Sophie Olúwolé of Nigeria 1935–2018

Müller, L.; Waithe, M.; Dykeman, T.

Citation

Müller, L. (2023). Sophie Olúwolé of Nigeria 1935–2018. In M. Waithe & T. Dykeman (Eds.), *Women in the History of Philosophy and Sciences*. Cham: Springer. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3718338

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 22

Sophie Olúwolé
of Nigeria
1935–2018

Louise Müller

Abstract Sophie Bósèdé Olayemi Olúwolé was a professor of philosophy at the University of Lagos, and a prolific author of the history of African Philosophy, particularly, that of the Yoruba. She was a formidable defender of the view that indigenous oral traditions legitimately are considered philosophy. Olúwolé was a vocal critic of professional philosophers who were to claim that only written materials can be evidence of philosophical reasoning. She explored the hypocrisy of implicitly racist claims that effectively denied that those who do not write cannot think abstractly. She is best known in the west for comparing the philosophical work of two philosophers who were contemporaries: the Greek, Socrates and the Yoruba, Òrúnmìlà. In this chapter I explore the above topics addressed by Olúwolé, her comparative philosophical work, as well as her contribution to African feminist philosophy and to addressing the social and political barriers to contemporary African women's issues. For the latter, she urges a return to traditional Yoruban philosophy.

L. Müller (✉)
Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands
e-mail: l.f.muller@hum.leidenuniv.nl

22.1   Biography

Sophie Bósèdé Olayemi Olúwolé was born in 1935 in the city of Igbara-Oke in the Ondo state of southwestern Nigeria. She was the last-born and, unlike the other children, she was blessed with two Yoruba names (Bósèdé means 'born on Sunday', Olayemi means 'I feel comfortable with dignity'). Although ethnically she and her parents belonged to the Edo, Sophie's maternal grandmother was a Yoruba and Sophie grew up in a Yoruba dominated state. It is, therefore, not surprising that Sophie became interested in Yoruba oral tradition at an early age. Her parents, who were Anglican Christians, were not pleased with her interest in this African traditional culture and they forbade their four children to attend Yoruba ceremonies. Sophie was encouraged to focus on Christianity and around the age of eight she was baptized as 'Sofia'; an ancient Greek word that translates to being 'clever, skillful, intelligent, wise'. Sophie's local school headmaster, who was a family friend, chose this name for her, because of Sophie's high intelligence (Beier & Olúwolé, 2001, pp. 360–361).

After she attended St. Paul's Anglican Primary School at Igbara-Oke, Sophie proceeded to the Anglican Girls modern school at Ile-Ife in 1951. In the period 1953–1954, she went to the British oriented Women Training College in Ilesha and became a qualified teacher. Until 1963 she taught in Nigeria, first in Ogotun and later in Ibadan (Beier & Olúwolé, 2001). Shortly after Sophie got married, she moved to Moscow where her husband was posted as a United Nations' Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization scholar. In Moscow, she joined her husband in learning the Russian language in preparation for studying Economics. Unlike Sophie, her husband experienced great difficulties with learning Russian, which is why the couple emigrated from Russia to Germany.

In the German city of Cologne Sophie had to start another preparatory year, this time learning German. She was a good student and as a consequence at the end of the year, she was offered a full scholarship in Philology. Despite that, she emigrated with her husband to the United States. After some time in the USA, however, she decided to separate from her husband, among other reasons, because he had thwarted her further studies. She moved back to Nigeria to continue studying at the University of Lagos and enrolled in an Education program studying English. After switching to Philosophy, which well suited her critical and reflective nature, she had her first degree in this field of study in 1967. She then taught at a secondary school in Odo State for two years before returning to the University of Lagos to pursue her postgraduate studies (Godia, 2007).

Only when choosing a topic for her master dissertation, was Olúwolé introduced to African Philosophy. At the time African Philosophy was not well developed as an academic discipline, which is why nobody could supervise her in this field. Sophie, therefore, changed her field of study from African Philosophy to the Philosophy of Language. In 1984 she obtained a Ph.D. in Metaethics in Western Philosophy and became one of the first and certainly the first female Ph.D. in Philosophy awarded by a Nigerian University.

