

## Book Reviews

Kwasi Wiredu. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. pp. xiv, 239. Unpriced.

Wiredu maintains that philosophers and intellectuals generally, writing in the African setting, should not only be "seeking modes of political and social organization best suited to the requirements of rapid development" but they should, as well, be "engaged in re-appraising, changing and adapting their traditional culture" (p. 52). Contemporary Africa is in the "middle of the transition from traditional to modern society." This leads to a not inconsiderable amount of social dislocation and malaise. In such a milieu, there is, according to Wiredu, an important role for philosophy. What African philosophers should be doing is to give a closely reasoned articulation of a world view which squarely answers to those modern conditions and sensibilities.

In Africa, as Wiredu sees it, the key social problem is modernism — the movement from traditional society to industrial society with all the changes in belief, attitude and styles of living and perceiving things that this involves. Wiredu rightly sees that there is, for Africa, no reasonable turning back on its commitment to industrialization and to a commitment, in the name of modernity, to overcome the fetters of traditional society. He is perfectly unequivocal about that. But he also stresses that not all is dross in traditional society. It is here, in sorting out what continues to be worthy of acceptance and with what modifications, that the African philosopher can be — or so Wiredu believes — of the utmost value in the critical reappraisal of African traditional society (p. 52).

African traditional societies are characteristically afflicted, according to Wiredu, with anachronism, authoritarianism and supernaturalism. Traditional African belief systems typically involve a "strong belief in the existence and power of a hierarchy of spiritual beings headed by an omnipotent God" (p. 7). This naturally enough links with an authoritarian orientation where social arrangements are "shot through and through with the principle of unquestioning obedience to superiors . . ." (p. 4).

There is another culture trait which Wiredu takes to be pervasive throughout Africa, namely a mode of reasoning (a way of thinking) that is "intuitive, essentially unanalytic" and "unscientific" (p. 11). This also nicely meshes well with the authoritarianism of African society and is one of its worst anachronistic features. It has stood in the way of modernization and has hampered human liberation and emancipation in Africa. On the one hand, Wiredu rightly sees the importance of Africans breaking free from a colonial mentality and in doing this he also sees the importance of their conserving something of their own traditions; this is all linked with the crucial importance "of the post-colonial African quest for identity." Wiredu does not question the importance of these things, but, on the other hand, he does deplore, and rightly I believe, making a fetish, as some Africans have, of the non-analytical bent of African thought and taking that element in their traditional belief-systems as something to cultivate in setting themselves apart from Western intellectuals (pp. 12-13). He advocates, by way of a counter stress, the importance in education of developing a scientific culture. And, while he sees social philosophy as "the crown of all philosophy," he believes, understandably but I think disputably, that from a pedagogic standpoint this crown of philosophy should be approached, in any extensive way, only after philosophers-in-training have acquired the analytical disciplines of logic and epistemology (pp. 62; 172). He thinks — and this I do not dispute — that the failure to develop a critical, analytical, scientific outlook has hurt the development of African culture and that it is essential that a self-conscious scientific outlook be a part of the development of a contemporary African world view.

It isn't, of course, as Wiredu is quick to point out, that there is no place "for intuition and emotion in life" — life plainly "is not all logic" (p. 12). But the unfortunate thing has been that a stress on this point in the African context has all too often been taken "as an excuse for being unmindful of logic and rational procedures generally" (p. 12). And this, as he points out, has had baleful effects both theoretically and practically in Africa.

This unanalytical caste of mind works in the service, Wiredu points out, of a very extensive belief in witchcraft in Africa. Wiredu does not view belief in witchcraft complacently, as have some Western philosophers and anthropologists, as one form of life among others. Squarely looking at its socio-psychological consequences in modern Africa, he sees it as an anachronistic destructive force that has impeded the liberation of Africans from tribalism (pp. 14-16).

