

# Reflections of West-African thought Traditions in the Context of German Enlightenment: Amo as Cross-cultural Philosopher

**Martin Odei Ajei**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7258-8021>

University of Ghana

odeiajei@gmail.com; majei@ug.edu.gh

**Werner Kahl**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0158-2810>

Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main

W.Kahl@em.uni-frankfurt.de

## Abstract

This paper explores discernible resonances of West-African thought traditions in the philosophical writings of Amo. We highlight a combination of religio-theological and philosophical motifs that point in the direction of an impregnation of Amo's thinking by the encyclopaedia of his place of birth. Amo was neither decidedly a European nor an African philosopher, as controversies had it in the past. To a certain degree, he was both. From traces of this awareness of his origin in the coastal area of today's Ghana, we argue for his place in African philosophy by pursuing the thesis that he should be appropriately appreciated as a self-confident West-African, educated in German philosophical traditions and critically engaged in enlightenment philosophy.

**Keywords:** Anton Wilhelm Amo; African philosophy; German enlightenment; African traditions; history of philosophy

## Introductory Note

The history of the reception of Amo by cultural theorists and philosophers alike discloses tendencies of using Amo for a variety of ideological programmes. Lacunae, in his biography, invites ideologically driven fantasies to fill out empty spaces in order to arrive at narratives that suit the purposes of the respective narrator. This serves as a warning to distinguish facts from fiction, and to delineate the import of Amo's written works, notes and other documents from secondary information on Amo. In our view, a fruitful interpretation of Amo should constantly show awareness of its constructional activity, endeavour to carefully excavate possible hidden or subconscious agendas, and mark suggestions as more or less probable.

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Amo's academic writings are difficult to understand. Not only because they were written in a rather abstract Latin style, but also and especially because the range of meaning and relevance of his philosophical expressions can only appropriately be appreciated within the context of the philosophical and theological discourses and conventions of his time. And that poses a challenge because one needs to compare the other philosophical works of Amo's time—not only those of the few famous ones by influential figures, but also the many forgotten ones, including his doctoral thesis. Amo's work was by no means the only neglected philosophical work of the 18th century.<sup>1</sup> What is needed is a "thick description" of Amo's life and work that also traces his correspondences and reflections of his life and work in other documents in order to be able to situate his work within the given and evolving constellations of his time.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, it will not be possible to offer a comprehensive discussion of Amo's work. We, therefore, pursue a narrower aim of calling attention to a number of philosophical decisions and expressions that support a suggestion that Amo every now and again wrote with the traditions of thought of his place of origin in mind.

## Biographical Evidence for Amo's Links to Knowledge in, from and about Africa

### Date of Birth

With the data that we have, it is impossible to affirm with certitude the year of Amo's birth. We simply do not know. The, at times, proposed year 1703 is nothing but a guess, and possibly a bad one. It is the result of a combination of two pieces of information from the 18th century: First, the 1782 *account of a report* of the Swiss Henri-David Gallandat about his encounter with Amo at Axim in 1753.<sup>3</sup> In this we read, i.a., that

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- 1 The most important German academic review magazine in the first half of the 18th century, the (*Nova*) *Acta Eruditorum (supplementa)*, does not list any review of Amo's published works. Obviously, Amo's works did not make any impact in academia in his time.
  - 2 Cf. the work of the German philosopher Dieter Henrich on research into constellations of philosophers of past times (German: *Konstellationsforschung*): Dieter Henrich, "Konstellationsforschung zur klassischen deutschen Philosophie. Motiv—Ergebnis—Probleme—Perspektiven—Begriffsbildung," in Martin Mulrow and Marcelo Stamm (eds.), *Konstellationsforschung*, Frankfurt a.M. 2005, 15–30.
  - 3 It is important to note that we do not have Gallandat's narration in the original. It was Isaac Winckelman who gave a Dutch account of Gallandat's biographical notes ("in seyn dagverhaal") in the context of a commemoration of Gallandat's life (1732–1782) in the year of the latter's death. There is a slight inconsistency in his account: While he situates the encounter explicitly during the second journey at sea of Gallandat in 1753, he states just a few lines before that this journey took place *one* year after the first journey in 1751 during which Gallandat experienced a severe storm at sea. Also, while the report of the storm is *quoted* from Gallandat's diary, the report of his encounter with Amo is authored by Winckelman himself. Cf. Isaac Winckelman's report in the journal *Verhandelingen uitgegeven door het Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen te Vlissingen* (1782), 19–20.

Amo was at that time *about* 50 years of age.<sup>4</sup> And second, the remark in the entry of the church-book that recorded, *inter alia*, baptisms at the Saltzthal-Chapel close to Wolfenbüttel, according to which Amo was a “small African boy” (“ein kleiner Mohr”) by the time of his baptism. One should note that both are imprecise information. All we can gather from this information is that Amo, at the time of his baptism on June 29 of 1708 (not 1707),<sup>5</sup> was no more a toddler and not yet an adolescent. According to this information, he would have been older than four and younger than 10 years of age.

