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*roundtable*

## **Philosophy as Shared Life**

### **Decolonial Knowledge Grounded on African Land**

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This article is a record of the roundtable discussion titled “African Philosophy and the Opening of New Horizons for Decolonial Knowledge,” held on September 26, 2025, at Doshisha University. Organized by the authors, Takeo Suzuki and Zenta Nishio, the roundtable invited the Ghanaian philosopher Husein Inusah, a professor at the University of Cape Coast, to engage in discussion on a wide range of issues centering on the construction of decolonial knowledge. Rather than adopting the conventional format of “asking for the expert opinion” of an eminent overseas scholar, the discussion proceeded around a set of questions prepared in advance by the two organizers; participants were also encouraged to intervene and join the conversation freely as it unfolded. In what follows, we first explain the circumstances under which this roundtable was convened; we then sketch the genealogy of “African philosophy” and Inusah’s position within it, before offering an overview of the discussion as an introduction.

Inusah had originally come to Japan as a discussant for the First Kyoto Conference, held on September 23–24 of the same year. This international conference took as its theme the re-examination of the underlying values that shape contemporary society as it confronts a range of complex and interwoven challenges. Participants included scholars from non-Western regions as well as non-philosophers, reflecting the conference’s commitment to intellectual plurality. From Africa, through the mediation of anthropologist Motoji Matsuda, the conference invited Inusah from Ghana, sociologist Michael Neocosmos from South Africa, and philosopher Motsamai Molefe from South Africa<sup>(1)</sup>.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, we decided to invite Inusah for a separate event in order to hear more about his intellectually compelling and challenging work. The scope of Inusah’s scholarship

is wide: drawing on the philosophy of the Akan, the linguistic group to which he belongs, he engages with highly contemporary issues such as decolonial pedagogy and university reform, corporate social responsibility, and artificial intelligence (AI). His philosophy can certainly be called “African philosophy,” but not in the sense that it is confined to Africa; rather, it is African in the sense of being grounded in African local communities. While directly addressing the philosophy of a specific people—the Akan—his intellectual reach extends to fields at the cutting edge of contemporary science, including AI and quantum physics. In order to understand how such a dynamic philosophy has been formed and to explore its underlying ideas in greater depth, we organized this roundtable discussion.

Inusah addresses the contemporary task of constructing decolonial knowledge. Yet the standards of what counts as “decolonial,” and how such knowledge could be constructed, vary significantly depending on the thinker. In a modern world fundamentally shaped by colonization by Western empires, what does it mean, concretely, for knowledge to “break free” from colonial influence? How should we position ourselves between the universal standard long monopolized by the West and efforts to relativize it from the standpoint of the “rest”? Here, insofar as the present author (Suzuki) understands it, we sketch Inusah’s scholarly position on these questions within the context of African philosophy.

Although African philosophy today boasts several specialized academic journals, its emergence was marked by a long and complex process. Intellectual activity in Africa had long been subjected to the violent Eurocentric assertion that Africa had “no history”<sup>(2)</sup>, and similarly that there was “no philosophy” there. In response, after the Second World War, African intellectual activity gradually came to be recognized. On the one hand, Western scholars began to “discover” indigenous African philosophies; on the other, African scholars themselves began to present indigenous knowledge as philosophy. Through these developments, a discursive space emerged that linked “Africa” and “philosophy” (Hallen 2002: 13-8).

However, by the 1970s, African philosophy became the target of serious critique. Leading this critique was Paulin Hountondji<sup>(3)</sup>, who argued that what had been called African philosophy was in fact nothing more than “ethnophilosophy,” a pseudo-philosophy, so to speak (Hountondji [1976] 2013; roundtable transcript pp.94-5). From a professional standpoint that defined philosophy as universal, reflective knowledge produced by individuals, Hountondji criticized notions such as “Bantu philosophy” as merely unreflective, everyday ethnic knowledge that failed to meet the conditions of philosophy. Crucially, he also argued that ethnophilosophy essentialized past “traditions” and

responded less to Africa's internal intellectual demands than to the external demands of Western readers seeking a particular image of Africa—thus reproducing a colonial structure of epistemic extraction (Masolo 2000: 152-3; Hallen 2010: 74-6).

In response to such critiques, African philosophy entered what Hallen has described as “the extensive period of soul-searching” (Hallen 2010: 76), during which scholars sought ways to establish a universal philosophy while remaining grounded in African contexts. These efforts took diverse forms. Hountondji himself, for example, did not simply reject indigenous African knowledge; rather, his critique of ethnophilosophy led to the argument that such knowledge should not be displayed as a spectacle for Western audiences but instead refined into more sophisticated forms of endogenous knowledge (Hountondji ed. 1994=1997: 17-9). On the other hand, Kenyan philosopher Odera Orika proposed sage philosophy, which distinguished between collective folk wisdom expressed in proverbs and aphorisms and reflective, didactic knowledge articulated by individual sages. Orika argued that while the former remained within the realm of ethnophilosophy, the latter—where sages take critical distance from communal wisdom—deserved recognition as philosophic sagacity, and thus as philosophy proper (Oruka 1990).

In any case, the call to pursue universal philosophical knowledge raised persistent questions about how to reconcile the orientation toward African particularity with the aspiration to philosophical universality, and how to position one's intellectual practice between these two poles. Whether labeled “African philosophy” or “Eastern philosophy,” attempts to foreground non-Western specificity in a world where Western knowledge claims universality inevitably risk leading to an impasse. That is, one either enters the Western philosophical arena and gains recognition through a “contribution” to universal knowledge—at the cost of confinement within Western epistemic frameworks—or seeks to escape those frameworks in pursuit of genuine originality, only to be dismissed as alien to philosophy itself (Inaga 2011: 41)<sup>(4)</sup>.

Inusah's response to this problem is to advance a thoroughgoing epistemological relativism that refuses to rank knowledges produced in different contexts and instead seeks their mutual complementarity<sup>(5)</sup>. The impasse described above arises from the assumption—shared in both Western and non-Western traditions alike—that some form of universal knowledge exists and stands on top of a hierarchy of knowledge. For example, Kwasi Wiredu, an Akan philosopher who can be regarded as Inusah's most direct predecessor, compares English and Akan concepts of the mind and argues that the latter is superior insofar as it avoids certain metaphysical difficulties embedded in the former (Wiredu 1987). Inusah, however, criticizes this claim for presupposing an imaginary, ahistorical, and

transcultural standpoint from which different cultures can be evaluated and ranked, and thus for reproducing a form of ethnocentrism. Against this, Inusah insists on recognizing that empirically grounded, collectively sustained forms of knowledge coexist in different ways, without being ordered toward a single “universal.” In so doing, Inusah articulates a mode of philosophy that is not captive to hierarchies of knowledge centered on the universal (Inusah 2022=2022: 62-70; roundtable transcript pp.93-4)<sup>(6)</sup>.

From this standpoint, Inusah has devoted particular attention to articulating a distinctive intellectual world drawn from Akan proverbs. Many of his works exhibit a strong practical ethical concern; a co-authored article that draws intellectual virtues from Akan proverbs is a notable example (Inusah and Segbefia 2021). The intellectual virtues discussed there are clearly distinguished from moral virtues and include, for example, courage, curiosity, and autonomy; humility and empathy; tenacity, thoroughness, and attentiveness in intellectual inquiry. Inusah further applies these criteria of intellectual virtues to discussions of epistemic decolonization in university education (Inusah 2023; roundtable transcript pp.105-6). Whereas debates on decolonizing higher education tend to focus narrowly on curriculum reform, Inusah’s educational philosophy extends beyond the curriculum to encompass the attitudes and dispositions of teaching and learning themselves through the concept of intellectual virtue. No matter how much the content of teaching is improved, without an appropriate pedagogical atmosphere and stance, that content cannot be meaningfully apprehended. By addressing this gap, Inusah’s work demonstrates his commitment to thinking through the practical conditions for constructing decolonial knowledge.

Our resonance with Inusah’s perspective, stance, and enthusiasm as both a scholar and an educator led us to organize this roundtable. As noted at the outset, the discussion was loosely structured along topics prepared in advance by the organizers, while allowing participants to intervene freely. The four core topics were: 1. Inusah’s path to becoming a philosopher; 2. his understanding of the empirical foundations of his philosophy, particularly regarding the study of proverbs; 3. the ethical concerns evident in his work on intellectual virtues and his views on the practical application of philosophy; and 4. his view on disseminating philosophy through education and public lectures. We would like to extend our thanks to Molefe—who was also visiting Japan at the time—as well as the scholars of African studies and others whose active participation enabled the discussion to expand well beyond our initial expectations<sup>(7)</sup>.

