.*

The point to be emphasized is that the structure of the human mind is essentially alike and men reason alike in all cultures. There are, however, cultural factors that condition the forms in which this reasoning is manifested. *Its peculiar form in any culture cannot, therefore, be seen as a deficiency or worse still taken as a mark of irrationality (**Sogolo** 1993: xv – xvi).*

Hence, **Sogolo** does not approve of a paradigm of cross-cultural rationality that is too extreme and too Western in orientation. Such a paradigm, he contends, "unfairly discriminates against the rationality of certain African modes of thought and beliefs" (**Ibid**.). In clear terms, this means that an intelligible analysis of African thought system demands or calls for its own universe of discourse, its own logic and its own criteria of rationality.

Indubitably, also, the problem of translation and interpretation should not be handled or treated with levity in the discussion about rationality. In their attempts to translate and interpret rationality of much of the beliefs within the traditional thought system, the various works of the 19th century anthropologists have shown that they failed to pay enough attention to the problem posed by translation and interpretation.

Arising from this is the misleading notion that *the traditional thought system is irrational.* Related to this is the question of whether it is possible to provide a precise translation of the language of a society radically different from our own. This observation, we might say, has been the impetus behind **W.V.O Quine's** essay titled "Translation and Meaning."

Figure1.5: W.V.O Quine
Source: https://encrypted-tbn2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQYXFX_5kUC4Wz5-yNAQtXua2yrZTynW5-QWtVCKePsc9oKPiPE

In the essay, **Quine** coins the phrase "radical translation" *to mean the attempt to translate the language of "a hitherto untouched people"* (**Rosenberg** and **Travis** 1971:292). According to **Quine**, the meaning of any given sentence is indeterminate or vague. That is, in an attempt to

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translate a particular language of a people, each of the two sentences that are presumed synonymous, has a variety of meaning which makes translation more hazardous.

It is the case, however, that the "radical translators" or anthropologists often judge the rationality of a belief or thought based on translations that are not beyond reproach. More often than not, our translation and interpretation of a thought system are usually affected or tainted by our sociological interests.

From the foregoing, you can say that it is grossly mistaken to advocate the existence of only the criteria of rationality based on universally valid rules of logic and inference, as claimed by some scholars. In this sense, the Western-type definition or the analytic establishment of rationality and the purported validity of taking the Western model of rationality as the yardstick for judging others should be jettisoned.

Also, the difficulty identified with translation sensitizes us to look beyond the universal criteria into the possibility of employing standards that are context-dependent as a guarantee against faulty assessment. It is more prudential, therefore, to discuss the rationality of a thought system by meeting the concerned cultures on their own grounds. African traditional thought system, we might say at this point, is rational.

This is true not only because it is supported by the context-dependent criteria, but also because it is impossible for a people or race to flourish within an irrational thought system. Besides, the commonplace postmodernist saying that "every culture is at par with any other culture" impugns the self-congratulatory view of seeing the Western mode of rationality as the only paradigm to reckon with.

Box 1.2: African Traditional Thought System

African traditional thought system is rational because;
1. It is supported by the context-dependent criteria.
2. It is impossible for a people or race to flourish within an irrational thought system.
3. The commonplace postmodernist view the Western mode of rationality as the only paradigm to reckon with.

However, if a thought system is found or considered to be deficient in some sense, *it should not be seen as meaningless or irrational*. Rather, such a thought system should be addressed as undergoing its evolutionary process. In summary, you have posited that:

(a) The criteria of rationality are best viewed as context-dependent and,
(b) That African traditional thought system is, therefore, rational.

Does it follow then that, since it is rational, African traditional thought can pass for philosophy? After all, rationality is not the only condition for philosophy. At a point it was observed that the early white investigators, versed in Occidental logic, made such disenchanting pronouncements against the African because they could not penetrate his system of thought.

1.4.1 African Traditional Thought System as Raw Material

It is true that quite a number of scholars have commended African traditional thought system as raw material for or as a philosophy. By and large, it is argued that the content of traditional thought is rich in philosophy if closely examined. Added to this is that Yorùbá (prototypical African) oral tradition is made up of theoretical and practical possibilities capable of being used for the purpose of explanation, prediction, and even philosophy.

Contrast between Western and African traditional Thought

The African, as opposed to the scientific-minded man (the Western man), believes in the unknown and even sees the unknown as serving as the final explanations of events, causes and effects. If, for instance, all attempts to fix a stuck machine fail, the traditional African, unlike the scientific-minded who would have given up ever fixing the machine again, begins to impute the mechanical problem of the machine to some unknown or "unseen" force.

Believing that nothing happens by chance, and that there always must be an explanation for everything, the African believes that the unknown, its identity and mission, can be revealed by the diviner or an *Ifá* priest (among the Yorùbá). **P.O. Bodunrin** summarizes this more succinctly:

Scientific causal explanations cannot explain certain unique features of
some occurrences. Thus, while the wetness of the road, the ineffectiveness of
the brakes and driver's carelessness etc... may explain why accidents
generally happen, they cannot explain why it has happened to a particular
*person, place and at exactly the time it happened (**Bodunrin** 1981:174).*

Again, the cosmic duality of *Àbíkú* (a child believed to transport between two worlds) does not make sense within a scientific community. But an ordinary traditional Yorùbá man can easily explain the seeming puzzles enmeshed in *Àbíkú*'s comic duality, relying on the revelation of such "puzzle" by *Ifá* since it is believed that *Ifá* "sees" through all secrets.

By extension, such concepts as "*àyànmo*" (destiny), "*orí*" (personality head), magic, divination, and the entire content of oral tradition of the Yorùbá have glaring contradictory claims embedded in them. However, the conservative methodology of philosophy compels us to reconcile, for instance, the concept of "freewill" and the contradictory claims of "*àyànmố*" (destiny) as being fixed and yet at the mercy of unseen forces.

The conservatism of philosophy also impugns on our consciousness the need to question the knowledge claim by the Yorùbá about the extra-terrestrial, the metaphysical, given the wide gulf between the physical and the metaphysical. Going by the conservative standard of philosophy, the epistemological relation between a cause and its effect should be sought if we really want to do philosophy.

In other words, African oral tradition ceases to be philosophy if it disregards the laws of physics, sees the practice of magic or necromancy and others as ordinary. Strictly speaking, however, oral tradition can best be viewed as belonging to the "mythical world" where it is not a matter of necessity for a particular effect to result from a particular cause.

This is to underscore the point that mythical ontology, unlike science, is essentially a conception of the world which does not seek to establish unequivocal relation between causes and specific effects. Within the mythical world, therefore, everything that exists is consequential and, so, given much attention. Thus, it would be absurd to see the thought system of such a world as irrational or not passing for philosophy.

The sole concern of philosophy is to pursue truth. But you should be mindful of the fact that, since you are all interpreters of the world, there cannot be a claim to monopoly of truth. In her discussion of rationality, **Joanna Overing** seems to assert this point of view when she maintains that it is arbitrary to defend a Western control of reality construction. According to **Overing**:

*It would be self-defeating to compare 'models of thought' in the conviction
that the intellectual capacities of humankind are already known absolutely
and that the forms of correct reasoning are definitely exemplified in the
thoughts of the anthropologist and Western scientist.*

*And therefore, uneasy about the idea that our own (Western) notion of
humankind in its enthronement of reason can provide a firm basis from
which to judge the capacities either of ourselves or other human beings
(Overing 1985: ix).*

A point of interest in **Overing's** assertion lies in the attempt to offer "a softer version of relativism which encourages contact rather than estrangement between diverse rationalities or cultural perspectives" (**Ibid**.). African oral tradition can pass for philosophy though it fails to maintain the same status with Western philosophy. Obviously, too, the dichotomization between the two philosophies is due to our different ways of viewing reality.

Here, you should be reminded that the influence of science and the dictates of modern times have continued to remind us that a "true" philosophy should be capable of providing us with a sanatorium against the chaos of the contemporary world. Put differently, African thought system as philosophy – in its struggle against any form of anachronism or obsoleteness – should aspire to be logically consistent where humanly possible.

This will make it more relevant and progressive. Scientific analytical method has become almost the imperative for any discipline or culture. That African traditional thought system is marked by the absence of proper tools for constructive rumination is not verbiage.

Box1.3: African Traditional Thought System
The African traditional thought system is marked by the absence of proper tools for constructive rumination.

However, a thought system that emphasizes claims that incantations can have strong hypnotic influence on man, that human beings are capable of shortening long distant roads or pass through walls, that a man can be harmed from afar, that a bird's cry around a home indicates a

misfortune, that human destiny can be deciphered and "reshaped" (through *Ifá* divination among the Yorùbá), and many such claims, ought to interest philosophy.

There must be an iota of truth about these claims. Perhaps, we should suggest, as **D.A. Masolo** says of **Kimani Kiiru** of Kenyatta University, that the expression of the beliefs concerning the aforementioned claims or events is "a pointer to some epistemological model and a logical operation worth investigating" (**Masolo** 1994:185).

We can conclude here that the contextual contrast between Western and African thought systems which gives preference to the former as the only suitable material for philosophical reflection is baseless and that African traditional thought passes for philosophy. **Barry Hallen** corroborates this point when he contends that:

*Divination, for example, may not be based upon the same methodology as science. But this need not mean that the conclusions it comes to about the nature of reality and the prescriptions it recommends for coming to terms with that reality are false or untrue (**Hallen** 2002:43).*

Summary of Study Session1

In Study Session 1, you have learnt that:

1. Any subject matter of philosophy is a topic for all philosophers in general, regardless of their national or racial affiliations.
2. The assertions of the British social anthropologists about African beliefs and values reflect their biases and prejudices since they claim that Africans cannot infer the rationale of their beliefs and values.
3. The debate concerning the cross-cultural comparison of thought systems centres on the question of the criteria to be employed in determining the rationality of a thought system.
4. Epistemic rationality or the strong accounts of rationality is basically concerned with proving a thought system or belief, based on valid inferences drawn from true propositions.
5. Practical rationality or the weak accounts of rationality is the antithesis of epistemic rationality and it acknowledges that rationality is relative since there are "universes" of discourse. Hence, each cultural group engages in its own unique universe of discourse and, as such, there cannot be culturally-independent standards of rationality.
6. The contextual contrast between Western and African thought systems, which gives preference to the former as the only suitable material for philosophical reflection is baseless.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) for Study Session 1

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next! Support meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 1.1 (Tests Learning Outcomes 1.1)
Discuss the debate between the modernists and the traditionalists on the existence of African philosophy.

SAQ 1.2 (Tests Learning Outcomes 1.2)
Explain why the debate about African philosophy is commonly referred to as "Rationality debate".

SAQ 1.3 (Tests Learning Outcomes 1.3)
Critically discuss "epistemic rationality" and "practical rationality".
Discuss the views of the British social anthropologists about Africa.

SAQ 1.4 (Tests Learning Outcomes 1.4)
Do you think it is legitimate to assess such issues as magic and rituals in traditional African belief using the paradigm of science?

Study Session 2: Philosophy and Oral Tradition

Introduction

Every society has its own oral tradition with varying contents. In this study session, you will show that oral tradition in Africa is preserved mainly in such oral media as proverbs, lyrical songs and sayings, narratives, myths, folklore and systems of divination. These oral media help us to understand and appreciate the beliefs and values of the African people. More specifically, you will show that they constitute an integrative cultural institution which embodies the precepts and values of the African people and serve as sources of knowing a people's history of thought and philosophy.

Learning Outcomes for Study Session 2

At the end of this study session, you should be able to:
2.1 Define the term Oral Tradition.
2.2 Explain term perspectives on Oral/Written thought.

2.1 Oral Tradition

An Oral Tradition is usually regarded as an unwritten, inherited pattern of thought. **J.C. Miller** sees "*tradition*" as the inherited wisdom of the past and defines Oral Tradition as "*a narrative describing, or purporting to describe, eras before the time of the person who relates it*" (**Miller** 1980: 2).

For **David Henige**, who seeks a fixed and formal definition of oral tradition, "*Oral Traditions are those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture*" (**Henige** 1982:2)

Henige adds a restriction to his definition when he maintains that recollections of the past "*that are not widely known should rightfully be considered as 'testimony' and if they relate to recent events they belong to the realm of oral history*" (**Ibid**.).

Examined critically, we can note that there is a distinction between the two definitions offered by **Miller** and **Henige**. While **Henige's** definition emphasizes that recollections of the past should be "*universally known in a given culture*", **Miller's** definition frees the concept of Oral Tradition from the problematic of the "*universality*" of the text in the culture of reference.

Jan Vansina also offers a definition of Oral Tradition which predates and is far more complex than those offered by **Miller** and **Henige**.

In fact, **Vansina's** definition of Oral Tradition is "*organized around a concept of transmission and a hierarchy of what are considered as specific and distinctive types of oral tradition*" (**Cohen** 1989: 10).

According to **Vansina**: *Oral Traditions are historical sources of a special nature. Their special nature derives from the fact that they are 'unwritten' sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission, and that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings* (**Vansina** 1965: 1).

Box 2.1 Definition of Oral Tradition
Oral Tradition as a narrative describing, or purporting to describe, eras before the time of the person who relates it

Vansina adds that oral traditions consist of all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past. What easily comes to mind here is the question of the reliability of such oral materials as legends, proverbs, music, poetry, myths, systems of divination, and so on.

A number of researchers, mostly anthropologists, have tried to establish whether an oral tradition contains a kernel of historical truth or not.

In fact, some anthropologists have grappled with the question of the reliability of oral traditions by distinguishing between what they refer to as anonymous "*oral*" traditions and oral traditions of known authors. It is contended that the former should not be relied upon as a true account of event "*because nothing is known of the first eyewitnesses or of those who subsequently transmitted it*" (**Ibid**: 4).

Figure 2.1: J. C Miller
Source: http://history.virginia.edu/user/44

We are cautioned, however, that accepting a tradition on the basis of having the knowledge of its origin may be misleading or fail to furnish us with historical truth since certain traditions have been found to be distorted without the informants or the recipients knowing. Vansina further sheds more light on the foregoing by relying heavily on the work of an earlier anthropologist who has two distinctive views of oral traditions.

According to **Vansina**: *The first comprises all sources – regardless of whether they have survived intact or have become distorted in the process of transmission – which can be traced back to a particular individual and which have been handed down for some definite purpose, either public or private.*

To the second group belong those sources for which no personal authorship can be discovered, and which have spread more or less of their own accord. This is the group to which rumours, myths, sagas, legends, anecdotes, proverbs, and folk-songs must be assigned.

When dealing with sources of this kind, it is important to establish immediately whether they have been composed or concocted for propaganda purposes, or with some autobiographical aim in view (**Ibid**: 5).

- ■ Inherited pattern of thought regarded as an unwritten is ....

  A. Oral
  B. Oral Tradition
  C. Tradition
- ☐ B.

Such anthropologists as **E.S. Hartland** and **R. Lowie** are skeptical about the reliability of Oral Traditions. **E.S. Hartland**, for instance, makes us believe that oral traditions provide us with worthless information concerning the past. He attributes their dearth of historical truth to migrations and cultural diffusion.

Lowie's disapproval of oral traditions is more stringent. **Lowie** maintains a Eurocentric stance and asserts that oral cultures could not produce any history and tribes of such cultures had no sense of historical perspective. He, therefore, refuses to "*attach to oral tradition any historical value under any conditions whatsoever*" (**Lowie** 1915:598).

Lowie's declaration has, however, elicited reactions from quite a number of writers or anthropologists who are of the opinion that oral traditions can furnish us with reliable information about a people's past.

