

# Introduction

## *African Philosophy?*

Are those who know equal with those who know not?  
 But only those of understanding will remember.  
 —QUR'AN 39:9

So ask the people of remembrance, if you do not know.  
 —QUR'AN 16:43

*Odo to ba gbagbe orisun, o ma gbẹ ni.*  
 The spring that forgets its origin will run dry.  
 —YORUBA PROVERB

While browsing through a bookstore during my first year of college, I saw the title of a book that got me so excited that I almost shouted out loud. The book was called *African Philosophy*, an anthology edited by Emmanuel Eze. I bought the book on the spot and almost ran into a few trees and lampposts on my way home because I could not take my eyes off it. But the more I read, the more my excitement cooled into disappointment. Aside from one or two articles, the book's title seemed to me to be false advertisement. I felt as if I had bought an album labeled *The Royal Drummers of Burundi*, but when I played the music it was Taylor Swift—enjoyable in its own right, but not what I was looking for.

A little bit of context will help explain why I felt this way. At the time, I had been reading, spellbound, a translation of al-Ghazālī's *Deliverance from Error* while borrowing the books and handouts from my roommate's Indian philosophy course, most of

which were translations of mind-blowing primary texts by Buddhist philosophers such as Nagarjuna (d. 250 CE) and Dignaga (d. 540 CE) and the Vedantin philosophers Adi Shankara (d. ca. 820 CE) and Sri Harṣa (d. 1180 CE). In middle school and high school (besides the books on Greek and Norse mythology that my brothers and I wore the spines off), my favorite book was another anthology, *Classics of Philosophy* edited by Louis Pojman, which contained the equally mind-blowing (at least to me at the time) excerpts of the writings of some of the most influential figures in Western philosophy from the pre-Socratics to Wittgenstein, along with short introductions designed to contextualize the readings and make them more accessible. So, when I saw Eze's anthology, I was excited to have my mind blown again, but this time by the thinkers and traditions of Africa! I was expecting to be introduced to radically new ways of seeing the world (as Indian philosophy had done), to have my assumptions exposed and challenged (as both Indian and Western philosophy did), and to find the concepts and words for, and origins of, some of the ideas I already had half-formed in my head.

Instead, I found a group of academic articles, almost exclusively by Western-trained scholars, about what should count as African philosophy, and about the philosophy of race, gender, slavery, colonialism, and so forth. Almost all of the articles in the book seemed to be writing around the things I wanted to read about, and virtually all of them seemed written from a perspective with which I had become familiar through years of schooling, but in which I never fully felt at home. With the exception of an article by the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob, I felt more at home in the works of al-Ghazālī, Nagarjuna, Plotinus, St. Augustine, and even Kierkegaard, Hume, Spinoza, and Wittgenstein, than I did in the articles of the *African Philosophy* anthology. I remember asking myself the following questions: If this was African philosophy, and I'm African, should I just suck it up and learn to love it, like I do with my great-aunt's *moin-moin* (bean cakes)? Is there no African equivalent to Greek, European, Indian, and Islamic philosophy? Does it matter if there is or is not? Should it matter?

I now have a bit of perspective on this important experience of disappointment. Part of the problem, I think, was that I was looking for the wrong thing. I was looking for an *African version* of the works of philosophy with which I already had some familiarity—that is, I was looking for a treatise with clearly stated premises, standard logical arguments, refutations of other known positions, and relatively clear conclusions that defined the author's position on a certain topic. I already knew what I was looking for and was just hoping to find a new flavor or style that perhaps had some resonances with my ancestry and upbringing. What I have since concluded is that while the works of many African intellectuals do fit this description (such as those of the neo-Platonic, North and Northeast African Christian, and the even more voluminous Islamic traditions of the continent), part of what makes the indigenous philosophies or intellectual

traditions of the continent so interesting and worthy of study are the ways in which they *do not* fit this description. Practitioners of African traditions such as Ifa pursue knowledge and truth and engage in critical debates with one another, but they do so in very different ways, which I may not have recognized as philosophy back in the bookstore in 2003 during my first year of college.

Because of this, not only was I not looking for the right thing, I was also not looking in the right place. I began to realize this while reading Amadou Hampâté Bâ, the seminal Malian Africanist, belle-lettrist, activist, and scholar of traditional West African culture, orature, and religion. A Tijani Sufi himself, Bâ quotes his master Tierno Bokar’s observation, “Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photographing of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light which is within man. It is the heritage all the ancestors knew and have transmitted to us as seed, just as the mature baobab is contained in its seed.”<sup>2</sup> Or more succinctly, in the words of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassa (one of the focal points of this study), “Secrets are in the chests [*sudūr*] of the spiritual heroes [*rijāl*], not in the bellies of books.”<sup>3</sup> Thus I came to realize that in order to find what I was looking for back in the bookstore, I would have change my ideas about what philosophy looks like and where I could find it.

The present work is the result of this effort to learn about, learn from, learn with, and present two “ways of knowing” popular in West Africa: Tijani Sufism and Ifa. The term “ways of knowing” has two meanings: (1) the process or manner in which something is known; and (2) a program, a path, a way of life characterized by knowledge. In this book, I present an account of the “ways of knowing” (first meaning) that are used in Tijani Sufism and Ifa, which are themselves “ways of knowing” (second meaning).

Ifa and the West African branches of Tijani Sufism are perhaps the most widespread and influential of African religious traditions, claiming millions of adherents throughout the continent as well as in Europe, North America, East Asia, and the Middle East (Sufism), and Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean (Ifa). Texts and spiritual leaders of West African origin have wide influence and authority in these traditions, both of which have their geographic centers in the region: Ile-Ife, Nigeria, for Ifa; and Medina Baye, Senegal, for the most widespread branch of Tijani order, the Fayḍa, founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niassa (d. 1975). While issues of “African” authenticity are largely outside the scope of this project, both traditions had a significant presence in precolonial West Africa. Moreover, the practices and opinions of communities in Senegal and Nigeria are regarded as authoritative and normative by many adherents worldwide, and people come from around the globe to study with babalawo (priests of Ifa) in Nigeria and shaykhs (Sufi masters) in Senegal. There is a modest but growing secondary literature on these traditions in European languages, which attests to the intellectual sophistication and wide appeal of both traditions. Thus Tijani Sufism and

Ifa represent two different African worldviews and ways of knowing, similar in transnational appeal and profound influence.

After providing a brief introduction to each tradition (chapters 1 and 5), I discuss how each tradition defines knowledge, how these forms of knowledge are acquired, and how they are verified (chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8). Finally, I conclude with a comparison of these two traditions to each other and to contemporary academic perspectives (chapters 9 and 10, respectively). Chapters 1 and 5 can serve as stand-alone introductions to Tijani Sufism and Ifa, respectively; alternatively, chapters 2 through 4 can serve as a detailed study of Tijani epistemology, while chapters 6 through 8 can serve as a completely separate in-depth study of epistemology in Ifa. The two traditions are neither compared nor addressed together before the ninth chapter.

But before moving on to these discussions, it is important to consider the reasons I did not find what I was looking for in the bookstore all those years ago. Why did the anthology (with a few exceptions) not have the kind of African philosophy, the “photographs of knowledge,” I sought? And why was I looking for that kind of philosophy in the first place? To answer these questions, we must first understand a bit of the history of philosophy itself, and how I (and most of the rest of the Western-educated world) came to have the particular conception of it that I did back in 2003.