From then on, she was finally free to write and research on her field of interest in African Philosophy, which was the Ifá corpus in Yoruba culture and philosophy. Because the verses in the Ifá corpus were complex to understand, she took classes to improve her understanding of the Yoruba language. After that, she became a rising star in African Philosophy. Between 1989 and 1996, she wrote five books in this field of which the most noteworthy are *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God Head* (1992), *Women in Yoruba Traditional Thought* (1993) and *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (1997) (Beier & Olúwolé, 2001). In 2014 she wrote *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*; a book that became of great significance for the field of African and Intercultural Philosophy. For many years, Sophie Olúwolé headed the Department of Philosophy at the University of Lagos and was the chairman of the Nigerian Society for Philosophy. In 2000 after her retirement, she fully devoted herself to her self-founded Center of African Culture and Development (CEFACAD) which mainly focuses on the development of women in Africa (Müller, 2009).

To sum up, Olúwolé did not only stand up for the study of African oral tradition as philosophy and the development of African and Intercultural Philosophy, but she also contributed significantly to the progress and development of women in Africa by her studies of Yoruba culture, and her writings and many public performances. Sophie Olúwolé was an active public philosopher with an impressive academic record, who received many awards and honors from institutions in Africa and beyond. She gave birth to eight children from two husbands. She died at 83 and went down in history as the *Mamalawo* or philosophical sage/priestess of classical Yoruba Philosophy.

22.2   Methodology of Classical African Philosophy

22.2.1   Critiquing the Oral Tradition

In 1977, the Beniner philosopher Paulin Hountondji wrote *Sur la "Philosopie Africaine": Critique de l'Ethnophilosophie.* In 1983, Henri Evans translated Hountondji's book as *African 'Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. In this book, Hountondji defined African Philosophy as 'a set of texts, specifically the set of texts *written* by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves'. By explicitly mentioning that texts could only be part of African Philosophy if they were *written* by Africans, Hountondji excluded oral traditions from the field of African Philosophy. In 'How African is Philosophy in Africa?', a relatively recent article in the journal *Filosofia Theoretica,* which was dedicated to the late Sophie Olúwolé, Hountondji reformulated his definition of African Philosophy. He mentioned that by 'African Philosophy' I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts *produced* by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves (Hountondji, 2018, p. 12). With this reformulation of African Philosophy, Hountondji now acknowledges that so-called 'oral texts', the currently written, previously orally transmitted oral traditions are part and parcel

of African Philosophy. As a protagonist of Yoruba oral texts, such as the Ifá corpus, Sophie Olúwolé has played a major role in the recognition by (African) Philosophers, including Hountondji, of African oral traditions as a source of classical African Philosophy.

22.2.2 The Ifá Tradition

Olúwolé disputed the idea that there is one universal logic, which is the only method to practice philosophy, and that all texts with an underlying different type of logic are irrational and thus unphilosophical. She pleaded for the recognition of an African logic in oral traditions, which qualify these traditions as philosophy. In her book *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà*, she explains that the Ifá corpus is an oral traditional Yoruba text which is characterized by a different philosophical methodology than the one used by Western philosophers and most modern African philosophers. She makes the point that as an oral text and as a divination system, the Ifá corpus is rational and logical. In her opinion, the corpus was created by the Yoruba sage philosopher Òrúnmìlà and his disciples who lived in the Yoruba city of Ile-Ife around 500 BCE. Sophie thus opposes the idea that Western logic is universal and proposes that the binary complementarity behind the Ifá corpus should be acknowledged as a specific African logic that qualifies Ifá as being part of indigenous, pre-colonial or what Olúwolé calls 'classical African Philosophy'.

By quoting the Yoruba proverb *Láko lábo ni Olórun dá gbogbo nnkan* (every natural existence occurs in male–female antithesis), Sophie explains that Ifá follows a logical system, both mathematical and textual, that centralizes the binary but complementary nature of masculine and feminine energies in both the universe and the human consciousness (*àṣẹ*). In her view, binary complementary logic is to be found in the working of the cosmos, in the natural mechanism that causes movement, sustains and transforms. She explained that African Philosophy differs from the Western philosophical logical system, which is based on a binary opposition between paired entities, such as man versus woman, dark versus light. Yoruba logic is, instead, based on the idea that there is not an opposing but a complementary duality between entities.

In Olúwolé's view, the entities man and woman, for instance, are not opposed to one another and cannot exist without each other. A man is no man without a woman and vice versa. Men and women represent different but complementary aspects of reality, of the totality of consciousness. This implies that consciousness consists of polar, separate entities that are nevertheless interconnected. Olúwolé calls the Yoruba logic an "and/or logic", because polar entities such as a valley and a hill, what we may call "heads or tails" of a coin, are separate but at the same time complementary to one another. They are independent (or/or) and yet together they are part of the same cosmic source.

