Although the geographical meaning of the term “Africa” is widely accepted as settled, questions and problems arise as soon as expressions such as “Arab Africa”, “Maghreb Africa” or “sub-Saharan Africa” are used. These expressions manifest the historical meaning of Africa as well as indicate the multiple dimensions of the term “Africa”.

Let us now turn to one way in which the term “Africa” can be examined, namely, as the name of a geographical location. It is reasonable to accept the geographical meaning of “Africa”: Africa, from the geographical point of view, does not mean Asia, Latin America, Europe, North America or the Middle East. Yet the reasonableness of accepting the geographical meaning is questionable on two grounds:

- The first point of contention that we can raise is that from the point of view of natural history. We learn that all the continents of our planet Earth were once a single, compact, undivided whole, called Pangea. According to geologists, our planet with its geographical divisions did not always exist as such. The geographical divisions evolved over millennia. At a particular point in the course of the evolutionary process the separation into the various continents of the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe (as well as numerous islands) occurred by natural means. Not nature as such, but human beings – though part of nature too – gave specific names to the continents, which leads us to our second point of contention.

- The naming of the continents is therefore the second ground on which we may question the reasonableness of accepting the geographical meaning of “Africa”. This ground forms the bridge between understanding the term “Africa” as a purely geographical term and the historical meaning of “Africa”. In the course of political and social history human beings gave names to various African regions, which were changed from time to time. For example Northern Rhodesia was renamed Zambia, Tanganyika was renamed Tanzania, Southern Rhodesia was renamed Zimbabwe, South West Africa was renamed Namibia, but South Africa was not renamed Azania. The point is to introduce you to the idea that the study of the natural sciences does to some extent help explain why certain changes occurred at a particular time, why they will recur or why they will not happen.
again. The study of the human sciences – and, for our purposes, political and social history in particular – explains why, for example, the Kingdom of Basutoland was renamed Lesotho. Accordingly, the geographical meaning of “Africa” must be complemented by the historical meaning.

From the above it is reasonable to suspect that perhaps the name “Africa” arose at a particular time under specific historical circumstances. Regarding the historical meaning, we read the following:

*In antiquity, the Greeks are said to have called the continent Libya and the Romans Africa, perhaps from the Latin aprica (sunny), or the Greek aphrike (without cold). The name Africa, however, was chiefly applied to the northern coast of the continent, which was in effect regarded as a southern extension of Europe. The Romans, who for a time ruled the North African coast, are also said to have called the area south of their settlements, Afriga, or the Land of the Afrigs – the name of a Berber community south of Carthage. Another explanation occasionally offered is that the name applied to a productive region of what is now Tunisia meant Ears of Corn. The word Ifriqiyyah is apparently the Arabic transliteration of Africa (“Encyclopaedia Britannica” 1974:117).*

From this citation we note three things:

First, the Mediterranean provided a platform for cultural interaction between and among the Romans and the Greeks and the peoples of what was later to be called North Africa. It was also the platform for cultural interaction between and among the Romans and the Greeks, the peoples of “North Africa” and the Arabs. It is in the course of this cultural interaction in the Mediterranean cultural space that the name Africa emerged; first with regard to the northern part of the continent only and later applied to the whole continent as it is today.

Secondly, in terms of the interaction and relations between the Greeks and the Romans on the one hand and the peoples of “North Africa” on the other, it is clear that the name “Africa” is a description of the Greek and Roman experiences of the continent’s climate. In view of the Roman “rule” of “North Africa” and the “settlements” the Romans had established there, it is reasonable to infer that the name Africa was not given by the continent’s indigenous, conquered inhabitants. On the contrary, it is a description based initially on the Roman conquest –
“Carthago delenda est”, Carthage has been destroyed – of “North Africa”. (Does the name of the Roman general Scipio Africanus come to mind?) Over time, this description became part of the everyday vocabulary of the peoples of southern Europe. It later spread to other parts of Western Europe, including England. The conquest of Africa through the unjust wars of colonisation then reaffirmed this description, making it possible to speak of Africa as if it comprised only one ethnic group of people having a single common culture. The name Africa therefore ought to be questioned. According to Ali Mazrui (1986:25, 29, 38):

*[T]he name Africa may have originally been either Semitic or Greco-Roman ... [T]he application of the name in more recent centuries has been due almost entirely to Western Europe. ... [W]e should question Europe’s decisions about boundaries of Africa and the identity of Africans.*