Like Dewey, Wiredu takes the function, or at least a function, of philosophy in any society to be that of "examining the intellectual foundations of its culture" or, as he puts in another passage, the

"intellectual foundations of our life" (pp. 20; 62). This involves reasoned criticism of the culture and, wherever possible, a setting out of the general direction that that cultural reconstruction should take (p. 2). But this critique and reconstruction should not be unmindful of the past. In the African context, this means that one of the things that it is most important to in some way preserve is the African sense of community and of group solidarity. In the face of industrialization and "the gradual withering away of communal caring," a central task of a contemporary African philosophy is to show how communal caring can make sense in such a context and what forms it could sensibly take. Technology and industrialization *per se* are not the enemy or the destroyers of the possibility of appealing forms of community. What we must do is ask what kind of technology and what kind of industrialization, with what type of relations of production and forms of social life, could wear a human face. Here again questions concerning Marxist socialism and of what, if any, plausible alternatives to it there are, emerge as a central consideration.

Traditional African philosophies, as the traditional philosophies of any society, are folk philosophies (pp. 28-29). (The renewed ideological vigor of such philosophies, particularly in the United States, should make it plain to Western philosophers how pervasive and powerful they are and how they are anachronistic and authoritarian in ways not unlike those of African folk philosophy.) All folk philosophies emerged in pre-scientific times and remain pre-scientific. It is important to make it clear that they, African and non-African ones alike, cannot withstand rational scrutiny and how they will not stand comparison with the analytically structured philosophy of a scientific age. Yet this philosophy cannot remain simply critical and negative, but must, as well, make some positive systematic reconstruction of its own.

African youth, Wiredu continues, "more or less bereft of the security of traditional orthodoxies stands in need of [such] a new philosophy" (p. 30). They should, as we have just noted, critically transcend all folk philosophies, homegrown and foreign, e.g., Christianity and Islam, and, they should, assuming a thoroughly scientific outlook, come to utilize logical and analytical techniques. With that in place, they should develop a critical and comparative approach to the study of the philosophies of other cultures "with the aim of trying to see how far issues and concepts of universal relevance can be disentangled from the contingencies of culture" (p. 31).

Wiredu acknowledges that philosophy as it is actually practised is "culture-relative in various subtle ways" (p. 31). A recognition of this understandably causes unease in the African intellectual concerned with the utilization of a philosophical approach coming from

cultures distinct from his own. Yet the paradoxes of relativism or an utter sociology of knowledge approach are not inconsiderable. Against the relativist, Wiredu maintains, that "some philosophical positions must be nearer to the truth than others" and that in principle at least "philosophy is universal" (p. 31). The African philosopher, like any other philosopher, must, Wiredu asserts, seek to push philosophy a little closer to the approximation of this universality. Any conscious relativism on his part is not a defensible policy, though he should in his philosophizing, in the relevant philosophical domains (e.g., social philosophy), develop a "sensitivity to what is specific to the African situation" (p. 33).

There is much, including much that I have not even mentioned, in Kwasi Wiredu's rich book that deserves careful pondering and it is my hope that it will not remain just a curiosity in the West. There is also much in what he says about what philosophy can and cannot do, in what he says about truth, ideology and Marxism and in what he assumes about rationality, that I would want to dispute, though that will have to await another occasion. What I would like to do, in closing, is to invite comparison of Wiredu's work with that of two other contemporary philosophers, one German and the other American, who have also been deeply influenced by John Dewey, but who both, again themselves in different ways, carry from Dewey a rather different stress. I refer to Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty.

Habermas teaches us to beware of scientific thinking, to avoid assuming, in all domains and relative to all interests, that science or something called "scientific method" is the source of truth or correctness. Rorty also teaches us to beware of claims to the effect that we have any sure method, such as science or reason, which will resolve either the problems of philosophy or the problems of life. He teaches us, as well, to distrust the analytical ideal with its claims to be able to articulate the conceptual foundations of anything which in turn would lay the basis for a systematic philosophical theory which would provide us with a universal Archimedean point to examine the intellectual foundations of our cultures and provide a guide to life. Here is where philosophers are very apt to suffer from hubris and from false consciousness. Following Wittgenstein, Rorty teaches us to beware of the power of reason to resolve the nagging problems of life or to reveal to us "ultimate reality." The idea that we might, if we were only clever enough or diligent enough, discover or invent some philosophical foundations which could do so is very likely a philosopher's illusion.

What Habermas and Rorty — particularly Rorty — are opposing is in its core an ancient and powerful ideal of philosophy. It is something that indeed has a strong hold on us, if we are philosophers, but

there are impressive developments in twentieth-century philosophy itself, as well as in the work of Marx, that have, though in different ways, given us reason to be skeptical concerning this traditional ideal. (See A. M. Manser, *The End of Philosophy: Marx and Wittgenstein* [Southampton: Camelot Press, 1973].)

