

# “WHEN EVERYTHING STARTS TO FLOW”: NKRUMAH AND IRIGARAY IN SEARCH OF EMANCIPATORY ONTOLOGIES

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## KEY CONCEPTS

Irigaray; Nkrumah; consciencism; fluid ontology; difference; emancipation; materialism; decolonisation; humanism

## ABSTRACT

A more explicit, comprehensive and sustained dialogue between the African philosophical and Western feminist traditions would yield insights at once rich and useful to both traditions, and beyond, e.g. to the African feminist tradition. Here, I place the work of Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray in discussion with Ghanaian Kwame Nkrumah's conception of "consciencism". What they most saliently share is an understanding of how the dichotomies central to traditional Western philosophy (mind-body and idealism-materialism) have been key in the structural exclusion and oppression of the "others" of this dominant tradition. Both are convinced that Western metaphysics serve ideological purposes and help to perpetuate relations of domination. Both struggle with the question of how to effectively resist this specific violence of the Western philosophical tradition without repeating its logic. Most importantly for the current analysis, in their search for sources for resistance and emancipation, Nkrumah and Irigaray do not remain with diagnoses; instead both assume or construct a fluid ontology outside of, or beyond, this dominant symbolic order.

- "Water is the fundamental substance" (Thales of Miletus, 600BCE).
- "The endurance of the world consists in process; and activity, or process, becomes the life-blood of reality" (Nkrumah 1964: 25).

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- “You could never come across a language without the rupture of space, an aerial or aquatic language in which, moreover, alterity would be lost more surely than ever” (Derrida 1981: 112-3).
- “[F]orm [is] no more than an apparent and temporary stability in the patterns of potentiality or flow” (Battersby 1998: 51).
- “[The] sacrificial economy of solids depends upon a forgetting of those elements that do not have the same density” (Irigaray 1999: 2).
- “[A] fluid economy creates the possibility of a community capable of recognising, rather than excluding, difference” (Caldwell 2002: 25).

## INTRODUCTION

There have been sporadic attempts to foster a dialogue between predominantly Western feminist and African theoretical positions, early on by Harding (1987) and lately also by Metz (2013).<sup>1</sup> In her comparative work, Harding criticises both so-called “difference feminists” such as Gilligan (1982) as well as African “difference” theorists for committing essentialist fallacies in their respective attempts to valorise (particular conceptions of) “femininity” and “Africanness” over against “masculinity” and “Europeanness”. She claims that such arguments tend to lose sight of the extent to which the alleged differences or dichotomies have been the historical outcome or result of systems of domination and exploitation. Metz’s project, on the other hand, has been to critically compare “Western feminist care ethics” and “Afro-communitarian ethics”, concluding that “an African ideal of community, when understood in a philosophically refined way, provides an important, relational corrective to the [feminist] ethic of care” (Metz 2013: 77).

While both these articles have obvious merits, it is clear from the literature that the debate so far has mostly been narrowly focused on ethical considerations. In what follows, I take the debate between feminist and African philosophy into the more fundamental domains of metaphysics and ontology. This, however, does not mean that the normative dimension disappears completely; in fact, it is assumed that ethics, politics and ontology are tightly interwoven, and that a thorough critique of the dominant paradigm should include an ontological dimension. In particular, I take seriously the claims to *difference from* the dominant Western paradigm, which come from these two streams of thought, as long as they avoid falling into the trap of essentialism. In response to Harding’s first concern, I aim to show through my comparison of Nkrumah and Irigaray how the essentialist pitfall can be avoided while taking the claim to difference seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> See Metz (2013: 77) for a list of other authors who have alluded to these apparent commonalities, including Tronto (1987) from the side of care ethics and Mangena (2009) from the sub-Saharan tradition.

Harding's second major concern about comparisons between Western feminist care ethics and African communitarian ethics, namely that the reason that they are both different from mainstream ethics and similar to each other is because they both emerge from similar structures of oppressive power relations, is also a central aspect of my approach here. Strengthened by the critical analysis of another feminist author, Kroeger-Mappes (1994), Harding's suspicion that care ethics and African ethics may effectively constitute "slave moralities" in response to the same excesses of the same (white, patriarchal) master, represents potentially the most devastating critique of care and African communitarian ethics. The power relations underlying lived differences should thus be squarely acknowledged – as is also emphasised by African feminist authors such as Tamale (2008: 48) and Mangena (2009: 18). This insight remains crucial, whether one's focus is on ethical or ontological differences, so let us consider it more closely.

Speaking only to Western feminist care ethics, Kroeger-Mappes (1994) emphasises the unequal power relations upon which the gendered dichotomy between a (masculinised) ethics of rights and a (feminised) ethics of care is erected and which this dichotomy serves to sustain. She asserts categorically that these ethical systems are not as Gilligan's early work may have implied, "separate but equal" (see Gilligan 1982, in Kemp & Squires 1997: 151-2 and for her later corrections on this point, see Gilligan 2014).<sup>2</sup> Instead, these two "ethics" in actuality form two sides or dimensions of the same system in which the dictates of care ethics (placing obligations and duties of care on women that would remain strictly supererogatory for men) facilitate the privileged existence of a masculinised world of self-interested subjects limiting themselves to a self-centred, non-relational ethics of rights (see particularly Kroeger-Mappes 1994: 113-114). A devalued care ethics and "women's work" are the necessary (material as well as symbolic) prerequisites for the existence of "autonomous" adult (male) agents who are neither obliged to give care nor need ever acknowledge the extent to which the material maintenance of their lives depends upon the care work of others. These authors imply that naively emphasising these apparently straightforward "sex differences" and attempting to valorise the neglected feminine side of the equation could amount to a conservative gender politics, and I agree with them.<sup>3</sup> This critical analysis could plausibly be

2 Gilligan (1982) speaks for instance of "two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected... both perspectives converge...[in a] dialogue between fairness and care [that] provides a better understanding of relations between the sexes [and]... gives rise to a more comprehensive portrayal of adult work and family relationships" (in Kemp and Squires 1997: 152).