This article, which introduces Inusah’s philosophy to a Japanese readership, is timely. In recent years, there has been a growing effort to expand philosophy into a non-Western, world philosophy that

situates African philosophy and Japanese philosophy within a broader world-philosophical framework (Kawano 2024; Davis 2025). Inusah’s defense of epistemological relativism can offer important insights for such endeavors. At the same time, the roundtable was open to a wide range of contemporary issues—not limited to African philosophy in the narrow sense—including urgent academic issues such as higher education and AI. We hope that readers with diverse interests, not only in Africa, philosophy, or decolonization, will find much here to engage with.

## Endnotes

- (1) Of these three conference invitees, Inusah and Neocosmos had previously participated in the “African Potentials” project, co-directed by Matsuda, and contributed to one of its published outcomes, *African Potentials* (Ohta et al. eds. 2022).
- (2) For further details on the intellectual environment against which African history had been denied, the emergence of African historiography in that context, and the challenges it has faced, see Nagahara (2001) and Matsuda (2022).
- (3) A philosopher from Benin who studied in France under Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida.
- (4) As this problem stems from the structure of knowledge established through Western centrism, reducing the unit of analysis—from “Africa” to “Luo” or “Akan,” or from “the East” to “Japan”—will not fundamentally resolve the issue unless the structure itself is transformed.
- (5) For a closely related perspective, see the dialogical approach to political thought proposed by Canadian public philosopher James Tully (Tully 2016).
- (6) For a clear articulation of this position, see Inusah and Omaboe (2023). This co-authored article juxtaposes cutting-edge quantum physics with indigenous knowledges from various African regions, arguing that rather than competing with one another, they can complement each other and expand our understanding of reality in different ways.
- (7) In the roundtable transcript, participants other than the two organizers and Inusah are generally anonymized; however, Molefe is named due to his important position as a speaker.

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Husein Inusah: I am Husein Inusah, Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Classics and Philosophy at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. And I also serve as an adjunct professor in the Department of Philosophy and Classics at the University of Ghana. I will probably speak more about my research later, but for now, I can say that I publish and conduct research in several areas of African philosophy, with a particular focus on decolonial epistemology.

I am always careful, and in fact reluctant, to use the term “Africa” in a broad or generalized sense. This is because the term carries with it a number of problems, and I do not regard Africa as culturally monolithic. For this reason, I focus instead on the linguistic group to which I belong, namely the Akan.

In recent years, my work has evolved taking up contemporary challenges and asking how Akan philosophy might respond to them. I have also done work on racism and Pan-Africanism. In addition, I have conducted extensive research in analytic philosophy, particularly in relation to knowledge and legal justification.

Takeo Suzuki: My name is Takeo Suzuki, and I have been working on research into Indigenous movements in Canada. My work does not directly overlap with Husein’s research, but I see it as indirectly related. This is be-

cause Indigenous peoples in Canada have also been struggling to decolonize their systems of thought and their ways of living. It is precisely this kind of decolonial thinking, decolonial knowledge, and decolonial way of life that I am interested in. In that sense, my concerns connect with broader questions of decoloniality and African philosophy as well.

Zenta Nishio: My name is Zenta Nishio, from Ehime University. My research has focused on people’s lives in cities shaped by colonial rule, particularly in the Philippines, in places such as Manila and Baguio. I would not say that I have extensive knowledge of African philosophy. However, I have been critically examining the forms of coloniality that persist in contemporary cities and thinking about alternative visions of the cities. For this reason, I am very interested in learning how Husein has grappled with Western knowledge and opened up different ways of imagining the world from within his own context.

## 1. First Encounter with Philosophy

Suzuki / Nishio: We are really happy to see such a diverse group of people gathered here today. The topics we have prepared are general rather than specialized. In terms of expertise, many of you here have far more specialized knowledge of African societies than we do,

so we hope you will help us. Although we are acting as organizers, we also see ourselves as participants on the same footing as everyone else.

This roundtable is structured around four topics. For the first topic, we would like to ask about your first encounter with philosophy. We are interested in how students in Ghana and in other African contexts come to philosophy in the first place. This encounter might be a complex one, or it might be an encounter with a specific person or a particular book. We would like to hear how you yourself were shaped by philosophy. Speaking from my own experience in Japan, I (Nishio) never encountered philosophy before entering university. I was not even aware of philosophy as something one could study in junior high school or high school. But in your case, perhaps you were inspired or influenced by philosophy at a much earlier stage, maybe through philosophical texts. So, my question is: In your context, how did you first come to encounter philosophy?

Inusah: I think, actually, that there are two questions folded into this one. So, I would like to start with the “why” and then, afterwards, talk about the “how.”

## 1.1 Why I Became a Philosopher

This is partly a joke, but I grew up in a Muslim family in Ghana. My mother became a Muslimah because she married my father. We practiced a kind of extended family system, so among my cousins, aunts, and uncles, some are Christians, some are practitioners of traditional religion, and we ourselves are Muslims. In fact, my father’s mother was also a Christian. Because of this, I think I developed a certain kind of tolerance, simply by growing up in a family where there were traditionalists, Christians, and Muslims all together.

However, because I was raised as a Muslim, my father used to tell me very often, “When you grow up, never become a lawyer, because lawyers always lie and they go to hell” (laughs). He was very religious, and for religious reasons, he kept emphasizing that I should never become a lawyer. Then, before I entered university, my father passed away suddenly. And I became a philosopher.

Looking back, I sometimes think that this was even worse than becoming a lawyer. Because now I am someone who asks the question: Does God exist? If my father were still alive, I could never have sat in front of you to discuss whether God exists. That would have been a non-starter. The moment such a question was raised, my entire family would have

gathered to bring me back and reintegrate me into the faith community. And if I refused, I would have been immediately excommunicated—simply for asking, “Does God exist?” That is not even a question you are supposed to ask. So, in that sense, my becoming a philosopher was really a matter of providence.

When I was in senior high school, I was deeply interested in literature. I read African poetry and African novels on my own. My desire was to go into the arts. However, my university had a rather peculiar admission system. Even though I applied for the arts program, when I received my admission, I was assigned four subjects: Classics and Philosophy, English, and History. I did not choose these subjects myself.

I studied all of them at first, but gradually I became more interested in English and philosophy, and I abandoned history and classics. I abandoned classics because it was largely a classical study of Rome and Greece. At the time, I did not yet have a clear concept of coloniality—it simply did not occur to me in that way—but I just did not like it. As for history, it was quite restricted to Western history. From Level 100 to Level 200, I hardly encountered African history at all, except for African history discussed in connection with Arab incursions into Africa. Other than that, it was mostly American history and European history. I felt that I was not really doing any-

thing meaningful, so I decided to abandon history as well. As a result, I focused my attention on English and philosophy. My interest in literature—especially African literature—was what initially drew me toward philosophy.

As I studied philosophy, I gradually became something of a rebel. My first act of rebellion was to become an animal rights activist, which is why I stopped eating meat. This had nothing to do with religion, faith, or any particular belief system. My first rebellion was about wanting to defend the rights of humans as well as non-human entities. Because of this, my undergraduate project was on animal rights, which was not a popular topic at the time. When I later applied for my master’s degree, I proposed exactly the same topic. During the proposal defense, the panel asked me only two questions. After that, they spent the rest of the time arguing among themselves about why I said I should not eat meat. I just sat there quietly. After they had argued for a while, they finally said, “Okay, you can go.” And so I left. In that sense, I was saved by their argument.

## 1.2 How I Became a Philosopher

### Resonance with Richard Rorty

As I mentioned earlier, my entering philosophy was not something that I planned. It

was simply a matter of providence. But how I became interested in philosophy is a different question, and that is something worth exploring.

As I said before, my approach to philosophy was a kind of revolt. This had a lot to do with the structure of my department, which was organized as a Department of Classics and Philosophy. The original idea was that we were to be trained primarily in classical philosophy. Our concentration was on reading the pre-Socratic philosophers, then the Socratic philosophers—including Plato and Aristotle—followed by a bit of medieval philosophy, and then early modern philosophy.

