

A Companion to African Philosophy

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and
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A Companion to African Philosophy

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*To the memory of Cheikh Anta Diop and Alexis Kagame,
departed leaders of Contemporary African Philosophy,
and of our lamented colleagues John Arthur,
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Preface

This volume is intended to be a comprehensive anthology of essays on the history of African philosophy, ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary, and on all the main branches of the discipline, including logic, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and politics. The chapters are nearly all new. They have been written in such a way as to be reflective, enlightening, and useful to both students and scholars. Methodological concerns as manifested in contemporary controversies among African philosophers on the proper relations between the traditional and the modern in their discipline have been addressed. But pride of place belongs to substantive issues of philosophy as these have occupied the African mind in communal conceptions and individualized cogitations.

Accordingly, this text will not only serve as a companion to a main text in a course in African philosophy; it can also serve as the principal text at the graduate as well as the undergraduate level. The reader will therefore find ample bibliographies appended to most chapters. But this is not their only rationale. The discipline itself, of contemporary African philosophy, is in a phase of intense postcolonial reconstruction, which manifests itself in print in many different ways. The availability of relevant literature must therefore be a welcome aid to the curious. But even to the incurious outside of Africa, who are still often frankly taken by surprise by the mention of *African* philosophy, such notification of availability might well occasion the beginning of curiosity. Teachers newly embarked upon courses in African philosophy will also be empowered by the same circumstance. They will find that the Introduction to this volume was designed with their basic needs, though not only that, in mind.

It is a pleasure to specify my own helpers. My thanks go first to Professors Abraham, Irele, and Menkiti for their help as advisory editors. Thanks go next to all the contributors for their contributions. The call of the *Companion* often diverted them from pressing pursuits. Last, but most lasting of all, my thanks go to Barry Hallen for helping me with this work in every conceivable way from conception to completion. His lengthy survey of contemporary Anglophone philosophy (see chapter 6), which, more than any of the entries, gives this work the stamp of a *companion*, is only a sign of the lengths to which he has gone to bring help to me in various ways. To be sure, without him, that survey would most likely have taken a committee of at least five scholars.

PREFACE

In a class of its own is my indebtedness to Blackwell's technical staff. Without the initiative of Steve Smith, Blackwell's philosophy editor, in concert with inputs from Professor Tommy Lott, the project would never have started. And without the combination of patience and purposefulness on the part of his colleagues at Blackwell, Beth Remmes, Nirit Simon, and Sarah Dancy, it would never have been completed. The completion was also facilitated by the extraordinary collegiality of Professor Lewis Gordon through whom I had access to the facilities of the Department of Africana Studies when I was Visiting Scholar at Brown University in the summer of 2002.

Kwasi Wiredu

Introduction: African Philosophy in Our Time

KWASI WIREDU

The Postcolonial Situation

A principal driving force in postcolonial African philosophy has been a quest for self-definition. It was therefore quite appropriate that Masolo entitled his history of contemporary African philosophy, the first full-length history of the discipline in English, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. This search is part of a general postcolonial soul-searching in Africa. Because the colonialists and related personnel perceived African culture as inferior in at least some important respects, colonialism included a systematic program of de-Africanization. The most unmistakable example, perhaps, of this pattern of activity was in the sphere of religion, where mighty efforts were made by the missionaries to save African souls perceived to be caught up in the darkness of “paganism.” But, at least, it did seem to them that Africans had something somewhat similar to religion, and some of them actually wrote books on African religion and even, in some cases, mentioned that subject in their university teaching.

The position was markedly different as regards African philosophy. Philosophy departments tended not to develop the impression that there was any such thing. I graduated from the University of Ghana in 1958 after at least five years of undergraduate study. In all those years I was not once exposed to the concept of African philosophy. J. B. Danquah’s *The Akan Doctrine of God*, subtitled *A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics*, had been published in 1945. Yet for all the information that was made available at the Department of Philosophy, that would have remained a secret to me if I hadn’t made acquaintance with it in my own private reading in secondary school. I do not now remember what else in the literature relevant to African philosophy I knew by the time of graduation (1958) either by the grace of God or by the play of accident, except for the bare title of Radin’s *Primitive Man as Philosopher*. However, when I ran across or stumbled over it, the word “primitive” in the title put me off, and I stayed away from its pages until a long time after graduation.

I do not say these things with the slightest intention of casting aspersions on my teachers. They were hired to teach my schoolmates and me Western philosophy, and they did that well. I remember them with the fondest feelings, not only because