A.A. Goldenweiser, for instance, is convinced that even conjectures and hypotheses regarding the accuracy of an oral tradition should be considered as evidential, though these could lose their value if refuted by other higher evidential value. But, more specifically, he is of the view that "*Poor evidence is poor evidence but it is evidence*" (**Goldenweiser** 1915: 763 – 764).
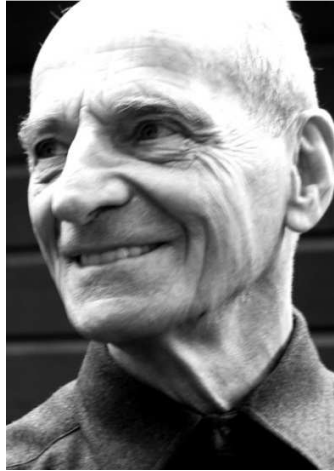
Figure 2.2: Jan Vansina
Source: http://africa.wisc.edu/?page_id=2728

For **R.B. Dixton** (1915: 599), oral tradition serves as a good historical material for knowing the origins of a tribe, an ethno-linguistic unit in Africa. **H.U**. **Beier** corroborates the views of Goldenweiser and Dixton and, drawing his inference from a *Yorùbá* myth, points out that oral traditions are essentially sources of knowing a people's history of thought or philosophy (**Beier** 1955:17 – 25).

The corollary of the foregoing is also expressed by **E.E. Evans-Pritchard** who refutes the functionalist claim that oral traditions are couched in myths and should not be taken seriously without written documents. **Evans**-**Pritchard** is optimistic that a critical attitude towards oral traditions will help to bring out certain truth concerning the past history of a people.

Yorùbá oral tradition is preserved mainly in such oral media as proverbs, lyrical songs and sayings, narratives, myths and systems of divination. These oral media illuminate and furnish us with the beliefs and values of the *Yorùbá*. More specifically, they constitute an integrative cultural institution and congeal into "*a communal activity which informs, as well as embodies the precepts and values that are permanent including those that are changing*" (**Andah1987**: 9).

In fact, these oral media serve as a rich source of *Yorùbá* thought system and capture the achievements of the *Yorùbá* in such areas as law, politics, arts, science, technology, and so on.

Figure 2.3: Edwin Sidney Hartland
Source: http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/efft/efft00.htm

Barry Hallen seems to corroborate this when he says that:

For it certainly is the case that academic philosophers were for long predisposed to turn up their noses at the suggestion that an anonymous corpus of writings that included myths, legends, poetry, song, and proverbs was truly worthy of the title "philosophy" … it is sufficient to suggest that most African philosophers, as well, would have reservations about labeling the whole of their continent's oral literature, literally, "philosophy".

But that is not to say that it would be justifiable to reject the whole of that amorphous corpus as philosophy, either (**Hallen** 2002: 11).

2.2 Perspectives on Oral/Written Dichotomy

In **Mariama Ba's** *So Long a Letter*, **Ramatoulaye**, no doubt the heroine of the book, lauds the importance of literacy in society when, with ardent enthusiasm, she declares:

The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress (**Ba** 1989:32).

Jack Goody, an eminent social anthropologist, conveys **Ramatoulaye's** opinion when he asserts that writing, "*indeed any form of visual transcription of oral linguistic elements, had important consequences for the accumulation, development and nature of human knowledge*" (**Goody** 1987:78).

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Figure 2.4: Jack Goody

These claims by **Goody** and **Ba's Ramatoulaye** are true; after all it appears that their claims do not overtly suggest that intellectualism is absent in non-literate cultures. Also, in the contemporary time, the success of science which gained its hegemony through writing is a pointer to the huge importance of writing or literacy in society.

But the claims by **Goody** and **Ba's Ramatoulaye** would become contentious if they were indeed a valorization of writing at the expense of orality.

As a matter of fact, written/oral dichotomy has been an issue central to the Eurocentric discourse on writing. Thus:

The idea that writing plays a special role in human development is one that has permeated European thinking, from Cordorcet to Popper.

The latter, for instance, distinguishes between three Worlds: World 1, the physical world; World 2, the world of our conscious experience; and World 3, the world of the logical content of books, libraries, computer memories, and so forth. World 3 is the world of theories and intellectual discoveries, in other words, of critical thinking (**Mazama** 1998:4).

This excerpt seems to lend credence to the assumption that lack of writing necessarily hampers individual cognitive development. This view is corroborated by **Karl Popper** and **Walter Ong**. While the former, adopting the Hegelian spirit, contends that full consciousness of self can never be realized without writing or literacy, the latter believes that writing is "*indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials*" (**Ong** 1986:25).

- ■ "The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving" is according to ………..
  A. Ba
  B. Ong
  C. Mazama
  D. Goody
- ☐ A.

Ong stresses his point further by directing his barb at oral people. He maintains that:

We know that all philosophy depends on writing because all elaborate, linear, so-called "logical" explanation depends on writing. Oral persons can be as wise, as wise as anyone, and they can of course, give some explanation for things. But the elaborate, intricate, seemingly endless but exact cause-effect sequences required by what we call philosophy and by extended scientific thinking are unknown by oral people (**Ibid**.:43).

In **Ong's** assertion we see on the one hand a repeat of the epistemological assumption that relegates all forms of fideism by placing a premium on the "*unrestricted and rather naïve faith in reason*" (**Mazama** 1998:4).

On the other hand, we notice a reaffirmation of one of the features of the universalist notion of philosophy, that philosophy in the real sense of the word requires a writing tradition in that ideas are preserved and exchanged in books and journals.

In the enterprise of African philosophy, the oral/written dichotomy was inherited by such philosophers as **Hountondji**, **Wiredu** and, to some extent, **Bodunrin**. For **Hountondji** (1986:106), philosophy "*begins at the precise moment of transcription.*"

Figure 2.5: Reverend Father Walter Jackson Ong
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_J._Ong

Henry Louis Gates, an African-American, also reflects the intellectual sentiments of **Hountondji** and company when he embraces the Eurocentric sentiment of Hegel's and argues that philosophy essentially has to do with a written language without which "*there could be no ordered repetition or memory, there could be no history*" (**Gates** 1991:7).

■ Philosophy begins at the precise moment of transcription is according to ………
  A. Wiredu
  B. Hountondji
  C. Gates
□ B.

In short, **Gates** and **Hountondji** are of the view that only through writing is it possible for us to store linguistic material in an exact form over long periods, in principle to infinity.

Looked at closely, three major points can be distilled from the views of **Hountondji**, **Gates** and other insistent champions of literacy: that, without writing, there can be no philosophy, a people cannot have history and there is no possibility of science. We shall look at the errors in these points in the next study.

Summary for Study Session 2

(1) An oral tradition is an unwritten, inherited pattern of thought.

(2) It can also be defined as the inherited wisdom of the past or a narrative describing, or purporting to describe, eras before the time of the person who relates it and consists of all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past.

(3) Oral traditions are preserved in such oral media as proverbs, lyrical songs and sayings, narratives, myths, folklore and systems of divination.

(4) Writing, or indeed any form of visual transcription of oral linguistic elements, had important consequences for the accumulation, development and nature of human knowledge.

(5) Three major points can be distilled from the views of those who argue for the primacy of writing over Orality: that, without writing, there can be no philosophy, a people cannot have history and there is no possibility of science.

Self-Assessment Question (SAQs) for Study Session 2

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 2.1
What is an oral tradition?
Differentiate between anonymous oral traditions and oral traditions of known authors.
Do you think that an oral tradition contains a kernel of historical truth?
Do you think that oral traditions are sources of knowing a people's history of thought or philosophy?

SAQ 2.2
Do you agree that lack of writing necessary hampers individual cognitive development?
Discuss the perspectives of the modernists on oral/written dichotomy.

Study Session 3: Philosophy and the Consequences of Literacy

Introduction

In this study session, you will examine how the problem of written/oral dichotomy which, among others, is responsible for the intransigent relationship that exists between the traditionalists and the universalists in African philosophy. You will show that this intransigent relationship persists between the traditionalists and the universalists because the two groups have failed to recognize the need to furnish a paradigm of interaction or dialogue between the "*Oral*" projects of the traditionalists and the "*written*" projects of the universalists.

Learning Outcomes for Study Session 3

At the end of this study, you should be able to:
3.1 Explain the Philosophy and the Consequence of Literacy.
3.2 Discuss the individual views on Oral/Written cultures.

3.1 Consequence of Literacy

In your last study session, you showed that three major points can be identified from the views of **Paulin Hountondji**, **Henry Gates** and other insistent champions of literacy: that, without writing, there can be no philosophy; a people cannot have history and there is no possibility of science.

Taking the first point, you would recall that many scholars have insisted that the alphabet was an invention of the Greeks and this has served as the basis for many people to claim that literacy began in Greece as an exigent foundation for the enterprise of philosophy to flourish.

But an insightful study of the chronology of Greek literacy would reveal that writing was not a significant cultural factor before **Plato**. **Paulin Hountondji**, one would suspect, was aware of this historical fact and this explains why he insists that philosophy started with Socrates because the latter's disciples committed his discourse to writing. Thus:

Figure 3.1: Henry Louis Gates Jr.
Source: http://www.nytimes.com/ref/opinion/henrylouisgatesjr-bio.html?_r=0

One would conclude … that Hountondji does not recognize the Pre-Socratics as philosophers, inasmuch as no one is sure that Thales wrote anything …, nor Heraclitus, or Pythagoras for that matter … It appears that in this regard Hountondji is not in tune with the European philosophers he holds as his models (**Owomoyela** 1987:89).

The point to be stressed is that the history of philosophy is not complete without evident recognition of the "*Oral*" contribution of the Pre-Socratics to the enterprise. Though one must not overlook the fact that writing engenders a comparatively permanent and reliable storage of information outside fallible human memory, it is also true that writing itself cannot create thought.

Creation of thought is clearly congenial to the formation of ideas which may not necessarily have to be fixed or documented before they are made available to philosophy or reflection. "*If ideas are capable of transmission from one mind to another without the intermediary of documentation," **Owomoyela** asserts, "then the receptive mind can be a reflective mind"* (**Ibid**.:88).

Here, again, we should take seriously Socrates' warning that anyone who relies heavily on writing as that which will provide something reliable must be exceedingly simple-minded. As a matter of fact:

All alphabetic writing can do is record what people think and say; it cannot itself create thought. Western Europe had its excellent alphabet throughout the six or seven hundred years of its Dark Ages without any notable intellectual progress or even innovation.

Indeed intellectual progress and innovation were not much in evidence in the Roman Empire despite widespread literacy and a large reading public, nor in the earlier Byzantine empire (**Halverson** 1992:162).

Figure 3.2: Paulin J. Hountondji
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paulin_J._Hountondji

It makes sense to posit here that the emphasis on oral/written dichotomy (inherited by the votaries of analytic school in African philosophy) is responsible for the intransigent relationship between them and the traditionalists.

In other words, this intransigent relationship persists in the enterprise of African philosophy because the two dominant schools have failed to recognize the need to have paradigm of interaction or dialogue between their projects (that is, oral and written projects).

The position of *Ifá* on oral/written dichotomy will perhaps help to show a way out of this problem. In *Ogbè-ṛẹtẹ̀*, *Ifá* says:

> *Báà ró̩tí a à bo̩ó̩gún*
> *Báà róbì a à   bòrìsà*
> *Báà bá róbìnrin a à leè bímo̩*
> *A díá fó̩kànlérínwó irúnmalè̩*
> *Wó̩n ń lo f'Èdè o̩mo̩ Olódùmarè sobìnrun*
> *Wó̩n ní wo̩n, ó kára ńlè̩*
> *E̩bo̩ ni wó̩n ó ṣe*
> *Ò̩rúnmìlà nìkàn ló gbé̩bo̩ níbè̩ tí ń tubo̩...[39]*

> *Without wine, we cannot appease the ancestor*
> *Without kolanut, we cannot appease the gods*
> *Without a woman, a man cannot procreate*
> *Thus divination was undertaken for the 401 gods*
> *As they fought over Èdè, Olódùmarè's daughter;*
> *They were told to offer sacrifice*
> *But only Ò̩rúnmìlà heeded the divine warning ...*

The story is related in *Ogbè-ṛẹtẹ̀* that, once upon a time, *Ò̩rúnmìlà* and other *Yorùbá* divinities were competing to take Èdè, *Olódùmarè*'s daughter, as wife. Each of the divinities consulted a diviner on what to do to be able to emerge as Èdè's suitor and was advised to offer certain sacrifice in order to be victorious. Alas, all the divinities except *Ò̩rúnmìlà* did not offer the

sacrifice and at the end *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* emerged as *Èdè*'s suitor. When approached by friends and well-wishers to relate the secret of his success, *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* started to sing saying:

> Kátó mọ̀ọ́gbọ́, kátó mọ̀ọ́fọ̀
> Àti mèdè ọ̀pẹ̀ lósòro;
> Kátó mọ̀ọ́dá, kátó mọ̀ọ́tẹ̀
> Àti mèdè ọ̀pẹ̀ lósòro;
> Kátó mọ̀ọ́rú, kátó mọ̀ọ́tù
> Àti mèdè ọ̀pẹ̀ lósòro…[40]

> *To learn, to teach*
> *All can be sought in Ifá;*
> *To cast, to write*
> *All can be sought in Ifá;*
> *To apply, to decipher*
> *All can be sought in Ifá...*

Ọ̀rúnmìlà then told the people around him that he was victorious because he learnt early enough that the individual can only excel in the world if he combines all the processes of cogent thought: understanding and good use of language; writing and interpretation.

In the song, *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* maintains the complementarist stance and shows that both writing and orality will help the individual to excel in society. The other divinities lost *Èdè* to *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* because they were "*illiterates*" in modern sense.

Olódùmarè allowed *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* to take *Èdè* as wife because he was the only divinity who recognized that a man does not pride himself over oratory or writing alone, but by recognizing that there is no substantive division between the two. Jack Goody seems to reflect this when he says:

The problem of assigning a work to an oral or literate tradition is that ... there is a meaningful sense in which all 'literate' forms are composed orally ... And there is also a meaningful sense in which all earlier oral works are known because they have been written down, usually by a literate member of ... society (**Goody** 1987:80).

Bearing the foregoing in mind, let us now examine from the standpoint of *Ifá* the tenability of, first, the claim that a people cannot have history without writing. We take "*history*" to mean an account of past events or a study of past events, especially of human affairs.

- ■ "Then the receptive mind can be a reflective mind*"* is asserted by ………..
  A. Owomoyela
  B. Goody
  C. Halverson
- ☐ A.

35

Among those who valorize writing at the expense of orality the assumption is that only writing could capture a people's history since history, in their view, is based on facts as opposed to myths. This group also emphasizes the European belief in objectivity "*which can be obtained only through the separation of the knower and the known accompanied with the objectification of the latter*" (**Mazama** 1998:8).

Also, an emphasis on the objectification of the known presupposes "*the idea that meaning is ever stable, given, objective, and conserved through the ages by writing*" (**Ibid**.).

Box 3.1: Standpoint of *Ifá* tenability.

The claim that a people cannot have history without writing.

The idea that meaning is ever stable, given, objective, and conserved through the ages by writing

---

In the *Ifá* system, the general assumption is that the *Ẹsẹ Ifá*, rendered orally either in prose or poetic form, represent an accurate account of what once happened or what has once been observed in the past. **Wande Abimbola** explains that:

History is the language of Ifá divination and "histories make men wise". A man who goes to an Ifá priest to ask for advice on whether he should go on a journey is not told a straight answer. He is given a long story of people who have traveled in the same direction or for a similar purpose and he will be advised to make his decision from this list of precedents.

At least this long list of precedents will serve as a warning to the intending traveller. In this was Ifá guides the people who believe in him from the rich experience of the past (**Abimbola** 1965:4).

Figure 3.3: **Prof Wande Abimbola**
Source: http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/index.cfm?n=27

Thus, to achieve what could pass as "*historical objectivity*", a diligent *Ifá* priest normally consults senior *Ifá* priests or better-informed colleagues on various subjects beyond his knowledge.

Since meaning is the most elusive part of any language, *Ifá* priests often come together in seminar-like gatherings to exchange views on *ẹsẹ Ifá* and ensure that the *ẹsẹ Ifá* are intact as historical materials.