## CLEARING THE GROUND: AFRICA, RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, AND RATIONALITY

### A Brief History of the Conception of Philosophy in the West

Although it is now a professional academic discipline and subject of study like mathematics, physics, economics, or history, philosophy started out as something rather different. The first person to call himself a “philosopher” (*philosophos*, which means “friend or lover of wisdom”) was probably Pythagoras (d. 495 BCE),<sup>4</sup> whom we all know for his theorem about triangles. But just as Pythagoras’s geometry was about much more than shapes and angles, his school of philosophy, which we today would probably call a religion, cult, or monastic order, was concerned with achieving a divine mode of life. Through initiation, strict moral discipline, secret lessons on the esoteric symbolism of numbers and forms, the study of the world through this numeric symbolism, and other ritual exercises, including listening to music, Pythagoras’s school sought to mold the characters of its members into this divine ideal. This school is believed to have profoundly influenced Plato (d. 348 BCE) and his Academy, which was but one of many such philosophical schools that operated in Greek and Roman antiquity.

These schools or brotherhoods of philosophers differed greatly on some points, but all of them were concerned with using argument and reason (as well as other rituals) as “spiritual exercises” in order to cultivate an ideal way of life. As Pierre Hadot writes:

Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one’s being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being. Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us “be” in a different way. . . . First and foremost, philosophy presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind’s anguish.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the idea of the “philosopher” and “philosophy” of the ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman eras was something very different from the contemporary idea and practice of academic philosophy, although something of the older notion still resonates in today’s popular imagination.

The coming of Christianity eventually eclipsed these philosophical schools, but many of their texts, practices, ideas, and terminology (including that of “philosophy” itself) were assimilated (and transformed) by Christian thinkers to the extent that many Christian intellectuals interpreted and presented Christianity itself, especially the monastic life, as *philosophy*.<sup>6</sup> The texts, doctrines, and exercises of the Greek and Roman philosophical schools did not only find a receptive home in Christianity, they were also taken up with great enthusiasm and creativity in Islamic civilization (by Muslims, Christians, and Jews living under Islamic rule) from the ninth century onward, as well as by some pre-Islamic Jewish intellectuals, such as Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 CE).

What many today call Islamic philosophy took the form of many distinct traditions that engaged with Greek and Roman philosophical traditions in various ways. The discipline or science known in Arabic as *falsafa* or *hikma* creatively engaged with Pythagorean, Aristotelian, neo-Platonic, Stoic, and other traditions and sought to wed them with, and interpret them in the light of, Islamic prophecy and spirituality. To a large extent, this discipline maintained the goal of cultivating an ideal mode of life that characterized Greek and Roman philosophy. The most important and influential philosopher of this tradition was Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), known as Avicenna in the medieval West. However, his influence in the West was eclipsed by that of Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (d. 1198), who, ironically, never had much influence in the Islamic world as a philosopher, being better known as a first-rate jurist of the Mālikī school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). As he was the last Muslim philosopher to have a significant impact on Western thought,

some Western scholars (and their Muslim students) declared Islamic philosophy dead after Ibn Rushd, but the fact is that the traditions of *falsafa* and *hikma* have continued to thrive and produce remarkable works and thinkers such as Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1275), Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 1311), Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), Sabzawarī (d. 1873), ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

Since the twelfth century CE, however, the discipline of *falsafa/hikma* began to become more integrated with the disciplines of *kalām* (theology) and *taṣawwuf* (Sufism, a tradition of Islamic mysticism or spirituality). The discipline of *kalām* was primarily concerned with the dialectic exposition, proof, and defense of Islamic doctrines about God, man, and the cosmos, and its various schools engaged in highly sophisticated arguments with one another and with schools of *falsafa* and Sufism that would be considered philosophical by any measure.<sup>7</sup> The work of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), the most celebrated Islamic theologian (*mutakallim*) of the Ash‘arī school, shows the increasing convergence between Sufism, theology, and *falsafa* in Islamic philosophical thought. Sufism will be introduced more fully in the next chapter, but for the purposes of the current discussion, it designates an important tradition of Islamic spirituality and thought that posited and sought a direct, experiential knowledge of God (*ma‘rifa*) through an intensive regimen of spiritual exercises. The Sufis articulated this knowledge in various forms, often borrowing from, debating, and engaging with the traditions of theology and *falsafa*, to the extent that it became difficult to distinguish the three disciplines in the works of many figures from the twelfth century (the sixth Islamic century) onward. Prominent examples of such syntheses that came to dominate Islamic intellectual life include Suhrawardī’s “Philosophy of Illumination” (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) and the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi’s (d. 1240) school, both of which were integrated into Mullā Ṣadrā’s school of “Transcendent Philosophy” (*al-ḥikma al-muta‘āliya*). In the Western lands of the Islamic world, even the most popular texts of theology, such as the *Umm al-Barāhīn* (*Source of Proofs*) of al-Sanūsī (d. 1486), which was and still is widely used in North and West Africa, comprise a synthesis of ideas and terminology from Avicennan philosophy (*falsafa*), Ash‘arī theology (*kalām*), and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*).

Overall, the tradition of Islamic philosophy was and is characterized by a synthesis of reason, mystical intuition, and revelation, and an abiding interest in cultivating an ideal way of life, just as it was for the philosophers of Greek and Roman antiquity.<sup>8</sup> For the Islamic philosophers, righteous living, logical thinking, ritual practice, and spiritual realization supported and reinforced one another.<sup>9</sup>

However, Islamic philosophy’s sister tradition of Christian philosophy/theology was to go in a very different direction, especially during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. In Western Europe, from the thirteenth century onward, philosophy and theology began to drift apart—philosophy being reduced to its technical and discursive



aspects and made the “handmaiden of theology”—until the two disciplines became completely separate and even antagonistic with the arrival of Descartes. The gradual hardening of the Catholic Church’s dogmatic Aristotelianism combined with the new availability of Greek and Roman texts led to the decline of scholasticism and the rise of new forms of philosophy and new relationships between philosophy and Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Most significant, however, was the gradual collapsing of the classical triad of noetic faculties: intellect (Latin: *intellectus*; Greek: *nous*), reason (Latin: *ratio*; Greek: *dianoia*), and the senses (Latin: *sensus*; Greek: *aisthesis*) into just reason and sense. In Platonic, neo-Platonic, and many Christian schools of philosophy and theology, the intellect was a faculty that allowed one to directly perceive truths of a metaphysical nature and, in some cases, was even described as being mysteriously united with God or the Holy Spirit. Hadot illustrates the distinction between reason and intellect in Plotinus’s philosophy by explaining that his philosophy was not meant “to be a discourse about objects, be they even the highest, but it wishes actually to lead the soul to a living, concrete union with the Intellect and the Good. . . . Reason, by theological methods, can raise itself to the *notion* of the Good, but only life according to Intellect can lead to the *reality* of the Good.”<sup>11</sup>

In the late Renaissance and early modern period, philosophers gradually abandoned this distinction between intellect and reason, rejecting or reducing the former to the latter, and reading this rationalist tendency back into the Greek, Latin, and Arabic texts they translated. Thus, the only valid sources of knowledge became reason and the senses. As a result, the “wisdom” that was philosophy’s goal became more mental and practical and less existential and divine. In this way, the conception of philosophy gradually shifted away from “a way of life” to a mode of rational discourse, or as Hadot says, from “philosophy” to “philosophical discourse.”<sup>12</sup>