Also, the circumstances of his translocation from his place of birth (on the western coast of what is today’s Ghana) to Amsterdam, and from there to the duchy of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (in what is today’s Germany) are unclear. Theories range from Amo being sent by his family to Amsterdam for education to him being abducted, enslaved and brought to Amsterdam against his family’s will.<sup>6</sup> What is clear is that he came into the service of the duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, possibly not in 1707 but sometime in the first half of 1708. The report of Amo’s request to the Dutch West India Company from 1746 to get a free passage back to Axim, which was deliberated in December 1746 and granted, mentions that Amo was brought into Holland in 1707 from Axim by a certain Bodel who took Amo to Braunschweig (where this Bodel died) and that Amo came *afterwards* into the service of the Duke of Braunschweig.<sup>7</sup> Other sources identify

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4 In Winckelman’s account of the report of the Swiss Henri-David Gallandat about his encounter with Amo at Axim in 1753, we read, *inter alia*, that Amo was at that time about 50 years of age, that he was in Amsterdam in 1707, that he stayed about 30 years in Europe, and that he was presented as a gift to the duke of Braunschweig. We are not told by whom Amo was presented as a gift. But what Gallandat’s report and that of the Dutch West India Company report reflecting Amo’s request for a passage back home disclose, is that the duration of his stay in Europe was in fact 40 years, from 1707 until 1747. This is so, even if we grant that the 1746 Dutch West India Company report should carry more historical value than the 1782 summary of Gallandat’s 1753 encounter with Amo.

5 Burchard Brentjes, followed by many to this day without checking the church registers in its original, maintained that Amo was baptised in 1707, cf. his *Anton Wilhelm Amo. Der schwarze Philosoph in Halle*, Leipzig 1976, 29 and 80. Upon checking the church registers, the following researchers insist that Amo was baptised in 1708: Norbert Lochner, “Anton Wilhelm Amo: A Ghana scholar in eighteenth century Germany,” in *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1958), 169–179, here: 170; William Abraham, “The Life and times of Anton Wilhelm Amo,” in *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, Vol. 7, No. 7 (1964), 60–81, here: 64; Ingeborg Kittel, “Mohren als Hofbediente und Soldaten im Herzogtum Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel,” in *Braunschweigisches Jahrbuch*, 46 (1965), 78–103, here: 85 (even though she claims in the beginning of her article that she relies on primary sources, including church registers, she seems to follow Lochner here); Stephen Menn and Justin E. H. Smith, *Anton Wilhelm Amo’s Philosophical Dissertations on Mind and Body*, edited, translated and with an Introduction, Oxford 2020, 15: “Having consulted the original document, we can confirm that Kittel is correct.” Their suggestion that Kittel “seems to be the only previous scholar ... to correctly date Amo’s baptism to 1708” is, however, incorrect.

6 Cf. Abraham, *Life*, 61–64. Cf. in this respect also the fascinating research into the possible, and probable, family origins of Amo by Justin E. H. Smith, “Anton Wilhelm Amo: Basic Writings.” Accessed February 6, 2022. <https://www.jehsmith.com/files/amo.pdf>.

7 Cf. Menn and Smith, “Amo’s Philosophical Dissertations,” 38.

the person who brought Amo to Holland with Christian Bodel, who died in his hometown Rochlitz in Saxony in January 1708.<sup>8</sup>

The approximated date of Amo's birth would have to be *around* 1700, in contrast to the much cited definite date of 1703.<sup>9</sup> If Amo was about seven years old by the time of his departure from Axim, he would have incorporated part of the encyclopaedia of his initial cultural setting, in a wider semiotic sense, i.e., including language, proverbs, songs, fables, traditions and customs; even if their analytical significance were obscure to him at that age. The older he was at the time of his departure from West-Africa, the greater would have been his preparedness to internalise and memorise structures as well as traces of the culture of his ethnic origin.

### **Naming and Self-designation**

That he retained his Nzema name "Amo" as an African throughout his 40-year stay in Europe—from being a paid servant at the duke's palace to being a student and eventually a lecturer—is unusual when compared to the general naming of Africans in Europe at the time. Of the 16 known first generation Africans who served in the duchy of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel between 1650 and 1750, only one other person also carried his birth name, i.e., Matthias Jubat.<sup>10</sup>

In his publications, on handwritten notes and in university registers, Amo usually added his two baptismal names that were reminiscent of the names of the two dukes who served as his godparents. However, it is notable that he abbreviated them to A.W. at times, while he spelled out Amo at all times. Additionally, he usually qualified his name by additions such as "African"; "from Guinea"; "from the nation of Africa"; "from Axim"; or a combination of those. Arguably, all these indicate a constant awareness of his origin and belongingness, an awareness that may be taken to reflect concurrence with the contention common to the Akan cultural communities on the West African coast that a person's name signifies more than an individual's identity. More than this, a name encodes one's site of communion with fellow humans and other beings that occupy various locations on a continuum of existence. A name, thus, signifies one's origins or the indelible reference point for one's relationship with physical and metaphysical existence.

### **African Company and Access to Literature on Africa**

Contemporary with Amo in Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel lived the African family of Mohr Rudolf August (enslaved by a Jewish merchant from Portugal and freed by the

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8 Cf. Menn and Smith, "Amo's Philosophical Dissertations," 14–15.

9 Cf. also Monika Firla, "Anton Wilhelm Amo (Nzema, heute Republik Ghana). Kammermohr—Privatdozent für Philosophie—Wahrsager," in *TRIBUS Jahrbuch* 51 (2002), 56–89, here: 59: "Realistischer ist es deshalb, ein Geburtsjahr um 1700 oder eher noch früher anzunehmen."