In comparison to Yoruba Ifá studies by social anthropologists, historians and literary scholars, Sophie Olúwolé most clearly articulated the rationality of the

Ifá geomantic system and corpus. Yoruba oral historian Samuel Johnson, the American anthropologist William Bascom and Yoruba language and literature professor Wándé Abímbọ́lá instead departed from the mythical descriptions of the Yoruba people in their oral tradition, which did not become oral history before the 1890s. In their point of view, Òrúnmìlà might have existed as a semi historical figure and philosopher around 450 BCE but until Johnson's ' *A History of the Yoruba* (1897) there was no human migration history of him and his disciples. Due to the emphasis of the semi-historical nature of Òrúnmìlà in the Ifá corpus, it not surprising that this group of scholars perceived this figure as a primal *orisha*, a Yoruba ancestor or a semi -historical figure rather than a real human being as Olúwolé did. As a compromise between scholars of different fields one could perhaps best speak of Òrúnmìlà as a semi-historical figure, comparable to Socrates, Jesus and Mohammed. None of these figures left us any self-written texts and so we only know of their existence by others.

Our knowledge of Òrúnmìlà came to us because it was passed down from generation to generation by the Yoruba traditional priests, who were trained for years to learn the verses of the Ifá corpus by heart. Some of these verses mention that Òrúnmìlà had wives and that he came from Ile Ife, whereas other says that he received his knowledge from the Yoruba god *Oduduwa*. The Ifá corpus did not become an oral text before the nineteenth century. Socrates is known to us because of the written accounts of Plato, Aristophanes and Xenophon that were first orally transmitted and only published around thirty years after Socrates' death. Our knowledge of Jesus and Mohammed came to us via the Bible and the Qur'an respectively. None of these three left us any self-written texts and so we only know of their existence through others. One could say that by comparing Socrates and Òrúnmìlà and describing them as both philosophers and patron saints, Olúwolé has either deified Socrates or has secularised Òrúnmìlà; one way or another she has smuggled religion into the philosophical discipline or contemporary Western philosophers have rustled religion out of ancient Greek philosophy.

Sophie Olúwolé emphasizes the rationality of the Ifá corpus by focusing on its corresponding paired oral verses (*odu méjìs*). She explained that the sixteen *odu méjìs* which make up the primal *méjìs* of the Ifá divination system are specular in form and represent contrary energies. The seeming chaos of the Ifá texts, consisting of poems, prose, chant, litany and song, is structured according to the same binary complementary logic. In each *odu méjì* masculine and feminine expressions of reality are making up the totality of the story. It is, therefore, up to the listener, the client of the Ifá diviner, to decide what to take away from the oral texts in the Ifá literary corpus. The explanation of the one listener may be contrary to that of the other, since reality as a whole consists of contrary but complementary forces, encompassing both the order and chaos of the universe. The experience of Ifá, which is the repository of Yoruba traditional wisdom, differs from person to person depending on where they stand in their path of life and where they are going. Due to its different forms of wisdom, which assemble various aspects of the human experience, Ifá and the interpreter or diviner can help people to guide them in life and to develop a good character (*iwa*) (Olúwolé, 1997a, 2014).

Olúwolé concentrated so much on the rationality of Ifá as a geomantic system and a literary corpus because she aimed to correct the assumptions that underpinned the colonial educational system and those of Western philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, George Friedrich Hegel and David Hume. In their point of view, Africans were irrational beings, whose belief was no more than superstition, and who were unable to think let alone to philosophize. For that reason, these Westerners concluded that African Philosophy could not have existed before the colonial period or beyond. These ideas also resonated in the twentieth-century philosophy of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in *La Mentalité Primitive* (1922), who made a distinction between the prelogical and mythical Africans versus the civilized and logical Westerners. Such views also appeared in the work of social anthropologist Edward Evans Pritchard, who categorized anthropology under the humanities and who copied the same *mythos* versus *logos* dichotomy in his book *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965).

Olúwolé went against the dismissal by Western and African philosophers and social anthropologists of oral traditions as a source of philosophy. Until the end of her life, she persisted in her argument that classical African Philosophy exists and that it has a specific logic. She was thus of the opinion that the method of practicing philosophy was particular: not universal but cultural. In Olúwolé's view, in all cultures, there have always been philosophers or philosophical sages that reflect upon life and ask philosophical questions about what is good and evil (ethics), about life after death (metaphysics) or about how social and political organizations ideally look like (Social and Political Philosophy). She rejected the idea of a pre-logical phase in the thinking of any culture and thought that the Yoruba philosophical sage *Òrúnmìlà*, was as logical in his thinking as Socrates, who was his contemporary.