I, however, became interested in postmodern philosophy instead. I moved beyond even late modern philosophy and began to show a strong interest in postmodern philosophy. One scholar who particularly caught my attention was an American philosopher, Richard Rorty. From as early as the 1960s, Rorty and some of his contemporaries had begun to depart from mainstream Anglophone philosophy, especially from its dominant concerns with objectivity, rationality, representation, and related ideas. I decided, therefore, to work on Rorty. But I was met with resistance. My professors were, in a sense, students of Plato and Aristotle, so I had to convince them that they should allow me to work on Richard Rorty.

The first book by Rorty that I read was *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1979). It is a fascinating book—one that departs quite radically from mainstream Anglophone philosophy. Later, Rorty wrote another book titled *Truth and Progress* (Rorty 1998), in which he argued that truth is not a goal. Because if truth were a goal, we would be able to say how close we are getting to it. He then wrote *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Rorty 1991), where he proposed replacing the scientific notion of objectivity with the idea of solidarity. He also argued that relativism is not something we should be afraid of.

In fact, Rorty is one of the very few philosophers who was bold enough to openly describe himself as a relativist. Even feminist philosophers—who are, in practice, doing relativist philosophy—often resist that label. Many feminist epistemologists in the West, such as Helen Longino and others in that tradition, insist that they are not relativists. The same happens among African philosophers. When I ask them, “Are you a relativist?” they often respond, “No, I am not.”

So, I was genuinely pleased that Rorty was able to come out and say, quite clearly, “I am a relativist.” What especially caught my attention was the way he juxtaposed objectivity with solidarity, rationality with reasonableness, and social coercion with reconciliation. I was drawn to this shift—to solidarity under-

stood as a matter of multiple perspectives, to reasonableness rather than rationality, and to reconciliation rather than mere coercion. These ideas have since become the bedrock, the foundation, of my philosophical research.

### **Moving into African Philosophy**

As for African philosophy, I did not initially show much interest in it. And the reason for this was quite deliberate. I wanted first to survey the terrain—the landscape—of Western philosophy. My intention was to challenge Western philosophy, but I believed that in order to challenge it properly, I needed to know exactly what I was challenging. So instead of immediately entering African philosophy, I spent time exploring the existing canons of European philosophy. I used this exploration as a basis for eventually moving into African philosophy.

My PhD thesis was centered on the idea of epistemic justification. In the European philosophical context, epistemic justification is often restricted to an individual subject—an isolated knower, abstracted from context. I sought instead to move from individual knowledge to collective knowledge and to ask how collectives justify their beliefs. At the time, this was an emerging field in the United States, which we now call social epistemology. Previously, epistemology had been largely androcentric, individualistic, and con-

text-insensitive. This work in social epistemology, therefore, prepared the ground for me to turn more fully toward African philosophy.

When I encountered African philosophy, the first thing that was required of me was time—time to reflect carefully on the existing canons of African philosophy. Only after that could I begin to formulate my own views about what needed to be done within the context of African philosophical debates. I was fortunate to meet Kwame Gyekye, one of the most distinguished figures in African philosophy. Gyekye was based at the University of Ghana, and I met with him on several occasions for discussion. He was a tremendous intellectual stimulus for me, although our scholarly trajectories do not fully converge.

On the other hand, although I never met him in person, the philosopher who in fact had the greatest influence on me was Kwasi Wiredu, who had already passed away by the time I was in the United States. In comparison with other philosophers such as Paulin Hountondji and Odera Oruka, I find that Wiredu's concepts and explanations capture Akan ontology more accurately, particularly in terms of contextual sensitivity. Among philosophical approaches circulating within African philosophy—especially those focused on Ghana—Wiredu's work stands out for its explanatory power.

I was also extremely fortunate in my doctoral training. Richard Feldman, one of the leading epistemologists in the United States, was my supervisor at the University of Rochester. Jeremy Wanderer, who at the time was based in the philosophy department at the University of Cape Town and later moved to Boston, was another of my supervisors. In addition, Carl Simpson of Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada, also served as one of my advisors.

I relocated to Rochester, which was geographically close both to Boston and to Canada, making it possible for me to receive guidance from all three scholars simultaneously. At the time, my home department was still in a developmental phase and lacked a sufficient number of faculty members who could supervise my work. As a result, my doctoral training came to be shaped largely by scholars based in North America. But this was not the only reason. At that stage, my intellectual orientation was toward Anglophone philosophy rather than African philosophy, which made it necessary for me to seek supervisors outside my home institution.

My experience in the United States may not have been especially exciting, but it was deeply instructive. Many of the discussions I had with my peers revolved around the idea of collective knowledge. This way of thinking departed significantly from the prevailing

assumptions about knowledge that my colleagues took for granted. Engaging in these debates played an important role in shaping my philosophical trajectory.

### 1.3 Away from the Illusion of Superiority

#### African Literature

Suzuki: You mentioned earlier that you were very interested in literature. Were there any particular works or writers that you especially liked?

Inusah: I focused mainly on African writers. I was also interested in European literature, but only up to a point. At some point I realized that in many European poems—especially Romantic poetry—the poets list things like flowers, for example, daffodils. And I had never seen daffodils in my life. So, I simply could not relate to some of these images. Because of that, I decided to focus more on African poetry. I read South African poems, especially liberation poetry. I was also interested in Nigerian writers. And then there was one writer from Senegal who wrote *The Beggar's Strike* (Sowa Fall 1979=1981). It has been a long time since I've read those books, so I may not remember all the details, but these are some of the works that really interested me at the time.

Participant 1: I am also interested in West African literature. You mentioned Nigerian writers—who would you consider the best writer, especially among novelists?

Inusah: Honestly, I don't really know who the "best" writer is. But I really love Chinua Achebe, especially because of the way he uses proverbs. At the same time, I often feel tempted to read more women writers. I seem to have a kind of soft spot for women's experiences—gendered experiences in Africa—particularly the situation where women are expected to work and, at the same time, to be wives and mothers. So, to be honest, I'm not even sure exactly what I want to say here. But I do feel a strong desire to somehow place myself within the experiences of African women, to try to understand those experiences from within.

Participant 1: What about Wole Soyinka?

Inusah: Yes, I've read his work as well. For example, *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka 1975), one of his plays. But Soyinka's writing often feels very obscure to me. His language is extremely difficult. Even though the point of his drama is quite educative, there is a kind of hidden ontology in some of his works. You really struggle to unravel it. Because of that, it is difficult to teach his

works at the senior high school level. Students usually find it hard to relate to them.

### Sentiments Toward Western Countries

Participant 2: At that time, or in the early stage of your career, what kind of stance or sentiment did you have toward Western countries?

Inusah: I did not have any resentment toward Western countries themselves. But I did have resentment toward Western intellectual agendas—toward Western ways of thinking about Africa. When you study philosophy and read some of the modern philosophers, you encounter what they say about Black Africans. I don't like reading those passages, because they do not just make you sad; they also make you very angry.

What is particularly striking, though, is the hypocrisy of the period in which these writings emerged. These ideas were produced during the Enlightenment—a time in Europe when social equality was being actively pursued, and when there were major social upheavals around people's rights. And yet, at that very same time, scholars were writing texts that denigrated other human beings. Take David Hume, for example. He is one of the celebrated Scottish philosophers of the Enlightenment. And yet he wrote extremely negative things about Africa. That is the hypocrisy I am talking about. The same can be

said of figures like Immanuel Kant. Edmund Husserl also wrote very negative things about Papuan people<sup>(1)</sup>.

So, my concern was not really about confronting individual persons. Rather, I was thinking about how to confront this approach to knowledge itself—European thought, Eurocentric thought. The problem is not people as such, but a particular way of knowing. In that sense, I did not have a problem with Western countries themselves.

### **My Kind of Relativism**

Motsamai Molefe: Your fascination with Richard Rorty is itself fascinating to me. But what really struck me as I was listening to you was this issue of relativism. For the sake of our mutual understanding, could you give us a sense of what relativism is about, why someone would count as a relativist, or why feminists, for example, might be regarded as relativists?

Inusah: Let me begin by noting the following point. An American philosopher, Paul Boghossian, wrote a book titled *Fear of Knowledge* (Boghossian 2006). In that book, he argues that one of the main reasons scholars are opposed to relativism is what is known as the “equal validity” argument. The equal validity argument goes like this: if there are different perspectives on an issue, then all of them

cannot be right at the same time. Therefore, one must be right, and that one must be judged superior to the others.