Names and naming comprise one of the on-going problems about the identity of Africa. Most African countries changed their names at independence – for example Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. This name changing illustrates the on-going problem. The situation that gave rise to the name changing is comparable to that of a child who lived for a long time with foster parents who deliberately and systematically concealed the fact that they were not the child’s biological parents. Surely, when the child ultimately discovers its biological parents, its relationship with the foster parents will change for better or worse? The same is true of its relationship with its newly discovered biological parents. The term “Africa”, applied to the entire continent, could have had a different significance if the “Afrigs” were responsible for its reference to the entire continent. Against this background, the discovery that “Africa” is not only a description by an outsider but also an imposition by the same outsider generates many problems. One of the problems is that it is rather funny that the study of “African” philosophy simply means the study of “sunny” or solar philosophy! No doubt anyone interested in the impact of a climate “without cold” on the philosophy of a people living in such a climate may propound a theory about that climate. But this is not the same thing as the philosophy expressed by the peoples of this climatic region in their own right. In other words, it is one thing to talk about the philosophy of the Bantu, the San or the Akan peoples and quite another to theorise on solar philosophy. This is not an idle point because some of the critics of “African” philosophy argue that it is impossible to speak of such a philosophy, precisely because the peoples of Africa belong to complex and diverse ethnic
groups. Of course, the critics take the meaning of the term “Africa” for granted, whereas we in this instance do not. Similarly, they accept the term “European” philosophy or the “European” Union at face value.

Thirdly, the term “Africa” speaks more of the West European historical experience with the peoples of the continent and much less of these peoples’ experience of their own self-understanding. In other words, the history of “Africa” is mainly the history of the West European experience of “Africa” and only incidentally the story of the peoples of the continent about themselves. Let us take one example to illustrate this. In the sixth volume of Encyclopaedia Britannica (1974:461) under the rubric “History of Egypt” we read:

_The Egyptians were a practical people, and they reveal through the products of their arts and crafts their particular genius. In classical times these early Egyptians were also credited by the Greeks with great knowledge and wisdom; but the evidence provided by Egyptian writings does not support this Greek opinion. It is probable that Greek travellers in Egypt, impressed by the grandeur and antiquity of the monuments of the land and misled by the accounts of past ages given to them by their priestly guides, grossly misinterpreted the evidence and jumped to unwarranted conclusions. Unlike the Greeks, the Egyptians were not philosophically inclined, intellectually inquisitive, or prone to theorising ..._

First, the author here contradicts “Greek opinion” on facts which he or she does not care to bring to light – except to refer to them vaguely as “Egyptian writings”. The second problem is that not only “Greek travellers” visited and sojourned in Egypt, but also people from other parts of the world. Nor was it only the “priestly guides” who passed on information about Egyptian “knowledge and wisdom”. In fact, some of the “priestly guides” actually received their priestly training from the Egyptians. For this they had to stay in Egypt for much longer than a fleeting visit. Aristotle, by his own admission (Metaphysics 1.1981b:14–24), acknowledged the Egyptian origin of the sciences of mathematics and astronomy. Apparently, it is testimony like this which the author of the entry cited either ignores deliberately or denies. He or she is by no means alone in this approach. Even Copleston, a towering figure in the history of Western philosophy, has shown similar disregard and implicit denial of first-hand testimony from the ancient Greeks. Commenting on this, Osuagwu (1999:87, 94, 95, 96) argues thus:
Copleston totally rejects a historical and scientific African philosophy of ancient Black Egypt and its subsequent influence on and relation with early Greek philosophy ... F.C. Copleston (1907–1985), an American Catholic clergyman, is a typical 20th century European representative of the view which denies and severs all historical philosophical links of ancient Egypt with Greece and Rome ... Furthermore, Copleston would not accept even the personally documented testimonies of the ancient Greek philosophers ... If Copleston ignores the personal and first hand literary testimonies of ancient Greek philosophers, he would certainly be less ready to accept the secondary reports of later past authors like Herodotus ...

It goes without saying that the author of the encyclopaedia entry just cited falls within the same category as Copleston. Both the entry in Encyclopaedia Britannica and Copleston’s rejection, denial, disregard or even misinterpretation of ancient black Egypt arrogate philosophy and reason exclusively to the West. The will to appropriate impels the author of the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry to assign “wisdom” but not thought or reason to ancient black Egypt. The same will to appropriate reason permits the author to give himself or herself the licence to ascribe, later in the same paragraph of the above citation, “magic” to the body of knowledge of ancient black Egypt. This will to appropriate reason as the exclusive quality and right of the Western European is one of the robust pillars of Western philosophy.

Aristotle’s definition of the human being as “a rational animal” seems to have inspired the philosophy of colonisation and has survived decolonisation. In effect, the notion that humanity is exclusively Western is alive in our time, although in somewhat more subtle manifestations.

Please study Ramose’s essay “The struggle for reason in Africa” (2002) against this background.

Once you have worked through the second learning unit entitled “Discourses on Africa”, you will understand why and how some people still continue to raise one or both of the following questions:

- Is there an African philosophy?