With this gradual disappearance of the intellect from Western philosophical discourse in the early modern period (fifteenth–eighteenth century), philosophy also became more distant from theology and mysticism. Furthermore, as the senses and reason came to be regarded as the only sources of knowledge, “the immaterial became immaterial,” and the elaborate metaphysical cosmologies of medieval Europe gradually faded from mainstream intellectual life and thought. Moreover, reason replaced intellect as the *imago Dei*, the divine trace that marked man as being made in God’s image, and rationality rather than spirituality or conformity to the Divine through the intellect became the measure of humanity. But as God was no longer directly perceived by the *intellectus*, but abstracted from sensory data and the rational faculty, His role in Western intellectual thought became more and more vague and distant, culminating in the nineteenth-century view of the divine as a creation of the mind of man—a god made in man’s own image.<sup>13</sup>

While the possible reasons for these related shifts are many and complex,<sup>14</sup> the early modern thinkers seemed to want to create a space for themselves to think outside the theological dominion of the church. From its inception, the Enlightenment project of the modern period was concerned with creating and defining itself *against* its past through categories based on the newly enthroned reason. For example, the post-classical, pre-Renaissance period became known as the “medieval” period, or Middle Ages, or “Dark Ages” based on the early modern notion that this period marked a lapse in Europe’s history between two glorious ages of reason: the Greco-Roman classical period, and its “rebirth” in the Renaissance. And so modern philosophy emerged as a privileged category of difference, to define “reborn” or “enlightened” Western Europe against and elevate it above its ancestral past and other civilizations.

Relatedly, the new philosophy of the Enlightenment (as opposed to the religious theology of the Middle Ages) emerged as one of a number of new categories created to define modern Europe against and above its “other,” what it considered itself not to be. For example, the medieval category “mystical” (*Mustikos*) was used to refer to three closely linked elements: a method of allegorical biblical interpretation (such as Dante’s anagogical), liturgical mysteries (such as the Eucharist), and the contemplative or experiential knowledge of God.<sup>15</sup> However, the Enlightenment philosophers, especially Kant, took up the task of oppositional definition and defined the new, rational “philosophy” against “mysticism,” which was in turn defined against rationality and characterized as subjective as opposed to objective, emotive as opposed to intellectual, private as opposed to public, irrational as opposed to rational, and so forth. Mystical worldviews were dismissed as backward and prerational, mystical experiences became subjective psychological states (usually described as the result of some kind of disorder), mystical practices and rituals were dismissed as “superstition” and “magic,” and mystical modes of interpretation such as allegory were largely relegated to secular literary criticism and poetry.<sup>16</sup> This deeply affected modern readings of classical and medieval thinkers, as the seemingly “rational” elements, texts, and figures were emphasized and the seemingly “mystical” elements, texts, and figures were excised and devalued. For modern thinkers such as Kant, “the mystical” was the death of philosophy, in part because the modern conception of “philosophy” was given life through its definition against “the mystical.”

As the work of Emmanuel Eze and Peter K. J. Park has demonstrated,<sup>17</sup> this dynamic had profound significance for Enlightenment Europe’s understanding of itself in relation to other civilizations and peoples. With the disappearance of the *intellectus/nous*, and the noetic realms of reality perceivable only by it (the divine and angelic realms or world of Platonic Forms), Western man found himself in the curious position of being at the top of the “great chain of being,” the neo-Platonic and medieval hierarchy



of the cosmos.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, God and heaven still lurked in the background or up in the clouds somewhere; but in terms of the knowable, perceivable universe of philosophers and scientists, Western, rational man was at the summit, with his newly defined rationality as the mark of his superiority. Whereas in the Middle Ages humanity was judged by participation in or proximity to a transcendent, divine ideal (Christ or God), the secularization process of the Enlightenment resulted in humanity being judged by proximity to the immanent ideal of rational, enlightened European man.<sup>19</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Hegel explicitly enunciated this doctrine, declaring Western Europe “the land of the elevation of the particular to the universal”;<sup>20</sup> and eighteenth-century English dissident philosopher James Beattie wrote, “That every practice and sentiment is barbarous which is not according to the usages of Modern Europe seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our critics and philosophers.”<sup>21</sup> The particular mode of reasoning that came to characterize Enlightenment thought was elevated to the level of “universal reason,” the mark and determiner of humanity. This allowed Enlightenment thinkers, and their descendants, to “speak from nowhere and for everyone.” Just as the Enlightenment thinkers defined themselves against their “dark,” “mystical,” and “irrational” past, they also defined themselves against their “dark,” “mystical,” and “irrational” neighbors. Thus, membership in this elite class of humanity—“rational Europeans” (what later became “whiteness”)—emerged as the transcendence of “race,” which was seen as a privation of full humanity, an impediment to participation in that which makes one human: rationality.

Kant and Hegel also contributed to the development of a temporalization of this “great chain of being,” creating a narrative in which the rational faculty was responsible for man’s progress from “primitive” to “civilized.” In his works on geography, on which he lectured more than any other subject, Kant argued that “lower” human beings exist for the sake and use of those at a “higher level of humanity”—of greater rationality—just as plants exist for the sake of animals.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Hegel’s evolutionary theory established a temporal continuum with evil, ignorance, darkness, the past, the “primitive” and the nonwhite races of humanity on one end; and good, knowledge, light, the future, “civilization,” progress, and the white race on the other. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel combined this teleology with environmental determinism to argue for the right and duty of the conquest, subjugation, and even elimination of the dark side of the continuum by the light.<sup>23</sup>

This is the philosophy at the foundations of modern notions of progress and development. Socially and politically, the markers of “full humanity” have shifted from “rationality” to “scientific and technological innovation,” “liberal democracy,” and “human rights,”<sup>24</sup> but the basic architecture and the complexion of the people at the top of the hierarchy generally remain the same. Thus, philosophy became more than just

a means of rational inquiry; by exemplifying the functioning of rationality, it became an important criterion for “civilized humanity,” and provided the rationale to “civilize,” often with great force, those segments of humanity deemed lacking in it. So as imperial Europe came into contact with the intellectual traditions of other civilizations, it compared them to the “mystical” thought of the European medieval period, categorized them as “irrational,” and generally considered none of them to “rise to the level of philosophy.”<sup>25</sup>

This has begun to change in recent years due to the careful study by Western-trained scholars of Islamic as well as South and East Asian texts and thinkers whose sophisticated logic, dialectics, critical acumen, and well-developed theories made it difficult for scholars to categorize these traditions as “irrational.” As Jay Garfield writes, illustrating this new approach and broader understanding of “philosophy”:

Ignoring the philosophical traditions of other cultures in fact, whether we like it or not, continues the colonial project of subordinating those cultures to our own. That project was “justified” by the white man’s burden of bringing civilization to the benighted heathen, a burden of which we can only make sense if we deny their manifestly existent intellectual traditions the epistemic status we grant ours. Giving the Western philosophical tradition pride of place as “philosophy” while marginalizing in our departments or in our individual life all other traditions . . . hence implicates us directly in institutional racism. Recognizing that we are so implicated and refraining from changing our individual practice and from working to change our institutional practice constitutes, however passive it may be, individual racism. It also constitutes a profound epistemic vice, that of willfully ignoring sources of knowledge we know to be relevant to our own activities.<sup>26</sup>

But what of those traditions that do not so closely resemble modern European philosophy, and are thus not so easily recognized? What of the intellectual traditions of the Amerindians, of the Polynesians and Aboriginal Australians, and what of those of Africans, the ultimate racial other of the Enlightenment?