But the problem is this: no relativist actually subscribes to the idea of equal validity. From that perspective, I think the very label “relativism” is already based on a misguided assumption. The kind of relativism I defend does not assume that the existence of different perspectives necessarily leads to disagreement. The relativism I am talking about does not operate with restricted diversity, but it emphasizes participatory diversity. This is an active form of diversity. It does not require that you subsume your philosophy or your perspective under another one, nor does it require that one perspective be declared “right” over the others. At the same time, relativism does not mean that anything goes. In relativism, we still have explanations. We have what we call “warranted assertibility”: the ability to explain why you believe what you believe. And you can explain this to others in a way that enables understanding<sup>(2)</sup>.

So, there are genuine possibilities for cross-cultural communication within the kind of relativism I am describing here. Now, when we turn to Wiredu, what we see is the following: Wiredu returns to African philosophy, particularly Akan philosophy, and argues that Akan philosophy rests on certain assumptions that are so robust that, when

placed on the world stage, they can be regarded as superior to other philosophical perspectives. I think that this very search for superiority is already deeply embedded in the logic of universalism. Universalism is the view that we should be indifferent to difference, and that once we adopt such indifference, one particular idea must ultimately override all others.

From my perspective, Wiredu should have recognized the following point: Akan philosophy may indeed be robust—for example, the Akan conception of God—but there is no reason why a Yoruba person or a Zulu person should abandon their own concept of God in favor of the Akan one, even if the Akan believe that their own ontological explanations or theological views are far more robust than others. What happens, however, is that Wiredu begins from a relativist position but eventually returns to universalism. He tries to present the Akan philosophical system as somehow superior to others. He suggests that if we enter into a cross-cultural philosophical space and deliberate on the basis of so-called “common assumptions,” then the Akan conception of God, religion, and related ideas will emerge as more robust than Western ones—and that we will all end up choosing the Akan view.

This is precisely why I argue that to be a relativist is to confine oneself to explaining

one’s own issues and one’s own epistemology within one’s own context. The moment you move beyond that and begin to claim that your context is superior to others, you step directly into the very universalism you were trying to challenge and dismantle.

## 2. Situatedness of Knowledge

### 2.1 Epistemology of Collective Knowledge

Suzuki: As sociologists and anthropologists, we are very interested in the practical or empirical ground of philosophy. In particular, I’m interested in your relationship with an African world—or more specifically, an Akan world. For example, how do Akan proverbs relate to your philosophy?

Inusah: As I mentioned earlier, I have an interest in storytelling and proverbs as a form of resistance. And one reason I go in this direction is connected to the question of why African philosophy has so often been rejected. In the early stages of African philosophy, there was a long and intense debate about whether there is even something called “African philosophy.” And one of the reasons often given for rejecting African philosophy was that it is a collective philosophy. Hountondji, for instance, described it as an uncritical collective talk of people, something that cannot

qualify as philosophy. This was also tied to a series of Western attacks. There was also the argument that because African philosophy was not written down, it could not count as philosophy. In other words, documentation was treated as a condition for something to be recognized as philosophy.

It is precisely for that reason that I turned toward storytelling and proverbs. African storytelling was not originally documented. African stories were not originally written. And our proverbs were not originally documented either—they are transmitted from one generation to another. Now, in doing this, I use the book as a symbol. Here, the “book” stands for Western civilization. It has often been said that the West brought the book to Africa, and that the book is “light”—and that prior to this, Africa was a “dark continent.” What this metaphor implies is that what is in the book should subsume the oral culture that has sustained us for a very long time. And it is exactly that assumption that I want to question.

But you see, oral culture has its own benefits. The moment something is written down, it becomes a dead thing. Oral tradition, however, is always alive, because it must be carried by living people and transmitted through generations. And beyond that, proverbs cultivate intellectual virtues—virtues of the mind—such as listening attentively or looking carefully. But when the book arrived,

people began to rely on the book and stopped listening for themselves. So the practices of attentive listening and careful looking quickly began to disappear from the African landscape. And yet, there is a very valuable—though also vulnerable—intellectual resource that we can learn from Akan proverbs. And not only Akan proverbs, but the proverbs of many other peoples. When I was in South Africa, I also learned other proverbs. Proverbs teach us about the situatedness of knowledge, because proverbs themselves are knowledge: they are knowledge claims, and they display how knowledge is situated.

For example, there is an Akan proverb: “*Anomaa antu a, obua da.*” If a bird does not fly from its position, it dies—or it becomes inactive. Meanwhile, the Germans would say something like: “The devil’s favorite place is the long bench”—that is, idleness. In abstract terms, these two proverbs are saying the same thing: you have to be active, responsive, committed to your duty—otherwise you cannot feed yourself. But what these proverbs refer to are things that are available within a particular context. Among the Akan, a bird is available, and so a bird is used. Among the Germans, a bench is available, and so a bench is used.

What does this tell us? It tells us that proverbs are situated. They represent knowledge that is embedded in particular contexts. And

they also show us a concept of diversity: that we can use our particular languages and the resources available in our contexts to express the same abstract idea. This is what I call participatory diversity. To understand an Akan proverb, you have to empathize with an Akan person—you have to try to understand the perspective: why the bird rather than the bench. This is part of why I went into the study of proverbs and storytelling. And once you study proverbs, you realize that, especially in the Akan case, it is difficult to understand them if you are not situated in the context. You need a sense of familiarity with almost every entity within the Akan ecology.

I have already spoken about aliveness, but let me add a bit more. Akan proverbs are always alive. By “alive,” I mean they are treated as if they have life—they breathe. And for language to “breathe,” it must have grounds. In [an Akan language of] Twi, we call this something like *nnyinaso*—that is, what is the ground upon which this proverb is constructed? And that ground must breathe. Among the Akan, animals breathe—so they “say” proverbs. Trees breathe—so they “say” proverbs. The tortoise says his proverbs.

There are many proverbs attributed to the tortoise. For example, there is a proverb that says, “*Akyekyedeɛ sɛ ɛnsa kɔ na ɛnsa aba.*” The tortoise says, “One hand goes, and then the other hand comes.” At first it sounds very

simple. But once you delve into it, you realize why it matters. Think of animals that walk on four legs: even if one leg is hurt, they can still walk—perhaps limping, but still moving. But the tortoise is different. Because it is enclosed within its shell, if one of its legs—especially a foreleg—is injured, its movement becomes severely constrained, since the shell touches the ground. So the tortoise cannot properly move if even one limb is damaged. This helps you understand why the tortoise says, “If one hand goes, the other hand must come.”

But there is something else important. The tortoise appears in this proverb also because the tortoise moves slowly. Yet even though it is slow, it still moves, and it still reaches its destination. So the proverb is also saying if one hand moves and the other hand moves, even if the movement is slow, we will still make progress. So you see, to understand this proverb properly, you have to understand all these contexts. And to understand those contexts, you must be situated within the Akan ecological world.

Now, this brings us to the issue of attribution. This knowledge is attributed to the tortoise. But not all proverbs are attributed to animals or trees. Some are attributed to parts of the human body, for example. There is a proverb attributed to the hand. There is a great deal one can study here. But the most interesting part is that it is the hand [a part of

the human body] that “says” it.

Then there are other proverbs that are not clearly attributed to animals, trees, humans, or body parts at all. So how do we justify those proverbs? What grounds do we give them? Because proverbs are always alive, we justify them by grounding them in what the elders have said. We say, “Our elders say so.” And we say that because our elders are alive. But remember: in African communitarian contexts, even the dead are still alive. That is why we perform libation: we first share food and drink with the ancestors. So sometimes we say, *nananom*, our elders—when our elders say so and so, they do not lie. We attribute the proverb to our elders in order to give it life and to make it breathe.

These issues resonate deeply with our culture. And I think that to look at them is to bring into focus what colonialism implanted and what colonialism and modernity rejected. That is why I return to them. This is part of what decolonialism involves—what Aimé Césaire (1947=2014) calls a return (*retour*), and so on.

### **Situatedness as the Ground of Proverbs**

Suzuki: How do you think philosophy and anthropology differ? Anthropology also does this kind of work—analyzing local languages, and so on.