10 Kittel, Mohren, 87.

Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel) and his wife Juliana Rosina, both also paid servants at the palace, together with their nine children.<sup>11</sup> In addition, other African servants at the duchy, at the same location or in nearby cities and palaces and in German-speaking regions, who were contemporary with Amo, must have been in the hundreds.<sup>12</sup>

In 2020, Monika Firla discussed a tiny publication of Amo, recently discovered by her at the Herzog August library in Wolfenbüttel. It is a four-page printed edition of a poem in German by Amo, written on the occasion of the recovery from illness of Duke Herzog August Wilhelm of Braunschweig-Lüneburg in July 1729.<sup>13</sup> On the front cover, the author is not only introduced as a student of law and philosophy but also as librarian and secretary of the duke! In this function, Amo was well acquainted with that famous library, and he would have had easy access to the then famous travel literature on Africa, such as the compilation work of the Dutch-man Olfert Dapper (Dutch 1698/German 1700) and especially the description of the coast of Guinea by the Dutch trader Willem Bosman who had spent 14 years at the Gold Coast, eventually as highest ranking representative of the Dutch West India Company at Elmina (1704/1708).<sup>14</sup>

Bosman's work is by no means innocent; it served the function of making trade more profitable for Europeans, i.e., especially the slave trade. At times, he demonstrates some knowledge of West-African cultures and traditions, which leads him to correct some European views, e.g., in his No. 10 letter concerning religion, he describes the belief of the local people in the abilities of a powerful traditional priest who lived further inland. Even though Bosman himself demonises this figure, he nevertheless points out that the local people regard the traditional priest as a "gift of God."<sup>15</sup> It is indeed unreasonable to suppose that a studious young African man like Amo, who was much aware and presumably proud of his West-African origin, would not have read Bosman's book, which was the most famous treatise on Guinea at that time.

In his academic work, Amo touches on the subjects of slavery, superstition and the question of the presence of theological thinking among non-European and non-Christian

11 Kittel, Mohren, 80–82.

12 Cf., in addition to the references in Kittel, Mohren, also Peter Martin, *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren*, Hamburg 1993.

13 Monika Firla, *Drei Texte aus A. W. Amos Feder in deutscher Sprache 1729–37*, Stuttgart 2020.

14 Willem Bosman, *A new and accurate description of the Coast of Guinea divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts*, London 1707. (Dutch original: *Nauwkeurige beschryving van de Guinese Goud- Tand- en Slave-kust*, Utrecht 1704; German version: *Reyse nach Gvinea, oder, Ausführliche Beschreibung dasiger Gold-Gruben, Elephanten-Zähh und Sclaven-Handels*, Hamburg 1708.)

15 Page 190 in the German edition. He explicitly corrects the view of some other European writers according to whom the local people were devoted to the devil. They rather, says Bosman, in their own understanding fear the devil and aim at warding him, and also other evil spirits, off by means of ceremonies, rituals and festivals. By implication, Bosman suggests that the people in fact claim to believe in God. He, however, denounces their attitude towards the spirit world as expressions of superstition and miracle belief.

peoples.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, it is not a necessary condition that Amo had read the work of Bosman to inform his own thinking on West-Africa and give it direction. He might have relied on his experiences and exchanges with fellow African servants and learned men and other literature at the duchy and at university. What we wish to highlight is the point that Amo had access to resources to ignite and develop the content of the encyclopaedia that he carried from childhood, and so the traces of African thought present in his work could not be there fortuitously.

## Impregnations of African Thinking and the Value of African Thought in Amo's Works

The previous section examined the background circumstances that ushered Amo into German philosophical and theological debates. In this section we highlight how these circumstances could facilitate our understanding of his philosophical positions, which are examined in this section and the following section. In his lengthy philosophical work—the tractate *De arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi*, published in Halle in 1738—Amo gives an overview of the content, function, extension and limits of philosophical thinking. Comparing it with other philosophical works of the first half of the 18th century, this tractate appears like a compendium for teaching purposes.

In General Part, chapter one, division IX §§ 2–7, Amo shortly treats theology as one of four faculties. He explicitly states that apart from the theology of Christians, “there are other theologies—that of the heathens, that of the Turks and others according to the variety of peoples.” Theology “of the heathens” would refer to theological reasoning among peoples with a religion aside from Christianity, Judaism and Islam, including, for example, peoples from West-Africa. With theology “of the Turks” he refers to theological discourses in Islam. Their existence in the form of numerous works, some of which were available in Latin translation, could be known to European academics at the time. Also, the Latin version of the Quran itself of 1142/43 was widely available in Europe after it was for the first time printed in Basel in 1543.<sup>17</sup>

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16 A reviewer of this paper cautioned our usage of “non” in this sentence. In his view, this usage is philosophically problematic as it places the other as a counterfoil of “Europe” and “Christianity” and as such denigrates the metaphysical and moral reality of the other in comparison to the “European” and “Christian.” Indeed, Amo himself used the words “African” and also “heathen” (to describe practitioners of other faiths other than Christianity). We acknowledge the precaution of the reviewer, but nevertheless consider the notions non-European and non-Christian appropriate to denote other peoples and faiths of equal metaphysical and moral standing as Europeans and Christians.

17 The history behind this printed edition makes transparent the interests involved in its production. It was Martin Luther himself who convinced the city council in Basel of the value of this endeavour: As Luther remarked in his foreword to the first edition, it should serve the needs of knowing, and attacking the mindset of the enemy. Cf. Hartmut Bobzin, *Der Koran. Eine Einführung*, München 2007, 13–14.

The fact that Amo acknowledges the existence of non-Christian theologies has, at times, been over-interpreted, and its possible implications have been blown out of proportion as suggesting that Amo was original here and critical of contemporary theologians.<sup>18</sup> These are attempts to overrate the importance of Amo's work at his time. They betray an ignorance of the philosophical and theological discourses that formed the context of Amo's philosophical thinking. In fact, proponents of European oriental studies that developed around 1700 could already affirm at the beginning of the 18th century that, e.g., Muslims had a theology.<sup>19</sup> And the most comprehensive encyclopaedia of the 18th century, Johann Heinrich Zedler's *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (1731–1754) discusses in volume 43 (1745) in particular entries “the theology of the godless ... unbelievers”; “the theology of the heathen”; “the theology of the Jews”; and even “the theology of the devils.” In these entries the unknown author(s) refer(s) to literature predating Amo's work. Underlying here, and also presupposed by Amo, is the fundamental distinction of revealed theology (exclusively Christian) versus natural theologies. Only the former would yield salvation, and Amo included himself in the group of Christians (cf. the proposition of § 2 at the beginning of his paragraphs on theology). It would have been extraordinary and potentially suicidal if Amo had also subsumed theologies of other religions and ethnic groups under revealed theology. Unfortunately for us, Amo is not explicit here. Amo must have been aware of the intense scholarly debates that took place on the subject, especially around 1710, in which the Halle theologian Christian Lange played a central role.