- Can there be an African philosophy?
In his celebrated essay on these questions in relation to Latin America, and indeed colonised peoples the world over, Bondy has argued that these are by no means empirical questions. Other contrary, they are based on doubt that the African, the Amerindian and the Australasian are also genuine and authentic members of the “rational animal” category. Bondy (1986:240–243) argues:

Where is the cause, the determining complex of this condition of Hispanic America as an entity and also of each of its constituent nations? If we are aware that this condition is not peculiar to Hispanic American countries, but is largely similar to that of other communities and regional groups of nations, belonging to what today is called the Third World, then it is clear that, to explain it, we must utilize the concept of underdevelopment, with the correlative concept of domination. ... Philosophy in Hispanic America has a possibility of being authentic in the midst of the unauthenticity that surrounds and consumes it, and to convert itself into the lucid awareness of this condition and into the thought capable of unleashing the process to overcome it. It must be a mediation about our anthropological status and from our own negative status, with a view to its cancellation. Consequently, Hispanic American philosophy has before it – as a possibility of its own recuperation – a destructive task that, in the long run, will be destructive to its current form. It must be an awareness that cancels prejudice, myths, idols; an awareness that will awaken us to our subjection as peoples and our depression as men. In consequence, it must be an awareness that liberates us from the obstacles that impede our anthropological expansion, which is also the anthropological expansion of the world. It must be, in addition, a critical and analytical awareness of the potentialities and demands of our affirmation as humanity.

You should read works such as the following in the light of this argument: The African origin of civilization (Diop 1974), The African origin of Greek philosophy (Onyewuenyi 1993), Philosophie Africaine de la periode Pharaonique 2780–330 avant notre ère (Obenga 1990), Great African thinkers (Van Sertima 1984), Black women in antiquity (Van Sertima 1986), Black Athena (Bernal 1991), and Black Athena: ten years after (Van Binsbergen 1997).

As mentioned above, you will find full bibliographical details of these publications in the list of references at the end of this tutorial letter. It is important to note that Onyewuenyi, Cheikh Anta
Diop, Obenga and especially Osuagwu take the meaning of the term “science” for granted. Yet it is precisely “science” that gave rise to the problems in African history in general and the history of philosophy in particular. It is therefore necessary to examine the meaning of “science” as a prelude to espousing the African perspective on history in general and the history of philosophy in particular. For example, “science” is not “neutral”, as it purports to be. Nor is it entirely “objective” and free of attachment to specific values. In the light of this, to take the concept of “science” for granted means admitting there is nothing problematic about the definition of “science” by others on behalf of Africa. Once this admission is made, by assuming the concept of “science” is unproblematic, it is clear that African philosophy is yearning for some space – to be integrated into the already existing body of “science”. Its philosophers demand to be allowed to do “science” just like those who defined it on behalf of Africans. But this is contrary to the demand to speak for oneself in one’s own right. Therefore we need to critically examine the meaning of “science” and determine its meaning according to the exigencies of the African experience as a critique of the concept of “science”. We may extract two crucial points from the preceding paragraph. One is that, for Bondy, the affirmation of our “humanity” means that the question “Can there be a Latin American philosophy?”, or, for that matter, “Can there be an African philosophy?” is pre-eminently an ontological, not an empirical question. It is predicated on the premise that the defect in the ontology of the Amerindian, the African and the Australasian lies in the putative fact that, by their very nature, these peoples do not qualify for the status of “rational animal”. A counter to this is indeed the ethical/political imperative to affirm their humanity, which is to leave no doubt that any ontological defect stands in the way of these peoples to qualify as “rational animals”.

Another point is that the disregard, rejection or misrepresentation of the histories and cultures of the indigenous peoples of the continent known today as Africa points out a problem with the writing and presentation of “African” histories and cultures. This is the problem pertaining to historiography, the writing and presentation of history. The problem here is that the standard of “objectivity” was not allowed to prevail. Instead, it was subjected to the writers’ interests. The result was and, to a very large extent remains, the disfigurement and distortion of the image and identity of the indigenous peoples of the continent known today as Africa. This aspect is discussed, for example, in the introduction as well as the first chapter of the first volume of UNESCO’s eight-volume General history of Africa (1978–1993). The point of the discussion is to
underline the need to deal with the disfigurement as well as the distortion of the African identity. It is, in other words, the recognition of the ethical-political duty to put the record straight by assuring that the indigenous peoples speak for themselves in their own right. On this basis it may not be necessary to abolish the term “Africa”. The retention of the term shall, however, not exclude specific foci such as the Rwandan Bantu Philosophy of Being, the Akan Conceptual Scheme, the Yoruba Concept of a Person, the Human Person and Immortality in Ibo Metaphysics, and the philosophy of Ubuntu.