3 While it is true that dangerous, dirty and hard work is often relegated to men of lower social standing, the gender division of labour means that in most societies, traditionally, women have been assigned the care work, irrespective of what else they should do. Also characteristic of feminised care work is that it has carried and still carries associations of low social status and in fact is almost always non-paid. In contrast, even the low status and hard work of men are as a rule paid work.

extended to colonial and racist divisions of labour where the excess value produced by undervalued and unacknowledged work of the “natives” facilitates the possibility of self-centred, non-relational and uncaring lives for “settlers”.

However, where I part ways with these analyses, is in that Harding and Kroeger-Mappes seem to me to run the risk of reducing the claim to difference to *nothing more* than a symptom of existing distorted power relations. Though I take on board their caution concerning constitutive power relations, it is my contention in this paper that relations of domination do not account for *all onto-political claims to difference*, and that a thorough engagement of especially the European feminist tradition, with African philosophers, focused on questions of ontology, epistemology and metaphysics, is likely to show this idea more clearly than if we were to limit the discussion to the normative sphere. In particular, I find the work of Irigaray illuminating in that it helps to show how similar questions and issues are at stake in African and in feminist thinking, and how they may be used to critique and enrich each other. My analysis should show that by placing in a constructive dialogue the work of two specific thinkers working within these two (counter- or marginalised) traditions, the gains of a critical dialogue between these traditions will emerge more clearly. I first focus on Nkrumah’s work in *Consciencism*, and then turn to Irigaray to draw links between their key ideas. In a final section, I refine and set out some of the results of this constructed dialogue, with a particular concern regarding the implications for the African feminist tradition.

## NKRUMAH

In *Consciencism* (1964) Nkrumah constructs a dialectical materialism in line with the Marxist tradition (and the work of authors such as Friedrich Engels and Georgi Plekhanov). His idea, for which he coins the neologism “consciencism”, however differs from the Marxist tradition in that he claims his understanding of dialectical materialism to be in line with traditional or pre-colonial African (i.e. non-Western) metaphysics. He thus squarely falls into the category of what Harding would call “African difference” thinkers. The term “consciencism”, suggesting simultaneously “conscience”, “consciousness” and “science”, does not, however, derive its name from its alleged link with the pre-colonial past, but rather from a certain anticipated future. Nkrumah sees this ontology or description of reality as the necessary philosophical frame or “consciousness”, the necessary contemporary “African conscience”, or African worldview, to accompany the praxis of colonial liberation and of both material and symbolic decolonisation. Consciencism is his way of beginning to resolve what he sees as the “crisis of African conscience” of his time, caused by colonisation (Poe 2005: 195).

I contend that it is for these reasons impossible to do justice to this concept as it features in Nkrumah’s (1964) work without acknowledging that, like most

“postcolonial” writing, it is self-consciously historical, and embedded in a transitional landscape. It is thus heuristic and strategic and particularly for this reason does not need to fall into the trap of a simplistic essentialism.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, “consciencism” is posited as playing a key role within this transitional process, as it were anchoring the possibility of an alternative future (and of emancipatory action) in an enabling picture (myth, even) of a more humane African past. In this regard, of course, Nkrumah stands in the tradition of Marx and Engels who are not interested in merely philosophically *interpreting* the world, but especially, in changing the world (Marx’s famous 1845 *Eleventh thesis on Feuerbach*). Nkrumah, as an author writing during the process of African liberation, is acutely aware of the practical import of philosophical ideas, and of the need for solid theory to guide processes of decolonisation.

Nkrumah (1964) highlights with this book the necessity of not only challenging the ethics and politics of Western global domination, but also to delve deeper into the Western worldview which has facilitated or undergirded the large-scale exploitation of “others” and “non-Westerners”, especially during Western “modernity”. The main question that underlies Nkrumah’s work in *Consciencism* is one shared by many twentieth century European philosophers, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (first published in German in 1944). These echoes point to an intertwinement of contemporary concerns, which is one of the main reasons why I find a dialogue between the European and African philosophical traditions to be potentially particularly fruitful. The Europeans’ most immediate concern in 1944 is the internal state of Europe at the time - the European crisis associated with fascism and the two world wars.

Thus they, like Nkrumah, urgently search for the roots of totalitarianism in Western thinking, tracing them as far back as Odysseus (“Excursus I” 1997: 43ff) and the ancient Greek concept of “Enlightenment” which they believe has haunted Western self-understanding since its beginnings (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 3). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the answer to their question thus lies in the early Western conception of reason as a force of domination over nature, including over the natural aspects of the self, over supposedly “more natural others” such as women and slaves, and over nature as such. The promise of control was conflated with the promise

4 There are clearly aspects of Nkrumah’s thought that may correctly give rise to the charge of essentialism. For example, his notion of the “African personality” which is viewed as “an essential characteristic of the African nation” (Nkrumah 1964: 79; Poe 2005: 196) shared by all African peoples in a timeless manner, does entail such an essentialist concept. My non-essentialist reading of consciencism is, however, not completely unwarranted, I would say, because of Nkrumah’s acknowledgement of its heuristic and strategic importance (cf. for example Nkrumah 1964: 62-3). I suppose it is a charitable reading in this context to claim that Nkrumah did not necessarily believe in (or did not strictly speaking need to believe in) the veracity of his broad and largely unsubstantiated claims about the continuation of pre-Socratic, pre-colonial African and contemporary scientific views, supposedly underlying his notion of consciencism, as explained in the chapter “Consciencism” (Nkrumah 1964: 78-106).