Nevertheless, Sophie Olúwolé thought that the philosophical methodology of these philosophers did not need to be the same for both approaches to qualify as philosophy. And so where Socrates developed the method of the interrogation by using the dialogue to clarify philosophical concepts, *Òrúnmìlà* developed an original dialectic to help his disciples to find their path in life (Olúwolé, 2014).

Olúwolé also followed her Kenyan colleague Henry Odera Oruka (1990) in reckoning with the belief of African Philosophers that there was no classical African Philosophy. Their belief is that Africans before the colonial period did not develop any individual thinking. Like Oruka, Olúwolé also criticized the belief of Westerners who were of the opinion that Africans were either superstitious or adherents of a 'primitive' religion. Like Oruka and the Ghanaian Akan philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1997), Olúwolé thought that individual philosophical sages had always existed in African societies. These philosophers argued that even though African cultural groups share a group philosophy, such as the one of the Akan, the Yoruba or the Bantu people, this philosophy originates from the mind of individual philosophers. The fact that their thoughts are shared collectively through proverbs, aphorisms and maxims, does not make them less philosophical. For these reasons, Olúwolé recognized *Òrúnmìlà,* who in one of the *odus* in the Ifá corpus

is described as a philosophical sage who came from Ile-Ife and together with his sixteen disciples were the source of Yoruba philosophy.

Even though Olúwolé did not object to classifying the Ifá corpus as the library of classical Yoruba philosophy, she did not regard herself as a so-called ethno-philosopher, which are those African philosophers who study the philosophical thoughts of a specific cultural group. Examples of African ethnophilosophers are, as the founding father, Placide Tempels who wrote about the Bantu people (1952 [Orig.1946, Transl. Collin King]), Alexis Kagame who focused on the people of Rwanda (1956), Makarakiza on Barundi (1959), Mudasiru and Oshodi on the Yoruba (2021), de Souza on the Fon of Dahomey (1975) and Sylla on the Wolof in Senegal (1978).

Olúwolé's vision of African Philosophy was close to that of Henry Odera Oruka, who had a deep knowledge of the Luo traditions of Kenya. Oruka iden-tified four orientations in African Philosophy, which were ethnophilosophy (as mentioned), national-ideological philosophy (consisting of the political thought of African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, L.S. Senghor, Sekou Toure, and Kenneth Kaunda), professional philosophy (as mentioned) and philosophical sagacity (Oruka, 1981). Oruka, who was the founding father of phil-osophical sagacity in African Philosophy, and Olúwolé shared the opinion that pre-colonial African Philosophy in oral traditions had emerged from the brain of individual African Philosophers, the so-called philosophical sages.

Nevertheless, Olúwolé differs in opinion on the nature of Òrúnmìlà. Where Oruka classified him as the first traditional priest or *babalawo*, which, according to Oruka, are folk sages, Olúwolé believed that Òrúnmìlà and his disciples were not folk sages but philosophical sages or patron saints. She thought that these sages or saints were philosophical because the Ifá geomantic divination system and liter-ary corpus consisted of rational structures even though, within those structures, Ifá was also irrational, emotional and associative. She thus plied a broader definition of philosophy than that of 'systematical theoretical reflective thinking' most com-mon in Western philosophy and, therefore, believed in the existence of a specific classical African Philosophy based on the ideas of individual African philosophers. Although we can probably say that Olúwolé's project best fits into Oruka's ori-entation of philosophical sagacity, she did not use this terminology. Instead, she added another one possibly because, unlike Oruka, she mainly focused on sage philosophy in orally-transmitted texts and did not conduct empirical research on the ideas of living philosophical sages in African societies.

22.3   Critical Traditionalists

Olúwolé identified another trend in African Philosophy, that of the so-called 'crit-ical traditionalists' to which she added herself (Olúwolé, 2014). Like other tradi-tionalists, but in contrast to the universalists, Olúwolé believed that writing cannot be a precondition for philosophy because philosophical ideas can be preserved and

conveyed through *mnemonic* devices such as proverbs, maxims, myths and songs (Adegbindin, 2010). Olúwolé was critically analytical because, unlike other traditionalists, she regarded Ifá as a human institution founded by the sage philosopher Òrúnmìlà rather than by an eponymous god. In her view, Ifá is not the word of a god but of a philosopher.