These seminar-like gatherings are also of great significance in ensuring that the subject-matter of *ẹsẹ Ifá*, which is the whole range of *Yorùbá* thought and belief, is protected against multiple interpretation and reinterpretation.

3.2 Individual views on Oral/Written Cultures

Though **Wande Abimbola** admits that there is a problem of change in *ẹsẹ Ifá* due largely to the process of oral dissemination and environmental conditions, his one point of interest to us is that there exists historical evidence in the *Ifá* corpus. Abimbola points out that there is historical evidence in the Ifá corpus from personal names and place names.

On the former, for instance, Abimbola delves into *Ìwòrì Méjì* and shows the possibility that the cross-bow was not a fighting implement of medieval Europe alone, but also a widely used implement in traditional *Yorùbá* society for hunting and fighting. The lines in *Ìwòrì Méjì* read:

> Pá-bí-ọsán-já;
> Ọsán-já, awoo wọn lode Ìtóri
> Àkàtàǹpó-jákùn-ó-dòbììrí-kálẹ̀
> A díá fún Òrúnmìlà,
> Ifá ńlèé táyé Olúufẹ̀ orò sọ
> Bí ẹni tí ńsọgbá
> Ta ní ó wàá bá ni táyée wa wọ̀nyí sọ
> Ewé òpèpè tilẹ̀ sọ… (**Abimbola** 1968:48).

> Sudden-as-the-snapping-of-leather-string;
> Leather-string-snaps,
> The Ifá priest for them in the city of Ìtóri;
> Crossbow-loses-its-string-it-dances-all-over-the-ground;
> Cast Ifá for Òrúnmìlà,
> When Ifá was going to mend the life of the king of Ifẹ̀
> As one mends broken calabash.
> Who, then, will help us mend these our lives?
> Palm-tree grows its leaves right from the ground.
> It is Òrúnmìlà who will help us mend these our lives.
> Palm-tree grows its leaves right from the ground.

In the above *ẹsẹ Ifá*, three names of *Ifá* priests (namely, Pá-bí-ọsán-já, Ọsán-já, Àkàtànpó-jákùn-ó-dòbììrí-kálè) draw our attention to a possible historical evidence which relates the ancient tools used by the *Yorùbá*, though these tools "*are either no longer in use nowadays or... have a restricted application*" (**Abimbola** 1965:50).

Concerning place names, **Abimbola** uses empirically verifiable point to show that place names in *Ifá* are of historical significance. He, therefore, draws on *Ìká Méjì* to prove that Ìká, a town now standing some forty miles north-west of present Oyo, actually existed.

However, Abimbola believes that sometimes it could be difficult to locate any particular place name due to frequent change in names and location. Historical evidence in *Ifá* is not extracted from personal names and place names alone; there is also evidence of *ẹsẹ Ifá* that relate the histories of the foundation of particular towns and of an *ẹsẹ Ifá* that recalls the conflict between Islam and *Yorùbá* traditional religion during the early propagation of Islam in *Yorùbá* land.

Interestingly, the present researcher learnt as a child, native of Ìbàdàn, that *Ọsẹ́ Méjì* was the *odù* cast on the occasion of the foundation of Ìbàdàn. Despite the fact that the foregoing seems to lend credence to historical objectivity in *Ifá*, **Abimbola** (1965:55 – 57) cautions that "*there are problems involved in the use of Ifá divination poems as sources for historical evidence.*"

In the main, this results from the difficulty of separating myths from actual facts. **Abimbola** seems to endorse **G.I. Jones'** definition of myth as that which "*one wants to believe about the past and is based on belief or emotion*" (**Jones** 1975:7).

Looked at more closely, **Jones'** conception of myth evokes the question of whether it is possible for a people to have a purely factual history. One could be tempted here to admit that, since the Greeks are considered as the inventors of literacy and the literate basis of modern thought, European history which supposedly started with the Greeks was fortified against myths as venal purveyors of historical objectivity.

One might then think, going by the notion that written text is always value-free, that the Fathers of European history (the Greeks) did not incorporate myth into the writing of their history. But, on the basis of the need to reevaluate historical facts by succeeding generations, one might argue that history is necessarily founded on value systems, without which there could be no selection of facts.

Thus, hardly can a people's history be written without recourse to some myth. **M.I. Finley** underscores this point when he contends that:

The atmosphere in which the Fathers of History set to work was saturated with myth. Without myth, indeed, they could never have begun their work. The past is an intractable, incomprehensible mass of uncounted and uncountable data. It can be rendered intelligible only if some selection is made, around some focus or foci (**Finley** 1965:83).

The above point by **Finley** no doubt amplifies the importance of the suggestion that *Ifá* divination-poems can be taken as reliable historical sources inasmuch as the information they

purport to give is corroborated by either written sources or other bodies of oral literature like *Ìjálá*, *Oríkì* and *Rárà*.

Having shown the falsity of the claim that, without writing, a people cannot have a history, let us examine the more pervasive claim that only literate cultures could have science.

Perhaps it is in the area of science (and technology) that the power of Western epistemological ethnocentrism on the rival picture of writing and orality is much felt. In fact, the popular opinion in the intellectual sphere is that Africa was "*backward*" in the development of science and technology due to lack of writing tradition in traditional Africa.

This opinion goes on to affirm "*the usual opposition of the non-scientific, magical and superstitious traditional man and the scientific, pragmatic and rational Westerner*" (**Owomoyela** 1987:90).

The point to note here is that there exists among Eurocentric scholars the belief that literacy was the sole and principal cause for the evolution of logical modes of thinking which gave birth to science.

In clear terms, therefore, the Eurocentric mind would not imagine that science could ever flourish in oral cultures. But the grandiose claim that only literate societies could lay claim to science and technology is mistaken; after all science is understood as the system of behaviour by which man acquires mastery over his environment.

Even if science is understood in a formal sense as a systematic and formulated knowledge, the *Yorùbá* (Africans) cannot be described as a people without science. A look at the traditional *Yorùbá* society and the latter's contribution to scientific configuration of our human society will, from the standpoint of *Ifá*, be illuminating.

Among the *Yorùbá*, there is the widely-held belief that it is through *Ifá* oral text that an inquirer can understand the influence or "*achievement*" of other *Yorùbá* gods in society. This is not to say, as we have pointed out somewhere in this study, that *Ifá* should be regarded as superior to other gods in the *Yorùbá* pantheon; it only attests to the role of *Ifá* as the encyclopedia of *Yorùbá* history, belief and philosophy.

Thus, it is not surprising that *Ifá* in *Ògúndá Méjì* eulogizes *Ògún* as the founder of ironworking or, in modern parlance, metallurgy which today is considered as the backbone of our civilization. In *Ògúndá Méjì*, *Ifá* reveals that:

It was Ògún who introduced iron with a ringing sound to the world
It was Ògún who introduced bronze with a ringing sound to the land of Sòkòrì
It was Ògún who introduced brass with a ringing sound to the town of Ìjùmú
It was Ògún who forged iron continuously
Till he reached the expanse of heaven,
Where Àjàgunmàlè initiated Òrúnmìlà in the casting of Ifá (**Adeniji and Armstrong** 1977:5).

The *Yorùbá*, especially the devotees of *Ògún*, rely on the above verse to support the claim that ironworking started with *Ògún* who is variously described as "*the god of war*", "*the god of iron*", "*the patron of the smiths*", and so on.

Although *Ògún* is a primordial deity and ironworking associated with him, no dates can be assigned to the beginning of the science of ironworking. As expected, non-Africans – especially European anthropologists and archeologists – would not condone the *Yorùbá* idea that the origin of ironworking is not datable; these researchers do not see any connection between the material and the spiritual.

They do not believe in any primordial history that sources its material from mythology. But it is noteworthy that the views of these anthropologists and archeologists are stimulatingly conflicting as to the dates and origin of ironworking technology.

We have among these researchers those who contend that ironworking technology originated in Africa and that Europe borrowed it from Africa. Another opinion shared by other researchers is that ironworking technology was imported into Africa from the Middle East. Yet another opinion is that the technology originated in India.

Of the three opinions enumerated, only the first opinion is placatory – for it traces the origin of ironworking to Africa. However, the first opinion, like the other two opinions, fails to acknowledge the *Yorùbá* belief that the ancestry of this material culture is traceable to the divine.

It is expected, therefore, that those who hold the opinions enumerated above would not embrace the view that ironworking technology first emerged from *Ògún*'s primordial industry. But one is easily struck by what could be gleaned from a *Yorùbá* mythological narrative concerning the origin of ironworking and its basic technological knowledge.

According to the narrative, *Ògún* in the far-away past was ordered by his community to go forth in war and conquer the neighboring towns. Before going to war, *Ògún* made a resolve to forge weapons that would be "*stronger than cudgels torn from the armpits of baobab, durable as green grass by the riverside, swift as Eshu, more deadly than the elephant*" (**Gleason** 1971:45).

He then went ahead to embark on the painstaking task of extracting ore from "*rich layers of gravelly laterite*" (**Ibid**: 46). He manufactured charcoal by burning logs of wood and later fetched "*a quantity of moist clay sufficient for the construction of a furnace*" (**Ibid**.).

The narrative explains that "*with his old stone chisel, he drove a wedge into a tree stump, ripped out of the heartwood and lined the cavity with hot coals … Then … Ogun slept out the course of the sun*" (**Ibid**.).

The narrative continues, describing *Ògún*'s final task:

Arising at nightfall from his bed of stone, Ògún went first to the burned out tree stump. Fitting a trimmed branch as pestle to this mortar, he began to pulverize the warm ore one handful at a time. He sifted the powder in a reed basket, washed the heavier particles in pure spring water, and set them to dry in hollowed log troughs. Then he went into his cave to prepare for the arrogant transformation (**Ibid**.).

The "*arrogant transformation*" is related thus:

Ògún … created tools of iron. First he fashioned tools for himself – shaft hammers, a billet, an adze and tongs. Then he forged implements of war – swords, knives both stabbing and throwing, cutlasses, iron tips for arrows and materials for clearing paths (**Ibid**.).

The above narrative underscores the *Yorùbá* belief that knowledge of material relationships and causality is a representation of spiritual truth.

More importantly, the narrative furnishes us with the idea that this "*primordial*" technology grew out of a series of cogent thought, affirming the intellectual significance of myth and showing that, if metallurgy is science, myth does not impoverish scientific thought as some modern-day Eurocentric scholars might think.

The strength of this claim lies in the fact that, though the recitations of its rigorous processes are not frozen in the pages of a manuscript, ironworking has become the heritage of the *Yorùbá* smiths.

That is, ironworking among the *Yorùbá* did not result from any evident cultural diffusion from outside the *Yorùbá* kingdom, nor was it a direct achievement of some non-African technicians and other experts present in Africa; the *Yorùbá* smiths owe this technology to the word-for-word mastery of the processes involved in *Ògún*'s primordial industry through oral transmission.

We can from this end be lured to argue that the much-vaunted enlightenment of Europe could flourish without written texts. Granted this, **Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton** and **Rene Descartes**, considered the founders of modern science, could still formulate a new scientific paradigm or a material world which functions like a machine through some mnemonic genius. This stresses the point that mnemonic activities could also bring about prodigious feats in science and technology.

From the foregoing, we can infer that there is a possibility of science in oral cultures and that science is not European in origin.

Here, however, a critic might argue that what we term as *Yorùbá* (prototypical African) science as we have presented it through the industry of *Ògún* is crude, suggesting that it cannot be compared in any way to Western science and technology. **C.E. Ayres** reacts to this criticism and sees this line of thought as representing a crude positivistic attitude on the part of Eurocentric scholars.

Figure 3.5: Clarence Edwin Ayres
Source: http://www.pragmatism.org/research/ayres.htm

He then draws our attention to some negative aspect of Western science and technology.

According to him: *the prime mover in our recent developments is not that galaxy of noble truths which we call science, but the thoroughly mundane and immensely potent driving force of mechanical technology. Science is the handsome Doctor Jeckyll; machinery is Mr. Hyde – powerful and rather sinister* (**Ayres** 1927:19).

The tone of the above assertion of **Ayre's** is directed to the attitude of today's philosophers who are only infatuated with applicatory science without considering the incalculable imprecation that Western science has brought upon humankind.

The threat of atomic bomb is a good example. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in the assertion that intellectual heritage changes with each generation and that "*fresh analysis carves new facets, new intellectual tools reveal new speculations in its structure*" (**Spencer** 1948:439).

This is in consonance with the need to incorporate the contributions of both the oral and written cultures in order to understand the complete intellectual configuration of our human society.

Though many African intellectuals are still reacting to the traumatic experience of the pre-colonial Africa and are not really receptive to the universalist approach to African thought system, the foregoing underscores the desirability of an accessible knowledge pool from which the entire human family can benefit.

In other words, there is the need to bring individual views in oral and written cultures together to enhance a wider human vision in the area of science and technology. Thus, in tone reminiscent of this recommendation, *Ifá* advocates in *Òtúúrúpon Méjì* that:

> Pẹ́sẹ́-pẹ́sẹ́ lobìnrin ń lọ̀'kuru;
> Wọ̀in-wọ̀ìn lọkùnrin ń l'ọ̀gì
> Ògì tí ò kúnná lẹlẹ́dẹ̀ ń bù sán
> Ìgúnnungún-ab'omi-láńtóró-bí-omi-agbada
> Ọmu-nìfà-obìnrin, ọmú-nìfà-ọkùnrin
> A díá fún Elébùtéé, awo ayé

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A bù fún Odùkèkè, awo òde òrun
Níjó tí wón ń lọ rèé tún Òtufè se
Ifá Elébùtéé ṣe, t'Odùkèkè náà sì ṣe
A fọwó wẹwó, ọwó wa ti mó
Àwa ti d'ọlọgbón méjì awo òde òrun.[79]

A woman grinds bean-meal softly,
A man grinds the corn hastily,
The lumped corn-meal is food for the pigs;
Vulture-with-a-probing-eyes,
Women-benefit-from-breasts, Men-benefit-from-breasts,
Cast Ifá for Elébùtéé, the earthly priest,
For Odùkèkè, the heavenly priest,
On their way to redeem Ifè.
Elébùtéé's divination thrived, so was Odùkèkè's.
We rubbed our hands together and they are clean
We thus become two wise men of divine gifts.

The above verse relates how, in the distant past, two *Ifá* priests of different orientations and outlooks came together and exchanged views in the bid to restore peace and development in Òtufè, an ancient town.

In Òtufè, Elébùtéé and Odùkèkè were the most famous and well-versed *Ifá* priests. But the two priests were sworn enemies, too, because each felt that he was superior to the other. As the two were now entangled in a war of rivalry, Òtufè continued to grow in constant bickering and strife. Social life was stifled and the natives became victims of all sorts of ailments.

Figure 3.6: Sample of Ifa as Priest.
Source: http://www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/29afr_uk.htm

Gradually, Òtufẹ̀ became desolate and was almost on the brink of extinction as people were seeking refuge elsewhere. The situation became so unbearable that the king of the day had to summon the two priests to his court.

In tears, he pleaded that the two priests should bury the hatchet and, instead, use their wisdom (as a knowledge pool) to improve the situation in Òtufẹ̀. Of course, the priests themselves had turned victims of their war: each had lost wives and children to the strife. They listened, humbled themselves before their king and swore to improve the situation in Òtufẹ̀.

Thereafter, the two priests dialogued and learnt that the only way to redeem Òtufẹ̀ was hidden in a lengthy Ifá verse. Elébùtéé had only committed the beginning of the verse into memory and could not complete it.

On his apart, Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀ had long forgotten the beginning of the verse, but could assist Elébùtéé in completing it. The two priests then came together and interpreted the hidden meaning of the verse. In the end, the two were able to redeem Òtufẹ̀ from the brink of ruin.

With a sharp hermeneutic insight, one can admit that the above verse clearly translates to the need to ponder the way out of the problem oral traditions pose to the contemporary "*letter-crazed*" human family, "*that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings*" (**Vansina** 1965:1).