of emancipation and enlightenment (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 4). Rationality understood as domination of the natural world for them reached its devastating peak in Western modernity, finally exploding during the twentieth century in places like Auschwitz and Nagasaki.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that these Enlightenment critics make a historical or genetic argument, showing how and why Enlightenment conceptions of rationality have been overly narrow and instrumentalist, leading to totalitarianism, oppression and alienation. They are thus not essentialist and do not see Western philosophy as inherently corrupt; instead, they show the contingency or non-necessity of the rule of instrumental reason within this tradition. The neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School – including Adorno and Horkheimer, but also Marcuse, Habermas and others – were thus among the key role players ushering in the major self-critique of Western philosophy of the late twentieth century and beyond.

Nkrumah’s answer to the same question can be viewed as following similar lines,<sup>6</sup> but he focuses on the mind-body, meaning-matter or idealism-materialism hierarchical dichotomy strongly associated with Descartes and Plato, and of course his focus was on the devastation the West wrought on the African continent. The Nkrumah of *Consciencism* posits this dichotomy as being not only central to Western metaphysics, but also an important key to Western global domination and the colonisation of Africa. He claims that this dichotomy “favours or inspires” oligarchy, hierarchy and inequality (Nkrumah 1964: 75), first of all within Western society, but also extending beyond. It thereby functions to maintain and legitimise unequal social relations; “power over”, as Hannah Arendt would put it (Arendt 1970: 36; discussed in Bernstein 2013: 80-85). The basic hierarchy which is established in Greek antiquity between the supernatural (associated with abstract reason) and the natural (the sensible world), Nkrumah claims, tends to get translated on a social level into a class-stratified society.

For Nkrumah, supernatural explanations of nature – i.e. any positing of a superior “outside” to, and/or opposite of, the natural and material world – simultaneously require and justify a class-stratified society. Since in an idealist world nature cannot be explained by nature – to which everyone typically has equal access via the senses – supernatural explanations are almost per definition elitist and require some form of initiated priesthood. This for him inevitably gives rise to a jealously guarded priestly class of higher human beings associated with the supernatural realm and its wisdom. He believes that the ancient Greeks had social-moral preoccupations which they expressed in metaphysical terms (Nkrumah 1964: 36). The most obvious example here would be Plato (pp.41ff), who constructed an extended metaphysics with a hierarchical binary set up between the visible and the “real” world, in order to frame

5 For a recent study of the role of philosophical thinking in facilitating the *Shoah*, see Segev’s (2013) *Thinking and killing: Philosophical discourse in the shadow of the Third Reich*, De Gruyter, 2013.

6 Space limitation prohibits a fuller comparison between Nkrumah and Adorno.

and justify his ideal hierarchical republic, presided over by the class of philosopher-kings.

It sometimes seems as if Nkrumah postulates a dichotomy between idealism and materialism, and that he wants to simply cancel out the former by erasing the supernatural realm altogether. He postulates a harmful otherworldliness as necessary for the maintenance of social hierarchy, and he believes that by annihilating that type of ontology, and replacing it with a purely immanent, material world, he can further the political pursuit of equality. Such a position seems inherent in the following excerpt (Nkrumah 1964: 75):

I explained how idealism was connected with a tiered society, how through its mode of explaining nature and social phenomena by reference to spirit, idealism favoured a class structure of a horizontal sort, in which one class sat upon the neck of another. I also explained there how materialism, on the other hand, was connected with a humanist organization, how through its being monistic, and its referring all natural processes to matter and its laws, it inspired an egalitarian organization of society. The unity and fundamental identity of nature suggests the unity and fundamental identity of man in society. Idealism favours an oligarchy, materialism favours an egalitarianism.

It seems then as if Nkrumah wants to dissolve the most basic hierarchical binary between the supernatural and natural worlds by abolishing the supernatural superior pole for the sake of pure immanence, which would directly support (African, and human) liberation.<sup>7</sup> Finding that the worldviews of some traditional African societies and of the pre-Socratic philosophers including Thales, Heraclitus and Anaxagoras resonate with some central insights of contemporary scientific theories, Nkrumah postulates a dialectic materialist understanding of the world in line with these thinkers, where nature, mind/spirit, as well as society are all explained purely immanently. Nature is primary, and the cause of everything.

This is also why Thales becomes one of the heroes of his book. Nkrumah sees Thales' naturalistic explanation of the material world as "dispensing with the gods altogether as sources of explanation of natural or social phenomena" (Nkrumah 1964: 32). The *origin* or *source* of the material world no longer lies outside of or beyond it in an opposing, but superior, domain. Thales' idea that "everything is water" implies for Nkrumah in the first place that no supernatural explanations for the world are needed, since the material world contains its immanent cause within itself. Secondly, it importantly suggests that "everything [is] derived from one and the same substance". And so he concludes, that Thales' thinking implies on a social, political level:

...the fundamental identity of man as well, man according to him being not half natural, half-supernatural, but wholly natural. That is to say, on the social plane, his [single] metaphysical

7 Nkrumah (1964: 78) states in this regard: "The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of man."



principle underlying all of reality amounted to an assertion of the fundamental equality and brotherhood of men. (Nkrumah 1964: 34)