In line with the traditionalists, Olúwolé critically searched for philosophical ideas in African oral traditions, such as witchcraft, reincarnation and destiny, without glorifying them. She, therefore, distinguished herself from African literary theory philosophers of the *Négritude* movement, such as Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor. Olúwolé rejected *Négritude* philosophy, which emerged out of a reaction against Western colonialism, based on its' essentialization of the African nature and the celebration of their alleged emotionality and irrationality. She recognized the irrational aspects of the Ifá corpus but stressed that classical African Philosophy was both rational and irrational. She recognized the dual nature of African Philosophy in oral traditions; that of a rational geomantic system and textual structure and a multi-interpretable literary content (Olúwolé, 2014).

Olúwolé's categorisation of African oral traditions as philosophy implies that the ability to read and write is not a necessary condition for being a philosopher. In *Philosophy and oral tradition* (1997a, 1997b, 1997c) Olúwolé points out that teaching someone how to read and write does not necessarily make him or her a better thinker. These are techniques that can be helpful to learn new things but that cannot turn a fool into a genius. On the contrary, some thinkers express ingenuity in the oral form, such as Òrúnmìlà and his sixteen disciples, whereas they have never learned how to read and write. In Olúwolé's point of view, African oral cultures have brought forth brilliant, self-reflective philosophers and the oral traditions in these cultures are thus not inferior to written ones. Olúwolé, therefore, rejected the opinions of Kwasi Wiredu and Peter Bodunrin. These philosophers explained that African Philosophy with its methodology and linkage to oral traditions would only function as an evolutionary stage in the emergence of a written— and, therefore, superior and professional—African Philosophy based on western subject matter, logic and systematic reflective thought. (Ikuenobe, 1997; Olúwolé, 1997c).

Olúwolé argued against the Eurocentric notion that logical and thus philosophical explanations depend on writing as, for instance, expressed by Popper (1992) and the historian and literary theorist Ong (1986). Such views also resonate in the thinking of African philosophers Bodunrin (1966), Wiredu (1996) and Hountondji (1996). She also spoke out against the notion by Western philosophers that colonial Christian education had improved the lives of Yoruba women and freed them from the so-called misogyny in African Indigenous Religion, philosophy and culture.

22.4   Olúwolé's Philosophy of Gender

In her book *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà* (2014), Olúwolé argues that the position of women in ancient Ile-Ife was relatively good compared to that of those in ancient Greece. Whereas in the city of Ile-Ife around 500 BC men and women had equal rights as members of society, in Socrates' Greece only rich men counted as citizens. This type of gender bias was absent from the ancient Yoruba society (Olúwolé, 2014). Olúwolé stressed that, nevertheless, there is no reason to glorify the position of African women in their pre-colonial societies. Real historical figures, such as the Asante queen mother Yaa Asantewaa who successfully fought a war against the British and the wise Ethiopian Queen of Sheba were exceptionally powerful. Nevertheless, Olúwolé's research on gender relations in the Yoruba oral tradition reveals that there has been no equivalent to the Greek myth of Pandora's box designating a woman as the cause of all evil in the world. Ancient Yoruba myths and proverbs, including those in the Ifá corpus, do not reason from the existence of permanent qualities of good or evil, which implies that women are not conceptualised as wrongdoers (Olúwolé, 2014). Instead, the Yoruba oral tradition describes the complementary but equal nature of women and the necessity of their tasks. In the Ifá verses, Olúwolé finds evidence that the public tasks carried out by women are highly appreciated in the Yoruba society, which cannot do without women.

To support her statement, she offers a proverb in an Ifá verse (Olúwolé, 1997b, p. 110):

'Da gike, da gike	Cutting alone, cutting alone,
Aakekanko le e da gike	The axe cannot cut alone,
Da' gi la, Da' gi la	Splitting alone, Splitting alone;
Eelekan o le ledagi la;	The wedge cannot split alone;
B'o s'erelu	without a female member (*erelu*),
Osugbo o le e da awo se'	the cult of Osugbo cannot operate

The Osugbo was a society that functioned as the legal arm of government in Yorubaland.

In Sophie's point of view, women in pre-colonial Yoruba culture were to some extent proverbialy oppressed by men, but at the time most women were economically independent and there were no suppressed gender roles. Women occupied titled positions as queen mothers or traditional priestesses, played significant intermediary roles in major trade centres, and accumulated wealth through farming, cloth production and specialized crafts.

In the colonial period, the importance of the mentioned title positions declined by the shift to cash crop production, albeit women continued to flourish in the market place. Olúwolé thought that the colonial period worsened the position of women in Yoruba society as gender hierarchies became more articulated and the Western philosophy of oppositional dualism between the sexes won over that of

Yoruba binary complementary logic (Olúwolé, 2000). Olúwolé shared her point of view with many so-called third-wave feminist scholars in Africa, such as Gwendolyn Mikell, Morolake Omonubi-Mcdonnell, Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. The African scholars Ogundipe, Salo Mama and McFadden, were opiniated differently (Du Toit & Coetzee, 2017).