Inusah: I am not merely analyzing or explaining proverbs. I also go into philosophical details, and I sometimes use philosophical tools. I want to ask: how are proverbs justified? That is an epistemological question. How are proverbs justified as a source of knowledge? I theorize this, as I have been explaining. If you go to an anthropologist, the anthropologist may explain the proverb to you. If you go to a linguist, the linguist will tell you what the proverb means in linguistic terms. But I am not only interested in explanations—I am interested in the justifications behind these proverbs and in whether it is possible to have collective knowledge and collective beliefs. Please note: proverbs are collective knowledge, and they also function as the collective memory of a people. In Eurocentric contexts, [in contrast,] the tendency is to say that there can be no collective memory—only individual memory.

I also look at questions of migration, for example—positionality, location, and dislocation. For me, these become philosophical questions through the use of proverbs. How do Africans—meaning those who share cultural descent with Africans, such as our brothers and sisters in Europe and in the diaspora—connect with African proverbs? How do they connect with these proverbs when they are not situated? How do they share in this collective memory? Among the Akan,

there is what we call *adinkra*—pictorial forms of proverbs crystallized into images. If you go to the United States, you can see African Americans using symbols such as *sankofa* to show a cultural connection back: you are dislocated from your positionality, from your situatedness, and you want to reconnect. These are some of the things I examine.

### “I Am Because We Are, We Are Because I Am”

Nishio: You said that philosophy needs collectivity and situatedness. How do you think the meaning of being a philosopher changes depending on the context? In terms of situatedness, Western philosophers are also situated in their own contexts. And you are situated in an Akan context, which may be a very different context with its own landscapes, history, and memory.

So I’m curious: even if we use the same words—“philosophy” or “philosopher”—they may carry very different meanings, roles, and practices depending on one’s context. From your perspective, how does being situated in an African—or specifically Akan—context reshape, or even challenge, what it means to do philosophy, compared to the Western sense?

Inusah: I accept that my philosophy is situated. But the problem with Eurocentrism, which

we inherited from the Enlightenment era, is that Western philosophy does not accept that its philosophy is situated. When René Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am,” that was a complete departure from situatedness. “I think” is having an idea or an opinion, and “I am” denotes existence. So Descartes says, I think—therefore I exist. But in fact, it should have been the other way around: it is because I exist that I can think. Western philosophy, beginning with Descartes, tried to place knowledge—or ideas—ahead of existence. They may have German Idealism and so on, which are clearly situated in particular histories, yet they still present their philosophy as universal. So, the core issue is whether one accepts one’s situatedness.

In contrast, there is an African proverb often cited in relation to *ubuntu*, and for us it is precisely about situatedness. It says, “I exist, therefore I am.” And when we say you are situated, we do not mean that you are situated alone. You are situated as a social being. That is why we say that you are a person because you are with others. It is reciprocal: “I am because we are, and we are because I am”<sup>(3)</sup>.

### Placeness of Thought

Molefe: I think we’re slowly teasing out something here—and you’ve been naming it with a strikingly interesting term. What you seem to be suggesting is that the philosopher’s work

is always located somewhere. Or to put it differently, what you are teasing out is the very idea of place.

Thinking along these lines brings to mind philosophers from other traditions who speak of “no-place,” an ideal of nowhere. In our teaching, too, we often introduce ideas as if they have no history—as if they simply fell from the sky. Yet one of the central operations of coloniality, I think, was precisely an erasure of place. After erasing an existing place, a new place is then imposed. So, what I keep hearing in what you are saying is that this question of an “ideal place” is absolutely central: nobody is nowhere. Every somewhere carries some knowledge, and that situated knowledge will generate different expressions. That is how I’m receiving your point—am I understanding you correctly?

Inusah: Yes. I would say that knowledge is an abstraction. But how we contribute to that abstraction comes from our embeddedness—from our situatedness. So, the conceptual vocabulary can vary, while the abstraction itself remains the same. In other words, we say the same things by using different conceptual vocabularies. That is what I mean. And also—yes—I reject completely this “God’s-eye” point of view, this idea of a view from nowhere.

## How to Keep Proverbs Alive

Participant 1: I want to return to your first point about your interest in African oral literature—proverbs and storytelling. You said they were “not documented,” but I want to disagree. To a considerable extent, many African proverbs have in fact been documented—for instance, as you yourself mentioned, in the works of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka.

Inusah: No, I’m not saying they have not been documented. What I’m saying is that prior to the coming of Europeans, our proverbs were not documented. Of course, by now, we have documented them. But here is the problem: the moment you document proverbs, you kill them—they lose their sense of creativity.

Because proverbs are supposed to be used in context. It is within context that new knowledge emerges, through the creativity of proverbs—through the way you adapt, maneuver, and improvise with proverbs in particular situations. That is why, if you are in an Akan community—say, you enter a chief’s palace, a traditional authority space—and you use a proverb inappropriately, you can be fined. For them, a proverb is not merely “culture.” It is also creativity. You must know exactly when and how to maneuver a proverb so that it suits the situation.

Participant 1: So, you are against documenting proverbs. But what if the population forgets them [because they are not recorded as documents]?

Inusah: Yes—and that is precisely why what I am doing now, instead of that, is to use AI. First, I have gathered about 500 Akan proverbs. And I'm currently in the field, interviewing people across different age groups, asking how they interpret and understand these proverbs. So I collect data on proverb-understanding by age range. Then I bring this to AI: I ask it to write a story around that proverb, I feed footage into it, and I let it determine the context.

Participant 1: But that is still documentation.

Inusah: No, no—look. That is also digitization, yes, but it is a kind of digitization that is alive. It is not dead like something written in a book. What AI can do is this: if you say, “Give me the meaning of this proverb under this context,” it gives you a story of the proverb in that particular context—in a visual form.

Participant 1: Today we are talking about AI. But when Achebe was writing, this technology was not there. So perhaps writing things down was the only way. People preserved

this knowledge because they felt they might lose it.

Inusah: I think you may be taking me out of context—let me come back. Chinua Achebe used proverbs in context. He did not document individual proverbs one by one. What I'm talking about is those who document individual proverbs as a dictionary. For example, Kwame Anthony Appiah and his mother documented about 7,000 Akan proverbs—just the proverbs alone (Appiah et al. 2008).

Now, when people use proverbs inside stories and novels, that is good—but that is not “proverb documentation” in the sense I'm criticizing. That is using proverbs in context, and that is absolutely acceptable.

What I am criticizing is when you take a proverb, isolate it, write it down, and stop there. Historically, the first people to start doing that were colonial actors. I have discussed this in some of my writings: there was an early compiler who produced a first collection, and then a German named Christaller wrote down around 3,000 West African proverbs—simply documented them (Christaller 1879). That does not help. What we are trying to move away from is that practice. The issue is not using proverbs; the issue is stripping them out of context and freezing them.

## 2.2 What Proverbs Are Among the Akan

### How Proverbs Are Transmitted

Participant 3: To help clarify the discussion, let me pause for a moment and ask for confirmation. What I am particularly interested in is this: in an African context, what is considered a “proverb” in the first place?

Given that African proverbs often do not have a written script, how are their accuracy and meaning maintained? As proverbs are passed down from generation to generation, contexts inevitably change. Words spoken two hundred years ago may not be teachable in the same way in the age of AI. If that is the case, the meanings and uses of those words must also change over time. Under such conditions, how is it decided what counts as a “proverb” and what does not? To be honest, it sometimes feels to me as though there is a certain absence of authority here. I would very much appreciate it if you could offer some insight from within your own context as to whether this understanding is correct.

Inusah: First, I would avoid speaking of “Africa” in general. Let’s talk about Akan proverbs. In Akan proverbs, authority is collective. Because the moment you install an individual authority, you defeat the communitarian idea of knowing. From my investigation, this is how proverbs are formed: prov-

erbs are the product of the wit of one and the wisdom of many. One person coins an expression and brings it into the public sphere; it resonates with people, they adopt it, they refine it over the years, and it becomes public usage. The name of the original person disappears completely.

So, for attribution, Akan people find it better to attribute proverbs to our *nananom*—our elders/ancestors, those who are still alive and those who are dead—rather than to a single individual. Also, there is no single interpretation of any Akan proverb: interpretation depends on context. But you can also fall out of context. There are linguistic and social structures you must follow. If you say a proverb among your peers—same age group—there is a way to address it; and that addressing itself is part of the proverb. In other words, who you are addressing, and how, is woven into the act of proverb-speaking.