For Nkrumah then, a pervasive strategy for shoring up arbitrary social hierarchies in the history of the West lies in its supernatural accounts of the world and the sacerdotal powers that they facilitate. And thus, when philosophy and science offer fully natural explanations of the world, they undermine this kind of power and could serve as instruments of social justice (Nkrumah 1964: 36). The postulation of the Judeo-Christian supernatural realm and of privileged access to it - via the sacred texts and literacy - of course lay at the heart of the rationalisation of the European “civilising mission” entailing the subjugation and exploitation of the whole African continent. While the spread of Christianity functioned as a kind of excuse for invading Africa, its inherent metaphysics and hierarchical views of the visible and invisible worlds on Nkrumah’s interpretation surreptitiously supported the resulting unequal power relations between coloniser and colonised. And Nkrumah (1964) explicitly warns that “in present-day Africa” it is necessary to vigilantly and explicitly recognise this ideological strategy - this “dialectical opposition” - “for it helps us to anticipate colonialist and imperialist devices for furthering exploitation by diverting our energies from secular concerns”. He sees the coloniser’s otherworldly religion as an obstacle to true African liberation (even if it can be instrumental in the short term) and concludes that “it is essential to emphasize in the historical condition of Africa that the state must be secular” (Nkrumah 1964: 13).

Yet, an apparently straightforward choice for materialism over idealism becomes refined when Nkrumah starts to describe the *kind of* materialism which he considers to be indigenous to Africa. The picture which emerges turns out to be more subtle and intricate with the introduction of his understanding of matter as incorporating some aspects of what is usually associated with the supernatural. What Nkrumah shows, is that the dismantling of the hierarchical dichotomy that Plato installs between the visible and the invisible, does not necessarily entail an erasure of the distinction between the two, neither the collapsing of one into the other. In contrast, it is the strict opposition, the incommensurability, between mind and matter which idealism introduced in the West, that Nkrumah views as a kind of “perversion” of thinking largely absent from traditional Africa – from “many African societies” (Nkrumah 1964: 13). Although he does not mention it, the difference between written and oral cultures might have played a significant role in the origin of this difference between Africa and the West, with the power of the written word (logocentrism) which became associated in the West with supernatural, idealised and abstract power and consequently with force and domination. In her novel, *Nehanda*, Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera places the following sentiments in the mouth of tribesman Ibwe, who responds to his first encounter with a white man and the latter’s attitude to the written word:



Our people know the power of words. It is because of this that they desire to have words continuously spoken and kept alive. We do not believe that words can become independent of the speech that bore them, of the humans who controlled and gave birth to them. Can words exchanged today on this clearing surrounded by waving grass become like a child left to be brought up by strangers?<sup>8</sup> Words surrendered to the stranger, like the abandoned child, will become alien – a stranger to our tongues. The paper is the stranger's own peculiar custom. Among ourselves, speech is not like rock. Words cannot be taken from the people who create them. People are their words. (Vera 2007: 33-4)

Based on this reading, one could say that written culture is the West's peculiar form of superstition: investing the written word with supernatural powers – think of the holy texts, the legal texts and contracts, the great literary classics. In contrast, in traditional, oral African societies, Nkrumah claims that "the visible world was [fully] continuous with the invisible world" so that there was no "dialectical contradiction between "inside" and "outside" [between immanent and transcendent – Du Toit (2008)] as we find in Western idealism". For traditional Africans, "heaven was not outside the world but inside it" (Nkrumah 1964: 13). Not only that, but "man", too, even though viewed as fully material, "is regarded in Africa as primarily a spiritual being, a being endowed originally with a certain inward dignity, integrity and value" (Nkrumah 1964: 68). This is the "non-atheistic", materialist humanism which Nkrumah sees as deeply ingrained in African communities and world-views. I interpret his notion of "non-atheistic" to mean that this worldview does not give up on notions such as the invisible, the spiritual, or the transcendent, but at the same time it nevertheless does not postulate a fully separate abstract realm superior to and in opposition with the "natural", material world in which we live. The supernatural is not seen as the superior or outside (transcendent) origin of the natural world. Instead, the spiritual elements of life are fully incarnated, which means that all of life is spiritual while being fully material. The world is thus fully immanent and material, but carrying a spiritual dimension within the material itself. While Western metaphysics thus tends with its sharply hierarchical binaries to desacralise the sensible, lived reality, to suck out all value, intrinsic worth and finally all life of that part of reality that it designates as "nature" (along with certain classes or groups of humans deemed "natural"), reducing it to raw material to be exploited, the African materialism of Nkrumah sees all existence as teeming with "a plenum of [life] forces in tension, capable of self-motion" (Poe 2005: 196), and thus as imbued with spiritual value.

For Nkrumah, then, the notion of the human being as "primarily a spiritual being" should therefore also not be seen in opposition to, or in stark demarcation from, "material being"; rather, the spirituality is an aspect or manifestation of the material being. Whereas idealism asserts that matter is inert and cannot exist independently

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<sup>8</sup> In *Phaedrus* Plato famously struggles with the same question of the relative value of writing to thinking and live discussion, also comparing a written text to an orphan who is abused in the absence of its parents (274c-276a).