It seems to me that Professor Wiredu does not give sufficient heed to those sources and to those worries. However, there is another side to this too. Wiredu, with a fine sense of translation into the concrete, shows how disciplined logical thought, linked with a scientific outlook, can quite unproblematically undermine the intellectual authority of folk philosophies and, in doing so, have a role, in certain auspicious circumstances, in the undermining of harmful human practices and institutions. If the subtleties of Habermas or Rorty, or, for that matter, of Wittgenstein or Cavell, were to commit us to denying that, then they must be artificial subtleties driving us to the kind of philosophical paradoxes that such philosophers aspire to dispel.

Still — to reveal another turn to the dialectic — to be as confident as Wiredu is that “institutions and practices may be reviewed in the light of *first principles*” and to speak, again as confidently as he does, of *reason* being that which is to “decide between alternatives” is to treat as unproblematic what is deeply, though hiddenly, problematic (pp. 24; 3; italics mine). It is Wittgenstein — I speak here of his later work — Rorty and Cavell, philosophers whose work (though in a creative way) is largely derivative from Wittgenstein, who compel us to see how some things that Wiredu, or for that matter Russell, Gellner, Popper or Ayer, portray as straightforward and unproblematic — things that any clear headed and informed person just must accept — are not that “clear to the light of reason.”

KAI NIELSEN

Carolyn Parker and Stephen Arnold, eds. *When the Drumbeat Changes*. Washington: Three Continents Press, 1981. pp. 296. \$18.00; \$12.00 pb.

“When the drumbeat changes, the dance changes.”

— HAUSA PROVERB

This book calls for change, promises change and, in many ways effects change. Despite a rather exotic title, suggestive of a novel, it is a collection of 15 captivating essays on the literature of Africa today. These essays the editors have dexterously (and not without pains) welded into a single book.

It covers a wide range of topics: from familiar to obscure material, from African literature in English and French to neo-African

writing in Portuguese and Swahili, from authors of recognized social status at home to those who are languishing (sometimes thriving!) in exile, from "standard" literature to "popular" works, from traditional literary criticism to essays on publishing facilities and problems in Africa. *When the Drumbeat Changes* is not, however, a hotch-potch of unrelated elements, thanks in large part to Carolyn Parker's introduction which guides the reader to recognize what unites its component parts:

The individual articles in this selection lead to several collective conclusions: exile as a factor in African literature, the growth of publishing houses, and other factors are common themes in many of these papers.

(p. 6)

Other common themes, she adds, are a growing concern for folklore, for race and for indigenous languages in writing by Africans.

Grouping the papers under four broad categories is at the same time a unifying process and a concession to the differences of viewpoints expressed. This approach also gives the reader a sense of progression as he is first led into the "emerging areas" of African writing in Portuguese, Swahili, Arabic and even Berber, and introduced to "neglected" authors or titles. This is done in Parts I and II. In Part III, he is recalled to the origins of written African literature (from Tempels, to Kagame, to Jahn) before the all-too-familiar names of Okigbo, Aluko, Dennis Brutus and René Depestre are evoked in Part IV.

It is stressed in the introduction that the panels from which these papers were selected were arbitrary and overlapping (p. 4). This phenomenon persists in the selections themselves. The works of José Luandino Vieira and Arlindo Barbeitos which feature prominently in Part I (pp. 23-24) provide the subject matter of two chapters of Part II (pp. 134-52). Stephen Arnold, in his detailed analysis of S. K. Msuya's *Mazungumzo ya Mchana* (pp. 101-06) adequately justifies the title of his paper: "Popular literature in Tanzania . . ." and its inclusion in the category of "emerging areas." But does his repeated lament that Tanzanian literature has been widely ignored and the country itself considered as a "literary desert" (p. 91) not suggest that this paper also belongs to Category II: "Explorations of Neglect"?

