

An Assessment of Kwasi Wiredu's Contributions to African Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

The African philosophy of religion has come of age. However, laying the groundwork and shaping its intellectual trajectories was the work of eminent thinkers and philosophers who laboured in recent years. Kwasi Wiredu is one of the scholars who stood tall and strong with the depth of his thoughts and perspectives seemingly traversing the scope of time and space. In light of the overarching objective of this study "to decisively re-launch African philosophy of religion as a self-sustaining field of African philosophy," it behoves that a review of Wiredu's contribution to the field is critically examined, considering the postmodern categories and contexts. Using an analytical approach, this paper shows that Kwasi Wiredu's contribution to the discourse on the substance and nature of Africa is highly informative and enlightening, though it is open to dispute and reflections just like every other philosophical work. A brief review of the catalogues of Wiredu's scholarly works shows that the issues of conceptual decolonization, cultural reconstructionism and the nature of African philosophies underscore his work. The article argues that for contemporary philosophers, it behoves that Wiredu's analytic framework

may be adopted. But, culturally-inclined and realistic approaches should be adopted in doing Africa philosophy. The diversities of African cultures and traditions as well necessitate a pluralistic approach from various parts of Africa.

Keywords: Conceptual decolonization, African philosophy of religion, Kwasi Wiredu, Cultural Reconstructionism.

Introduction

The African philosophy of religion has come of age. However, laying the groundwork and shaping its intellectual trajectories was the work of eminent thinkers and philosophers who laboured in recent years; among these scholars, Kwasi Wiredu stood tall and strong with the depth of his thoughts and perspectives seemingly traversing the scope of time and space (Azenabor 6). Osha Sanya, a critic of Wiredu writes that, "Wiredu contributed immensely to the foundation and shaping of contemporary intellectual discourses in the discipline of the African philosophy" (7). A brief review of the catalogues of Wiredu's scholarly works showed that the issues of conceptual decolonization, cultural reconstructionism and the nature of African Philosophies underscore the bodies of his work. It has been commented in several quarters that Wiredu's contribution to African philosophy has been magisterial, insightful and at best consequential. As such, he remains one of the towering philosophical figures in the annals of African philosophy and religion. It is as a result of this that serious attention has been paid to his contributions in various quarters; regardless in light of the overarching object "to decisively prelaunch African philosophy of religion as a self-sustaining field of African Philosophy" it behoves that a review of Wiredu's contribution to the field is critically examined, considering the postmodern categories and contexts.

Early Beginnings of Kwasi Wiredu

According to available data, Kwasi Wiredu was born in 1931 in Ghana. Harrison writes, "Wiredu's parents came from a lower middle class. He was well brought up with sound moral education and acquired basic literate skills at the Adisadel Secondary School from 1948 to 1952, where he started developing interest in philosophy" (56). Osha claims that he had his first exposure to philosophy very early in life. Sanya even writes: "Wiredu read his first couple of philosophical books in school around 1947

in Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti. These books were Bernard Bosanquet's *the Essentials of Logic* and C.E.M Joad's *Teach Yourself Philosophy*" (8).

It was also pointed out that logic as a branch of philosophy was fascinating and attractive to Wiredu because of its affinities to grammar which he enjoyed (Sanya 8). There was also a keen interest in practical psychology during his formative years. In 1950, he came across *The Last Days of Socrates*, a philosophical text while on vacation with his aunt in Accra (Sanya 8). These dialogues, according to Sanya, significantly influenced Wiredu as can be seen in the final chapter of his first ground-breaking philosopher work *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980) which is also in dialogic format (8).

By 1952, he gained admission to the University of Ghana, Legon to read philosophy. During this period, he was heavily influenced by the philosophy of C.E.M. Joad and this was seen in the fact that "he employed the name J.E. Joad as his pen-name for a series of political articles he wrote for a national newspaper, *The Ashanti Sentinel* between 1950 and 1951" (Sanya 8). He was instructed mainly in Western philosophy at the University of Ghana. According to him, "the character of his undergraduate education was to leave his mind a virtual *tabula rasa*, as far as African philosophy was concerned" (Sanya 8). As such, he came to develop his interest in African philosophy by himself. Danquah's work on *Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* was among the first texts of African philosophy he read.

Upon his graduation from the University of Ghana in 1958, he was admitted to Oxford University where he continued with his graduate studies. After that, he was appointed to a teaching position at the University College of North Staffordshire (now Keele University) where he worked for a year and later returned to Ghana (Harrison 56). Sanya pointed out that Wiredu began publishing relatively late, but was very prolific (9). He has published articles in virtually all areas of philosophy: logic, epistemology, social-political philosophy, ethics and principally African philosophy.

Kwasi Wiredu's Contributions to African Philosophy

Having established the historical background of Wiredu, this section shall consider briefly Wiredu's significant contributions to the development of the African philosophy of religion. The focus of this section is mainly on Wiredu's idea of an African philosophy and conceptual decolonization.

The Idea of an African Philosophy in Wiredu's Perspective

From the perspective of Wiredu, the postcolonial African quest for identity constitutes the search for the correct conception of African philosophy (xxi). It has been argued that African philosophy may be conceived as ethnic or folk philosophy. However, Wiredu is of the view that it is inappropriate to regard 'African philosophy' as such. For him, African philosophy may be viewed from three angles (xxi). First, he believes that it is essential that contemporary African philosophers reject the folk philosophy approach of researching the traditional background of a people while conducting a philosophical endeavour. For him, such an approach is communalistic as against the Western philosophy which is individualised. Since this form of approach lacks room for comparative growth it contains no argument that he considers the foundation of doing philosophy (Harrison 57).