So yes, many things go into how proverbs are adjusted and altered. But that does not mean we need a single authority. In a communitarian framework, if you discover something, it belongs to the community. Knowledge is shared; it is collective. I collected many proverbs from a town called Ejisu. And you may be surprised: some of the people who gave me deep insight into the meanings of many proverbs—including even some elders—were under thirty. So this tradition is

not simply dying. It is dying in urban areas, perhaps, but within the core—traditional Akan towns and houses—you still have young people carrying it forward.

### Ecological Background of the Proverbs

Participant 4: My interest lies in the relationship between folktales and proverbs. Folktales are not proverbs themselves, but in many cases, it is not the entire story that is widely shared—rather, it is the final line or the key point that circulates most broadly. What I would like to ask, then, is how such folktales are remembered and transmitted. It is often the case that older people know the whole story, whereas younger generations know only the conventional ending or the core phrase. There has been a great deal of discussion about the continuity of collective memory, but folktales take a different form from proverbs. How do you understand this partial remembering and transmission of folktales, especially in relation to proverbs?

Inusah: Yes—some proverbs have folktales around them. One interesting thing about Akan proverb practice is that it differentiates between axioms, apophthegms, and proverbs. In European cultures, it can be difficult to separate “proverb” from “apophthegm” or “axiom.” Among the Akan, we have *εβε*—that is the proverb. And we also have *asem*

*sebe*: sayings or expressions that resemble proverbs. These are the two main categories; other forms tend to collapse into these. *Asem sebe* is not a proverb—it is language that resembles a proverb. And one important point is that if you take something that is not a proverb and attribute it to the elders, the elders will stop you and tell you, “This cannot be assigned to us.” So there is a form of gate-keeping with rules that protect the integrity of proverbs and ensure that the core can still be transmitted. In fact, among the Akan, when someone is to become a chief or king, one thing that is examined is the person’s fluency in using proverbs, and their understanding of them. That is how, within the core, proverbs are transmitted.

In urban areas, however, it is different—partly because of Westernization. Akan people believe in totemism; every family has a totem symbol. Yet in senior high school interviews, many students can say they belong to a given family, but they do not even know what the symbol is. We have been moved away from our ecology, and younger people struggle with proverbs because the entities invoked in the proverbs are no longer familiar to them. In that respect, there is not much we can do. As for your (Participant 3’s) question about changing metaphors—replacing “horse” with “car,” for example—that kind of change has happened in Yoruba proverbs

in Nigeria; with the influence of pidgin, a lot has shifted. As for that, colleagues assembled many examples and shared them with me. But I haven't worked on that yet (the conceptual changes in terms of the object). And frankly, sometimes I hesitate, because going too deeply into the language can pull me away from philosophy.

### 3. Decolonial Pedagogy

#### AI and the Question of Personhood

Nishio: At this point, I would like to turn to the question of education. To begin with, I want to ask about how we should engage with AI in educational settings. There are many debates surrounding generative AI, but in one of your lectures you focused on the issue of the digital divide (Inusah 2024b). In many African contexts, a large number of people do not even have access to the internet, and as a result, their knowledge is treated as if it does not exist in the process of AI production. This concern with accessibility also seems to be reflected in the way you open up philosophy through Akan philosophy. If I were a student, I think I would find this extremely compelling. As AI is increasingly used—and as we find ourselves being used by AI—how have students responded to your approach?

Inusah: The use of AI is both a problem and an advantage. When I think about this issue, the first thing that comes to mind is the following. As you know, many students now use AI in their own ways, often copying content generated by AI with very little cognitive engagement of their own. This is a very difficult problem. At the same time, there is a kind of contradiction here. When we try to check whether students have used AI, we often end up using AI itself to do the checking. In other words, we rely on a tool we already distrust in order to verify the integrity of what that tool has produced. That is a rather strange situation.

That said, I believe AI is already here to stay, and we cannot stop it. What we need to do is to help students understand that the use of AI must not replace their own intelligence or their own ways of creating knowledge. To explain this, I draw on our own ontology. I explain why they, as persons, are fundamentally different from AI. In Western contexts, there is a great deal of confusion about whether AI can be considered a “person” and about the difference between human intelligence and artificial intelligence. But in our context, there is a clear way of understanding this distinction: if you are human, you are a person, and as a person, you are not the same as AI.

Among the Akan, being a person does not

mean being composed only of a body and a brain. After all, AI also has neuron-like structures and chips that function in ways similar to a brain. But we have additional elements. Among the Akan, this is called *okra*, which is understood as the “spark of life.” *Okra* denotes the final encounter a person has with God just before birth—the moment of departure. In this sense, a human being is constituted by this spark of life. When I use the term “God” here, I am not referring to a specific religious deity but to a concept that is broadly shareable. In addition, we have *sunsum*, a spiritual element that shapes one’s character and personality. Many of you may have experienced meeting someone whose presence feels overwhelming, or someone you are naturally drawn to, or conversely, someone you instinctively keep your distance from. That is *sunsum*. Furthermore, a person is connected to their mother through *mogya* (blood) and to their father through *ntɔn* (or *ntrɔn*). To be a person is to carry all of these elements. AI, by contrast, is merely a “body.” In our context, it has no biological connection to parents, and it has neither *okra* nor *sunsum*.

What I want to emphasize through this explanation is that in our context, you are a person. And because you are a person, even if you have access to tools that make thinking easier, you must not abandon your own cognitive agency. I always explain this in ways

that students can easily grasp from within their own context. That is how they are able to understand my point without contradiction. So, my concern about AI can be summarized as follows: we can use AI, and we cannot stop using it. But when it comes to educating students, we must ensure that AI does not replace their own cognitive capacities. This is because students are not merely humans; they are persons.

### **Pedagogical Practices for Moving Beyond Colonial Philosophy**

Participant 5: I have a question related to this idea of “aliveness.” It concerns philosophy as a discipline. Just as documentation can freeze something, disciplining a field—turning it into an academic discipline—can also force it into rigid frameworks. I would like to ask about the relationship between philosophy as an institutional discipline in the university and your own practice as a philosopher. To what extent do you think it is possible to teach this sense of “aliveness” within the university system? Or do you think it is necessary to reform the discipline from within?

Suzuki: Related to this, we are also interested in how you teach philosophy and how you communicate philosophy to a wider audience. In particular, we would like to ask about the concept of “intellectual virtue” that you dis-

cuss in one of your articles (Inusah 2023). Could you elaborate on how you put this idea of intellectual virtue into practice in your actual teaching?

Inusah: As I mentioned earlier, my focus has been on a kind of digression from Western philosophy—and by Western philosophy here, I mean colonial philosophy. The way colonialism manifests in Africa differs from region to region. When I was in South Africa, I realized that colonialism there is much more concrete and physical. In South Africa, you can see colonialism, so you feel compelled to confront it. You can see racism, so you want to confront it.

In Ghana, by contrast, colonialism is far more subtle. When South American colleagues speak of coloniality as distinct from colonialism, they often mean that colonialism has formally ended and that a new phase has begun. In Ghana, however, we understand our situation through what our first president, Kwame Nkrumah, called neocolonialism. We do not believe that colonialism actually ended; rather, it transformed itself. Nkrumah made this point in his book *Neo-Colonialism* (Nkrumah 1965).

From my context, because colonialism keeps changing, it can become difficult even to recognize that one has been conditioned within a colonial framework. It becomes hid-

den from us. For example, when you drive toward my university, at the entrance there is a figure holding a book and a light—an unmistakable symbol of colonial education. And yet this university was founded by a Pan-Africanist, Nkrumah. The fact that this contradiction is not immediately obvious to us reveals the depth of our conditioning. Until around the year 2000, Ghana even used a former colonial castle as the seat of the presidency. The horror of those castles—the death, the violence, everything that happened there—was quickly silenced. No one spoke about it.

My approach to teaching, then, is to foreground what I call sensitivity. By sensitivity, I mean awareness—awareness of how we, as colonized people, have been conditioned. How do I teach this? I teach it by emphasizing virtues—virtues of the mind. Colonial styles of knowledge, as I see them, are marked by epistemic vices, such as epistemic arrogance: the belief that “only our knowledge is valid,” that “ours is better than yours,” and that “others must conform to our structures.” To dissociate oneself from this requires intellectual virtues. You need humility to learn from others. You need courage because challenging conformity always comes at a cost. If there is an established order and you try to challenge it, there is a price to pay. That is why courage is essential. So, I teach

the virtues of courage, humility, and empathy. I teach the virtue of attentive listening and the virtue of careful observation.