of spirit (a non-material force animating, moving, and inhering in matter) (Nkrumah 1964: 82), materialism as a minimum, Nkrumah claims, asserts “the independent existence of matter” (ibid: 15), independent of knowledge by mind (ibid: 20). Nkrumah uses the notion of “categorical conversion” to explain the emergence of self-consciousness from that which is not self-conscious; of mind from matter, of quality from quantity (ibid: 20), of a higher logical type from a lower (ibid: 89-90). He does not assert the sole existence of matter, but rather its “primary reality” (ibid: 21). By this he means that other categories of material being – such as what Westerners might call “spirit” or “mind” – are “able to arise from matter through process”, and thus matter and spirit are on a continuum, even if distinguishable as different types or configurations of matter. In his recognition that at a certain level of complexity in material arrangement we encounter something fundamentally different from matter in its simplest forms, Nkrumah enters what he designates as “a dialectical materialism” (Nkrumah 1964: 21): “Dialectical materialism recognizes differences between mind and brain, between qualities and quantities, between energy and mass; yet, it ‘does not allow the differences to become fundamental and irreducible’” (ibid: 23). The differences are real differences, yet not metaphysical in nature. He explains (Nkrumah: 23):

[O]ne may admit epistemological differences between mind and brain, quality and quantity, energy and mass, without accepting any metaphysical differences between them, without, in other words, admitting that for mind one needs any more than a brain in a certain condition; for quality any more than a certain disposition of quantity; for energy any more than mass in a certain critical state. From the standpoint of metaphysics, philosophical materialism accepts mind or conscience only as a derivative of matter. Although mind is derived from matter, we should not underestimate the difference or gap between the two.

Nkrumah (1964: 26) preserves the alterity of mind *vis-à-vis* brain, for example, by arguing:

...[t]his kind of emergence, since it depends on a critical organization of matter, truly represents a leap. When a crisis results in an advance, it is in its nature to perpetrate a leap... In dialectical evolution, progress is not linear; it is, so to say, from one plane to another. It is through a leap from one plane to another that new kinds are produced and the emergence of mind from matter attained.

The dialectic nature of Nkrumah’s materialism therefore leads to a dynamic and never stable view of the world. Instead of viewing the world as comprised of states, he sees it as comprised of *processes* – recall the quote at the beginning of the paper: “The endurance of the world consists in process; and activity, or process, becomes the life-blood of reality” (Nkrumah 1964: 25).

With the metaphor of life-blood our attention is drawn to the essential fluidity that characterises Nkrumah’s dialectical materialist understanding of the world, underpinned by an inherently dynamic, changing, moving, multiple, living and

streaming understanding of matter. “The acceptance of the vitality of matter – often called, pejoratively, ‘animism’ – was prevalent in traditional African societies”, explains Poe (2005: 196). This explanation also accounts for Nkrumah’s reading of why Thales could on the one hand banish the gods from his naturalistic perspective as an explanatory or originating principle, while on the other hand still proclaim that “things are full of gods” – representing maybe something like an incarnated or pantheistic view. Nkrumah sees this claim as “asserting the capacity of matter for spontaneous self-motion”, i.e. to reject its supposed lifelessness or inertness (Nkrumah 1964: 83). His position thus entails a radical reevaluation of matter as both primary and complex, dynamic and alive with forces. Thus it is not only Thales’ favourite element, water, which speaks metaphorically to Nkrumah’s ontology, but also Herakleitos’ chosen element, namely fire, which Nkrumah (1964: 37) describes thus:

...[f]ire, the fundamental thing, suffers transformation into other things. There is a permanent potential of instability in everything, and it is this instability which makes transformations possible. Objects are only deceptively serene, they are all delicate balances of opposing forces.

Matter’s capacity for self-motion is tied in Nkrumah’s thinking to the existence of multiple and opposing forces inhering within, or rather, existing as an integral aspect of material nature. Thus “matter is not just dead weight, but alive with forces in tension”, which becomes for Nkrumah a hallmark of African, as opposed to Western, thinking:

...for the African, everything that exists, exists as a complex of forces in tension. In holding force in tension to be essential to whatever exists, he is, like Thales...endowing matter with an original power of self-motion...endowing it with what matter would need to initiate qualitative and substantial changes. (Nkrumah 1964: 89)

On a social plane, the material notions of “a complex of forces in tension” and constant transformation strongly suggest respect for plurality, diversity, multiplicity and the dynamic change inherent in all of nature. Thus, in so far as Nkrumah’s thinking does still betray essentialist (thus static) tendencies (e.g. his talk of “the African”) and attempts at stabilisation and unification such as in “the African personality”, he has arguably not properly thought through the full, radical implications of his own dynamic ontology. By comparing his work with Irigaray’s similar interrogations, the strength of such a fluid position for opposing Western metaphysics and hierarchies becomes even clearer.

## IRIGARAY

The first striking resemblance between the work of Nkrumah and Irigaray is that they are both difference thinkers. One could say that Irigaray is a difference thinker in at

least the following two ways: (i) First, like Nkrumah, she refers to, or constructs, a possible outside or beyond of the currently dominant Western symbolic order.<sup>9</sup> They both actively explore alternative ontologies. Yet, through her more tentative or playful approach, Irigaray more successfully avoids the traps of essentialism than Nkrumah does.<sup>10</sup> (ii) Secondly, Irigaray's difference thinking strongly echoes that of Nkrumah in that she also emphasises fluidity, alterity and change as inherent characteristics of the different socio-symbolic order that she proposes. But I would say, since she is more alert to the extent to which the dominant symbolic order oppresses precisely through the strategy of the erasure of material difference, her vision of a non-sacrificial order poses important challenges to the remnants of identity thinking in Nkrumah's philosophy. On the other hand, the post-colonial context infusing Nkrumah's formulation of a philosophy of difference with a certain emancipatory urgency, in its turn poses far-reaching questions to Irigaray's thinking.