### **African Philosophy?**

Most of the contemporary debates about what should and should not be called African philosophy appear to boil down to arguments over the worth or status of the tradition in question, and thus whether it is worthy of the privileged category of “philosophy,” or debates about the authenticity of the tradition, and thus if it is worthy of the appellation “African.”<sup>27</sup> Because such concerns are foreign to the traditions I have studied

(most babalawo and Sufis do not care whether people call them “African philosophers”), this issue is not urgent for my work; however, were I to suggest a definition of philosophy, it would be the original Socratic or Pythagorean sense of the term, “the love of wisdom,” the love and pursuit of that *sophia* (Greek), *sapientia* (Latin), *hikma* (Arabic) that is at once knowledge and an ideal mode of being. Defining the “African” half of “African philosophy” is more difficult (not least of all because the adjective “African” is a largely peripheral and foreign category to these traditions that divide the world up in different ways),<sup>28</sup> but I would reserve it for those continuous indigenous (itself a problematic term), Christian, and Islamic traditions that have shaped and been shaped by people living on the continent for several generations. So, for example, a Russian man initiated into Ifa and practicing in England would qualify as a member of an African philosophical tradition, while a Yoruba woman living in Lagos who is a student of Buddhist Madhyamika philosophy would not.<sup>29</sup> The work of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora in various traditions of Western philosophy may be insightful, incisive, and interesting philosophical discourse, but in this definition, it would not qualify as what I would call “traditional African philosophy.”

The following contrasting historical examples should help to clarify this point. Anton Wilhem Amo (ca. 1703–ca. 1759) was an Akan man from the Axim region of present-day Ghana who was brought to Germany as a child, where he was raised as a member of the family of the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. He studied at the Universities of Helmstedt, Halle, and Wittenberg, and received his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Wittenberg in 1734 for his dissertation, an argument against Cartesian dualism titled “On the Absence of Sensation in the Human Mind and Its Presence in Our Organic and Living Body.” He lectured at the Universities of Halle and Jena, but after his patron, the duke, died, life in Germany became more difficult for him. In 1747, Amo returned to Ghana, and little is known about his life thereafter, save that he died around 1759.<sup>30</sup>

Susanne Wenger (1915–2009) was an Austrian artist who married the German scholar Ulli Beier and moved with him to Nigeria in 1949, when the latter accepted a post at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She was attracted to the traditional Yoruba religious ceremonies she heard going on down the street and, after a bout with tuberculosis, was initiated by the priest Ajagemo into the mysteries of the Oriṣa Ọbatala (a Yoruba deity). She became a respected and important priestess, and eventually settled in the town of Oṣogbo, where she revived the worship at the town’s Sacred Grove of Ọṣun (the Yoruba goddess of beauty and magic), building shrines for the Oriṣa (Yoruba deities) and fostering a whole “school” of traditional worshippers and artists. In large part thanks to her efforts, the Sacred Grove was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005. Upon her death in 2009, one of her students offered the following tribute:

“Her internment completes Susan Wenger’s transformation into a spirit, as devotees will henceforth make supplications to her, too.”<sup>31</sup> In this definition, Susanne Wenger (and any who have followed in her footsteps) could be considered as a traditional African philosopher, whereas Anton Amo (and those who have followed in his footsteps) would not.

This is what I think I was looking for all those years ago in the bookshop, and why the piece by the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob was the one that spoke to me the most out of all of the articles in Eze’s anthology. Now, as with any definition, this suggested one becomes fuzzier the more one investigates it. It is possible and increasingly common for someone to be a member of, and have training in, several different intellectual traditions, both traditional African and modern Western ones. Moreover, given the strong influence some of these traditions still exert on the general cultures of their societies (such as those of the Yoruba- or Dogon-speaking peoples among others), it is often difficult to say who belongs to a tradition and who does not. However, these traditions often draw their own boundaries through rites of initiation. Nevertheless, this provisional definition differs most strongly from those discussed above, not by the way it defines “African,” but by the way it defines “philosophy,” distinguishing “philosophical discourse” from “philosophy itself,” which is envisioned as a way of life, a love and pursuit of wisdom. Within this definition, some African philosophers may engage in written philosophical discourse, some (like Socrates) may engage in oral philosophical discourse, and others may not engage in philosophical discourse at all. It is not the discourse, but rather the practice of philosophy, as in Plato’s definition from the *Phaedo*, as a “preparation for death,” that is of greatest significance. The critiques that these traditions should not be called philosophical because they are not “critical” or “written” or “discursive” would thus be irrelevant. It would be like arguing that Genghis Khan should not be called a “world conqueror” because he did not play the video game of the same name—the two definitions of philosophy deal with different domains.

There is something of an inferiority complex that drives many scholars on the African continent and in the major centers of learning abroad to beg for the recognition and acceptance of these traditions (and/or their own work) into the privileged category of philosophy by trying to emphasize their similarities with contemporary academic philosophical theories. This has not been terribly successful, and with good reason, since what should be of interest is not the mere fact that precolonial Africans learned Aristotelian logic, but the distinct ideas, theories, perspectives, and modes of life developed by these African thinkers (e.g., why they learned, and what they did with Aristotelian logic). Musicians do not go to West Africa to hear local symphonies play Beethoven and Bartók; they go to appreciate, learn from, and be inspired by

the region's many incredible indigenous musical traditions.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, these musical traditions do not rely on Western approval for their continued relevance, popularity, and success, and neither do traditional African intellectual traditions. While traditional African philosophies may be of interest to non-Africans and Africans alike for the alternative perspectives they offer to recently dominant ways of life and knowing, I argue that, like traditional African musical traditions, they should be of interest, not because they are African, but because they are good—because their accounts of reality, the self, virtue, knowledge, and so forth, and the ways of life they exemplify, are compelling.

The facts, as I see them, are these:

1. The African continent has been and currently is home to a number of intellectual traditions, including some of the earliest to bear the name “philosophy” (North African Pythagoreanism, Platonism, neo-Platonism, etc.).
2. Some of these traditions are relatively recent importations from modern Europe, take place primarily in European languages, are taught in modern universities, and are primarily based on modern Western European worldviews, philosophies, and pedagogies.
3. Some of these traditions have a longer history on the continent, primarily take place in non-European languages, and are based on traditional worldviews, philosophies, and pedagogies that are distinct from those of modern, Western Europe.
4. Many of these traditions have long written traditions of discursive, rational argument (in Greek, Latin, Ge'ez, Arabic, Swahili, etc.) in addition to their oral traditions, while others, while still critical and dynamic, are “unlettered.”<sup>33</sup>
5. Virtually all of these older, traditional, non-Europhone traditions are categorized as “religious” and bear a family resemblance to the ancient Greco-Roman schools of philosophy in terms of methods and goals: ritual practices and exercises leading to the cultivation of “wisdom,” an ideal mode of life. On the other hand, virtually all of the newer, modern, Europhone traditions do not share in this family resemblance, and focus instead on philosophical, academic, or modern scientific discourse.
6. The members of these older, non-Europhone traditions have done and are doing sophisticated, compelling, and profound intellectual work that is worthy of academic attention.
7. Virtually all of these traditional, non-Europhone traditions exist quite independently of the modern academic traditions, have their own names for their traditions and categories of thought, and many of their members are largely

unconcerned with whether what they are doing is called “philosophy” by those outside the tradition.

Given these facts, the question now becomes, how does one engage with these traditional, primarily non-Europhone traditions?

Valentin Mudimbe’s *Invention of Africa*<sup>34</sup> convincingly demonstrates many of the dangers and pitfalls involved in trying to represent “Africa” in Western discourses. His basic argument is that discourse about Africa, even by Africans, takes place firmly within dominant Western discourses and philosophies, and thus tells us more about the Western training of the author than it does about anything “African.” Mudimbe asserts that the vast imbalance in political and epistemic power between Western discourse about Africa and the reality of Africa itself prevents “Africa” from becoming anything more than a product of Western theory and imagination. He labels this secret “knowledge” that experts claim to represent in their books and articles about Africa as “gnosis.”