The verse can also be understood as a cryptic emphasis on the need to syncretize both the oral and written projects, the need to rationalize and systematize largely mythological materials. This implies the imperativeness of static text, suggesting not that we valorize writing at the expense of orality.

Rather, the verse reckons with the fact that writing is necessary in our civilization, but it should only be seen as an addition, "not an alternative to oral transmission" (Goody and Watt 1963:345). Interestingly, too, *Ifá* says in another canto of *Òtúúrúpọ̀n Méjì* that:

> Ọlọ́gbọn ayé kan ò ta kókó omi m'étí aṣọ;
> Mòràn-mòràn kan ò mọ yèèpẹ̀ ilẹ̀
> Arìnnàká kò dé ibi ọ̀nà gbé pẹkun
> A díá fún Alábahun
> Tí ń kọ́gbọ́n r'orí ọpẹ rèé kọ́sí…[82]

> No wise man saves water in the hem of his tunic;
> No wise man knows the quantity of sand on earth;
> No traveller knows the edge of the earth
> Divination was undertaken for Alábahun
> On his way to hoard human wisdom …

In his community, long time ago, Tortoise claimed that he was the wisest and had successfully proved this on many occasions when contacted on any pressing problem. Because he claimed monopoly of wisdom, he decided to hide all human wisdom inside a legendary gourd so that no

any other individual would be able to have access to it. He had proposed to hang the gourd on top of a palm tree.

He finally got to the palm tree and decided to climb the tree. But he made several attempts to climb the tree without success and without knowledge of what was hindering him.

He struggled to climb the tree again and again … He was still struggling to climb the tree when a snail, passing by sluggishly, caught him. The snail stood by for a while in great amusement, knowing why it would be impossible for Tortoise to succeed in his task.

After a while, the snail drew Tortoise's attention and told Tortoise that strapping the gourd against his chest would make it impossible for him to climb the tree; his task would be accomplished if he strapped the gourd on his back.

- ■ Scientific underdevelopment or, more exactly, scientific dependence was referring by …..
  A. Hountondji
  B. Ibid
  C. Goody
- ☐ A.

Reluctantly though, Tortoise tried the snail's suggestion and found out that he would have been able to climb the tree had he strapped the gourd on his back. It dawned on him that he was wrong on the assumption that he was the wisest in his community.

It can be gleaned from the above verse that the coming together of both oral and written civilizations will help the *Yorùbá* (Africans) to overcome in the area of science and technology (and other spheres of human intellectual endeavours) what **Paulin Hountondji** (1995:4) refers to as "*scientific underdevelopment or, more exactly, scientific dependence.*"

Taking the complementarist stance, therefore, the point to stress is that Africa can borrow useful ideas from Europe, and also vice-versa. More significantly, "*we need a renewed, systematic reflection on the status, the mode of existence, the scope and limits and the perspectives of development of so-called traditional knowledge*" (**Ibid**.:6).

Summary for Study Session 3

(1) An insightful study of the chronology of Greek literacy would reveal that writing was not a significant cultural factor before Plato.

(2) Though writing engenders a comparatively permanent and reliable storage of information outside fallible human memory, it is also true that writing itself cannot create thought.

(3) Creation of thought is clearly congenial to the formation of ideas which may not necessarily have to be fixed or documented before they are made available to philosophy or reflection.

(4) On the basis of the need to reevaluate historical facts by succeeding generations, one might argue that history is necessarily founded on value systems, without which there could be no selection of facts. Thus, hardly can a people's history be written without recourse to myths

(5) There exists among Eurocentric scholars the belief that literacy was the sole and principal cause for the evolution of logical modes of thinking which gave birth to science. In clear terms, therefore, they are of the opinion that science could never flourish in oral cultures. But the grandiose claim that only literate societies could lay claim to science and technology is mistaken; after all science is understood as the system of behaviour by which man acquires mastery over his environment.

(6) Today's philosophers are only infatuated with applicatory science without considering the incalculable imprecation that Western science has brought upon humankind.

(7) The coming together of both oral and written civilizations will help the Africans to overcome scientific underdevelopment or, more exactly, scientific dependence. The point to stress is that Africa can borrow useful ideas from Europe, and also vice-versa.

Self-Assessment Question (SAQs) for Study Session 3

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 3.1
- Do you think that writing is a precondition for philosophy?
- Using an African culture as foil, discuss the need for a paradigm of interaction between oral and written traditions.
- Justify the claim that writing alone could not capture a people's history.

SAQ 3.2
- Using an African culture as foil, discuss the need for a paradigm of interaction between oral and written traditions.
- In what way can we enhance a wider vision in the area of science and technology?
- Do you agree with the claim that science could not flourish without writing?
- Critically discuss one of the factors that are responsible for the intransigent relationship between the modernists and the traditionalists in African philosophy.
- Do you think that writing itself can create thought?

Study Session 4: Differing Meanings of Death

Introduction

In this lecture, we shall look at the different conceptions of death by different scholars. This will help us to understand that, though death is mostly regarded as a phenomenon which causes the end of our existence or the extinguishing of all our projects, there are reasons to support the opinion that death is not finality or the end of our existence

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:
 4.1 Discuss an overview of the meaning of death
 4.2 Explain the concept of Death in the Pre-Socrates Era
 4.3 Briefly Discuss the concept of Death in the Modern Era

4.1 Overview on the meaning of Death

Oftentimes we wonder what actually could best describe the concept of death, so as to easily understand it and come to accept it as part of our existence. According to Christopher Agulanna:
The theme of death is basic to every thought system traditional, modern, metaphysical or scientific and usually the conception of death in any thought system determines, to a very large extent, its choice of values and the total significance it ascribes to life and human existence in general

Box 4.1 Definition of Death

Death is mostly regarded as a phenomenon which causes the end of our existence or the extinguishing of all our projects

In the latter sense, consciously or unconsciously, death is generally conceived as an evil, the greatest destroyer of our beings and identities
F.H. Cook (1989:155) maintains this view when he opines that, apart from certain prolonged and irremediable pain, "the individual can, in fact, not think of anything worse than one's own death." Cook, therefore, endorses the view that death is the greatest of all evils.
Before the development of philosophical knowledge, death as a phenomenon did not receive much attention. In fact, it was completely eschewed from serious philosophical speculations. But, these days, death has continued to receive serious philosophical attention and, we dare say, much of the theories or discourse concerning death have come down to us from the existentialist philosophers. Be that as it may, we may still need to go into history and see how philosophers - ancient and modern - have grappled with this phenomenon.

4.2 Pre-Socrates Era

During the pre-Socratic era, the major concern was to give a rational answer to the nature of the universe. During this era, death was simply regarded as unpleasant and what the philosophers of the era simply did was to emphasize the brevity and the failure of all human endeavours." For the Greeks, the world was beautiful and delightful to live in and death seemed terrible and the greatest evil.

With the emergence of philosophy in Greek culture, the view of death changed. For instance, the Pythagoreans had famously taught the transmigration of the soul, its purification in the wheel of birth and its final reunion with the Divine through death.

The **Ionians** gradually developed the discourse on death. They believed that knowing the nature of the universe could aid our understanding of the meaning of death. Thales, we know, stated that water is the cause of all things. The implication of this is that all things are one and, therefore, change with death inclusive becomes less radical through the essential oneness of all that exists.

Anaximander talked about the indefinite, where all things are bound together. Individual substances emerged through the eternal motion in the universe. For him, all things perish into those things out of which they take their birth as penalties of their act of injustice.

By proffering this view, Anaximander sought to make the fear of death less persuasive, an expression of the hope that, in the ground of being, death has no dominion. The death of the individual is necessary to unite the individual once again with the infinite.

Figure 4.1: Image of Anaximander
Source: http://artofty.deviantart.com/art/Anaximander-147718550

On his part, **Heraclitus** was concerned about fact of change in things. He contended that all things are in constant flux. If this be the case, then death too is not permanent; the soul of man is part of the fire which transforms itself but abides eternally. According to **Choron**:

It appears then that we have in Heraclitus an attempt to facilitate the acceptance of death as a necessary and natural event, through the realization that strife, the tension of life and death is precisely what makes and upholds the universe (Choron 1963:38).

The underlying idea in **Heraclitus**' philosophy is that death generates life just as everything changes and flows. **Parmenides** contends that there is permanence behind the Heraclitean flux: change, he held, is only a matter of illusion and if death is change, it is, therefore, an illusion and should not be feared. Like the Pythagoreans, **Democritus**, on his part, affirms the immortality of the soul, claiming that people who do not accept this fact in nature will live in perpetual fear.

He is stressing that man should not cling so much to things of this life because they are perishable and transient. If man heeds his counsel, then he will be able to bear the plague of death when the latter strikes.

For **Socrates**, man is a finite and contingent being. He, however, points out that it would be "pretence of wisdom" to claim knowledge of what death actually is. He believes that death is a journey to another place, and believes also that it is good thing to die, especially in a bid to preserving our good life.

He demonstrated this during his trial, stressing that there is a God whose concern it is to preserve the soul of the good man from eternal destruction. Plato presents us with the trial of Socrates in the *Apology* and this historical trial evinces the fact that Socrates strongly believed in the immortality of the soul.

Bertrand Russell extracts from the *Apology* and sheds more light on the idea that Socrates' bearing during his trial conveys his belief in the immortality of the soul. According to Russell:

The Apology gives a clear picture of a man of a certain type: a man very
sure of himself, high-minded, indifferent to worldly success, believing that he
is guided by a divine voice...

In the final passage, where he considers what happens after death, it is
impossible not to feel that he firmly believes in immortality, and that his
professed uncertainty is only assumed. He is not troubled, like the
Christians, by fears of eternal torment: he has no doubt that his life in the
next world will be a happy one (Russell 1996:120).

Plato regarded death as the release of the soul from the body. He posited that the soul is something divine in man, immortal and divine. The soul, according to Plato, was accidentally united to the body and dwells in it as a prisoner. At death it can escape and gain back its divinity. The soul is, therefore, not affected by death; moreover, death only grants it the means of going back to where it belongs.
- ■ Who points out that it would be "pretence of wisdom" to claim knowledge of what death actually is.
  a) Aristotle
  b) Socrates
  c) Anaximander
  d) All philosophers
- ☐ Answer is Socrates (b)

The Epicureans, we know, are mostly concerned about how we live our lives. In accordance with the recommendation of Epicurus, their patron, they advocated the pursuit only of pleasures that can be controlled and enjoyed in moderation. Their view of death is crucial here. They stress the fact that there is actually no meeting point between death and man and, for that reason; we do not have to fear death.

The Epicureans further explicated that the thought of death would deprive man of the pleasures they advocate and that the soul is easily affected by a sickness caused by religious belief in the fear of the gods and thereafter. Their view in this regard, according to **Choron**, is exemplified in the words of Epicurus:

The world from which gods are thus absent is ruled by chance. Man has no
hope of improving the world, and must resign himself to making, by his own
effort, the best of his own existence (Choron 1963:59).

Thus, **Epicurus** advised that we become familiar with the belief that death is nothing to us. This conviction makes life enjoyable and frees us from pain and fear of death.

The **Stoics** taught that death belongs to the cosmic order of things as birth is; if this be the case, then there is actually no ground for fear or compliant. **Plotinus** followed this line of thought when he posited that death is only a means of returning to the Divine and man, all through his life, is continually filled with intense desire of uniting with the One.

4.3 Modern Thought on Death

In modern era, the time when natural science enjoyed prominence in the quest for knowledge and the centralizing tendency in Christendom declined

Rene Descartes emerged as the father of modern thought. He holds the dualist view that man is made up of the body and soul, giving precedence to the soul or the mind (because of its ability to think). He urged that we should not be afraid of death or fear to die because the soul outlasts the body, that is, the soul continues to exist through natural reason.

According to him, death is only as a result of failure of some principal parts of the body and the soul is not in any way affected. Death should, therefore, not make us fear because, after we die, we are sure of enjoying what he refers to as the *"bliss of another life"*.

Figure 4.2: An Image of Rene Descartes
Source: http://historyoflinearalgebra.weebly.com/reneacute-descartes-ns.html

Like the **Epicureans**, **Benedict Spinoza** maintains that the fear of death disturbs one's peace of mind. He counsels that we banish this fear by positing that there is no life after death or nothing as the immortality of the soul. The view of **Gottfried Leibniz** is also relevant here.

According to **Leibniz**, no living thing perishes in death but only undergoes a metamorphosis. He developed this from his position that each individual substance is an idea of God, actualized by means of a continual emanation. These substances or monads mirror the image of the Deity, each capable of producing something that resembles it. Death, therefore, becomes positive because it brings about the birth of another.

Summary for Study Session 1

In this Study Session 1, you have learnt that:
1. Death is mostly regarded as a phenomenon which causes the end of our existence or the extinguishing of all our projects. In this sense, consciously or unconsciously, death is generally conceived as an evil, the greatest destroyer of our beings and identities.
2. For the Greeks, the world was beautiful and delightful to live in and death seemed terrible and the greatest evil. With the emergence of philosophy in Greek culture, the view of death changed.
3. The Pythagoreans had famously taught the transmigration of the soul, its purification in the wheel of birth and its final reunion with the Divine through death.
4. For Socrates, it would be "pretence of wisdom" to claim knowledge of what death actually is. He believes that death is a journey to another place, and believes also that it is good thing to die, especially in a bid to preserving our good life. He demonstrated this during his trial.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) for Study Session 4

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning Outcomes by answering these questions. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment Questions at the end of this Study Session.

SAQ 4.1 (Test Learning Outcomes)
1. What is Death?
2. Do you think that death is the greatest evil?

SAQ 4.2 (Test Learning Outcomes)
1. Discuss the view of the Ionians on death.
2. Explain the Pythagoreans' support for the idea of immortality.

SAQ 4.3 (Test Learning Outcomes)
1. Who is regarded as the Father of Modern Thought
2. Explain the Gottfried Leibniz idea on death

Study Session 5: Death and Immortality in an African Culture

Introduction

In this lecture, we shall look at the philosophical issues surrounding the idea of afterlife or immortality.

We shall examine the conflicting positions on the idea of immortality and show, using the Yoruba culture as foil, how Africans have been able to demonstrate the meaningfulness of human existence.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:
    5.1 Discuss the fact that 'Afterlife conceptions are problematic'
    5.2 Explain the conflicting views on the idea of immortality.
    5.3 Analyze the Yoruba (African) belief in death and immortality.

5.1 Various Philosophers' Concept of Immortality

Perhaps the difficulty of demonstrating immortality empirically or scientifically has won more votaries against the immortality-hypothesis.

Kai Nielsen

Immortality for him is a phenomenon that should be regarded as unreasonable. Speaking empirically, he holds that nothing survives the body after death and that the body simply disintegrates and decomposes.

He contends that:

> Conceptions of the afterlife are so problematic that it is unreasonable for a philosophical and scientifically sophisticated person living in the twentieth century to believe in life eternal, to believe that we shall survive the rotting or the burning or the mummification of our 'present bodies' (Nielsen 1989:1).

Clarence Darrow

Clarence Darrow (1973:251–253) is unperturbed by the widespread belief in immortality, as expressed by various convictions in the world today. For Darrow, the belief in immortality is a delusion which affirms the credulity or gullibility of man.

Miguel de Unamuno

The Spanish existentialist philosopher, **Miguel de Unamuno**, on his part, reacts to the phenomenon of immortality and sees immortality as man's natural desire which is bound to be frustrated by the fact of the extinction that awaits us at death (de Unamuno 1962:54 – 71). That extinction awaits us at death does not make sense to the Yorùbá and to say that life has no meaning is equally arrant nonsense.

In fact, the Yorùbá minimize the confrontation of individual's extinction with assurances of some form of immortality. Though they constantly express their fear of death, the Yorùbá do not fail to make impressive responses to it. Their responses underscore their belief in the meaningfulness of human existence and reflect their conviction that man's desire to survive his personal death is guaranteed.