Historically, some additional remarks are necessary to contextualise Olúwolé's ideas. On the one hand, she rightly remarked that in pre-colonial Yoruba society traditional female titleholders, such as queen mothers and traditional priestesses, were more powerful than in colonial times and that generally relations between men and women were more equal. The marginalisation of women in colonial Nigeria was the direct result of British colonial politics of indirect rule according to which only men were recognised in high ranked title holder functions, such as chiefs and priests. The situation is, nevertheless, more complicated than Olúwolé makes it appear because—as historians such as Cooper (2020) have demonstrated—colonial education also gave some women access to new means of gaining an income and a *persona,* mostly in the field of health care and education.

22.5   Olúwolé's African Political Philosophy

In addition to her study of the position of women in oral tradition-based classical African philosophic thought in ancient Yorubaland and in the Ifá literary corpus, Olúwolé was also a political philosopher. She focused on both traditional and modern African politics. Her academic contributions on socio-political philosophy include Culture, Nationalism and Philosophy (1997a, 1997b, 1997c), *The Cultural Enslavement of the African Mind* (2001) and *The Centrality of Culture to Economic and Social Development* (2008). In her discussion of the topic of democracy and human rights, she moves further away from Oruka's four trends in African Philosophy and centralises a hermeneutic orientation. She makes the point that the ancient Yoruba society was ruled by democratic monarchs and that a gender-balanced system of political checks and balances was in place to control the democratically chosen rulers (*oba*). She then argues that modern African politicians should fall back on traditional Yoruba politics to learn from it and to create a modern Yoruba democracy that is based on the indigenous African rather than the Western political system and tradition (Olúwolé, 1996). (For historians, the question to what extent pre-colonial West African societies were democratic is part of an ongoing debate). Among the Asante people in Ghana, one can say that the pre-colonial political system was partly democratic, in terms of the election process of the new rulers and the committee of elders, but equal to the Yoruba people it was a society mainly ruled by royals of upper-class families and their appointment is by no means comparable with the election of politicians in modern political democratic systems (Müller, 2010, 2013).

22.5.1   Intercultural Philosophy

In the mentioned work *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà*, Olúwolé compares the two to clarify that both were philosophers and that Òrúnmìlà was falsely translated as 'god of wisdom' rather than a philosophical sage who received the 'wisdom of god'. She stresses that Òrúnmìlà was once a real human being who lived in Ile-Ife at the same time as Socrates in around 500 BCE. After his death, Òrúnmìlà became an ancestral spirit and was deified, thereby attaining the same status as a Christian Saint. In search of an answer to the question of why Socrates became very well-known in Greek philosophy and Òrúnmìlà remained invisible in African Philosophy, she concludes that with the deification of Òrúnmìlà, the sage and his Ifá corpus were relegated to the academic fields of religious studies and social anthropology.

In Olúwolé's view, scholars in this field have deliberately misinterpreted the nature of Òrúnmìlà as they thought that Africans could not be rational. They were irrational beings and so they couldn't possibly have known a tradition of philosophical sages that created wisdom literature. By demonstrating that Òrúnmìlà and Socrates have a lot in common, she makes the point that there is as much reason to qualify Socrates as a philosopher as there is to do so for Òrúnmìlà. Both were oral philosophers and their contributions were written down only after their death. Neither pretended to have absolute knowledge and were convinced that they proclaimed wisdom to guide others to know themselves (in Greek *gnōthi seauton,* in Yoruba *mọ ara rẹ*). Both ancient philosophers believed in reincarnation. But there where Socrates believed in a dualism between the spiritual and the material, Òrúnmìlà saw them as one and, therefore, the union between the living and the dead was felt quite strongly in ancient Yorubaland. Above all Olúwolé shows that both philosophers founded schools for the study of critical philosophy and that Western scholars were thus wrong to assume that Africans were incapable of philosophizing until they became educated by European Christian missionaries who came to Africa to religiously re-program and colonize the minds of Africans (Olúwolé, 2014).