As this discussion illustrates, academia has inherited a tradition of ignorance and arrogance when it comes to other intellectual traditions, especially those of Africa. This has provoked the problematic reactions of *négritude*, Afrocentrism, and certain new age movements, which (like other colonized nationalisms—e.g., Arab, Turkish, Persian, and Hindu) accept the basic categories of the “oppressive” discourse (such as “racial essence,” “rational,” “mystical,” “philosophical,” and “civilization”) they seek to counter in their representations of Africa. In their many forms, these reactionary movements describe an imaginary Manichean dichotomy in which the “African” is natural, intuitive, and spiritual in contrast to the artificial, rational and material West. While such reactions are understandable, they are limited by their acceptance of these colonial categories.

Similarly, as Mudimbe, Paulin Hountondji, and others have demonstrated, Western attempts to understand and engage with traditional African worldviews and philosophies are fraught with the difficulties inherent in trying to learn and then represent a particular tradition from the perspective, and in the language, of another tradition. *Traduttori traditori*, the Italian saying goes—“Translators, traitors.” And yet, translation, or at least something like it, does happen.

Following other postmodern thinkers, one of the main contentions of Mudimbe’s work seems to be that the representation of “Africa” will never be the thing itself, and will thus always be the product of Western imagination, a mental construction of Western discourse. To use a linguistic analogy, when writing a translation of an Arabic text in English, I have to obey the conventions and rules of English prose, punctuation, and capitalization (which are not shared by Arabic), and when reading (especially if I am a nonnative speaker), I bring my own categories of thought, deeply shaped by my own mother tongue, to bear on the text. Similarly, when presenting African traditions



in Western academic discourse one must follow the academic conventions of logic, argument, genre, and even theory that are often not shared by the “translated” tradition. Moreover, one often brings one’s own theoretical assumptions, often unshared by the tradition, to bear on the study of it.

For Mudimbe, as for many poststructuralist and postmodern theorists, the task of representation and translation seems to be an impossible one. What one produces is a work “inspired” by the object of inquiry, but not an “accurate” representation. Some accounts may be better than others, but this superiority can only be relative, since one can never access the truth or reality of the original, which is located “outside of the text,” the discourse, and the self. This account of representation is based on something akin to the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal, “things as they really are” and “things as they appear to us.” Ironically, this distinction is not universally held, and is certainly not absolute in many traditions I would classify as “African philosophies.” For example, in Sufism and some traditions of Islamic philosophy (and other neo-Platonic philosophies), the intellect (*al-‘aql*), especially in its highest form (the Universal Intellect [*al-‘aql al-kullī*] or the Divine Intellect [*al-‘aql al-rabbānī*]), can know things directly, “as they are,” because it is identical with their ontological root. The resulting knowledge, coincidentally, is also known as “gnosis.” Thus Mudimbe’s “problem of translation” derives from the very fact that he situates himself within a particular Western (primarily Foucauldian) epistemology in which such “gnosis” is not a real possibility.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to the metaphor of translation, in his essay the “The Task of the Translator” Walter Benjamin quotes a passage by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz that I believe both elegantly describes and points the way out of this impasse:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. . . . However, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, I would argue that many, if not most attempts at engaging with, describing, or performing African philosophies (and other, traditional intellectual traditions from

around the world) have tried to turn them into contemporary Western philosophies and theories. Especially when dealing with intellectual traditions that differ greatly from those of the (post)modern West, it behooves scholars to go back into the historical and philosophical origins of their own discourses to examine where categories such as “reason,” “mysticism,” “religion,” “practice,” and “theory” converge and emerge.

Western-educated scholars who wish to understand African thought would do well to revisit the premodern philosophical traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity (especially Platonism and neo-Platonism) as well as medieval and Eastern Orthodox Christian theology. By this I do not mean the caricatures of this thought that have emerged after the Enlightenment. Any scholar familiar with the Pythagoreans, the Orphic mysteries, Socrates’s *daimon*, Plato’s mythology, the theurgy of the neo-Platonists,<sup>37</sup> the spiritual exercises of the early church fathers, the syntheses of critical reason, revelation, and mystical experience and exegesis found in medieval Catholic and Orthodox theologians, philosophers, and mystics, would instantly recognize parallels with traditional African rituals, modes of expression, and thought, and would be in a much better position to understand these diverse African traditions, and their similarities to and differences from various Western traditions. The spiritual and mystical dimensions of these philosophical traditions can no more be excised from their “rational” elements than the racist dimensions of Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Hegel can be excised from their more “rational” elements. My point here is not that these Enlightenment thinkers are wrong because they are racist, but rather that they are racist because they are wrong about knowledge, its conditions, and the universality of their theories.

Moreover, just as Pannwitz suggested that the translated language should “powerfully affect” and “expand and deepen” the language into which it is translated, African traditions can and should “powerfully affect,” expand, and deepen Western conceptions of philosophy and theory, and transform its discourses, but this can only happen if they are approached with reverence and taken seriously. To give a concrete linguistic example, this expansion and reshaping can be seen in the influence of Arabic on languages as diverse as Wolof, Swahili, Persian, and Malay, many of whose speakers have learned Arabic, and many more of whom interact with the Arabic language through daily religious rites—all of which has had a deep and lasting influence on the vocabulary, categories, and in some cases even the grammatical structures of these languages. Or, to give an example a bit closer to home, in describing Wọle Soyinka’s “Big English” (*Igilango Gẹ̀ṣi*), Biḡdun Jeyifo remarked, “When you use language in the *Igilango Gẹ̀ṣi* manner, you are transforming the English language, you are doing things with it and in it that the owners of the language themselves had not thought imaginable.”<sup>38</sup> I argue that we should do the same with Western theories and the philosophies behind them.<sup>39</sup>

In light of the difficulties highlighted in the above discussion, prominent scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including Latin American studies, South Asian studies, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, Islamic studies, history, and African studies have proposed the development of a “theory from the South” or “indigenous theory.” For example, the scholar of Yoruba art Babatunde Lawal writes, “Unfortunately, some scholars have become so obsessed with theories which attempt to relate the ‘particular’ to the ‘universal’ that their conclusions often reflect the Eurocentric bias of the theories *per se* rather than the traditions of the culture they purport to analyze. Moreover, the search for paradigms often results in intellectual fantasies that mystify rather than clarify the subject being studied. A number of scholars . . . have called for a new critical approach that will allow African traditions to be studied on their own terms, instead of being viewed through Eurocentric lenses.”<sup>40</sup>

This dynamic is particularly troublesome when the theories and the theorized differ in power, place, and culture, but is especially so when they differ radically in their worldviews and philosophies that define “power, place, and culture.” It’s hard enough for an American university student to understand an English-language article about colonial history written by a West African academic, but it can be an even more complicated task to get the same student to understand an Arabic poem by a West African Sufi, because the worldviews expressed therein are even more different. However, from another perspective (perhaps that of the Sufi poet), the poem could be easier to understand than the article, because it addresses universal matters of the heart (or at least more so than does the academic work). These dynamics illustrate the inescapable effects of perspective and theory and highlight the importance of this call for new methods that allow cultures and traditions to “speak for themselves.”