It is therefore instructive at this juncture to look or examine the ways through which the Yorùbá attempt to neutralize the power of death in a bid to enjoy some form of immortality. Among the Yorùbá, the death of the young is believed to be unnatural and that is why they often hold the opinion that such a death is caused by either the deceased's headstrong foolhardiness or by the will of enemies. In this case, the deceased is mourned.

But, contrary to this, the death of an aged person is expected; when the death of an aged person occurs the Yorùbá celebrate. Peter Morton-Williams expresses this view as embodied in Yorùbá religious practices:

Those who die prematurely, before begetting children or before their children have grown and while they have themselves not reached the threshold of old age, are mourned. But the mourning for the young is in private, by near kin only, and although individuals may come to offer sympathy, no public ceremonial marks their passing. Early death so offends that it is hidden from society at large.

Although patterns of mourning are stereotyped, and there are social sanctions to ensure their observance, they are never (except, of course, at the death of a king) directed at arresting the general attention. When the very old die, there are displays of joy - often on a grand scale. The grimness of death is masked by celebrations of the achievement of the preceding lifetime (Morton-Williams 1960:34).

It must be stressed here that the Yorùbá value such blessings as long life, increasing prosperity and children. So when a child dies, the Yorùbá are bothered by the fact of whether the child is attacked by a witch or, in the case of a series of dying infants, whether the child is an *àbíkú*, literally "born to die".

To neutralize the potency of witchcraft and sorcery, most individuals among the Yorùbá often wear amulets and hang some protective charms around the corners of their houses. This measure, they believe, guards against the sudden death of a child by witches or sorcerers. But in their response to the death of an *àbíkú* the Yorùbá observe certain rites. Their response to this form of death is described thus:

> A series of dying infants is held to be qualitatively different from ordinary children, and to be indeed the same child born again and again. There is a name for them**, àbíkú**, meaning 'born to die'. It is believed that an *àbíkú* is a child unwilling to leave its spirit playmates (*ará ọ̀run*) and to live on earth. Rites are performed to break its attachment to them.

It is commonly vilely dressed and...may even be disfigured, to make it unattractive to them; it usually bears chains or a fetter as a charm to bind it to earthly life, or a rattle to frighten away its spirit companions...Showing further that it is not a real child, its circumcision and the cutting of lineage marks on its face may be postponed until its parents are convinced that it is going to remain in the world (Ibid.:35).

The Yorùbá responses to the fear of death in the old, however, have some existentialist bearing. It is common knowledge that the Yorùbá religious practices exemplify their belief in individual immortality. Benedict Ibitokun explicates the concepts of existence, death and immortality in the

Yorùbá worldview. According to Ibikotun (1995:21), the Yorùbá worldview "is not restrained to the physical, tangible place of existence.

He explains further that a Yorùbá's cosmic totality has to do with his existence on earth, his relationship with his ancestors, his worship of the gods and his belief that the unborn guarantee future existence.

5.2 Philosopher Babatunde Lawal Concept of Immortality

Still on the Yorùbá belief in immortality,
Babatunde Lawal observes:

> ...to the Yorùbá, death is not the end of life. It is merely a dematerialization of the vital breath or soul, and hence a transformation from earthly to spiritual existence (a kind of After-Life), where the dematerialized soul may choose to stay forever, although it can make periodic returns to earth through reincarnation (*àtúnwá*). It is this belief in an After-Life and in reincarnation that assures the Yorùbá of immortality (Lawal 1977:51).

Lawal draws his inference from the popular Yorùbá ontology concerning how Olódùmarè, the Supreme-being, and Obàtálá, a Yorùbá god, jointly created man. While Obàtálá moulded man's physical body from clay, Olódùmarè animated the moulded image by emitting his vital breath into it.

Olódùmarè's vital breath assures immortality in the sense that the Yorùbá believe that the vital breath which is divine (since it is from the Supreme Being) cannot decompose at death, though its withdrawal from the body (an image moulded from clay) results in death.

In other words, the vital breath (generally referred to as the soul or *èmí* in Yorùbá) has the divine power of retuning to earth in different forms and at different periods. The Yorùbá belief in reincarnation finds its meaning and is borne out of this view.

Our explication of how the Yorùbá respond to the fear of death in the young has shown us a type of reincarnation in *àbíkú* whose soul "is only visiting the earth as a sort of tourist; for it will soon desert the 'borrowed' body in order to return to its unborn companions" (Ibid.). The second type of reincarnation is markedly consequential to the Yorùbá belief in immortality. This occurs when a child is believed to be the reincarnate of his dead ancestor. On this, William Bascom writes:

> The ancestor reborn in the child may be identified through physical resemblance, similarity in character or behaviour, through dreams in which the ancestor tells someone in the family that he has returned, or through divination for the mother during pregnancy, or for the newborn child (Bascom 1960:404).

Apart from the view stated above, the Yorùbá belief in immortality is expressed through their various forms of ancestral worship or through naturalistic representations used in funeral rites of the deceased. In many parts of Yorubaland, especially during the second-burial obsequies, the Yorùbá use naturalistic life-size effigies to represent the deceased who will be led in a procession and parade himself around the town as though the deceased is back alive.

There is also the *ìpèkú* ('calling the dead') ceremony whereby "a masked figure, wearing the dress and hat of the deceased, and walking and talking like him, is made to return to his old home to give the last farewell" (Lawal 1977:52).

Lawal explains further:

➢ By and large, the use of naturalistic mask or effigy during the second-burial ceremonies is not only to mark the last physical appearance of a departing soul on earth, but also to demonstrate that he has 'changed position' (pa ipò dà), and to impress upon the soul of the deceased - if he is watching the

ceremony - that, having cast off his earthly mask, he must now proceed to heaven to join the souls of his predecessors and to team up with them to help the living.

The destruction or burial of his effigy implies that, like the slough of a snake, his erstwhile mask can never be re-used. However, the departing soul may want to return to the living in a new mask; he may do this either by reincarnation in any of his grandchildren, or through *egúngún* mask which his children will make for him (Ibid.).

As a matter of fact, we find in the *egúngún* mask the most dramatic demonstration of the concept of the 'Living Dead'. The Yorùbá believe that the *egúngún* is a physical form of a departed ancestor who, veiled behind the mask, comes around to inquire about the welfare of his living descendants. There are several myths and legends concerning the origin of *egúngún*.

Of importance here, however, is the legend which relates that the first *egúngún* were heavenly beings sent to earth by the Supreme Being to order the state of things for the terrestrial beings (humans).

A close examination of other myths and legends about the *egúngún* will reveal, however, that the Yorùbá conceive of the *egúngún* as heavenly beings who neutralize the fear and imminence of death by impersonating their departed ancestors.

The Yorùbá believe that, as spiritually potent ancestors, the *egúngún* have power to heal the sick and bless barren women with children. As revered ancestors, now physically present in the midst of their family or community, the *egúngún* also settle disputes and promote the spiritual well-being of the society by cleansing the society of evils like witchcraft and disease through certain rituals.

Most importantly, the Yorùbá find in the image of the *egúngún* the need to expatiate and "celebrate the triumph of the human spirit over Death" (Ibid.:58). Summarizing the import of the foregoing, Lawal explains the important role the *egúngún* play in cushioning the individual's extinction with some form of immortality.

According to him:

The actual presence of the dead among the living provides a psychological boost for the community: the young are so thrilled at the prospect of immortality that they sometimes whip one another almost to the point of severe injury, while the old, especially those in the evening of life, may occasionally be so moved by the spectacle that they begin to imagine the time when their own *egúngún* would be welcomed with the same pomp and pageantry.

For the *egúngún* is a dream-come-true to the Yorùbá, a dramatization of their belief in an After-Life and in the strong bond between the living and the dead. A typical Yorùbá 'extended' family comprises not only the living members but also the departed ones. To the Yorùbá, the *Dead* are not dead; but will soon be back, either as grandchildren or as *egúngún* (Ibid.: 60).

Though the *egúngún*, as we have pointed out, are the most dramatic demonstration of the Yorùbá belief in immortality, the performance of *ìrèmòjé* also affirms this belief through some naturalistic representation of the deceased.

Ìrèmòjé funeral dirges are usually sung in poetry; this is not surprising since the imagery of death is embedded in African poetry. As a matter of fact, there is the conception that the living, the dead and the unborn form a single community in Africa. This conception is found in African poetry generally.

It is related that Ògún, the Yoruba god of iron and war, during the later part of his life, directed his followers (hunters) to observe *ìrèmòjé* as a sacred religious duty. Ògún warned, however, that

the deceased hunter would be denied his right place in the ancestral realm should his living guild members fail to observe the *ìrèmọ̀jé* after his death.

In short, the deceased whose *ìrèmọ̀jé* is not observed will in the spirit or ancestral world be "in a state of peril in which he would not be able to find his proper place among the ancestors" (Ajuwon 1997:174 – 175).

This view is expressed in the following *ìrèmọ̀jé* song:

> Ọdẹ yòówù ó kú,
> Tá a bá ṣèrèmọ̀jé ẹ̀
> Ọ̀dọ̀ Olúmọkin ló ń lọ
> Ọdọ yòówù tó side lọ,
> Tá à bá ṣèrèmọ̀jé ,
> Tòun tegbére ní ó jọ máa jẹ (Ibid.)

> A hunter who dies,
> For whom *Ìrèmọ̀jé* is performed,
> Shall join *Olúmọkin* in heaven.
> A hunter who dies,
> For whom *ìrèmọ̀jé* is denied,
> Shall join the company of demons.

Ìrèmọ̀jé ritual performamce could, therefore, be regarded as a ritual meant to mark the deceased's passage from earth to heaven and, as a divine model from Ògún, from an amateur rank (on earth) to a professional rank in heaven.

The chant below boosts this point:

> Ìgbà mîi,
> Ìgbà mîi,
> Ká má tùún jọ règbẹ́ mọ́ (Ibid.).

> In future,
> In future,
> Stop going a-hunting with us.

Bade Ajuwon

Bade Ajuwon draws our attention to the significance of the above chant and its esoteric import. He says:

It is believed that this chant represents Ògún's own order to the deceased to refrain from ever hunting again with his living colleagues and, instead, to take up his earthly profession in heaven. There he will be exposed to superior hunting skills, as imparted to him by Ògún (Ajuwon 1997:176).

Ajuwon's view is in consonance with the fourth of the six themes identified by Gerald Moore which embrace the concept of death.

The theme reads:

> Energy has primacy over matter. It precedes, controls, and survives all material forms. The energy or force of the dead man does not perish with him, but passes into new manifestations. Death feeds life and makes renewal possible (Moore1968:57).

The latter view emphasizes that death among the Yorùbá is not regarded as the end of existence, but as the rite *de passage par excellence*. With this view in mind, the Yorùbá - especially members of the hunters' guild - gather at the second-burial ceremony of their departed member and cushion the death of the latter with an effigy, achieved by clothing the effigy in the best dress or hunting smock of the deceased.

Lawal adds that:

> The effigy is paraded round the town and thereafter taken to the bush along with a basket containing the hunting charms of the deceased. After the final rites have been performed, the effigy is either destroyed with gunshots or simply left to perish. This marks the end of the physical existence of the deceased (Lawal 1977:52).

Where an effigy is not usedthe service of someone of exact resemblance of the deceased is sought. This living impersonator will, in dramatic demonstration, appear to the assembly of hunters, the deceased's relations and townspeople, and bid them farewell. This point is also obvious in Ajuwon's exposition of *ìrèmòjé* as he points out that:

> Death cannot be considered as a finality...It is a gateway to another kind of life: the life of an ancestor. The *ìrèmòjé* thus move from the solemnity of death to the joy of another kind of existence (Ajuwon 1997:194).

Ajuwon substantiates the plausibility of the above view with an *ìrèmòjé* chant:

> Mo posese-posesee,
> Owóo mi ò BÁkànbí mó,
> Babaá wá diná òrun kò tie kú mó.
> Babaá wá sí ti, dòòrùn,
> Eyí ta ó fi sáso gbe kalé
> Ákànbí ire lálèdé òrun (Ibid.:194 – 195).

> I trotted and trotted,
> I couldn't reach Ákànbí any more.
> Our father has been transformed in a heavenly light
> Which never dies.
> Our father has even been transformed into a sun,
> Whose rays shall dry our clothes.
> Ákànbí, rest in peace.

Ajuwon cites another chant whose import is not so dissimilar from the one above. This particular chant is replete with metaphors and presents the deceased (now an ancestor) as a "transplanted tree".

It reads:

> Baba àwá ti dìmùlè.
> Wón ti digi àlóyè,
> Èyí tí ò leè kú mó,
> Èso weere ni wón n so (Ibid.).

> Our father is now an ancestor in whom to confide.
> He is a transplanted tree that thrives,

> A tree that no longer dies,
> But bear countless fruits.

Ajuwon delves into the metaphor in the above chant and explains that:

> An ancestor is like a "transplanted tree" in that he has demonstrated an ability to "take root" in a new setting. He "thrives" in that he has been resurrected in the countless descendants who have been left on earth to reproduce in the generations yet to come (Ibid.).

On this latter account, a synthesis of the first and second chants becomes instructive. If we consider this synthesis and allow the personality of Àkànbi in the first chant to replace "Baba wa" in the second chant, we will be able to grasp the immortal status given to Àkànbi.

Though Àkànbi himself is gone, he has the infinite potential for spiritual transformation and, therefore, the "ability to live on in the spirit world and to direct, influence, and even control human activities from afar" (Ibid.).

Summary

1) That extinction awaits us at death does not make sense to the Yorùbá and to say that life has no meaning is equally arrant nonsense. In fact, the Yorùbá minimize the confrontation of individual's extinction with assurances of some form of immortality.

2) Though they constantly express their fear of death, the Yorùbá do not fail to make impressive responses to it. Their responses underscore their belief in the meaningfulness of human existence and show their conviction that man's desire to survive his personal death is guaranteed.

3) Among the Yorùbá, the death of the young is believed to be unnatural and that is why they often hold the opinion that such a death is caused by either the deceased's headstrong foolhardiness or by the will of enemies. In this case, the deceased is mourned. But, contrary to this, the death of an aged person is expected; when the death of an aged person occurs the Yorùbá celebrate.

4) The Yorùbá (African) worldview is not restrained to the physical, tangible place of existence. The African's cosmic totality has to do with his existence on earth, his relationship with his ancestors, his worship of the gods and his belief that the unborn guarantee future existence.

Post-test

Self-Assessment Question (SAQs) for Study Session 5

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.
Discuss why the immortality-hypothesis is difficult to demonstrate.

SAQ 5.1
In what way do the unborn guarantee future existence?

SAQ 5.2
Critically discuss the idea that death is merely a dematerialization of the vital breath or soul.

SAQ 5.3
Discuss how the Yoruba or any other ethno-linguistic unit in Africa has been able to overcome the fear of death.

SAQ 5.4
Examine critically naturalistic representations of the concept of the "Living Dead" and their moral significance.

Study Session 6:   The Idea of Destiny

Introduction

In this study session, the main focus is to look at the different definitions of the term destiny. At the level of definition, the concept of destiny contains an ambiguity which, if not classified, can lead to very serious problems.

In essence the term contains some form of ambiguity, in the sense that it is a concept that has more than one meaning and, if its various meanings are not understood, it could lead to unnecessary disputes. Therefore, you will be briefly engage in the analysis of the various senses or meanings of the concept.

Learning Outcomes for Study Session 6

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:
- 6.1   Define the concept of Destiny.
- 6.2   Explain the definitional problem of Destiny.

6.1   Conceptual Definition of Destiny

Destiny is defined as the mysterious power that determines the course of events. Destiny is a certain kind of fraternity. It is the effective reality, that is, the history and the judgment of the world. The word "destiny" is coined from the Greek compound word *Proginosko* or *Proriso*, which means "to foreordain", "to foreknow", "to appoint as the subject of future privilege."