22.5.2   Belief in Witchcraft

In her book *Witchcraft, reincarnation and the God-Head* (1992) in articles and public talks, Olúwolé wrote or said that for many Africans, spirits are as real as tables and chairs, people and places. For the Yoruba and other Africans, witches are believed to be people whose character is so strong that they can use their spiritual power to influence others. For many people, witches are thus real people who control and manipulate real cosmic powers. What does it mean when scientists say that these powers do not exist? Olúwolé asks herself. Scientists say that witchcraft is unreal because it is not observable with the naked eye. Nobody

has ever seen a witch put a spell on a person causing him or her to die or those other things witches are accused of doing. There is thus no empirical justification of witchcraft. Scientists say that those who believe in witchcraft are incapable of separating the physical from the metaphysical, to distinguish the objects of the ordinary world of experience from those in the world of thought. They have long called Africans primitive people because of their belief in the reality of witchcraft. Olúwolé agrees with these scientists that one cannot find empirical evidence for the existence of witches. Nevertheless, she disagrees with their point of view that this means that witches are unreal. She finds this a narrow interpretation of reality and argues that witchcraft should merely be perceived as a phenomenon that is not yet understood. Olúwolé wrote:

> …Just as it is fraudulent to assert the existence of a power whose nature we know nothing about, so is it equally fraudulent to deny the occurrence of an experience just because we do not yet understand it. (Olúwolé, 1978, p. 16)

Olúwolé argued that what is not yet understood is different from what is unknowable. In her opinion, witchcraft is a phenomenon that is not 'beyond explanation' but that is 'not yet explained' (Olúwolé, 1978).

22.6 Conclusion: Olúwolé and the Future of an Oral Tradition and Gender Conscious African Philosophy

Sophie Olúwolé devoted her academic life to address two issues in African Philosophy: the near absence of an oral tradition based or classical African Philosophy—a philosophy with a particular logic—and the marginalisation of women and women's issues in African Philosophy. She put the figure of Òrúnmìlà, who first lead the priesthood of Ifá, on the map as a philosophical sage and a patron saint of philosophers, comparable to his contemporary, the Greek philosopher Socrates. She believed that Òrúnmìlà and Socrates had a lot in common and that on equal grounds both figures can be regarded as founding fathers in Ancient Philosophy. Olúwolé owed the unfamiliarity of Òrúnmìlà in the philosophical discipline (compared to Socrates) to the tendency of Western scholars to portray Òrúnmìlà as a god of wisdom rather than as a human being who was the first to receive the wisdom of Ifá geomancy from a Yoruba god.

She opposed the presumption of non-existence of pre-colonial African philosophy (including its philosophers) and agitated against the appropriation of classical African Philosophy by Western and African religious studies scholars and social anthropologists. She was against the arguments of Western and African philosophers that did not believe that individualism, rationality and logic could be found in African oral traditions or 'primitive' thought and who, therefore, excluded classical African Philosophy from the study of African Philosophy. She believed that African Philosophers, such as Hountondji, were too Western and narrow-minded in their definition of the field, thereby denying the existence of a unique and particular African logic and philosophy. She also argued that Western Philosophers

had been too eager to deny the rationality of Africans as a strategy to colonize their minds and to carry out their civilizing mission. Scholars in other disciplines, such as religious studies and anthropology, have argued that Olúwolé over-rationalised and secularized the Yoruba indigenous religious tradition of Ifá, whereas literary scholars have categorized the Ifá corpus as *Dichtung* and have argued that as oral text it is broader than philosophy.

Still, Olúwolé's mission was to make people aware that Yoruba philosophical sages and traditional priests had conveyed a rational philosophical oral tradition since pre-colonial times. This was powerful evidence that Africans were capable of thinking rationally before the Europeans colonised and allegedly 'civilised' most of the continent. Speaking of classical African Philosophy is as valid as making the claim for the existence of an antique Greek/Western philosophy. Olúwolé had many opponents in both Africa and the West and yet she kept fighting into old age against the denial of the existence of an African Philosophy before the colonial era.

Of equal significance is that Sophie Olúwolé dedicated her professional and private life to putting African women on the map. She founded an organisation to address women's issues and she set herself up as a feminist African philosopher. She delivered a black women's critique of *his*tory; a story in which Christians had come from Europe to free African women from their oppressing husbands who adhered to very hierarchical gender relations and partriarchal traditional norms and values. In her own story, Olúwolé made the point that in traditional Yoruba thinking, as expressed in the Ifá corpus, women were complementary but not inferior to men. Their position in pre-colonial times was not utopian, but it worsened in the colonial period. This way, she increased her audiences' insights into the consequences of the introduction of Western dichotomous thinking in the colonial period for women in both Yorubaland and the rest of Africa. Overcoming obstacles to education as a consequence of her race, gender and marital status, Sophie Bósèdé Olayemi Olúwolé rose to the top of her profession and became one of the foremost African philosophers of her time.