In contrast with Nkrumah, Irigaray does not make any confident claims about the historical or otherwise existence of the alternative symbolic orders that she favours. Instead, in her meticulous and suspicious (psychoanalytically inspired, against the grain) readings of some classical Western texts and authors, she shows how, what she later terms the sacrificial symbolic order (Irigaray 1993a: 75ff) of Western metaphysics, again and again sacrifices the material world (gendered feminine) in order to establish, found or reinforce an immaterial world (gendered masculine) which should reign over the former world. For example, in *Speculum de l'autre femme*<sup>11</sup> in an essay called "Plato's Hystera" (Irigaray 1985a: 241-364), she reads the cave myth as a kind of origin myth of the sacrificial symbolic order of Western metaphysics. By showing in this text the elaborate procedure necessary to first postulate the material world (starting from the visible, the concrete) and then to gradually erase its reality and truth in favour of the abstract, she implies that this is a specific cultural or symbolic strategy and thus contingent. Here she agrees with Nkrumah's claim that these constructs are Western idiosyncrasies or customs, and thus neither necessary nor universal. She does not, however, base the contingency claim on knowledge claims about the actual existence of alternative worldviews; but

9 Irigaray stands out as a theorist who dares to imagine alternatives to the dominant philosophical tradition. Braidotti says of her: "There is a visionary, utopian, and at times even prophetic quality in Irigaray's writing, which expresses her faith in the force of the feminine as a new symbolic and discursive economy" (Braidotti 1994: 130).

10 Not everyone would agree that Irigaray successfully avoids essentialist thinking. Braidotti is one of few theorists who do, saying: "The ontological claim for sexual difference is what makes Irigaray so important theoretically and politically; the essentialist belief in ontological difference is a political strategy aimed at stating the specificity of female subjectivity, sexuality, and experience while also denouncing the logic of sexual indifferentiation of phallogocentric discourse" (Braidotti 1994: 131).

11 This text was first published in French in 1974, ten years after Nkrumah's *Consciencism*. The first English version of *Speculum of the other woman* appeared only in 1985, published by Cornell University Press.

rather on showing how some of the founding myths of the West are actively erasing competing worldviews.

In her reading the cave is representative of the womb, and thus of the maternal body (Irigaray 1985a: 243). This material-maternal origin must in the Platonic ontology be left behind, overcome, transcended, and finally denied and erased as unreal. This happens through the tiresome, counter-intuitive journey undertaken by the philosopher in the direction of the pure Forms (understood as abstract, disembodied and other-worldly Ideas). For Irigaray, as for Nkrumah, the philosophical and political orders of the West can be distinguished, but never completely separated from each other (cf. Whitford 1991: 101). And therefore, the erasure of the feminine cave (female difference and embodiment) from Plato's metaphysics (even while he remains dependent on it to establish the absolute alterity and superiority of the supernatural realm), is inseparable from the political exclusion of actual women from the polis.

Where Irigaray thus differs markedly from Nkrumah, is that for her, this strict separation of orders was from the beginning dependent on a certain symbolic arrangement of *sexual* meanings into a hierarchical dichotomy. Where Nkrumah foregrounds the formation of different social classes, Irigaray focuses on the formation of two different sex classes. For her, the devaluation and final erasure of the material world can thus not be fully appreciated without an understanding of how this devaluation depended upon the devaluation of the feminine and female within the symbolic and their erasure within the political domain (Whitford 1991: 101). Implicitly agreeing with the likes of Horkheimer, Adorno and Nkrumah, that the causes of the specific ailments of the Western world should be sought in its metaphysical foundations, Irigaray nevertheless differs from them in that she identifies at the heart of the founding logic of the West the crime of matricide: the murder of the mother and the covering up of the deed.

Although Irigaray detects this strategy of meaning-making in the founding strategies of Western metaphysics, its effects and implications did not remain limited to a founding moment but are still travelling with us, in particular within the Western philosophical tradition. An author like Battersby (1998: 79) shows how the masculine Western philosopher from Plato to Kant and beyond sets himself up in heroic opposition to feminised nature, which must be overcome by manly, abstract reason. In particular, matter is still pervasively portrayed as inert, passive and feminine, and thus as exploitable by the "higher" reality of abstract masculine reason – reason conceptualised from the start as domination and control over nature and everything feminine, including body and emotion. Irigaray's narrative is thus to my mind better suited to explain how the devaluation of the material world serves to bolster relations of domination, than Nkrumah's seemingly deterministic link between idealism and inequality on the one hand and materialism and equality on the other. In fact, without Irigaray's added nuanced insights into the gendered dynamics

of the hierarchical dichotomy, which could play out in different ways in different contexts of domination, it seems actually fairly easy to disprove Nkrumah’s basic claim: materialistic worldviews have *not* in fact invariably led to social equality, e.g. in certain hierarchical, even racist receptions of Darwinism, and it is on the other hand also true that sometimes supernatural worldviews support equality and emancipation, such as liberation theology.

Irigaray’s work can thus be made fruitful in the context of colonial and post-colonial Africa, especially if we ask, with Mbembe (2001), Thomas (2007) and Fanon (2001) about the dimensions of sexual subjugation and racist bodily objectification as key aspects of colonisation. Insight into how the Western sacrificial order works as a mechanism to stabilise master identities dissociated from concrete embodiment, can greatly enhance our insight into the psychological damage entailed by colonisation on the one hand, but also (more pertinent in our own time) help to illuminate to what extent post-colonial African societies perpetuate harmful sacrificial orders and thus repeat and perpetuate the logic of their own colonial trauma.