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, destiny is described as Predestination; in Islam it is *Taqdir* or *Qadar*. The Akan speaking people of Ghana calls it is *Okra*. In Eastern religious world it is called *Karma*. The Igbos call it *Chi*. the Kalabari of Niger Deta refer to it as *Teme*. The Ijaw call it *Oru Agbani*. For the Idoma it is *Owo*. Nupe call it *Kuci*, while the Ewe speaking people of West coast call it *Se*. It is *Fate* in the Greco-Roman world.

- ■ In your own view how ca you define Predetermined Destiny?
- □ Predetermined Destiny, sometimes just shortened to Predestiny, is the idea that everyone's path and actions in life are already decided upon before birth by a higher power

6.2   Definitional Problem of Destiny

There are critical definitional and conceptual problems as related to the concept of destiny. At the level of definition, the concept of destiny contains an ambiguity which, if not classified, can lead to very serious problems.

What we are saying in essence is that the term contains some form of ambiguity, in the sense that it is a concept that has more than one meaning and, if its various meanings are not understood, it could lead to unnecessary disputes. Therefore, we shall briefly engage in the analysis of the various senses or meanings of the concept.

6.2.1   Destiny as Fate

Destiny is used to raise the issue of fate. Fate is the power that controls all events and it is the end of things that are. If we accept this definition of seeing destiny as fate, then it shows that man is powerless under the influence of fate because fate controls every event and there is no opportunity for man to exercise his initiative or freedom. Therefore, destiny as fate shows clearly that man is the subject of a superior force.

Again if we say that destiny is the end of all things that must happen then we are submitting to a form of determinism (determinism says that every event has a cause). If this is true, then the events of life are causally connected, that is, event A leads to event B and so on. This is a kind of historical determinism

Etymologically, the concept "Fate" is derived from the Latin word *Fatum*, which when translated into English means "that which has been spoken or decreed." According to Raphael Madu, the idea of destiny in this context "is linked to circumstances where all the phenomena of human life are traced to an ultimate unity or agency external to this historical phenomena"(Madu 1992:1).

Madu, therefore, avers that "fate is a unity or agency seen as an inevitable necessity controlling all things" (Ibid.). In this sense, destiny is considered as the absolutely inscrutable power or force to which all men are subject and may be either personified or presented as impersonal. This understanding of destiny expresses a feeling of helplessness in the face of natural and supernatural forces over which people have little or no control.

Homer, in Greek mythology, personified fate as spinning the web of destiny for men at their birth. At the time of Hesiod, a threefold personification is given in the Greek pantheon to reflect the attributes of destiny.

Fate was personified in the three gods who were called the daughters of necessity. *Lachesis*, the most senior, represents the past which was responsible for apportioning the lots of life. *Clotho*, who symbolizes the present, spins the thread of life, and *Atropus*, the inevitable future, who cuts life.

In Greek mythology, therefore, both the providential supersensible forces and necessity of nature were strongly interwoven and man is encased in the cobweb of superior forces. All his efforts notwithstanding, man cannot escape his lot. Any attempt to alter his lot makes him guilty of

pride and oftentimes brings upon him in full the malevolence of the offended power (Orangun 1998:4).

Destiny as fate or fatalism can also be understood in general as the view that the course of future events cannot be altered through any means. This means that all our hopes, desires, intentions and actions are powerless to make any difference because they form part of the inescapable or inevitable sequence.

6.2.2 Destiny as Predestination

Destiny as "Predestination" upholds the idea that a divine force is behind all things. But there is a problem here which is that we do not know the extent of the control of that divine force; we are likely to believe that predestination does not offer the possibility of freedom, chance and moral responsibility because it quotes that a supreme being has already predestined everything.

In the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* the term predestination is described as "the belief that God has decided everything that will happen, and that no human effort can change things" (1978:857).

The concept has been differently explicated by theologians and has fanned the flames of controversy all along because it appears "etymologically unscriptural, theologically depraved and philosophically not sufficiently distinctive" (**Madu** 1992:124). **Raphael Madu** regards predestination as "an absolute divine decree, an inner decision of divine wisdom and will, whereby God resolves and determines what He (God) Himself will bring to pass" (Ibid.).

6.2.3 Islam and Predestination

Destiny is described in Islam as *taqdir* or *qadar*, which can also be interpreted as Divine decree or a general law prevailing in the whole of the universe. Also, it could be interpreted as meaning that everything is subject to a law under a circumscribed limitation, while *Allah* (God) alone is the control of all things.

The implication of the above is that everything created, human beings inclusive, is subject to *qadar*, to a divine measure of all things, and to limitations imposed upon it by a higher controlling power.

The absolute will or power of Allah is stressed in the Quranic passages that follow: "Allah is the creator of all things, and of all things. He is the guardian. His are the Keys of the heavens and earth" (Q.39-63). "Allah is Sovereign in the heavens and the earth. He pardons whom He wills and punishes whom He pleases" (Q.48:14).

What follows from these verses of the Quran is that man is powerless in the face of the Supreme Being (Allah); he (man) does not have absolute knowledge or power. To this end, Mohammed argues… All these attributes belong properly to God (Allah).

Therefore all human knowledge, human power and human will are all subject to limitations which are placed upon man by the divine measure (*qadar*). Thus, in view of the absolute will of

Allah in human undertakings and the limitations that are imposed on him, can we justifiably praise, reward or punish man for action that are divinely imposed?

The *Jabarriyah*, the Islamic sect that championed the absolute concept of destiny, holds that view that *Allah* is the creator of man and deeds, be it good (*Khair*) or evil (*Shair*). Man, the sect argues, cannot take any action unless it is decreed; he acts as the divine will directs, he has not the choice or will to change what *Allah* has decreed. This is buttressed by the passage from the Quran:

> To Allah belongs all that the heavens and earth contain. Whether you reveal your thoughts or hid them, Allah will bring you to account for them. He will forgive whom He will and punish whom He pleases. He has power over all things. (Q.2:284).

Contrary to the opinion of the *Jabarriyah*, however, another sect, the Mutazilites – also known as the free-willers – holds the view that man is the creator of his own actions and has full control over them. He has been endowed with discretion to choose how to act. Therefore, Allah is wise and just to whom no evil or wrong doing may be attributed.

In the philosophical parlance, the issue of predestination, like other theological mysteries, is not adequately demonstrable. The debate concerning the idea of human destiny is between those referred to as determinists and indeterminists.

The determinists believe that the future has no ambiguous possibilities since everything has been fixed from eternity.

Indeterminism, on the other hand, denies this idea and maintains that the world is not "one unbending unit of fact" (Madu 1992:125). It conceives parts of the world as having some loose grips on one another to enhance possibilities.

In philosophical discourse, therefore, another name for predestination is determinism. However, we should not confuse determinism with fatalism. Fatalism asserts that:

> Every event has been preordained; that the causes of events are outside ourselves, that whatever occurs to us does so regardless of what we do; that we cannot act, since events are beyond our control, that there are no alternatives, (and) that deliberation is illusory (Abel 1976:243).

In other words, fatalism is a doctrine of resignation to fate. It maintains that the future will be of a certain kind in spite of what we do or we did not do. The doctrine sees man as powerless to change or alter the events which have been predetermined by the Supreme Being, who lies outside the causal chain of event.

- What is Determinism?
  - Determinism is a philosophical thesis of universal causation that says: "for everything that ever happens, there are conditions such that given them, nothing else would happen".

According to Hospers, determinism "does not say whether the cause is mental or physical, of inorganic nature, or people or God" (Hospers 1969:322). He adds that:

> As far as determinism is concerned the cause can be anything. It is not even necessary that we ever know what the causes of events are… every event has a cause of some kind whether we ever found out what it is or not (Ibid.).

Summary of Study Session 6

In Study Session 6, you have learnt that:

1. Destiny is defined as the mysterious power that determines the course of events. Destiny is a certain kind of fraternity. It is the effective reality, that is, the history and the judgment of the world.

2. The word "destiny" is coined from the Greek compound word *Proginosko* or *Proriso*, which means "to foreordain", "to foreknow", "to appoint as the subject of future privilege."

3. If we accept this definition of seeing destiny as fate, then it shows that man is powerless under the influence of fate because fate controls every event and there is no opportunity for man to exercise his initiative or freedom. Therefore, destiny as fate shows clearly that man is the subject of a superior force.

4. Destiny as "Predestination" upholds the idea that a divine force is behind all things. But the problem with this conception is that we do not know the extent of the control of that divine force; we are likely to believe that predestination does not offer the possibility of freedom, chance and moral responsibility because it quotes that a supreme being has already predestined everything.

5. In the philosophical parlance, the issue of predestination, like other theological mysteries, is not adequately demonstrable. The debate concerning the idea of human destiny is between those referred to as determinists and indeterminists.

6. The determinists believe that the future has no ambiguous possibilities since everything has been fixed from eternity. Indeterminism, on the other hand, denies this idea and maintains that the world is not one unbending unit of fact.

Self-Assessment Question (SAQs) for Study Session 6

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 6.1 (Tests Learning Outcome 6.1)
1. Attempt a definition of destiny?
2. Attempt the analysis of the various senses of the term destiny.

SAQ 6.2 (Tests Learning Outcome 6.2)
1. Definitional Problem of Destiny as fate
2. Discuss the idea of destiny in Islam or Christianity.

Study Session 7: Conceptual Problem of Destiny in an African Culture

Introduction

The philosophical nature of the beliefs in destiny in traditional African thought has for sometimes now, been controversial. Several metaphysical interpretations have been given by various African philosophers on the nature and the meaning of human destiny in traditional African thought. Some of these interpretations have been in tune with fatalism, predestinations and hard-determinism.

In this Study Sessionyou will be introduce to the conceptual problem of destiny in Yoruba, Igbo and the Akan traditional thoughts

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:
 7.1   Explain the conceptual problem of destiny.
 7.2   Discuss the debate on the idea of destiny in Yoruba philosophical thoughts
 7.3   Explain the conceptual problem of destiny in Igbo Akan thoughts

7.1   Conceptual Problems of Destiny in African Culture

Certain conceptual problems arise in the analysis of destiny. For example, when can we correctly or rightly or reasonably commence to assess a person's destiny? Is it at the beginning of the life or at the middle or at the end or after the life of that person? These questions raise another problem of the analysis of three approaches to destiny.

African philosophical discussions on the concepts of human destiny have presented both the greatest opportunities for individual speculation and the greatest difficulties of correct interpretation.

The metaphysical nature of the African Traditional belief and human destiny has been interpreted and argued by many scholars to be in harmony with the tenets of fatalism and hard determinism. However, before unfolding the thrust of their argument, there is need to perhaps state the idea of acquisition of destiny and its metaphysical relevance for human destiny in African thought system

- ■ What do you think is the problem surrounding the concept of destiny in African philosophical discussions?

□ The problem surrounding the concept of destiny in African philosophical discussions has much to do with the metaphysical interpretations which will be reflective of, consistent and coherent with the traditional belief in human destiny

7.2 Destiny in the Yoruba

Destiny in the Yoruba philosophy of existence is known as *Ipin-ori*, "the head's lot or portion". In the Yoruba understanding, the manner in which the *Ipin-ori* (destiny) comes to man is ambiguously conceived. In one-way man *chooses* his destiny, in another he *receives* his destiny and yet in another way man's destiny is *affixed* to him.

According to **Olusegun Oladipo**, the first conception is expressed by the Yoruba as *Akunleyan*, "that which one kneeks down and chooses," the second conception is known as *Akunlegba*, "that which one kneels down and receives," the third conception of *Ipin-ori* is known as *Ayanmo*, "that which is affixed on one" (1992:42).

Of the three conceptions of destiny, the first conception, *Akunleyan*, is the most widely held because the concept of choice is woven around it. But Oladipo says that none of the act by which *Ori* is chosen presupposes the act of free choice, because the preferential system which is rule of choice is absent (Ibid.).

The Yoruba believe that destiny by its very nature is permanent and unalterable because it is doubly sealed, first during the course of its conferment by *Olodumare*, and finally at the "gate" by the *Onibode*, "the gate keeper" of the gate between heaven and earth. Supporting the belief that the *Ipin-ori* is unalterable are several sayings among the Yoruba, one of which is expressed by Bolaji Idowu thus:

> *Akunleyan ni adaiye ba*
> *A kunle a yan ipin*
> *A daye tan Oju nro ni* (Idowu 1962:175).

> That which is chosen kneeling is that
> which is found on getting to the world
> We knelt and chose a portion
> We get to the world and are not pleased.

Generally speaking, the Yoruba believe that a person is made up of three basic components; *ara*, the bodily frame which is visible and tangible, and by which he interacts with the environment and other men; *emi*, the life-giving element which is invisible and intangible; and *ori*, "the individuality element".

Of these three elements, the most crucial to the Yoruba belief in destiny is *ori*. It is believed that it is what *ori* has been predestined to obtain that it brings to the world and carries through life (**Awolalu** 1979:161).

We may then ask: what is *ori*? What it its significance such that the Yoruba refer to destiny as *ipin-ori*? Literally, *ori* is the physical head, which houses the brain and also designates the seat of intellect. The physical head, some writers on Yoruba tradition say, is a visible representation or symbol of another head, the *ori-inu*, "the inner head." O*ri-Inu* stands for the essence of the person.

Figure 7.1: Yoruba Prayer for Ori-inu
Source: http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/16?start=8

The Yoruba believe that it is the *ori-inu* that "rules, controls and guides the life activities of the person" (Idowu 1962:170). Thus, *ori-inu* doubles as the "bearer of the person's destiny as well as the determinant of personality" (**Gbadegesin** 1998:155). **Gbadegesin** explains further that:

> *Ori* is, as it were the "case" in which individual destiny are wound up. Each… created being picks up his/her own… "case" without knowing what is stored there. But whatever is stored therein will determine the life course of the individual in this world (Ibid.).

The above excerpt suggests that once the matter of a person's destiny is settled in his pre-natal existence that is the end of it. The belief is that a person's *ori* can be good or bad. The fact of this is embedded in some of their saying, such as: *Olori ire*, "one who possesses good head," designates a person who is lucky and prosperous, while *Olori buruku*, "one who possesses a bad head," describes someone who is unfortunate and unlucky.

According to **Awolalu** and **Dopamu**, the Yoruba conceive of all *oris* to be basically good because they are derived from *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being). But that the situation of man in the world, "how he leaves his life in relation to his environment, and his general conduct, can always produce a change in the condition of his *ori*" (**Awolalu** and **Dopamu** 1979:159). **Wande Abimbola** expresses this view thus:

> Success or failure in life depends to a large extent on the type of *Ori* which individuals chose in *Isalu orun* (Spiritual world). *Ori* therefore is the element which represents human destiny. The choice of a good *Ori* ensures

that the individual concerned would live a successful and prosperous life on earth, while the choice of a bad *Ori* condemns the individual concerned to a life of failure (**Abimbola** 1976:113).

- ■ How many ways can a person choose destiny?
- ☐ (1) A person may kneel down and choose his destiny, this is called A kun le yan (that which is received kneeling). (2) He may kneel down and receive his destiny – that is called A kun le gba (that which is received kneeling). (3) he may have his destiny affixed on him – for this, Yoruba give the name Ayanmo (that which if affixed to one)

The assertion that the situation of man in the world, his relation to his environment, and his general conduct can produce a change in the condition of *ori,* introduces us to a new problem which is the problem of the alterability of destiny. The question at his juncture, therefore is: what is the nature of *ori* such that a change of it can alter human destiny?

According to some writers on Yoruba belief, *ori* (the individuality element) is another entity such as the *ara* (the bodily structure which is visible and tangle) and *Emi* (the life-giving element, which is invisible and intangible). For instance, **M.A. Makinde** contends that *ori* is an entity. He points out that:

> *Ori* which performs a metaphysical function presumably leaves the body after death, and goes back to heaven where it was originally moulded, waiting to be used by souls at another cycle of reincarnation. This means that, unlike the physical body, *Ori* does not perish on earth (**Makinde** 1983:39).