References

Adegbindin, O. (2010). Ifá and the consequences of literacy: A philosophical analysis. *Lumina, 21*(2), 1–23.

Beier, U., & Olúwolé, S. B. (2001). The making of a philosopher: Ulli Beier talks to Dr. Sophie Olúwolé. In F. Abodunrin, O. Obafemi, & W. Ogundele (Eds.), *Character is beauty: Redefining Yoruba culture and identity (Iwalewa-Haus, 1981–1996)* (pp. 357–372). Africa World Press.

Bodunrin, P. O. (1966). The question of African philosophy. *Philosophy, 56*(216), 161–179.

Cooper, B. (2020). *Women in West African history*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias of African History.

Du Toit, L., & Coetzee, A. (2017). Gendering African philosophy, or: African feminism as a decolonizing force. In A. Afolayan, & T. Falola (Eds.), *The Palgrave of African philosophy* (pp. 333–349). Palgrave Macmillan.

Godia, J. (2007). Kenya: African examples. Prof. Sophie Bósèdé Olúwolé, Philosopher par excellence. *The East African Standard*.

Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford University Press.

Hountondji, P. (1996). *African philosophy. Myth and reality*. Hutchinson.

Hountondji, P. J. (2018). How African is philosophy in Africa? *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions, 7*(3), 9–18.

Ikuenobe, P. (1997). The Parochial Universalist conception of 'philosophy' and 'African philosophy.' *Philosophy East and West, 47*(2), 189–210.

Kagame, A. (1956). *La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'être*. Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales.

Makarakiza, A. (1959). *La Dialectique des Barundi*. Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales.

Mudasiru, S., & Oshodi, A. G. T. (2023). Beauty in African thought: Critical perspectives on the western idea of development. In B. Bateye, M. Masaeli, L. Müller, & A. Roothaan (Eds.), *Omolúàbí: Understanding the Yoruba's moral obligations in human well-being and its implications for political participation in Nigeria—insights from Ikorodu*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Müller, L. F. (2009). Sophie Olúwolé. In C. Ceton, I. V. D. Burg, A. Halsema, V. Vasterling, & K. Vintges (Eds.), *Vrouwelijke Filosofen: Een Historisch Overzicht* (pp. 441–446). Atlas.

Müller, L. F. (2010). The persistence of asante chieftaincy under colonial rule: Explanations of an enigma. *Africana Studia: Revista Internacional De Estudos Africanos, 15*, 61–85.

Müller, L. F. (2013). *Religion and chieftaincy in ghana: An explanation of the persistence of a traditional political institution in West Africa* (Vol. 2). LIT Verlag.

Olúwolé, S. B. (1978). On the existence of witches. In A. Mosley (Ed.), *African philosophy*. Prentice-Hall.

Olúwolé, S. B. (1996). *Democratic patterns and paradigms: Nigerian women's experience*. Goethe Institute.

Olúwolé, S. B. (1997a). Culture, gender, and development theories in Africa. *Africa Development /Afrique et Développement, 22*(1), 95–121.

Olúwolé, S. B. (1997b). Culture, nationalism and philosophy. In H. Kimmerle, & F. M. Wimmer (Eds.), *Philosophy and democracy in intercultural perspective*. Rodopi.

Olúwolé, S. B. (1997c). *Philosophy and oral tradition*. African Research Consultancy.

Olúwolé, S. B. (2000). Africa. In A. M. Jaggar & I. M. Young (Eds.), *A companion to feminist philosophy* (pp. 96–108). Blackwell Publishers.

Olúwolé, S. B. (2014). *Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmìlà: Two patron saints of classical philosophy*. Ark Publishers.

Ong, W. (1986). Writing is a technology that restructures thought: The written word. In G. Bauman (Ed.), *Literacy in transition*. Clarendon Press.

Oruka, H. O. (1981). Four trends in current African philosophy. In A. E. Diemer (Ed.), *Symposium on philosophy in the present situation of Africa* (pp. 1–7). Franz Steiner Verlag.

Oruka, H. O. (1990). *Sage philosophy: Indigenous thinkers and modern debate on African philosophy*. Brill.

Popper, K. (1992). *Objective knowledge: An evolutionary approach*. Clarendon Press.

Souza, G. D. (1975). *Conception de "Vie" chez les Fon*. Editions du Benin.

Sylla, A. (1978). *La Philosophie Morale des Wolof*. Dakar.

Tempels, P. (1946). *Bantoe-Filosofie*. De Sikkel.

Tempels, P. (1952). Transl. Collin King. *Bantu philosophy*. Présence Africaine.

Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Indiana University Press.