These matters are of particular importance to the tradition of African feminist thinking, as Tamale (2008) shows so clearly in her writing on the supposed opposition between African culture and African women’s sexual rights. She shows that human rights instruments often perpetuate a colonial history of “Western imperialist caricatures of African sexuality” (Tamale 2008: 52) with “racist misreading[s] of African cultures such as polygyny, bridewealth and “widow inheritance” [which] reinforce...stereotypes of African women [and men]” (ibid: 53). At the same time, however, African women’s struggle to be co-interpreters of their own culture and to draw on the positive aspects of their cultures in working towards women’s sexual emancipation is often internally thwarted through the acceptance within post-colonial states of Judeo-Christian or Islamic laws and worldviews aimed at regulating and controlling women’s sexuality (ibid: 58). Here is then a clear instance of where an idealist or transcendent, supernatural worldview is used to create sexual hierarchies within society – precisely the kind of thing Nkrumah would oppose as a perversion and alien to Africa.

Tamale (2008) shows how African feminists thus have to wage a struggle for emancipation on various fronts: against the often almost intractable coalition between African patriarchal interpreters of culture and globally dominant, often misogynist religious worldviews on the one hand, and against persistently derogatory interpretations of African sexuality by human rights groups (including some Western feminists) on the other. It is my contention that the combined insights of Irigaray and Nkrumah can substantially contribute especially to the struggle for emancipation of African women, caught as they are in a double-bind of misrecognition both by dominant patriarchal interpretations of African culture and of religion, and by neo-colonial Western feminist and human rights discourses. Both these authors share a deep concern about emancipation – not just superficially in terms of normative



claims and structures, but also more deeply in terms of a reconceptualisation of the very nature of reality. This is necessary, both of them claim, because the structures of oppression are founded on a pernicious and sacrificial ontology and metaphysics. Nkrumah thus implicitly agrees with someone like Fanon (2001) who was concerned that mere political liberation was not enough for true African emancipation, for what is required is a thorough decolonisation of the mind and of African institutions. Irigaray is in a similar frame of mind when she returns again and again to the question of how to challenge, disrupt and re-imagine the currently dominant symbolic order.

Tamale argues powerfully that African women should not and need not abandon their cultural traditions in their pursuit of sexual liberation. Instead, they should insist on the "full and equal participation of women in determining what [their culture] should be" (Tamale 2008: 58), in deciding on cultural meanings and their implications. In considering what African culture should be/come, the criticisms of Nkrumah and Irigaray on the Western paradigm and its oppressive effects, as well as their utopian sketches of possible alternatives, can potentially be of great help. It is therefore important for anti-colonial thinkers to get a better grasp of what Irigaray means when she describes the Western symbolic as a sacrificial order, and also how she envisions an alternative which shows some clear overlaps with Nkrumah's consciencism. I will also show that Irigaray takes into account how asymmetrical power relations structure difference, and also that she avoids essentialist implications in her attempt to open up spaces for difference to be asserted.

Drawing on the work of Girard (1977), Irigaray (1993a) describes the symbolic order of the West as a sacrificial order, thereby illuminating Nkrumah's notion that the "dialectical contradiction between 'inside' and 'outside'" as posited by Western idealism is a perverted form of thinking. On Caldwell's reading of Irigaray, the sacrificial logic of Western philosophy and metaphysics "establishes limits and boundaries by demarcating sharply between inside and outside, [between] the material and the real" (Caldwell 2002: 26). Such limits and boundaries are necessary in order to establish personal or collective identity through the logic of sacrifice. Traditionally in the West, Irigaray argues, it is the maternal body and female sexual difference which have been sacrificed in order to erect the idealised and idealist masculine identity associated with the superior non-material sphere. This is why Irigaray wonders what a society would look like that did not exploit "the body-matter of women" (Irigaray 1985b: 85). Irigaray also, like Nkrumah, criticises the split and opposition which Western metaphysics forced between the mind and the material world. In becoming an idealised (strictly impossible, masculine) subject, all aspects of materiality, singularity and thus difference, interdependence and becoming, all needed to be split off from the self-understanding of the subject, and "reduced...to a static ground or constitutive outside on or against which concepts and subjectivity emerge" (Caldwell 2002: 18). The "self" of this economy or this logic needs a solid ground of "otherness" against which it can stabilise and erect its own identity. The

preferred solid ground in the case of Western metaphysics is the maternal body, associated with matter declared to be inert.

Just as the self is stabilised against flux and otherness through the projection of the Other, concepts and intelligible ideas (Plato’s forms) are also stabilised by being shielded against time, difference, materiality, and the contingent, by placing them in absolute opposition to the “feminine sphere of materiality (understood as) inert matter, whose constitutive exclusion sustains the intelligible by...serving as the ground upon which the progression to the intelligible world occurs” (Caldwell 2002: 18). Individual and collective identities in the sacrificial order thus reflect each other structurally, as the establishment and maintenance of all identities require an “other” onto which undesired aspects of worldly existence may be projected and then expelled from the self-understanding of the masculinised self or collective. Because stabilisation, grounding, is what is desired and fluidity is what is feared, Irigaray says “[m]etaphysics always supposes, in some manner, a solid crust from which to raise a construction...The metaphysical is written neither on/in water, nor on/in air, nor on/in fire. Its ek-sistence is founded on the solid” (Irigaray 1999: 2). Like Nkrumah, Irigaray is not satisfied with diagnosing the problem but suggests that part of resisting the dominant metaphysics could be to imagine how things could be otherwise.