In essence what **Makinde** is saying is that *ori*, like the *emi*, lives a separate existence of its own, and, like *emi*, it also goes back to *Olodumare* after death. Therefore, for **Makinde**, the initial choice of a destiny by an individual before *Olodumare* "is the choice of an actual entity, *ori*, which can be good or bad" (**Oladipo** 1992:39).

Makinde's assertions so far imply that *ori* has the same ontological status as the *emi* and *ara*, the other two elements believed to be the constituents of an individual. This belief is reinforced by the fact that the Yoruba offer sacrifices to the *ori* of departed ancestors.

However, **Oladipo** denies the fact that *ori* is an entity such as the *emi* and *ara*, arguing that to conceive of *ori* as an actual entity, capable of independent existence, introduces some theoretical difficulties. One of such difficulties is the question of what can be regarded as an adequate representation or characterization of the nature of *ori*. **Oladipo** asserts:

> If it (*Ori*) is an entity at all – it is either spiritual or physical, given the different ways it is conceived in Yoruba thought. If it is spiritual, then like

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Emi, its existence cannot be ascertained. And if it is physical, then it should
be possible to perceive it. Yet this is not the case (Ibid.:40).

Another problem identified in the concepts of *ori* as an entity is the question of how its activities can be related with the events that add up to the biography of a person in the world. For the Yoruba believe that a person has had his life history written before he comes into the world.

In view of the difficulties exposed above, we are in agreement with **Oladipo** that *Ori* should not be conceived as an entity, rather it should be conceived "as a series of events agreed to in a covenant with *Olodumare…*" (Ibid.:41).

This implies also that destiny should not be perceived as another entity, which some writers refer to as "inner person" or "soul," but "as a covenant or agreement with *Olodumare* as to what a person intense to become in the world" (Ibid.). If destiny is conceived as an agreement made by a person's *ori* in the pre-natal existence, then, there is no difficulty in changing the agreement on getting to the world.

This change in one's destiny can be effected in different ways. It could be altered by the divinities, especially *Orunmila*, the god of divination and wisdom, who is believed to be with *Olodumare* when a person was choosing his destiny. By virtue of his position, he knows what the circumstances are and can, therefore, advise on what to do, to rectify one's destiny. Hence, the propitiations offered to the divinities, "to prevent disaster and attract good fortune"

The Yoruba also believe that a person's destiny can be altered by the evil people of the world, for example, witches, wizards, cultists and some powerful medicine-men. The modification of destiny can come through a person's character. It is believed that people who are always rash or impatient in action stand the risk of getting their destiny, if it is a good one, changed to a bad one.

Figure 7.2   Ori Ile (House of the Head)
Source: http://www.pinterest.com/pin/530298924847110884/

A "house of the head," ile ori, is designed to contain a person's inner spiritual essence and identity. It protects, hides, and honors the importance of the head. The Yoruba believe the head is the seat of one's destiny and therefore, it is necessary to treat the head as a spiritual entity.

Because of the importance of one's destiny, an individual invests in the largest and most elaborate ibori and ile ori possible within his or her financial means. The Yoruba make offerings to one's inner head to ensure a long and full life.

7.3   Destiny in Igbo and Akan Thoughts

Here, it is important to look at the idea of destiny in other traditional African cultures, especially in Igbo and Akan thought. The reason for this is that destiny is a common feature in the idea of personhood across all cultures in Africa.

The belief is that a man's destiny whether chosen voluntarily or imposed, is a pre-determinant of what the person will be in life (Oyeshile 2002:105). Our purpose is to show the meeting points and variations, if there are any, in their idea of destiny as West African people, not to show that one conception is better than the other.

Igbo and Akan culture, believe in the inner head or what is called the personality soul, which emanates from the Supreme Being called *Chukwu* and *Onyame* respectively. The personality soul or inner head is usually held with the responsibility of human destiny, it accounts for human destiny.

Figure 7.3: Akan Belief
Source: http://ancestralvoices.tumblr.com/page/5

The Igbo call it *Chi* or *Uwa*, the Akans call it *Okra*, and the *Okra* is the sole transmitter of Nkrabea (destiny) of the individual (ibid). At this juncture, it is important to look at the variation of these cultures on the issue of destiny and predestation. According to **Oyeshile**, these cultures

vary on the degree of rigidity in predestination and destiny. He explains that "the Yoruba and Igbo have a flexible notion of predestination, while the Akan have a very rigid notion" (Ibid.).

It must be pointed out that the Akan conception of destiny is different from the Yoruba in the sense that it is not the individual who chooses his lot but the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) who confers or imposes destiny on the individual. However, the destiny that is imposed by *Onyame* is always good, but unchanging (**Gbadegesin** 1998:155).

The question, however, is this: if the Supreme Being imposes destiny, if destiny is always good and unchanging, how do we account for the evil and wickedness that exist in the human societies, especially, those perpetrated by man unto man?

- ■ Explain why the Akan's conception of destiny is different to that of the Igbo and Yoruba?
- □ Akan conception of destiny is different from the Yoruba and Igbo in the sense that it is not the individual who chooses his lot but the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) who confers or imposes destiny on the individual.

Summary of Study Session 7

In Study Session 7, you have learnt that:

1. From the above, we can perceive that the Yoruba conception of destiny is not a fatalistic one. Fatalism contradicts the Yoruba belief that a person's destiny can be changed, and it (fatalism) contradicts the belief in moral responsibility too.

2. From our analysis so far, it can be gleaned that an average Yoruba (or African) man is not a fatalist who believes that "what will be, will be". Neither does he resign to fate on his inability to prevent the course of unpalatable events, which has been allotted to him by a power, which lies outside the causal chain of events.

3. The Yoruba embrace a pragmatic approach in their reaction to different situations or circumstances in life.

4. Igbo and Akan culture, believe in the inner head or what is called the personality soul, which emanates from the Supreme Being called *Chukwu* and *Onyame* respectively.

5. Akan conception of destiny is different from the Yoruba in the sense that it is not the individual who chooses his lot but the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) who confers or imposes destiny on the individual

Self-Assessment Question (SAQs) for Study Session 7

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 7.1 (Tests Learning Outcome 7.1)
1. Explain the idea that destiny is unalterable.
2. Explain the idea that destiny is alterable.

SAQ 7.2 (Tests Learning Outcome 7.2)

Explain the concepts of destiny in Yoruba traditional thought
SAQ 7.3 (Tests Learning Outcome 7.3)
1. Describe the concepts of destiny in Igbo and Akan traditional thoughts
2. In what sense is the Yoruba conception of destiny different from that of the Akan?

Study Session 8: Analysis of God in Traditional African Thought

Introduction

In this Study Session, we shall examine the idea of God in traditional African thought and the controversy surrounding the status of God in African religion. Specifically, we shall look at the positions of those who argue that the African idea of God is polytheistic and those who are of the opinion that African concept of God rightly fits the model of Judeo-Christian monotheism.

Learning Outcomes for Study Session 8

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:
8.1 Explain the status of God in traditional African thought.
8.2 Differentiate between "monotheism" and "polytheism".

8.1 The Status of God in Traditional African Thought.

The question on the issue of the nature of God at first appears straightforward and non-problematic across lands. However, when examined more closely we discover a lot of problems and arguments. The discourse on God in African traditional though is different from that of the Western thought.

The westerners concentrate on arguments for the existence of God, for example, Ontology, but Africans are not interested in that. Rather Africans are interested in problems about

➢ The remoteness and immanence of God
➢ The moral attributes of God
➢ The problem of supernaturalism
➢ Problems about the name and worship of God

With the coming of the colonialists and Christian missionaries there was the idea that God in Africa was a *Deo-Remotus* or *Deo-Absconditus* (A God that has absconded). These were the ideas prevailing at that time. However, a problem arose about how to show that God is not really the way the colonialists are saying.

The reason for saying that God was a *Deo-Remotus* is because there was no specific place and mode of worship ascribed to God. Also there was a plethora of deities who seem to compete for the status of God. Hence, it was believed that God did not stand a chance in the African world and was not given due recognition.

To solve this problem the question of supernaturalism arose which is all about establishing a proper link between God and other beings in the universe.

1. The first approach to dealing with the problem of God is to say that the people of Africa are close to God simply because they use his name in the process of referring to things and people.

2. The second way of dealing with the problem is to say that despite the different African cultural perspectives about God there was a common understanding as to what God really meant.

Therefore, even if Africans link God to mountain, star, hills, forest, seas, for instance, they only sought to provide an idea of Supreme Being. But then there are problems again because the different conceptions of God in Africa have led to the question of whether religion as practiced in traditional African cultures was essentially monotheistic, or polytheistic or even pantheistic.

In other words, there was a problem of defining the type of religion or worship of God existing in African cultures. To deal with this problem, scholars proposed the theory of Ontological hierarchy of beings which sought to achieve the following goals:

➢ To establish the true position of God in the scheme of things or order of creation or cosmic arrangement
➢ To show God's relationship with the numerous deities or lesser gods
➢ To show God's relationship with human beings
➢ To implicitly justify the existence of various rituals and modes of worship ascribed to different religious entities or supernatural beings

In spite of the good point of the hierarchy of beings as an explanation for the nature of God and his relationship with other beings, certain issues still arise concerning the type of religion under study. In other words, how does the hierarchy of beings adequately explain the problem of monotheism, polytheism or even pantheism?

There is another issue about cosmogony which deals with the explanation of the origin of things in the universe. It seems that there are many cosmogonies; hence it is difficult to tell us which one is supreme to or more authentic than the others.

Activity 8.1

Do you agree with the Christian missionaries and anthropologists that God in Africa is far from the people? Discuss your reason for your answer.

Allowed Time: 1hour

If we admit that there are different cosmogonies which are sometimes different and contradictory then the question is which one(s) are we to accept as the authentic explanation because every cosmogony claims to be original or given by God?

Finally we are worried about the fact that God in African explanation is concerned with the immediate activities of His devotees while God in other religions (e.g. Islam and Christianity) is concerned with the transcendental world and the roles of the devotees in that transcendental world.

In view of all the above problems, the question still persists: Can any conception of God and religion legitimately claim that its doctrine is the only approach or true? What are we to do about the relativity that has taken over the very discourse on God and other things in the universe?

The *Ifá* corpus, for instance, often makes references to the numerous Yorùbá gods called the *Irúnmalẹ̀* or the *Òrìṣà*. In *Ògúndá Méjì*, the names of such divinities as *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*, *Sàngó*, *Ọya*, *Òòṣànláá*, *Ẹlẹ́gbáraa* and *Ògún* are mentioned (Abimbola1968:97 – 101). But the number is far greater than this. Akinbowale Akintola explains further that:

According to Ifá tradition, there are four hundred and one (401) divinities in the Yoruba pantheon. Two hundred and one (201) of these are classified as higher (or benevolent), while the other two hundred (200) are lower (malevolent) divinities (Akintola 1999: 52 – 53).

Figure8.1: Ifá Corpus
Source: SchulPortals Inc. ©

The above seems to indicate that there was a plethora of deities vying for the status of God and may lead an observer to see the Yorùbá as essentially polytheists. Besides, the colonialists and Christian missionaries brought with them such epithets as *Deus remotus*, *Deus absconditus* to indicate that God in traditional Africa had no place of worship or "the idea of his nonactive involvement in the affairs of the world…" (Ukpong 1983:188)

8.2 Monotheism and Polytheism

Africans have been found to link God to mountain, star, hills, seas, and so on; some people believe that there are different conceptions of God in Africa. This has led to the question of whether religion as practised in traditional African cultures was essentially monotheistic or polytheistic.

Box 8.1 Definition of Monotheistic
Monotheistic can be defined as belief in the existence of one god or in the oneness of God. It can also be said to be the belief in one personal and transcendent God.

In other words, there was a problem of defining the type of religion or worship of God existing in traditional Africa (Parrrinder 1970:81 – 83). To deal with this problem, some scholars have proposed the theory of Ontological Hierarchy of beings which sought to
    (i)   Establish the true position of God in the scheme of things or order of creation or cosmic arrangement;
    (ii)   Show God's relationship with the numerous deities or lesser gods;

(iii)   Show God's relationship with human beings;

(iv)   Justify the various rituals and modes of worship ascribed to different religious entities or supernatural beings.

In spite of the good point of the hierarchy of beings as an explanation of the nature of God and his relationship with other beings, the question of whether African religious practice is monotheistic or polytheistic still arises.

Box 8.2 Definition of Polytheism

Polytheism can be defined as the worship of or belief in multiple deities usually assembled into a pantheon of gods and goddesses, along with their own religions and rituals.

Here, it must be stated that an assiduous study of Yorùbá religion will reveal "that monotheism has been attenuated through the many divinities whose cults form the objective phenomena of the religion" (Idowu 1962:204). But this does not suggest that the term "polytheism" best describes the religion.

In the light of the foregoing, Bolaji Idowu offers the term "Diffused Monotheism" which "has the advantage of showing that the religion is monotheism, though it is a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him" (Ibid.).

Another different perspective that supports Idowu's observations is offered by Benjamin Ray. According to Ray:

Like a Yoruba ruler, or oba, Olodumare reigns supreme in the distant sky and rules the world through his intermediaries, the *orisha* the sky-dwelling Olodumare is transcendent, all knowing, and all-powerful.

Figure8.2: Oba
Source: SchulPortals Inc. ©

Unlike the *orisha*, he has no temples or priests, and no sacrifices or offering made to him because his will cannot be influenced or changed. Yet Olodumare may be invoked by anyone, anywhere, at any time and let him know their needs (Ray 1976:26).

Thus, it is mistaken to describe traditional African religion as polytheism. In polytheism, the important thing to note is the relationship that exists among the gods in the pantheon. Here, it is instructive to consider the religious belief of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Greeks which are good examples of classical polytheism.

In classical polytheism, the gods in the pantheon belong to one divine family, while their various associations and functions are explained in myths. The gods in the pantheon are all independent of one another; however, a few gods or one god may emerge as superior to or regarded as the chief among all the others (as we have it in the case of the Egyptian Ra, Greek Zeus and Hindu Shiva). But the superior god was never regarded as the creator of the other gods.

In African traditional religion, God, or the Supreme Being, is outside the pantheon of gods. He is the eternal Creator of all the other gods, and of men and the universe. This makes Him absolutely unique, and He is differentiated from the other gods in having a special name. Each of the other divinities has a generic name in addition to his specific name.

The role played by these divinities has made some to see African traditional religion as polytheistic. Africans worship one God through different means which shows that the various deities are only an avenue to reach the almighty God. The idea or concept of God among Africans is in the kind of names they give to their children. Thus, polytheism, pantheism, deism, agnosticism, and atheism are all new export into Africa.

Summary of Study Session 8

In study session 8, you have learnt that:

(1) The discourse on God in African traditional thought is different from that of the Western thought. The westerners concentrate on arguments for the existence of God, for example, Ontology, but Africans are not interested in that.
(2) With the coming of the colonialists and Christian missionaries there was the idea that God in Africa was a *Deo-Remotus* or *Deo-Absconditus* (A God that has absconded).
(3) It is mistaken to describe traditional African religion as polytheism. In polytheism, the important thing to note is the relationship that exists among the gods in the pantheon.
(4) In classical polytheism, the gods in the pantheon belong to one divine family, while their various associations and functions are explained in myths. The gods in the pantheon are all independent of one another.
(5) In African traditional religion, God, or the Supreme Being, is outside the pantheon of gods. He is the eternal Creator of all the other gods, and of men and the universe. This makes Him absolutely unique, and He is differentiated from the other gods in having a special name.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQS) For Study Session 8

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 8.1 (Testing Learning outcomes 8.1)
8.1 Explain the status of God in traditional African thought.
b) Discuss two approaches we can employ to deal with the problem of God.