However, such methods are not necessarily “new,” as demonstrated by the seminal works of Ananda Coomaraswamy on Asian art and philosophy, Toshihiko Izutsu on East Asian and Islamic philosophy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Chittick on Islamic philosophy and Sufism, and Jacob Olupona and Rowland Abiodun on Yoruba religion and art (to name but a few). What all of these figures have in common is a strong grasp of Western philosophy and a remarkably profound understanding not only of the languages of the traditions they study, but also of the metaphysics and epistemologies of these traditions, with which they have a great affinity, and even identity. Moreover, their works are largely presented from the perspective, and in the terms of, the traditions studied, and so one frequently finds Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Yoruba terms—not “sprinkled in for flavoring,” but as the fundamental categories of thought and analysis. Additionally, they all emphasize the relevance of the works

and figures they study not merely for an academic understanding of the intellectual, artistic, or political history of a particular sector of humanity, but also for the merits of their arguments and their relevance to the art of being human, a position very much in line with the traditions themselves. Thus, at times, these works can seem to stretch the contemporary conventions of academic language and genre, although never abandoning scholarly rigor in the process.

The present work is inspired by Toshihiko Izutsu's groundbreaking *Sufism and Taoism*, which demonstrates the power of taking seriously two non-Western thinkers and their arguments on their own terms (much as academics would with figures like Spinoza or Descartes) and the profound insights that can emerge from such a comparison.<sup>41</sup> William Chittick's books on the Sufi thinkers Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi (d. 1273) have also been particularly useful in demonstrating how to let texts and traditions "speak for themselves."<sup>42</sup> These books mostly consist of original translations from the primary texts of these two figures. However, through careful arrangement, discussion, and contextualizations of these texts, what emerges is much more than a straightforward translation; rather, it is a masterful exposition of the oeuvres of thinkers, almost entirely in their own words, and seemingly from their own perspectives. I have tried to follow suit in this work, allowing the texts and members of the tradition to speak for themselves as much as possible, and I beg the reader's indulgence and patience with the resulting long quotations from interviews and translations of texts, which I deemed necessary in order to preserve the unique voices of each tradition.<sup>43</sup> Valerie Hoffman's *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* also provided an important model for combining the study of classical texts and contemporary representatives of a tradition.<sup>44</sup>

### **Ibn 'Arabi as a Theorist**

However, the primary theoretical inspiration and model for the present work comes from the work of the thirteenth-century Andalusian Sufi, Ibn 'Arabi. Another one of Chittick's works, *Imaginal Worlds*, invites us to consider Ibn 'Arabi, known as the Shaykh al-Akbar, "the greatest master," as a theorist of religion. Chittick writes:

The bewildering diversity of religion's historical actuality is accentuated by the great variety of methodological approaches that are employed by specialists to study religion. Each of these approaches makes important contributions to our understanding of religion . . . but most are firmly rooted in the experience of modernity undergone by the West . . . Ibn al-'Arabi's perspective on religion differs profoundly from that of contemporary Western methodologies in its assumptions about the role and function of human beings in the cosmos. Of course, most scholars of

religion do not voice their assumptions on such matters, but it is precisely the unspoken assumptions that provide the greatest commonality among them. These assumptions are perhaps easier to express in negative than positive terms. For example, modern scholarship—in contrast to traditional Islamic scholarship—does not presuppose an ultimate reality that unifies all of existence, a clear purpose to human life, a moral dimension to both human activity and the natural world, the divine origin of religion, or the truth of scripture.<sup>45</sup>

For the purposes of the present study, Ibn ‘Arabi can serve as a theorist since he is by far the most influential theorist of the Sufi tradition itself, and his works are frequently cited in the Tijani tradition. Moreover, the Shaykh al-Akbar’s work is uniquely suited to this task not only because of its subtlety, depth, and dizzying breadth, but also because of its unique understanding of different perspectives on or theories of the Real (*al-Haqq*, one of the ninety-nine Names of God in Islam). For Ibn ‘Arabi, the Islamic declaration of unity (*tawhīd*)—that “there is no god but God” (*lā ilāha illā Llāh*)—therefore also means that “there is no reality but the Reality.”

This “Ultimate Reality,” by virtue of its nature, is also all-powerful (“there is no power but God”), all-living (“there is no life but God”), and all-knowing (“there is no knower but God”). By virtue of being all-knowing, this Ultimate Reality must know Itself both in and of Itself, and as another—or if you like, both perfectly and imperfectly. Thus, creation comes into being as means for this Reality to know Itself both in Itself and as another. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi often describes the cosmos as a “mirror of nonbeing” or a “dream” of the Real, in which it can contemplate Itself as not-Itself. While everything in a dream is distinct, but also nothing other than the dreamer, the characters through which the dreamer experiences the dream are somehow different. Because the dreamer (the Real) “sees through their eyes” they are more directly connected to him, and therefore to everything else in the dream. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s account, these “dreamers in the dream” are human beings, and their diverse and unique perspectives on and beliefs about reality are described as so many “self-portraits” of the Real (Ibn ‘Arabi calls them “gods created in belief”). Because they are just representations, they are not and should not be confused with the Real itself, but because there is no other reality save the Real, they are also identical with the Real, like images in so many mirrors.

Ibn ‘Arabi describes all these different approaches (“religious” or not) to reality as “knots” in the fabric of reality, because they represent so many limitations of the Real. To mix metaphors, as “dreamers in the dream,” human beings are only truly themselves, and therefore truly happy, when they “wake up inside the dream” or “untie all of their knots,” fulfilling their function of knowing the Real. Ibn ‘Arabi calls this “knot-free” state, the “station of no station” or the “perspective of no perspective”—the perspective

the Real has on Itself. Because the Real wants to be known, or because God is merciful, concerned with human felicity, He helps guide people toward felicity, toward knowledge of the Real. That is, He helps them untie their knots (or from another perspective, He unties the knots in Himself). This is usually accomplished through the forms of revelations/religions, which as particular limited self-portraits of the Real are knots in themselves. However, they have the distinction of being knots that undo other knots, including themselves. These “not-knots” and the process of untying they involve require the use of both reason and imagination.

The function of reason is analytic, to distinguish between the Real and its manifestations, the dreamer and the dream. The function of imagination is synthetic, to connect the manifestations to the Real, to see the dreamer in the dream. Because the purpose of these religious traditions is to connect human beings back to the Real, religious forms often emphasize imagination through poetic language and ritual symbolism. However, when taken too far, imagination leads to confusing and conflating the dream and the dreamer; while if reason is taken too far, it destroys the imaginal coherence of the religion, and makes the dreamer (the Real) seem out of reach, if not out of the picture altogether. Thus, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, people must learn to “see with two eyes”—reason and imagination—in order to untie their knots.