I do this pedagogically, not through the formal curriculum. I infuse my teaching with practices that train students to listen and to see. Sometimes I take my students to Elmina Castle<sup>(4)</sup> and simply ask them to observe everything and tell me what they see. I want to train them to see. If you have been to Ghana, you will know that the structure of Elmina Castle and the surrounding roads already tell a story of oppression. There are about fifteen cannons facing the city and only two facing the sea. Why? I mean, the real enemy must come from the sea. So, you see the idea. These are things I want students to see silently and become sensitive to. This is how I try to teach decolonization—through sensitivity to context. This approach also informs my definition of African philosophy. I believe that anyone who theorizes through sensitivity to the African context is an African philosopher. That is my definition. And it is this definition that makes much of what I do as a teacher possible.

Participant 1: You seem to resist creating a simple “[African] us versus [Western] them” dichotomy.

Inusah: Yes. So how do I address that issue? For

me, the key lies in vocabulary. Our institutions are colonial institutions, and the vocabularies they use already emphasize dichotomies. As Paulo Freire argues in his critique of the “banking model” of education, the teacher stands as an authority, the student is treated as a passive recipient, and knowledge is deposited into them (Freire 1968=[1970] 2000).

Pedagogical practices grounded in sensitivity to context depart from this model. I allow students to look and to tell me what they have seen. Through collaboration and dialogue, we clarify our differences—but we do not seek to eliminate them. This is how I try to bridge gaps. Otherwise, education itself becomes oppressive. When teachers and students are isolated from one another, when teachers see students as empty vessels and students see teachers as unquestionable authorities, we end up reproducing the very colonial context we claim to be challenging.

### **The Problem of Capitalism in the University**

Molefe: Recently, something has left a particularly strong impression on me—an impression that has become increasingly clear the more I speak with undergraduate students. Many of them genuinely want to learn, and quite a number even aspire to enter education themselves, to take up positions as instructors. They come to the university with the assumption that a teacher is, fundamentally,

someone who teaches. At the same time, however, artificial intelligence is unmistakably transforming the landscape of their learning.

I raise this point because I want to bring a certain issue into sharper focus: namely, the extent to which universities and the production of knowledge are captured by capitalism. We are deeply implicated in this system. Our salaries, careers, publications, and evaluation regimes—all of these represent forms of investment we have made within it. If, taking this into account, we begin to question critically the everyday structures of the university itself, we can see that these structures were historically formed within a European context, subsequently transplanted into Africa and other regions, and continue to carry heavy colonial connotations.

The problem is that what is taught within these institutions says very little about our own lives and realities. This leads me to repeatedly ask: how might we free students from this structure? This question returns to me insistently because I am acutely aware of how the power of capital becomes invisible in discussions of this kind. We are, after all, sustained by this very system—our salaries, career paths, and publishing opportunities are embedded within it. For this reason, the question of capitalism cannot be easily disentangled or set aside. I wish to present it here as a

question that is directed, first and foremost, at myself.

Inusah: It is funny: when it rains and students cannot come to class, they are jubilant. If they hear that I am ill and unable to teach, they are less concerned about my condition than delighted that “the professor cannot come.” In that sense, I think students generally do not like coming to class.

Yet I am convinced of one thing: when students come to love the lecturer, they also come to love what is being taught. Through this approach, my classes are usually full, and sometimes, at the end of the semester, students even say that they do not want to leave. This is because we must allow them to enter into what is being taught.

At the recent Kyoto Conference, a professor—Yasuo Deguchi—spoke about the idea of “diving,” which I find to be an extremely important metaphor. Since coming to Japan, I have learned many significant things, and among them is this way of thinking about “diving” and “surfacing.”<sup>(5)</sup> Just yesterday, in conversation with Japanese researchers, someone put it this way<sup>(6)</sup>: one can look at the sea and theorize about it; one can touch the sea and theorize about it. But to truly know the sea—to understand the strength and direction of its currents—one must actually dive into it.

The same applies to students. When one “dives” into something, one concentrates because one enters it with the whole body. One does not merely listen with the mind but engages through the body. This is what I refer to as sensitivity. Students enter from within and dive for themselves. When this happens, the majority become genuinely interested. Of course, there will always be some who refuse to come. But overall, this approach leads many students to continue attending classes.

So, returning to the question of capital: when you speak of it, are you referring to the investments that we ourselves have made?

Molefe: No—not investments in that sense, but the institutional structure itself.

Inusah: I see. In 2024, I wrote a paper on the “entrepreneurial university” (Inusah 2024a), an emerging phenomenon that is currently permeating much of Africa. At one point, I went to see a vice-chancellor, who simply announced, “We are going to introduce the entrepreneurial university.” I felt compelled to ask in response: what exactly is an entrepreneurial university? And what happens to the core of the humanities? Courses in philosophy, history, and religion do not generate money for the university. So what, then, becomes of our position?

All of this, in fact, forms part of a broader

neoliberal framework that has come to be normalized in Africa. Neoliberalism rests on the assumption that the market should determine everything—including political power itself. As a result, enormous sums of money now flow into politics. To become a president, a senator, or a member of parliament requires vast financial resources. And once one has spent such sums to become president, one must, of course, recover that investment. Neoliberalism is also accompanied by ideas of privatization, deregulation, and the removal of regulatory power from the state. Government intervention in the running of institutions is expected to be minimal, if not entirely absent.

These conditions have given rise to particular institutional arrangements. In my country, we already have what is called “cost-sharing,” whereby education is no longer the sole responsibility of the state but a shared burden between parents and educational institutions. More recently, however, another model has emerged: “fee-paying.” This refers to specific programs designed exclusively for the wealthy, for the bourgeoisie—because they can afford them. To become a medical doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer, one must pay one’s own tuition in full. What this means, quite simply, is that if you are poor, you cannot become a medical doctor. Ultimately, then, this is a systemic problem.

To borrow Professor Deguchi's terms, it concerns overt actions, the bridges that connect institutions, and the core values that sustain them (see note (5)). The core value at work here is the neoliberal belief that the market should determine everything. This value is then embedded within the "bridges"—public institutions such as the executive and the judiciary. In our system, often described as a neo-presidential system, the president appoints nearly all positions, including the chief justice, who heads the judiciary. In other words, by becoming president through the power of the market, one gains not only political authority but also economic dominance and extensive appointive power.

Against this background, neoliberal power declares, "This is democracy." Very well—hold elections every four years, and funds will be released by the IMF. The money flows in, and that same money is then used again in politics. The cycle continues. This is why I believe we must question the values that sustain our democracy—the very core values themselves. At the same time, we must also question the "bridges," the institutional structures that uphold this form of democracy. If African nations can stand together, dive deeply, and then surface again, we may yet be able to find solutions to these problems.

## 4. The Philosophical Potential

### Taking Philosophy Beyond the University

Participant 6: At present, it has become increasingly difficult for us to step outside the university. The university itself is being marketized, to the point where the market increasingly determines what counts as "knowledge." This is not a problem limited to Africa; it is occurring everywhere.

Even so, I wonder whether philosophy may still retain the potential to move beyond the market. There is reliable knowledge embedded in cultural contexts that may appear valueless from a market perspective, yet such knowledge can speak deeply about humanity and social life. This is not merely an institutional issue but a question of a more fundamental vision. I also feel that those outside the university may be better positioned to articulate this problem.

If philosophy were practiced outside Western knowledge infrastructures and beyond the university, what forms might it take? I think this is related to the question of translation [between different knowledge systems] and the difference between anthropology and philosophy we talked about earlier. I see anthropology as a discipline of translation, but how do you understand translation in the case of philosophy?

Inusah: To be frank, I find it shameful that philosophy has become what it is today. In a sense, we have all become “small capitalists”—and I am no exception. If one looks back to the origins of philosophy in Greek history, philosophers did not practice philosophy for money. It was the Sophists who taught philosophy for money—those rhetoricians and educators said to take payment in exchange for teaching virtue. Yet today we have, in effect, become replicas of the Sophists. We do philosophy for money. Students who come to the university pay tuition fees. Under such conditions, “not teaching” is no longer a viable option, because a clear contractual relation exists between the student and the lecturer. Precisely for this reason, I have been trying to take philosophy beyond the university.

One concrete way of doing so is through projects that engage people outside the walls of the university. In such contexts, I do not position myself as the one who teaches; rather, I find that they teach me many things. I sit together with elders and with young people, and we discuss proverbs. This work is deeply connected to the question of translation you raised.