SAQ 8.2 (Testing Learning outcomes 8.2)
8.2 Differentiate between "monotheism" and "polytheism".
   b) Give one reason why the Christian missionaries and anthropologists argued that God in Africa was a *Deo-Remotus*.
   c) Explain why African religious belief is best described as "Diffused Monotheism", despite the many gods that are worshipped in traditional Africa.

Study Session 9: Witchcraft Phenomenon in African Thought

Introduction

In this study session, we shall look at the concept of witchcraft and show why it is of philosophical significance. This lecture will avail us the opportunity to distinguish between "witchcraft" and "magic" or "sorcery". We shall examine, on the one hand, the claim that witchcraft phenomenon is archetype of primitive thought which should be jettisoned and, on the other, the claim in support of the existence of witches.

Learning Outcomes for Study Session 9

At the end of this lecture, you should be able to:
9.1 Define witchcraft
9.2 Explain that the idea of witchcraft is not uniquely African.

9.1: Concept of Witchcraft

The concept of "witchcraft" elicits some of the worst stereotypical and extremely negative images in most people's minds. When applied to Africa and Africans, the term automatically evokes and reinforces images of "ignorance," "backwardness," "dark continent," "primitive," "uncivilized," "superstitious," "undeveloped" (Tembo 1993:1).

Box 9.1 Definition of Witchcraft

Witchcraft (also called witchery or spell craft) can be defined as the use of magical faculties, most commonly for religious, divinatory or medicinal purposes. This may take many forms depending on cultural context.

This means that the concept of "witchcraft", when applied to Africa, vastly distorts the indigenous meaning, roles, their related ideas and customary practices. Indeed, the term has been hijacked and totally misused and abused as applied to African epistemology.

This attitude informs the application of witchcraft in Africa to enunciate that Africans are savages and induce feelings of a pre-logical mentality; more so that science, an essential attribute of a developed mentality, is alleged to have eluded the African continent where witchcraft endures. As a matter of fact, a discussion of witchcraft to most Westerners "seem arcane, archaic, or even comic" (Brain 1982:371).

Figure9.1: Witchcraft
Source: http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/fanpop-chaos-witchcraft-
edition/images/7489753/title/dark-regi-pyrokinesis-fanart

The idea of witchcraft is, however, not uniquely African; it is a feature of several traditions. According to E.G Parrinder, it is the archetype of primitive thought. Parrinder explains further that:

It seems curious that people so widely separated in distance and culture should share certain strange yet fundamental beliefs. Of course, some of these concepts are worldwide, perhaps, "archetypes of primitive thought.

Figure9.2: Mwizenge S. Tembo
Source: http://www.hungerforculture.com/?p=1195

Yet the clearest and most frequent manifestations of witchcraft beliefs seem to have occurred in Europe and in Africa (Parrinder 1956:142).

On his part, Mwizenge S. Tembo defines witchcraft as:

Box 9.2 Mwizenge S. Tembo's Definition of Witchcraft

Mwizenge S. Tembo defines Witchcraft as an act or instance of employing sorcery especially with malevolent intent, a magical rite or technique; the exercise of supernatural powers, alleged intercourse with the devil (Tembo 1993:4).

It is common knowledge that most people often confuse witchcraft with magic or sorcery. In an attempt to distinguish witchcraft from magic or sorcery, T.O Beidelman (1971: 131 – 132) describes magic as "the manipulation of persons and things through the use of objects, words and acts thought to give one access to supernatural powers for either good or evil purposes".

He describes sorcery as "the supernatural power to cause another person or that person's possessions harm through the use of various substances or acts." Beidelman adds that "the efficacy of sorcery depends upon the nature of the acts performed rather than upon the moral character of the practitioner". He goes on to provide us with what he believes to be the standard definition of witchcraft.

According to him, witchcraft is "the power to exert supernatural harm upon another person or his possessions that power depending upon inherent evil qualities in the evil person (witch) himself/herself" (Ibid.).

The general definition of witchcraft provided by Mwizenge, Beidelman and others which fail to place witchcraft in its linguistic and cultural context has been faulted. Several African scholars, including Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo, prefer that witchcraft be defined in African context (Hallen and Sodipo 1986:96).

Hallen and Sodipo point out African witchcraft should be divorced both in its definitional and explanatory senses from witch practices in the West. These scholars caution against understanding African witchcraft with Western lenses. Thus, they contend that:

There is no reason to assume, that witchcraft in Africa is the same as was witchcraft in Europe, any more than there was reason to assume that the English-language concept 'witchcraft' may serve as an accurate translation of its supposed African-language equivalents.

Whatever is translated as being 'witchcraft' in Africa (or even in one place in ' Africa) may well be a very different thing from whatever it is elsewhere in the world and history (Ibid.).

Hallen and Sodipo, therefore, denounce the tenacity of the views which hold that witchcraft in Africa today can be used to understand and to explain what witchcraft in the West once was, and that witchcraft in Africa today closely resembles what witchcraft in the West once was. They write:

…there would appear to be some inconsistency in maintaining that one does not understand one phenomenon (Western witchcraft), and at the same time maintaining that that phenomenon is effectively the same as another phenomenon (African witchcraft) mat one can understand (Ibid.)

The assumptions of Hallen and Sodipo certainly generate certain problems. For instance, the task for these two scholars include the chore of identifying and conceptualizing what is African in witchcraft, and how can it be used to define, discuss, and redirect westernized conceptions of African witchcraft to suit the African-context.

However, it is evident that neither Hallen nor Sodipo took cognizance of this challenge. Emeka Esogbue, in his essay *Witchcraft: Reality or Belief*?, seems to have a response to this challenge. According to him:

No amount of "use of grammar" can define witchcraft as it truly exists in Africa. Even then, one can throw away the definition presented by Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia as being "the use of supernatural or magical powers" Wikipedia further defines it as the use of such powers in order to inflict harm or damage upon members of a community or their property".

This is indeed a good definition of witchcraft but in the African society, if goes beyond this by far. It must be stated that only anthologists and historians are expected to see witchcraft as an ideology for explaining misfortune particularly whites (Esogbue: http//www.articlesbase.com/culturearticles/witchcraft-reality-belief-2441928.html, May 2011).

9.2: Features That Distinguishes African Witchcraft from European Witch Practices

E.G Parrinder seems to have identified those features that distinguish African witchcraft from European witch practices when he writes that the ideas of a god of the witches, a devil, a witchcraft cult, a black mass or sacrament, which appear in records of European witchcraft, are not found in Africa.

Some scholars have observed that African witchcraft is not a cult with a high priest. It is not a cult with a horned god, and is regarded by Africans in general as an anti-social and invisible activity, opposed to both religion and priesthood.

Although witchcraft might be explained using a particular context – say, African witchcraft, European witchcraft – the interpretation of witchcraft requires certain general applicable features from which it is often construed. In this light, contextualizing witchcraft on societal lines becomes unnecessary.

According to Munyaradzi Mawere, witchcraft is easily identified with supernatural powers, magic, and could be used to do both good and harm. He explains further that:

*...Both apply supernatural powers, involve the use of charm or magic, are
connected to the cosmological world and most importantly can be employed
to do both good and harm depending on the motivation of the individual
involved (healers or witch) (Mawere 2011:91).*

Margaret Field identifies some salient features of witchcraft. According to her, "the distinguishing feature of killing or harm by witchcraft is that it is wrought by silent, invisible, projection of influence from the witch. Thus, witches are believed to act at any distance" (Field 1960:36 – 37).

It is clear from the above that witchcraft is usually regarded as a peculiar power by virtue of which some people perform actions which the ordinary man cannot perform. The most unique and mysterious characteristic of this power, as Sophie Oluwole puts it, is "the claimed ability of the witch to affect her victims, or perform actions, without any physical, contact and using no medicine" (Oluwole 1978:20).

In other words, witchcraft does not involve physical-activities. As a practice which comprises "metaphysical" engagements, several scholars have denied the existence of witchcraft. To these scholars, witchcraft, if it has to be accepted, must abandon its metaphysical connotations, and must pass through verification.

The assumption which propels this crop of scholars to decline the meaningfulness of witchcraft is the argument that since witchcraft is not ordinary, witchery research cannot be ordinary. Sophie Oluwole expounds this view when she contends that:

*Authors who deny the existence of witchcraft claim that witchcraft neither
designates something tangible or observable nor does it refer to something
that has an independent existence either in the sense of being of actual or
true, hence they label it an illusion (Ibid.).*

It has also been argued that, since witchcraft is not ordinary, then ordinary men are not under obligation to believe that witchcraft exists. In this regard, E.O. Eyo (1967) claims that:

*I, myself, do not believe that man or woman is a witch in the supernatural sense
except insofar as he or she is practically a social deviant or unpleasing
person within the community that believes in witches... what is correct is
that it does not exist, not in reality but only in the minds of some people.
Witchcraft exists in fantasy in the minds of mentally sick people.*

It is essential to contextualize the allegation of "pyschism" stressed above. As a response to this task, S.F. Nadel (1954), in his book *Nupe Religion,* seems to have a meaningful suggestion when he writes that:

*That witches meet at night in the open, that they hold council, go out on
their errands and later share in a communal meal, all this is part of Nupe*

belief. But no one believes that the witches do things in the flesh, that is, with their whole and real body.

It is only their fifingi (soul) which go on these nightly excursions, their bodies, like those of their victims, remaining asleep in their homes. Thus, ultimately, it is a shadow which feed on shadows.

Margaret Field also underscores the allegation of "pyschism" when she corroborates Nadel's view by saying of the Ga people that:

Not only is the eating at these feasts not a physical eating, but the gathering is not a physical gathering. The witch's kla (spirit) – which maintains breathing and physical life – remains with her mortal body on her bed and to ordinary eyes, she is in a normal sleep, bat her "susuma" (personality) has gone to the meeting (Field 1960:140).

It is important to note that anybody who calls witchcraft as illusion seems to say that since it does not cohere with a body of known facts, it itself cannot be said to be a fact.

Figure9.3: Margaret Field

Source: http://www.conservatoire.bcu.ac.uk/profiles/margaret-field

The point we are making here is that those who use science as a paradigm for rationality are of the opinion that the defenders of the existence of African witchcraft cannot adequately justify that a particular event A is responsible for a particular event B, yet at the metaphysical level.

Put differently, this crop of scholars denies the causal theory of witchcraft which explains, contextually, that event "A" produces event "B". They seem to employ David Hume's argument against the existence of scientific facts derived from causal relations. According to Hume, it is observed in scientific practice and in ordinary life that things continue to endure even when they are not being observed-*cum*-perceived.

Figure9.4: David Hume
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Hume

But Hume argues that the senses are liable to and entitled to a single perception at a time. As Hume puts it, it will be erroneous to assume that even those things which are not being perceived continue to endure; hence, it is contestable, too, if what scientists refer to as causal facts exist.

This line of reasoning, which seems to deny the existence of witches in Africa, has been faulted by members of the Traditionalist orientation. In what seems like a rejoinder to the claims of the scholars with the modernist orientation, J.S. Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, among others, contend that witchcraft in Africa is real. In the words of Bolaji Idowu:

Do witches exist? I will assert categorically that there are witches in Africa;
that are as real as murderers, poisoners, and other categories of evil
workers, overt or surreptitious. This, and not only imagination, is the basis
of the strong belief in witchcraft (Idowu 1970:9).

From Idowu's assertion about the existence of witches in Africa, it is quite evident that the type of reality he is referring to is objective, like the practical efficacy of a power possessed and used by humans beings just as poisoners effectively use medicine to kill.

In other to explicate this view, Idowu avers further that "there is no doubt that there are persons of very strong character who can exude their personality and make it affect other persons. Witches and witchcraft are sufficiently real as to cause untold sufferings and innumerable death" (Ibid: 88). In a similar manner, J.S Mbiti maintains that:

Every African who has grown up in the traditional environment will, no
doubt, know something about this mystical power which often is
experienced, or manifests itself, in the form of magic, divination,
witchcraft and mysterious phenomena that seem to defy even immediate
scientific explanation (Mbiti 1969:194).

The above extract from Mbiti seems to ignore the argument raised by those who argue that the belief in witchcraft does not derive from its practical existence, but the acculturation of witchcraft.

Figure9.5: John S. Mbiti

Source: http://www.dacb.org/stories/kenya/mbiti_john.html

Put differently, those who are of the modernist persuasion are of the view that the belief in witchcraft as a causal force is part of Africans' answer to the general problem of why certain things occur. The African acculturate this belief and grows with it right from childhood. Thus, for the modernists, witchcraft is not real; rather, it is a matter of acculturation.

D.E. Idoniboye, however, holds a different view. According to him, the phenomenon of witchcraft is not acculturated. Rather, it exists in practical reality. For him, witchcraft, essentially in Africa, is not a myth, nor do holders of the belief that witchcraft exists speaks metaphorically when they talk of it. He writes:

The point I want to stress here is that when Africans talk of spirits in the sense I have been discussing, they are not speaking metaphorically nor are they propounding a myth. Witches are as real as tables and chairs, peoples and places (Idoniboye 1973:83).

Considering the argument raised by the modernists over the non-scientific nature of witchcraft, the traditionalists argue that it is not justifiable to hold that only that which our experience can easily grasp exists. Put differently, nothing in our experience has revealed to us that only that which is scientifically verifiable exists.

In this way, the traditionalists maintain that their consent to the occurrence of mysteries confirms that the mysterious is that which is not yet understood, but *not* what is unknowable. In fact, to deny the existence of witchcraft is to deny the existence of several other societies (for example, occults, among others) which are known to exist all over the world. Emeka Esogbue argues the case for the existence of witches more elaborately that:

To say that witchcraft is a belief that does not imply truth, validity or reality of what is believed in is like attributing same to the various secret societies that are known to exist all over the world because witchcraft in the African society is nothing but a society where adherents gather after secret initiations have taken place.

Anybody who has been privileged to listen to a witch who willingly confessed to evil and iniquitous acts brought on anyone will not share in the beliefs of those who see witchcraft as mere beliefs.

Many of our learned persons in our today's society are in the occult world and they have better understanding of "African powers". There are powers. Powers exist in Africa and beyond, whether good or evil.

Thus, those who have felt the practical powers of witchcraft would not doubt the existence of witchcraft as a practical causal force. Esogbue writes:

What those people calling for a science of witchcraft fail to understand is that their assumptions fail to consider the obvious fact that in the spiritual world everything remains allusion until it comes to pass. In fact, it does not require formal education to understand spiritual things. He who feels it knows it.

We are aware that it simply takes belief to stay in the spiritual world whether in Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, African traditional religion, Hinduism, etc; without belief religion itself is useless. Shall we then assume that religious practices are a waste of time because the objects of divinity are not seen?

Are the Christian and Islamic God mythical and lacking in validity?

It must be stated at this juncture that witchcraft is relevant to African value system. It has been argued by some people that the phenomenon can be used to entrench moral relations. This position derives from the conviction that a particular person, who is ill, would relate his illness to another person because he did a particular thing to such a person which is bad.

Consequently, in order to protect oneself from harm from others via witch practices, one must behave well as a member of the society.

Summary of Study Session 9

In study session 9, you have learnt that:
  - **(1)** The idea of witchcraft is not uniquely African; it is a feature of several traditions.
  - (2) The interpretation of witchcraft requires certain general applicable features from which it is often construed.
  - (3) Nothing in our experience has revealed to us that only that which is scientifically verifiable exists.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQS) For Study Session9

Now that you have completed this study session, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning outcomes by answering the following questions. Write your answers in your study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next study Support Meeting. You can check your answers with the Notes on the Self-Assessment questions at the end of this Module.

SAQ 9.1 (Testing Learning outcomes 9.1)
9.1Define witchcraft

b) Distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery

SAQ 9.2 (Testing Learning outcomes 9.2)
9.2 Explain that the idea of witchcraft is not uniquely African

b) Does it make sense to jettison religious practices (for example, in Islam and Christianity) because the objects of divinity are not visible?

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