An alternative, fluid economy or ontology would first of all preserve the dynamic link and necessary interdependence, as well as the distinction or interval, between on the one hand material relationships whose terms can never be fully separated and the concepts, subjectivity and identities that these construct on the other (Caldwell 2002: 24). Secondly, it would acknowledge on a conceptual as well as a material plane the necessary interdependence as well as the distinction and interval, between the masculine and the feminine, and between other forms of difference. Fluidity and interdependence also thirdly imply that such an economy will no longer invest in the possibility of arresting movement or meaning, and thus in the possibility that any identities, whether individual or collective, could be arrested and stabilised successfully over time through the sacrifice of alterity. This economy would in the fourth place not encourage or reward a flight from change and instability, and thus the fluidity and ambiguity within oneself, as well as multiplicity and change within the community, will be welcomed rather than feared and repressed. Such an economy will make it comfortable, dignified and human to live with the knowledge that, both individually, subjectively, and collectively, “form [is] no more than an apparent and temporary stability in the patterns of potentiality or flow” (Battersby 1998: 51).

It is fitting that in Irigaray’s metaphors, the forgotten passageway, the erasure of elements of lesser density, is also the way of literal birth, and the pathway of the monthly flow which links this passage to the metaphors and economy of fluids, and thus to Thales’ favourite element. For Irigaray, then, the ancient Greek separation and gendered opposition between mind and matter, form and substance, still lies

at the heart of the sacrificial order that we live in today. She claims that we need to remember and recover "the forgotten passage way connecting the material and the intelligible", since "concepts and subjectivity emerge within a dynamic interaction between the material and the intelligible, neither of which can be reduced to the other" (Caldwell 2002: 24). In the cave myth, the pathway that is travelled in order to move from the cave into the light, and thus the link between the feminine and masculine principles is gradually erased and finally denied. In other words, when the passageway is forgotten, then both the link and the inter-dependence, as well the interval, between feminised matter and masculinised intelligibility are forgotten and denied.

Like Nkrumah, Irigaray is concerned with facilitating a transition from a sacrificial order to something different and non-sacrificial, and like him she claims that in this transition, we need to substantially rethink the relation between matter and form. For Irigaray, as for Nkrumah, such a radically new understanding at the ontological level, aimed at repairing a fundamentally intact and integrated human world torn apart by a life-threatening metaphysics, needs to be named and for this she creates the neologism "sensible transcendental" understood as "participating in both the material and the ideal" and in the process "disarray[ing] the traditional oppositions between these domains" (Caldwell 2002: 24; Irigaray 1993b: 33). For Caldwell, this Irigarayan term refers to "a new symbolic economy shaped by a logic of fluids rather than solids" (Caldwell 2002: 25) and it "indicates that matter and form retain an irreducible relation characterised by an interval" (ibid: 25), with conceptual mediation remaining material and therefore necessarily disrupted by difference. This means that if conceptual mediation is simultaneously understood as material, it will not be seen to require "the exclusion of materiality and ambiguity" (ibid: 25), leading to a fluid economy of meaning.

Although Irigaray thus clearly, like Nkrumah, starts to conceptualise and imagine an alternative order to the currently dominant one, she does not fall prey to an essentialist or a-historical position and neither does she deny the influence of relations of domination on our current constellation of sexual difference. In fact, as Whitford (1991: 101ff) explains, for Irigaray, what poses as female sexual difference within the current mono-sexual symbolic order, is a distortion of actual sexual difference, and she would thus endorse Harding's (1987) critique of feminine care ethics as an approach that fails to grasp sexual difference authentically. She calls the appearance of female difference within the sacrificial order "the feminine" or "the other of the same" where female sexual difference can only appear or be represented as the rejected and devalued "other" of the male norm of the human. Since the sacrificial order is established on the murder of the mother or the erasure of material sexual difference, we cannot really know what women could be or become if they were allowed to cultivate their differences within a symbolic order that did not sacrifice them. For this utopian category Irigaray coins the term "other of the

other”, i.e. those aspects or dimensions or manifestations of “the other sex” which are currently repressed and not allowed to appear within the sacrificial order (cf. Irigaray 1985a: 90; Whitford 1991: 104). This is how she manages to keep open the possibility or dream of female sexual difference, instead of reducing it to an effect of current relations of dominations, but also instead of giving an essentialist content to what that difference could or should entail. Precisely because the non-sacrificial order is seen as fluid while still allowing for form and identity to momentarily appear and take shape, sexual difference and identity are neither discarded altogether, nor pinned down in new definitions.

## CONCLUSION

We should not be forced to choose between memory and hope. Perhaps there would be no more interest in emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and the Resurrection were effaced from the memory of mankind (Ricoeur 1981: 99-100).

In this essay, “Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology” Ricoeur links hermeneutics, or “an ontology of prior understanding” to memory; and he links ideology critique, or “an eschatology of freedom” to hope, in an infinitely mutually implicated circle or spiral. The way in which we remember (or wish we could remember) the past, feeds into and shapes the future. Stories about a better past inspire hope for a better future. We have seen in this chapter that both Irigaray and Nkrumah believe in the indispensability of such stories. And both tell their alternative stories with an emancipatory intent. I would go so far as to claim that, because of the intertwined nature of ontology and power, worldview and ethics, emancipatory projects cannot do without such stories conjuring up other worlds. Thinking that we can afford to live, can survive, will retain hope without such stories in a crushingly racist and misogynist symbolic order, is an idle fantasy. African women must keep on telling such stories to inspire our daughters and ignite their imaginations for a better world. But for the sake of a fluid future and the recognition of the sacred within the tension-filled material world, and of the sacred feminine, we would do well to remind ourselves that they are and remain just that - stories floating on the stream of time.

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