But what does all of this have to do with theories and methodologies of religion? Chittick explains:

Any methodology can be nothing but a knot in terms of which reality is construed. In the name of objectivity or other norms, certain assumptions are made about experienced reality. Modern methodologies are often considered to have achieved a superior view of things because of their critical approach, but the belief that one’s approach is “critical” already represents a particularly intractable knot. As the Shaykh would point out, the gods of critical belief have no privileged place in the pantheon. God is also the Critic, no doubt, but God as the Guide has a far greater claim to human loyalty.<sup>46</sup>

He then sketches an outline of an Akbarī (i.e., an Ibn ‘Arabi–based) approach to the study of religion:

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s approach provides a predisposition toward the study of religion that is also a knot, no doubt. Nevertheless, by recognizing the existence of knots and appreciating their value, and by acknowledging the position (perhaps never attainable) of untying all knots, this approach may provide certain insights unavailable



to other points of view. By taking up the Shaykh's standpoint, one is predisposed to deal with religious diversity as follows: Religion appears among human beings because the Real as Guide desires to bring about human wholeness and felicity. But manifestations of the Guide can never embrace the total truth of the Real as such, which lies beyond expression and form. Hence each religion has its own specific mode of expression that is necessarily different from other modes of expression. . . . The specific imaginal forms that guidance assumes in a given religion will be determined by the cultural and linguistic receptacles as much as by the specific self-disclosure of the Guide—the prophet, avatara, buddha, sage—who initiates the religion. In the last analysis, these two sides of reality are inseparable: The cultural and linguistic receptacles, like the revelations, are self-disclosures of the Real. “The water assumes the color of its cup,” but the cup is nothing but frozen water.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, Ibn 'Arabi's unique appreciation of the diverse and differing perspectives (self-portraits of the Real) on reality, his understanding and use of both of rational and imaginal modes of discourse and thought, and his sensitive appreciation of socio-historical context without becoming reductionist all make him a compelling theorist. Moreover, as a result of the “theory” outlined above, Ibn 'Arabi takes each of these “knots” or perspectives seriously “on their own terms,” since each is a divine self-portrait that reveals aspects of the Real not explicitly contained in any other. Thus he writes, “Beware of becoming delimited by a specific knotting and disbelieving in everything else, lest great good escape you. . . . Be in yourself a matter [*hyle*] for the forms of all beliefs, for God is wider and more tremendous than that He should be constricted by one knotting rather than another.”<sup>48</sup> And elsewhere advises, “He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.”<sup>49</sup>

For this reason, in his writings, Ibn 'Arabi constantly shifts between different perspectives, always evaluating the topic at hand from multiple points of view, in a manner that contemporary theorists would call “perspectivist” or “polyvocal.”<sup>50</sup> Ibn 'Arabi's peculiarly flexible style of arguing from and for multiple different positions (while still remaining mysteriously coherent) is such that even if you do not agree with him or all of his arguments, his undeniable acumen forces you to see the issue at hand from new perspectives, and always illuminates the issues at stake in these various discussions. Ibn 'Arabi gave answers (many, many different answers) to many questions similar to those we would ask of a contemporary theorist of religion: What is the relationship

between practice and doctrine? What is the purpose of prayer? What is knowledge? What is truth? Who has the authority to answer these questions, and why?

Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi is well suited to serve as a model and a theorist for approaching religious traditions, particularly those that appear to have much in common with his plural metaphysics. Nevertheless, while I use Ibn ‘Arabi a great deal in presenting Tijani Sufism, when presenting Ifa, a non-Islamic tradition of at least equally staggering profundity, breadth, subtlety, and insight, I try to use the terms, categories, and theories of the tradition itself. From time to time, in explaining Ifa, I also contrast and compare Ifa to other traditions in order to clear up confusions and false analogies that I anticipate may arise in the mind of the reader. As Abrahamic traditions, Christianity and Islam share a great deal of intellectual history and conceptual categories, and thus the categories of Sufism typically require less of an explanation for Western-educated readers (whatever their religious affiliation) than do those of Ifa.

### Comparative Philosophy

In this book, I also draw on Barry Hallen’s work in comparing Yoruba and Western epistemologies. One of Hallen’s most important insights is that when moving back and forth between different traditions, discourses, or languages, one has to be careful to understand the role that each term plays in its own context before constructing equivalencies and translations. His masterful analysis of the categories of “witchcraft” in English versus *aje* in Yoruba and of “knowledge” and “belief” in ordinary language and Anglophone philosophical discourse and *imọ* and *igbagbọ* in the discourse of Yoruba ritual specialists (*oniṣẹgun*) inspired my own methods in comparing forms of “knowledge” in Ifa and Tijani Sufism.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s kaleidoscopic method of shifting perspectives also deeply influenced the way I conduct and present these comparisons: examining Tijani Sufism from the perspective of Ifa, examining Ifa from the perspective of Tijani Sufism, and then examining certain topics from various positions within each of these traditions and those of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work.

This structure is also related to the main motivation for the comparative nature of this project. Comparing these traditions in this way allows us to experience how they can operate as theoretical perspectives in and of themselves and understand that they are more than just “data” to be theorized about from other perspectives. The exercise of adopting the perspective of each of these traditions to analyze the other also makes us more aware of the limitations and specificity of academic theoretical perspectives derived from Western intellectual traditions.

## Sources

This study is based on textual and oral sources, as well as my own observations during extended periods of research in Ile-Ifẹ and Modakeķe, Nigeria (June–August 2011 and September–December 2013), and in Dakar and Medina Baye, Senegal (January–February 2012 and January–May 2014). The oral sources from Senegal come primarily from formal interviews with Tijani shaykhs conducted in Arabic and French, as well as formal interviews with disciples conducted primarily in French, but also in Arabic and English. A few group discussions and interviews in which I participated (through the kind translation of friends) took place in Wolof (the most common language of Dakar), but the lack of Wolof oral sources is a major gap in the source material. My primary access to the community was through the incredible generosity of the Kane family, the sons and grandchildren of Shaykha Maryam Niasse, the daughter of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. Through their mediation I was able to interview shaykhs from several different branches of the family and spiritual lineage of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and interact with a wide variety of disciples. Disciple interviews in Dakar primarily came from the time I spent in the zawiyas of Baba Lamine, Shaykh Mamour Insa, Shaykh Babacar N’Diaye, the home of Shaykha Maryam Niasse, and “Keur Baye” in Dakar. As for textual sources, I made frequent reference to the Tijani sourcebooks *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī*<sup>51</sup> and the collection *Aḥzāb wa Awrād*,<sup>52</sup> as well as the prose works of Shaykh Ibrahim, particularly his collection of letters, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il*;<sup>53</sup> his Qur’anic commentary, *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr*;<sup>54</sup> his *Kāshif al-Ilbās* (translated as *The Removal of Confusion*);<sup>55</sup> and Maigari’s edition of his *al-Sirr al-Akbar*.<sup>56</sup> Shaykh Ibrahim’s published collections of poetry—*Dawāwīn al-Sitt*, *Jāmi‘ al-jawāmi‘ al-dawāwīn*, and *Sayr al-qalb*—were also frequently consulted, but seldom cited in the present work (the translations and analyses of these poems form part of another work).<sup>57</sup> I was a participant observer in many communal prayers as well as gatherings both formal and informal in Medina Baye and Dakar, but as a noninitiate there were strict limits to my participation in these rites and discussions. As a matter of methodological integrity, I shared the drafts of my chapters on Tijani Sufism with the Anglophone disciples and shaykhs I interviewed, and have tried to incorporate their suggestions into the present work.

In Nigeria, oral sources came primarily from interviews and conversations with babalawo, especially Chief Ifarinwale Ogundiran, the Araba of Modakeķe, Professor A. F. Agboola of Obafẹmi Awolowo University, and Awo Fajimi Faniyi, which were primarily conducted in Yoruba with some English, as well as informal conversations with apprentices (*omọ awo*). I made video recordings of performances of a number of Ifa verses with the Araba of Modakeķe, and Ayodeji Ogunnaike’s digital database of Odu Ifa was another important oral source.<sup>58</sup> I was an observer, but not a participant, in

the Araba's daily practice of divination as well as several rites of worship and festivals. Textual collections of verses of Ifa such as William Bascom's *Ifa Divination*, Epega and Neimark's *The Sacred Ifa Oracle*, Wande Abimbola's books, and verses recorded in the works of Rowland Abiodun and Jacob Olupona were also important textual sources. In addition, I shared several of my ideas and chapters with the babalawo whom I interviewed and have tried to incorporate their feedback.