While Amo does not specify the quality of the theologies of others, he also does not mark them as expressions of superstitious beliefs, as was prevalent amongst theologians at his time, especially in Halle. One can reasonably infer from Amo's statement that he considered philosophy also to be an occupation that is not confined to European thought.

In a lecture on the ethics or practical philosophy of the Chinese in 1721, the influential early enlightenment philosopher at Halle, Christian Wolff, claimed that Chinese ethics is both reasonable and valid and that it is the product of reason and high moral standards on the part of the leaders alone.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Wolff opted for a “Vernunftethik” (ethics of,

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18 E.g., Aywovi Emmanuel Edeh, *Die Grundlagen der philosophischen Schriften von Amo. In welchem Verhältnis steht Amo zu Christian Wolff, daß man ihn als “einen führnehmlichen Wolffianer” bezeichnen kann?* Essen 2003, 150–152.

19 Adrian Reland, *Zwey Bücher von der Türkischen oder Mohammedischen Religion: Davon das erste ist ein kurtzer Begriff der Moham[m]edischen Theologie; Im zweyten aber Viele Dinge untersucht werden, die man bißher den Mohammedanern fälschlich beygemessen hat, Nebst dessen curieusen Tractat von dem Mohammedischen Krieges-Recht*, Hannover 1716 (Dutch original: 1705). Cf. Stefan Leder, “Impulse der Islamrezeption: Von der Aufklärung bis zum deutschen Vormärz,” in Irene A. Diekmann, Thomas Gerber and Julius H. Schoeps (eds.): *Der Orient im Okzident. Sichtweisen und Beeinflussungen*, Verlag Berlin Brandenburg, Potsdam 2003, 109–141.

20 Gerhard Biller, “Biographie und Bibliographie,” in R. Theis und Alexander Aichele (eds.), *Handbuch Christian Wolff*, Wiesbaden 2018, 5–31, esp. 13–17.

from and by reason) that would be valid “even if there was no God.” Wolff’s contention that there could be a viable moral system among *non-Christians* that did not rely on divine revelation, was an abomination to the pietistic Lutheran theologians August Hermann Francke and Christian Lange at Halle. They accused Wolff of atheism, and as a result, in 1723, Wolff was ousted from his position and driven out of Prussia by the king. As compared to Wolff, Amo’s note—that also other peoples with their cultures and religions had theologies—suggests that he could have argued from a contrary perspective arriving at the same result. The conclusion would be similar; for both Wolff and Amo, there could be high value in peoples and intellectual cultures beyond Europe and *Christianity*. In this respect, Amo—like Wolff—had joined the latest developments in European thinking that had begun to distinguish facts from fiction with regard to the description and representation of other cultures, trying to give justice to what has been termed in ethnology (in the 20th century) an emic, i.e., insider perspective. In addition, this perspective could result in an appreciation of other societies, cultures, and their systems of thought and belief, as in the case of Wolff and Amo.

It seems plausible that it was Amo’s *cross-cultural* experiences<sup>21</sup> as a translocated person from West-Africa, his memories of his place of birth and early upbringing, and his reflective knowledge of West-African cultures that prepared him for such a position.

That it was for Amo of high value to argue for a theological foundation of practical philosophy, is corroborated by the German dissertation (2002) of Yawovi Emmanuel Edeh, originally from Togo.<sup>22</sup> He compares Amo’s works with those of Wolff, and he comes to the conclusion that Amo, contrary to Wolff, argues for an ethics that has its foundation in divine will. While this holds generally true, the antithesis to Wolff should also not be overstretched, as the latest studies of the theological work of Wolff suggest.<sup>23</sup>

That a theological grounding of philosophy is a central feature of Amo’s work, is further evident in the very opening sentences of Amo’s tractate. He starts his chapter I, division I (On Intention in General) with the following observation, in the English translation of his works: “Apart from God, the first cause of all things, every end is the effect of an intention already carried forward to its end.” In the immediately following short first demonstration, he recalls the phrase “apart from God” three times. In the Latin original, it reads: “*praeter Deum*.” It is remarkable that this phrase exactly renders the most known traditional Akan expression and symbol for the extraordinary potency of God:

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21 “Cross-cultural” renders the German “transkulturell” which has been suggested by Wolfgang Welsch in the discourse on interculturality and multiculturalism. “Transkulturalität,” according to Welsch, describes more precisely the fact of hybridity in cultures and persons than the term “Interkulturalität.” cf. Wolfgang Welsch, “Transkulturalität. Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen,” in Irmela Schneider and Christian W. Christian (eds.), *Hybridkultur: Medien, Netze, Künste*, Köln 1997, 67–90.

22 Edeh, *Grundlagen*.

23 Robert Theis, “Theologie,” in R. Theis und Alexander Aichele (eds.), *Handbuch Christian Wolff*, Wiesbaden 2018, 219–250.

*Gye Nyame*—except God, meaning unless God is involved, nothing is possible or, in a positive formulation: (only) with God is anything possible.