One persistent problem I have encountered in research projects shaped by Western perspectives is the tendency to extract data from local contexts and then fit it into Western the-

oretical frameworks, thereby hierarchizing what is found. For example, in our context, while there are biological differences between men and women, there is no strict dichotomy in social roles; roles are, in principle, complementary. Yet when this is re-read through a European lens, it is reorganized into a schematic narrative—“the man is the head of the household and owns property; the woman belongs inside the home,” and so on. Such reinterpretations continue to this day.

Indeed, I repeatedly tell a doctoral student whom I supervise, “The assumptions you are bringing in are not the ideas that sustained our communities in the precolonial era.” She is well versed in global debates concerning women’s oppression in the modern world, yet she attempts to present these debates as “African feminist philosophy” without sufficient attention to the ontological ground of the community she claims to speak from. I therefore ask her, “Which African feminist philosophy, precisely, do you mean?” Over time, she has begun to recognize that the ontology whose presuppositions she was criticizing does not necessarily hold in every context. A friend who studied women’s roles in India told me something similar: as she went deeper into the ontology of a particular community, she realized that care for women was already embedded within the society. It was not articulated loudly in the terms she expected,

but it existed—embedded differently and operating through another grammar of social life.

This is why one of my practices today is the following: when someone asks me, for instance, “What is the Akan perspective on AI?” I return first to Akan ontology and explain from there what AI means for us. This helps avoid the habit of taking a concept and forcing it directly into a Western frame.

Let me give another example. Recently in Germany, I participated in a discussion on “green energy.” Europe speaks of a “clean energy transition”: no fossil fuels, batteries instead. But where do the resources for those batteries come from? The answer is Congo in Africa—where forests, vegetation, and land are destroyed, and where human exploitation also occurs: people are made to work twenty-four hours for mere pennies. Yet this is still called an “energy transition.” The question, then, is: whose context does this transition serve? It is framed in a European context—and once again we encounter the dichotomy of “us versus them.”

One way to address these problems is to cultivate an empathic orientation toward the ontology of those whom one studies and to involve them actively in the research process. Furthermore, once research has been published, it should be returned to the people from whom it emerged. They should be able

to read it, to assess it, and to point out misrepresentations where they exist. Too often, we extract data, complete the project, and never return to those who helped us. In European academic language, research collaborators are often called “informants,” but this term is itself derogatory. They are not merely providers of information; they are experts—because they know what we do not. Research, therefore, cannot be a one-way process. It must be grounded in mutual respect, involving the sharing of both the process and the products of research.

### **The Dialogical Possibilities Between the “South” and the “East”**

Nishio: We have already entered our final topic: the future role of philosophy. You practice a philosophy that is deeply situated in the Akan—and more broadly, Ghanaian—context, while at the same time attempting to build bridges to different countries and historical contexts, such as Japan and Germany. I would like to ask how you envision connecting your philosophy with new collectives that are, in a sense, outside your usual context—for example, Japanese scholars and other emerging audiences. Yesterday, you mentioned that you were inspired by Professor Yasuo Deguchi’s talk. We find ourselves similarly situated in a moment marked by intensifying neoliberalization and privatiza-

tion, where more and more aspects of life are reduced to money. Against this background, if you have thoughts on future prospects—especially concerning gathering together, forming networks, and cultivating collectivity—please share them with us.

Inusah: To be honest, I am quite optimistic. The emancipatory struggles that Africans have undertaken in the name of decoloniality have already begun to bear fruit. One reason is that these efforts have enabled us to connect with other communities beyond Africa. Today, the emergence of multiple African Studies departments in Europe and Asia is particularly striking; it signals that these conversations are no longer confined within Africa.

As I was also saying over dinner yesterday, I believe it is important that we, as African scholars, begin to look toward the East. In decolonial practice, we have often written with Western readers in mind—effectively looking up toward the North. Yet we also need to look toward the East, because we share many things in common.

Through decolonial efforts, many Africans have come to live with a form of double consciousness. In processes of self-discovery, when one recognizes contradictions in what one has inherited from the West, one oscillates between repulsion and acceptance. This movement back and forth—between Western

ideas and African ideas—has shaped how African philosophy itself has been perceived. For a long time, African philosophy was treated as little more than a reaction to Western racist ideas and remarks directed at us.

Yet in relation to the East, I find a certain sense of familiarity—precisely because the differences do not feel as vast. Here lies the possibility that our philosophies can resonate with one another. Reflecting on what I have heard and read, and on the Kyoto Conference in particular, I have strongly felt that we have a great deal in common. This suggests that meaningful collaboration could allow us to make important strides. It would also help us avoid falling into mistaken binaries or false oppositions.

At present, the East looks to the West, and Africa also looks to the West, as if that were the only path. For Africa, the structure becomes “us and the West”; for the East, “the East and the West.” But what about the South and the East? There is room for very lively and stimulating conversations there—conversations that could improve our institutions and policy directions, and even enrich our respective ontologies.

Molefe: Yes—frankly, I have been in academia for several years now, and my attention has been heavily oriented toward the West. Yet coming here, listening carefully—especially

to the keynote address at the Kyoto Conference—I found many ideas that I could genuinely relate to. I therefore believe that meaningful dialogues can take place between our other traditions: we can learn from one another, collaborate, and work toward creating a different world for the next generation of students and intellectuals. For me, simply being here has been an event full of promise. I am thinking of carefully letting go of the West (laughter). I have invested a great deal of effort there. Now I want to see what we might do together with brothers and sisters from this part of the world. I believe there is much we can do. I feel deeply inspired.

Inusah: Finally, I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to Professor Motoji Matsuda, Professor Itaru Ohta, and everyone involved in the African Potential Project. Interestingly, at the final stage of the project I contributed to the writing, and I happened to be the youngest among the colleagues who contributed to the final volume. It has been a source of pride that my work was translated into Japanese. I keep the two books—an English version and a Japanese version—on my shelf. I never imagined that this would become the beginning of my relationship with Eastern philosophy; I thought it would be an outro, a conclusion. But now I see it differently. I would also like to thank

the organizers for today’s arrangements—for taking care of so many things and inviting me here. I am truly grateful.

## Endnotes

- (1) On the discrimination against Africans articulated by philosophers from Hume through Kant, see More (1996). On Husserl’s remark that “even Papuans are not beasts but human beings,” see Moran (2011).
- (2) “Warranted assertibility” is a concept discussed by John Dewey in relation to the nature of knowledge. Dewey held that knowledge cannot be absolute and immutable but should be understood as warranted belief—belief that has been tested through inquiry. Thus, insofar as any claim remains open to possible refutation, it cannot be regarded as an absolute and unchanging truth; nevertheless, it can be clearly articulated as a conclusion warranted through inquiry (Dewey 1941).
- (3) The notion of *ubuntu* referred to here is widely known as an indigenous African conception of social personhood and ethics, and it was repeatedly discussed at the Kyoto Conference. Molefe, a philosopher who specializes in *ubuntu*, responded to questions from the floor at this roundtable by explaining it as follows. *ubuntu* is an ethical framework grounded in: (1) the cultivation of a cognitive and moral disposition that recog-

nizes the intrinsic value of the very existence of others; (2) the acknowledgment that all human beings possess both the potential to become their best selves and the capacity to be kind to others; and (3) an understanding that humanity is essentially shared and comes into being only through relations with others and through cultural and social infrastructures. One cannot be human in isolation; one becomes human within infrastructures of language, the body, culture, and care.

- (4) Elmina Castle is located near Cape Coast on the southern coast of Ghana and, after its construction in 1482, served for nearly four centuries as a major hub of the transatlantic slave trade.
- (5) A model of the thought process presented at the Kyoto Conference. In the concept paper prepared for discussion, three analytically distinct levels were identified: the level of explicit practical action; the core level of values and worldviews that implicitly underpin such action; and the level of mediations—such as institutions—that connect the two. Taking the initials of these three levels, the model was termed the ABC model. To respond to social problems manifested at the level of action, a reciprocal movement of thought was proposed: “diving” into the mediating and core levels to identify root causes and then “surfacing” by discovering alternative values and reflecting them back into the

levels of mediation and action (Kyoto Institute of Philosophy 2025: 13–5).

- (6) On the evening prior to this roundtable, Inusah participated in a gathering with Japanese scholars, including the two moderators.

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