### The Present Work

The primary purpose of this book is to provide philosophical accounts of the “ways of knowing” of the branch of Tijani Sufi order founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and that of Ifa. That is, taking Hadot's definition of philosophy as a “way of life,” I propose to examine how each tradition defines, acquires, and verifies “knowledge” through various ritual and discursive means—or in Hadot's terms, through “spiritual exercises” and “philosophical discourse,” which can itself be a spiritual exercise. These accounts, for the most part, will be developed in the categories of the traditions themselves, and will attempt to represent the intellectual dimensions of these “ways of knowing” as a rigorously as possible.<sup>59</sup> Basically, I ask the representatives of each tradition: “What do you know?,” “How did you come to know it?” and “How do you know that you know it?” and critically investigate and “think with” or “think through”<sup>60</sup> their responses as well as those provided by the texts, orature, and practices of each tradition.

That is, I attempt to not only ask how each tradition defines different forms of knowledge in the ways that it does, but also why, intellectually, it does so. I endeavor to not only outline the means of acquiring knowledge, but ask how and why these means yield this knowledge, and I try to not only explain how these forms of knowledge are verified in each of these traditions, but also investigate the theories of verification in each tradition. Taking care to respect the plurality of voices and opinions, I construct a representation of the epistemology of *ma'rifa* among contemporary disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (chapters 2, 3, and 4) and of the epistemology of *imò ijinlẹ* (deep knowledge) of contemporary babalawo (priests of Ifa) (chapters 6, 7, and 8). While my goal is not to write an apology for or defense of either Ifa or Tijani Sufism, if I have done my job well and effectively communicated the ways in which these traditions “make sense” of and “make a case” for themselves, it may appear as such. This is because, following Ibn 'Arabi's lead, I make an effort to “learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his or her doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed in the specific mode in which it is correct for he or she who holds it, then I attempt to support it in the case of he or she who believes in it.”<sup>61</sup> I have generally not included critiques of the claims of the traditions in question, as I believe such

critiques first require the positive work of understanding them, a task that takes up the entirety of the present volume.

The secondary purpose of this work is, on the basis of these characterizations, to construct a comparison of Ifa and Tijani Sufism. Although currently neighbors in Nigeria, Benin, and some places in the African diaspora, Ifa and Tijani Sufism appear to have developed in radically different spiritual, intellectual, and cultural contexts.<sup>62</sup> However, the primary purpose of this comparative exercise is to examine each tradition from the perspective of the other, demonstrating how each tradition can and does serve as a critical, theoretical perspective that can analyze other perspectives. Moreover, the epistemologies of both traditions appear to share certain structural traits that make comparison not only possible, but potentially fruitful. Namely, the epistemologies of both traditions seem to be based on a kind of self-knowledge, one in which the knowing subject is identical with the known object. As such, these modes of self-knowledge are cultivated through various ritual practices, especially the watershed rites of initiation, which are believed to transform the knowing subject, leading to a kind of identification with the founder of the tradition, who is conceived of as the perfect embodiment of knowledge. It should be noted that this structure is in no way unique to these two traditions, but seems to be found in other religious traditions and forms of philosophy around the world. Thus, I attempt to construct an academic dialogue between contemporary perspectives from Ifa and Tijani Sufism, to complement and perhaps enrich the limited but ongoing dialogues between the two traditions outside of the academy.

That being said, I try to guard against facile and superficial comparisons through both the structure and method of this comparison. Following Izutsu, I divide the work into three parts: the first is an exploration of the epistemology of *ma'rifa* (direct knowledge) in Tijani Sufism, the second is an exploration of knowledge (specifically *imo ijinle*, or deep knowledge) in Ifa, and only in the third section do I attempt a comparison of the two traditions. Furthermore, this third part is further subdivided into four parts: In the first part, I present the opinions of practitioners of Ifa on Tijani Sufism, and then conduct a comparison of the two traditions from the perspective of Ifa. In the second part, I present the opinions of representatives of the Tijani tradition on Ifa, and then conduct a comparison from the perspective of Tijani Sufism. In the third part, I attempt to compare, and use the two traditions and Ibn 'Arabi's work to "think through," certain topics that emerge from the descriptions of the traditions given in the first and second parts of the book. Finally, in the fourth and final section of the book, I take some of the points where Ifa and Tijani Sufism appear to converge and suggest ways in which their perspectives can expand conceptions of these topics among contemporary academics.

## Metaphysics and Epistemology

I decided to focus my research on epistemology or “ways of knowing” in these traditions because it links their metaphysical doctrines and the rituals and practices designed to realize or actualize them in the souls and bodies of their adepts. Without an understanding of the epistemology of these traditions, one can study the doctrines of Sufism and remain baffled by its rituals (What does the oneness of being have to do with sitting in a dark room and repeating an Arabic phrase?), or conversely learn all about the rituals of Ifa and remain mystified by its mythology (What do incantations and sacrifices have to do with the relationship between the Supreme God and other deities?). Moreover, as the site where doctrine meets practice, epistemology can provide important insights into both and their relationship to one another.

From a certain point of view, the metaphysics or ontology of a given philosophical system is the result of the application of a particular epistemology: it is a knowledge arrived at through certain means. However, this epistemology itself is dependent on a particular metaphysics or ontology, because this particular ontology will, in turn, determine a psychology or anthropology: the nature of the knowing subject. In order to know something, I have to put some practice of knowing into action. For example, I may come to the conclusion that electrons exist through the application of a certain epistemological process. However, this epistemological process is itself determined by a priori assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge (i.e., messages from angels in dreams about superstring theory may not count as valid knowledge). I have chosen to focus on the epistemological pole of this philosophical loop, because it allows me to bracket some of the more difficult metaphysical disparities between these African traditions and contemporary Western academic worldviews and to explain how they arise.

### CONCLUSION

However, the point of all this research and theory and critical engagement with philosophy is to produce a work that would be able to speak to that seventeen-year-old back in the bookstore. Hopefully, the present project can add to the growing literature that provides introductions to the intellectual dimensions and philosophical discourse of non-Western worldviews and traditions. Such literature is important not only because it introduces alternative perspectives on reality, knowledge, ethics, and so forth into Western discourses, but because these perspectives can be compelling and transformative in their own right. At the very least, they can make us aware of unexamined



assumptions and prejudices, and perhaps they can even help us “untie our knots,” as Ibn ‘Arabi suggests. But this can only happen if we allow ourselves to take these traditions not only as anthropological or historical data, but seriously as “philosophical” accounts of knowledge and knowing—if we take them “on their own terms”—much as we are trained to do with Western theorists and philosophers. Such serious consideration does not require that we embrace these traditions or blindly accept all their claims, but rather that we acknowledge the possibility that our difficulties in understanding them may have more to do with our history and training than with the particularities of the traditions themselves. As Amadou Hampâté Bâ writes, “To discover a new world, one must be able to forget one’s own; otherwise one merely carries that along with one and does not ‘keep one’s ears open.’ The Africa of the old initiates warns the young researcher, through the mouth of Tierno Bokar, the sage of Bandiagara: ‘If you wish to know who I am, if you wish me to teach you what I know, cease for a while to be what you are, and forget what you know.’”<sup>63</sup> This is much more easily said than done, but I hope the following chapters can facilitate this kind of serious consideration and reflection. This is indeed a serious endeavor; for to take the epistemologies of Tijani Sufism and Ifa seriously on their own terms means to be open to possibilities that may seem foreign, strange, or uncomfortable, such as the possibility of a “deep knowledge” that is a discovery or remembrance of one’s true self, at once one’s origin and destiny.