## Re-membering Amo to African Philosophy

In this section we shift from a more historical perspective—Amo’s German context—to a contemporary debate—his current reception as an African thinker. The notion of “re-membering” employed here alludes to bringing Amo into the fold of the community of African philosophers, to re-admitting him to membership of the community after attempts to exclude him from it by consigning his work exclusively to early enlightenment philosophy. Such recognition, Hountondji suggests, is one of the real tasks of current African scholarship.<sup>24</sup>

Hountondji’s suggestion defies Kwame Gyekye’s assertion that “The cultural or social basis (or relevance) of the philosophical enterprise seems to indicate that if a philosophy produced by a modern African has no basis in the culture and experience of African peoples, then it cannot appropriately claim to be [a work of] African philosophy,” and that per this definition, Amo’s works cannot count as African philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Gyekye can be taken to be stipulating three conditions that must be met for a work to qualify as African philosophy. First, the author must be African, presumably by birth or by acquiring citizenship of some African country. Additionally, the work must deliberate, or be premised, on the culture or experience of Africans, or both. Finally, it must display a philosophical character.<sup>26</sup> These conditions have been considered overly stringent among alternative definitions of African philosophy. For instance, Wiredu assigns a legitimate claim to membership of the African philosophical corpus to a work that “exhibits elements of the African tradition,” irrespective of the nature of its content.<sup>27</sup>

But we believe that one would nevertheless be obliged to accept Amo’s work as a specie of African philosophy and, therefore, to rightfully consider him as the first known academic “great African philosopher of the modern age,”<sup>28</sup> even if one proceeds on Gyekye’s terms. Why is Gyekye’s exclusion of Amo untenable? It is primarily because he was an African whose work is philosophical in the manner defined, and we can trace

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24 Hountondji, P. 2021. “Re-Africanizing Anton Wilhelm Amo,” in *The Faculty of Sensing: Thinking with, through and by Anton Wilhelm Amo*, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, et al. (eds.). Kunstverein Braunschweig: Mousse Publishing, 230–244, 231

25 Gyekye, K. 1996. “An Essay on African Philosophical Thought,” Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 33–34

26 This means that its subject matter must not be merely narrated and interpreted, but there should also be an evaluative component conducted with meticulous argumentation.

27 Wiredu, K. 2004. “Amo’s Critique of Descartes’ Philosophy of Mind,” in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 206

28 This is the assessment of the authors of a plaque in front of the Philosophy Department of the University of Ghana, dedicated in 1982 by the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg in the (then) German Democratic Republic.

a journey of ideas in Ghanaian philosophy to which Amo deliberated. The discussed documentary evidence on Amo's self-identification as an African counts in tracing this journey. In addition to this is his academic career. The earliest known of this occurs in a report on November 28, 1729, by the Dean of the School of Law of the University of Halle, Johann Peter von Ludewig, documenting Amo's conduct of "a public disputation"<sup>29</sup> that defended the rights of Africans in Europe against slavery on the grounds of the illegality and injustice of slavery. The theme of the work defended is reported to be "*de jure Maurorum in Europa*," translated by Abraham as "About the Rights of Africans in Europe."<sup>30</sup>

Although unanimous agreement persists among Amo scholars that this event occurred, there is less concurrence on whether it was a disputation (*disputatio*) or a dissertation. The former is an oral defence of a work, whereas the latter is a text with an identifiable author. Thus, the point at stake in the difference between the two kinds of work is a conclusive indication of the authorship of the work in question. Smith and Menn explain that the expectation of a defender of a disputation, at the time, could merely be that she acquits herself of her argumentation ability by defending an argument authored by someone else, whereas a dissertation bears evidence of the definite identity of its author.<sup>31</sup> Menn and Smith suggest that Amo conducted a disputation, which leaves in question whether he was the author of the work; whereas Abraham describes the event as a "dissertation."<sup>32</sup> Since the work is not extant, it is impossible to resolve this question unequivocally, but it is difficult to envisage Amo's utter inactivity in the authorship of the text; for one must grant agency to an oral defender of a work by acknowledging as "authorship" the instantaneous resourcefulness brought to bear in the process of oral reasoning in support of an idea. Imaginative responses in the spur of the moment of oral argumentation *are* authorship and deserve credit if successful, as the event is reported to have been by the dean—it earned Amo the status of candidate of private and public law.

Whether a dissertation or disputation, Amo is known to have advanced an anti-slavery argument to the effect that Africans were entitled to identical immunities and privileges that erstwhile European vassals of Rome enjoyed. For, African kings were likewise subject to Roman Imperial law, and if such law forbade the enslavement of European vassals to it, then this condition was applicable to all individuals who were subject to such law. African kings held Imperial Patents and bore allegiance to them. Hence, the enslavement of Africans had to be contrary to accepted laws. Even the barest level of goodwill will hardly deny Amo's intention of speaking on behalf of Africans in defence of *de jure Maurorum*. Accordingly, this defence can be considered, even if partially, to respond to Gyekye's condition of a work based "in the culture and experience of African

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29 Smith and Menn, *Amo's Philosophical Dissertations*, 23.

30 Abraham, "The Life and Times of Anton Wilhelm Amo," 69, fn. 19.

31 Smith and Menn, *Amo's Philosophical Dissertations*, 24.

32 Abraham, "The Life and Times of Anton Wilhelm Amo," 68–71.

peoples.” Indeed, Hountondji considers this defence to attest to Amo’s activism in support of Black rights. In his view it was a statement, in contemporary parlance, that “Black lives matter!”<sup>33</sup> Hence, simply by virtue of his self-identification and philosophical rejection of the illegal and unethical nature of slavery, Amo qualifies as an African philosopher, also on Gyekye’s terms.