The issue of definitions seems central to a coherent reading of this volume. In his brilliant chapter, W. Curtis Schade numbers Henri Lopez's *La Nouvelle romance* among the "new popular fiction in French-language African literature." He however spends a good deal of time and effort proving how different this novel is, in its complexity of theme, from other "popular" novels like *Le fils d'Agatha Moudio*, *Ramitou mon étrangère*, *La Poupée ashanti*, etc. (p. 55). What exactly is "popular literature"? Is it one whose theme is locally

inspired, whose language and plot are simple and assimilable to the "populus" as suggested by René Philombe's prologue to *Sola ma chérie*: "I deliberately wanted this social novel to be simple. I intended it for the people, and the people have little taste for anything too highly seasoned . . ." (p. 60). Is "popular fiction" here to be understood in the context of the traditional opposition between "high" or "élitist" and "low" or "unartistic"? (See pp. 88 and 98.) For its complexity of plot, its international setting, its sophisticated language and thought-process, the classification of *La Nouvelle romance* as a "popular novel" may be contested, perhaps even by the author himself. One recalls this warning he gives himself in the very last sentence of the novel: "But, halt . . . before the novel turns into a philosophical treatise." (My translation.)

The need and the difficulty of clear definitions is more seriously raised by Linda Susan Beard's essay, "Doris Lessing: African Writer." The whole argument for admitting Doris Lessing to the rank of "African writer" rests on this definition of "African literature" by Nadine Gordimer which serves as conclusion to the essay:

My own definition of African writing . . . is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who have been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. (p. 258)

Even in this definition an uneasy distinction still exists between Africans themselves" and the "others. . ." Is "African literature" that produced only by "Africans themselves"? Elsewhere Linda Susan Beard calls attention to the subtle distinction between "African literature written in English" and "English literature written in Africa (p. 243). When it is recalled that many writers of note (including, and perhaps particularly, African) have been "shaped mentally and spiritually" by countries other than where they belong politically, the enormous prospects and problems of the Gordimer-Beard theory of African literature can better be assessed. Literature may well be able to defy national and regional boundaries. A "World Literature" may someday emerge and Senghor's dream of a "Civilization of the Universal" may finally become a reality!

The message of this book is, in brief, that as literary creative activity in Africa develops and diversifies, so should literary criticism. The contributors have demonstrated that this can be done. And their intellectual courage is their greatest attribute. In the vein of Paulin Hountondji and Stanislaus Adotevi, they do not fear to challenge long-established and almost sacrosanct conceptions of the African and African literature; they have highlighted hithertofore neglected materials, and dared criticize the critics; even the issue of male/fe-

male chauvinism in African literature (as a reflection of African societies) has not been left out. Not only is *When the Drumbeat Changes* daringly innovative and extremely informative, it is thought-provoking, at times polemical and controversial. Therein lies its challenge, and its charm.

JOSEPH E. NNADI

## Books Received

- BARTHOLD, BONNIE J., *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. pp. x, 209. \$17.50.
- CHAMPION, LARRY S., *Perspective in Shakespeare's English Histories*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980. pp. 226. \$16.00.
- CONROY, PATRICIA L. and SVEN H. ROSSEL, trs., *Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980. pp. xxxvi, 279. \$17.50.
- EGEJURU, PHANUEL AKUBUEZE, *Black Writers: White Audience*. Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1978. pp. 255. \$12.50.
- KILLAM, G. D., *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*. London: Heinemann, 1980. pp. vi, 122. \$10.95 pb.
- MACSHANE, FRANK, *The Life of John O'Hara*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980. pp. xii, 274. \$21.95.
- MILLS, JOHN, *Lizard in the Grass*. Downsview, Ont.: ECW Press, 1980. pp. 256. \$5.95 pb.
- MUIR, KENNETH, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1980. pp. vi, 179. \$22.50.
- RABKIN, NORMAN, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. pp. x, 165. \$16.00.
- RENWICK, ROGER deV., *English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980. pp. xii, 276. \$24.95.
- SULTANA, DONALD, ed., *New Approaches to Coleridge*. London: Vision Press (Critical Studies Series), 1981. pp. 246. £12.95.
- THOMAS, PETER, *Robert Kroetsch*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre (Studies in Canadian Literature), 1980. pp. 140. unpriced pb.
- VISWANATHAN, S., *The Shakespeare play as poem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. pp. x, 236. \$29.50.
- WAUTHIER, CLAUDE, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1978. pp. 416. £3.20 pb.