Additionally, a Resolution by the Commission on Philosophy at the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, held in Rome in 1959, quoted by Smith and Menn, declares that: a) “the African philosopher must base his inquiries upon the fundamental certainty that the Western philosophic approach is not the only possible one; and therefore ... that b) the African philosopher should learn from the traditions, tales, myths, and proverbs of his people, so as to draw from them the laws of a true African wisdom complementary to the other forms of human wisdom to bring out the specific categories of African thought.”<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, Amo emphatically argued the expansion of theological and philosophical status to include the work of *non-Europeans*, and could not plausibly have excluded Africans from this category. Further, c) as indicated, the import of the section of the resolution quoted above is inferentially reasonable from Amo’s work. In our view, the above factors alone suffice to count Amo’s work as “part of our [African] living history.”<sup>35</sup>

The endeavour to connect Amo’s work with African thought is certainly speculative, but not utterly devoid of theoretical support. Psychological theories of personality and aspects of the philosophy of memory provide a reason for not overlooking Amo’s debt to the encyclopaedia of knowledge in the form of the traditions, tales, myths, and proverbs that he carried with him from the shores of Axim, however rudimentary these may have been at the point of his departure.

Freud’s deterministic theory of mind claims that current thought or conduct is never accidental or haphazard, as such thought or conduct is invariably determined by causes in the mind of which their subject need not be conscious. For there are mental states of which we are unconscious<sup>36</sup> but which are a repository of experiences that can initiate action in spite of whether or not we consciously desire that action. Memories are preserved whole within the unconscious of the individual psyche<sup>37</sup>; and a characteristic of the contents of the unconscious is that they are “not altered by the passage of time.”<sup>38</sup>

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33 Hountondji, “Re-Africanizing Anton Wilhelm Amo,” 235.

34 Cf. Menn and Smith, *Amo’s Philosophical Dissertations*, 51 fn 141.

35 Hountondji, “Re-Africanizing Anton Wilhelm Amo,” 244.

36 Freud distinguishes this from the “preconscious” mental state, which contains experiences that can readily become conscious (L. Stevenson, 153). For instance, experiences that are recalled to memory when appropriate reside, before their recollection, in the preconscious mind.

37 Hutton, P. H. (1993). *History as an Art of Memory*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 7. Also, Hutton, P. H. (1994). Sigmund Freud and Maurice Halbwachs: “The Problem of Memory in Historical Psychology.” *The History Teacher* 27 (2): 145–158, 148.

38 Freud, S. (1915). *The Unconscious*, Standard Edition, Vol. 14: 159–190, London: Hogarth, 187

Thus, nothing that a person has experienced is unretrievable. This perspective grounds Freud's account of personality formation, which assigns a pivotal role to past experience; experiences in the first five years of life, although apparently forgotten, lurk in the unconscious mind and can exert decisive influence on a person's mental orientation and character.<sup>39</sup> Thus, early childhood experiences are scaffolding that shapes what and how we become.

Bernard Russell's reflections on the relationship between autographical memory<sup>40</sup> and self-consciousness strengthen the effort at re-Africanising Amo through the medium of Freud's theories. Russell defines memory as "past occurrences in the history of an organism"<sup>41</sup> and maintains that mental images that constitute [autographical] memories are accompanied by a feeling of belief which may be expressed in the words "this happened." The mere occurrence of images without this feeling of belief constitutes imagination; it is this element of belief that is "distinctive in memory."<sup>42</sup> Russell further explains that the content of such "believing is a specific feeling or sensation or a complex of sensations," and that the enactment of "the reference to the past lies in the belief-feeling."<sup>43</sup>

Our view is that enough facts exist to support the view that Amo had "a feeling or sensation of a complex of sensations" to indicate to him that "this happened": he asserted being African, which means he could not have renounced the fact of his subjection to a language and cultural resources as a child. A continuation of the "happening" cannot be ruled out by virtue of his contact with Africans. It is unlikely that all of these, in addition to his lived experience as an African, would be irrelevant to his interest in the legal status of Africans in Europe in 18th century Europe, and to African thought.

These considerations strengthen Wiredu's conjecture that the foundations of Amo's critique of Descartes' assignment of sensation to the concept of spirit (or mind) may be in residual commitments that he absorbed from his early life in Akan culture: "May it not be," Wiredu asks "that some recess of Amo's consciousness was impregnated by the concept of mind implicit in the language and thought of the Akans?"<sup>44</sup> He continues:

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39 Stevenson, L. and Haberman, D., 1998, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 157.

40 These are explicit, declarative and episodic memories: This means, according to Bermudez, that they involve retaining specific occurrences that one experienced at first hand, which one can retrieve and be aware of doing so: Bermudez, J. L. 2017. "Memory and Self-consciousness," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*. London: Routledge, 180–192, 181.

41 Russell, 1921. *The Analysis of Mind*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 55.

42 Russell, 1921, 176.

43 Russell, 1921, 186.

44 Wiredu, K. "Amo's Critique of Descartes' Philosophy of Mind," 204.

[I]n the Akan conceptual framework, insofar as this can be determined from the Akan language and corpus of communal beliefs, the feeling of a sensation does not fall within the domain of the mental, if by “mental” we mean “having to do with the mind.” Mind is intellectual, not sensate. This is obvious even at the pre-analytical level of Akan discourse. The Akan word for mind is *adwene*, and I would be most surprised to meet an Akan who thinks one feels a sensation—a pain, for instance—with his or her *adwene*. No! You feel pain with your *honam* (flesh), not with your *adwene*. The latter is just for thinking. And this is exactly what Amo seems to have been arguing as far as his thesis of apatheia is concerned.<sup>45</sup>

Wiredu’s speculation on the possible sources of the orientation of Amo’s philosophy of mind cannot be dismissed cavalierly, even if other Akan philosophers dispute his conclusion on the nature of mind. An intensely debated theme in Ghanaian philosophy, and in African philosophy generally, is the nature of the relationship and the points of convergence and divergence between spirit/matter and mind/body. Widespread disagreement occurs within Ghanaian philosophy between Nkrumah and Wiredu, on the one side, who espouse materialist interpretation, and Danquah, Abraham and Gyekye, on the other side, who may be considered to hold various degrees of an idealist position. Of younger philosophers, Safro Kwame and Martin Ajei align more closely to the materialist camp, whereas Hasskei Majeed and Caesar Atuire may be considered to be subscribers to the opposing camp. This, naturally, is an abbreviated categorisation, but the nuances of these alignments are less important for our purpose here than the principal point that Amo predates this discussion of the metaphysics of mind in Ghanaian academic philosophy.

Additionally, Amo can be ascribed a pioneering role in Ghanaian philosophical discussions on the notion of existence. On this, Amo declares that “everything knowable is either nothing or an *ens*.”<sup>46</sup> By *ens*, I mean whatever is actually “present somewhere.”<sup>47</sup> If it [a thing that is present somewhere] is actual, it is either a substance or a property, “for such things are known through their properties or attributes.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, existence is essentially locative: to exist is to be situated at some place. In contemporary Ghanaian philosophy, Wiredu explicitly endorses such a locative notion of existence and argues that the notion of place suggests an empiricist thesis as location is indexed to experience, to verifiable space, and thus renders existence immanent to the spatio-temporal schema. Gyekye opposes this perspective by indicating that although God “exists” and thus “is there,” the “there” where God “is” transcends the spatio-temporal schema and exclusion from an empiricist framework. We note, then, that Gyekye does

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45 Wiredu, 204.

46 Best interpreted as “existing thing” (see Complete Works, 95.).

47 *The Art of philosophizing soberly and accurately*, General Part, Ch. 1, Division 1. Complete works, 95.

48 *The Art of philosophizing soberly and accurately*, General Part, Ch. 1, Division 1. Complete works, 95. This point is reinforced in Chap 3, Division 2, Section 1: every *ens* in itself may be traced to being a substance or property, or a spirit, or a body, an operation of the mind, or a sensation (p. 120).

not deny the locative concept of existence. Even though his ontology is idealistic, he exhibits a quasi-occasionalist standpoint in causal theory: he accepts that God and other categories of spirits may occasionally intervene in the spatio-temporal world, but he simultaneously finds reason in assigning causal powers to matter. Two things are obvious in these considerations: first, that Amo subscribes to a locative concept of existence, and second, that in spite of his belief in the omnipotence of the pure spirit of an infinite God, his theory of mind weighs heavily on full-blown idealism. This struggle between idealism and materialism continues to mark contemporary Ghanaian philosophy.

Mind, for Amo, is a purely active and non-extended [spiritual] substance that admits of no passivity. Its presence in a human body thus becomes problematic, as it signals the possibility of mind interacting with that which is non-spirit; but *ipso facto*, the definition of mind, this is impossible. He defines sensation as sensible quality present in the sense organs<sup>49</sup>—i.e., the operation of the mind by which the mind represents a quality which is perceivable by the senses.<sup>50</sup> Thus, sensation, or feeling, requires bodily correspondence. To sense is to be affected by a body (material object), and to be affected by the body is to be passive; hence Amo's insistence that sensation must belong to the body but is not of mind. But one can infer from Amo's *Impassivity* that such adaptation of the purity of "mind in our living and organic body,"<sup>51</sup> which enables the mind to cohabit with passivity, is better conceived not as an imperfection or a blemish, for such adaptation "gives the human body all of its value and importance."<sup>52</sup> In Hountondji's view, this value and importance assigned to body imply, contrary to Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*, the thesis *Sentio ergo sum*: "I feel, therefore I am ... I am always already in the world, always already in contact with things and, at the same time, with others. I am never alone."<sup>53</sup> Hountondji's interpretation of the character of Amo's mind in habitation in "the living body" accords with salient perspectives on personhood in African thought. It is its inherent relationship to other persons and things.

Contemporary African philosophers largely agree on the ontological claim that the human being is inherently relational: she is by nature a member of a commune. She is logically distinct from other beings, but the reality of her being and the being of others intersect inextricably at a fundamental level. Accordingly, one may say of the nature of personhood: "Cognatus ergo sum": I am related, therefore I am. It is tempting to read

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49 Treatise, Chapter 4, Section 1, 140.

50 Treatise, Special Part, Chapter 2, Division 1, Section 2, 146.

51 Treatise, Special Part Section 2 Chapter 2, Section 7.6, 170.

52 Hountondji, "Re-Africanizing Anton Wilhelm Amo," 238.

53 Hountondji, 238–239.

the value assigned to the body and the emphasis on *sentio* to be at variance with Bujo's "*cognatus sum ergo sum*": "I am related, so I am."<sup>54</sup>

Such a view would construe Hountondji's invocation of the presence of the "I" as placing excessive stress on the individual, and thus question the whereabouts of substantive collective import in his maxim. The singular, on this view, would be seen to stand in sharp contrast with the plural. But we depart from such an interpretation of Hountondji by taking seriously his making plain that his "I" is never alone. It is our view that this idea of the necessity of relation for the "I" establishes interconnectivity as a basis of an individual's identity. Therefore, one can take Hountondji to mean that the fundamental import of the presence of the "I" (just as it is in Bujo) is an emphasis on *cognatio* (kinship), with an understanding that detachment from social ties distorts, or even deprives one of a cohesive sense of identity. Hountondji should thus be seen as agreeing with Bujo that "without communal relationships one can neither find his or her identity."<sup>55</sup> This thought is explicitly captured in Mbiti's maxim that "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am."<sup>56</sup> The question is on the understanding of self. And Hountondji's interpretation of Amo and Mbiti brings to expression that the self is conceptually embedded in the "we."

Such views on the constitution of humans make possible talk of the ontological co-originality of persons and community, of persons in commune as necessarily mutually dependent and mutually valuable beings. Although a fundamental right is granted *a priori* to discard social affiliations and mutual interdependencies into which one was born,<sup>57</sup> communal life *per se* is hardly considered optional.<sup>58</sup> Thus, mutual interdependence and the reciprocal duties it solicits from everyone become a human mode of being. The moral significance of this relational ontology is that to be human is to be different from others, but not to be indifferent in the social setting.<sup>59</sup> Amo's explication of sensation, and the implication that Hountondji draws from it for the nature of the human being, cannot be said to be disconnected from discussions of mind and personhood in current African philosophy.

Finally, we call attention to the remarkable continuity between Amo's hermeneutics and current Ghanaian meta-philosophical discussion of the notion of tradition. In the

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54 Bujo, Benezet. 1998, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 54

55 Bujo, *The Ethical Dimensions of Community*, 54–55

56 Mbiti, J. 1970. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 141.

57 Wiredu, K. 1990. "An Akan Perspective on Human Rights," in *Human Rights in Africa: Cross Cultural Perspectives*. An-Na'im, A. A and Deng, M. F (eds.). Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 243–260, 255.

58 Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 39.

59 Masolo, D. A. 2004. "Western and African Communitarianism: A Comparison," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Wiredu, K. (ed.). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 483–498, 495.

*Tractatus*, Amo criticises the “prejudice of antiquity”<sup>60</sup> and the “prejudice of tradition.”<sup>61</sup> His prejudice of antiquity is equivalent to the informal fallacy of “appeal to authority” in current logical nomenclature, i.e., the acceptance of a claim as true and authoritative because it emanates from some famous or prominent historical source; and he defines the “prejudice of tradition” on the other hand, as the belief that traditions are unchangeable and unquestionable.<sup>62</sup>

Danquah, Nkrumah, Abraham, Wiredu and Gyekye have all written extensively on the relevance of tradition for modern life. Their deliberations on “tradition” accept Gyekye’s well-regarded definition of it as “any cultural product that was created and pursued by past generations and that having been accepted and preserved in whole or part, by successive generations have been maintained to the present.”<sup>63</sup> They all consider as meaningful the task of excavating, expounding and polishing traditional African knowledge and value systems for contemporary life and for fashioning the African future. The idea that successive generations “accept and preserve” tradition implies their deliberative agency. Therefore, these contemporary Ghanaian philosophers can be considered to accept Amo’s rejection of both the “prejudice of tradition” and the “prejudice of antiquity.”

## Conclusion

The present paper corroborates the suggestion by Abraham and Wiredu, from their respective readings of Amo’s works, that Amo’s philosophical thinking was impregnated to a certain extent by the world-knowledge and early life experience that he acquired in his native Nzema. We have argued that Amo, in a sense, became an African thinker through his engagement with European thought—it was really in the context of his engagement with the latter that he developed both sub-conscious and conscious allegiance to his African heritage. As such, Amo became an African philosopher in exile by using his European philosophical training to examine and affirm the conditions for advancing the cultural causes of Africans.

Amo appears as a cross-cultural philosopher who critically and constructively engaged the German *enlightenment* tradition. He avoided the extreme positions of those who relied either on reason alone or on revelation alone as essential foundation for philosophy. His was a middle path mediating between these extremes, presupposing a theological foundation for philosophy while at the same time not embracing some exclusivistic tendencies of radical pietists at Halle university. The paper, thus, asserts the elasticity of the identity of African philosophy by affirming Wiredu’s perspective

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60 Amo, *Tractatus*, Chapter 4, Sect. 7, No. 4, 210.

61 Amo, *Tractatus*, Chapter 4, Sect.7., No. 5, 210.

62 Amo, *Tractatus*, Chapter 4, Sect.7., No. 5, 210.

63 Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 221

that its optimal flourishing requires the confluence of various ways of forging its identity.<sup>64</sup>

Amo's unique perspective allowed him to arrive at some—at his time—remarkable conclusions. He, most likely, in his very first and unfortunately not surviving academic contribution, argued for equal rights of Africans in Europe in the context of a discourse on freedom and slavery. The fact that neither Amo nor the so-called Mohr August Wilhelm—who had been bought out of slavery by the same duke who would later take Amo in—were slaves but paid servants at the court, suggests that Amo, in his disputation, aimed at given historical and judicial reasons for the abolition of the enslavement of Africans at least in Europe. Also, Amo expressed an appreciation of other cultures, ethnic groups and religions as having valid—albeit not revealed but natural—theologies and arguably philosophies. Additionally, Amo proposed a philosophy that was theologically grounded and that was to be practically relevant for the development of society, or as he put it, for the “preservation and perfection of humankind,” which ultimately aims at the “soul's eternal blessedness.”<sup>65</sup> It is quite remarkable that, after philosophy and theology had become completely separated in the West in the wake of Wolffian and Kantian *enlightenment* thinking, the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas in his recent *opus magnum*, *Also a history of Philosophy* of 2019, tries to bind theology or religion and philosophy or ethics productively together, for the peaceful and just development of increasingly fragmented and diverse societies.<sup>66</sup>

Pure preservation of humankind is probably the most urgent need of contemporary times, in view of the human-caused climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. Amo's philosophy can be read as an invitation to employ all our mental faculties to help tackle such problems.

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64 Wiredu, K. “Amo's Critique of Descartes' Philosophy of Mind,” 206.

65 Amo, *Tractatus*, General Part, Chapter One, Division 8, Number 1, 104.

66 Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie: Vol. 1: Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen. Vol. 2: Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt 2019.

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