The second angle is that there is an ongoing process regarding African philosophy. According to Wiredu, the sense of perceiving philosophy is still in the making. In his words, "African philosophy as separated from African traditional worldview is the philosophy that is being done by African philosophers and that is still in the making," (xxii). The third aspect may be classified "as the thought of certain class of individuals in traditional African societies, who though unaffected by modern intellectual influences are capable of critical and original philosophical reflections as distinct from folk ideas of their people." Harrison speculates that it may have influenced his definition of African philosophy as "the philosophical thought embedded in or articulated in the oral and written traditions of Africa" (57).

From this, it can be seen that Wiredu possesses a universalist approach to doing African philosophy. He urges that contemporary African philosophers invest more in engaging modern African philosophy which focuses on development in logic, mathematics, science and humanities (Wiredu 37). As earlier noted, he rejected traditional African philosophy because it is communal. However, he argues that contemporary African philosophers must be ready to reconstruct and examine the intellectual foundation of traditional African philosophy if they are to accept it. The reason for this is that "philosophy is not just culture-inclined but also serves as a critique of culture" (Harrison 57 - 58). Thus, he proposes that cultural reconstructionism should be adopted as a philosophical approach in this regard. For him, this kind of approach affords the opportunity to "acquaint ourselves with different cultures of

the world and see how far issues and concepts of universal relevance can be disentangled from the contingencies of culture" (Harrison 58). The need to reconstruct African traditional philosophy birthed the idea of conceptual decolonization in Wiredu's thoughts.

Wiredu's Idea of Conceptual Decolonization

According to Harrison, Wiredu's theory of conceptual decolonization focuses on the quest to emancipate African minds from the grips and grasp of colonialism and Western ideologies. It should be noted that his theory of conceptual decolonization essentially defines his approaches and attitudes towards the content of contemporary African thought. As noted by Sanya,

Wiredu began his reflections on the nature, legitimate aims, and possible orientations in contemporary African thoughts not as a result of any particular awareness of the trauma or violence of colonialism or imperialism but by a confrontation with the dilemma of modernity by the reflective (post)colonial African consciousness. (10)

For Wiredu, decolonization may be viewed from two complementary sides which are positive and negative. Positively, there is the need for African philosophers to exploit the resources of African indigenous conceptual schemes in their philosophical meditations on even the technical problems of contemporary philosophy. Negatively, it is avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness of the unexamined assimilation in our thought of the conceptual frameworks embedded in foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought (Wiredu 67). As such, the impetus and necessity for decolonization are occasioned by the historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on the African thought process and system via colonialism (Sanya 14).

Wiredu's volume on *Conceptual Decolonisation in African Philosophy* is an apt summary of his philosophical interest alongside his magisterial seminal work on *Philosophy and African Culture*. It must be noted that the contribution of Wiredu is also pervasive. He made salient comments on Marxism, mysticism, metaphysics and the general nature of the philosophical enterprise itself (Sanya 14). Sanya claims that although his latter text, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* has a more Africa-centred orientation, his first book, *Philosophy and an African Culture* presents a

wider range of discursive interests: a vigorous critique of Marxism, reflections on the phenomenon of ideology, analyses of truth and the philosophy of language, among other preoccupations (14).

Evaluations

It is obvious from the contributions highlighted above that Kwasi Wiredu is a great thinker and one of the foremost philosophers to ever emerge from the African continent. While his thought on conceptual decolonization is ingenious and ground-breaking, it appears that there are a few contradictions and complexities in his general submission (Oke 12). Harrison points out that Wiredu's theory of cultural reconstruction and his thought on conceptual decolonization somewhat contradicts. Harrison writes that in Wiredu's essay *Need for Conceptual Decolonization*, it was noted that Africans need to mentally free themselves from the grips of a foreign conceptual framework. If Africa needs to do this, "how then plausible it is to use the same Western framework and epistemologies as yardstick and basis for determining an 'authentic' African philosophy? (Ozumba 9). Thus, it is the view of Harrison that "it is self-refuting and ironical, in determining what constitutes or identifies as African philosophy, African philosophers still need to use foreign approach or foundation." In fact, according to Harrison's argument which this paper subscribes to, the African philosophy is occasioned by the need for an authentic and unique identity, personality and freedom from colonialism and its effect and as such to submit to Wiredu's position in this regard is to defeat the very reason of the idea of an African philosophy (Oruka 6).

Nevertheless, it is agreeable that Wiredu proposes that in terms of the application of certain values and concepts in solving issues concerning challenges and situations African philosophy needs a drastic change to occasion the development and improvement of human life on the continent. However, it is reasonable that "such be done through the lens of a traditional and contemporary thought system, fusing some important ideals, belief and values of the past African philosophical tradition with the new contemporary philosophy which is advanced in terms of scientific discoveries and technology" (Harrison 71). Harrison argues that it is contrary to the view of Wiredu that it is indeed impossible to jettison the traditional thought system, as it serves as part and source of African history and heritage (71). Indeed, discarding the African traditional thought system while claiming to engage in decolonization would be an almost impossible task. In the words of Harrison:

Though a major critique could be made on the fact that it would keep us going backwards in search of a forward modern theory we believe that when this is done, we can arrive at reasonable conclusions as to why such theories and ideals never worked in the first place, why it could or could not work now, which to extract, and so on and by doing this we can close that chapter and move forward towards a contemporary authentic African philosophy. Because it is impossible to discard the traditional thought system, it serves as part of African history and heritage, otherwise, why is it necessary to keep recounting the pain and disadvantages of colonial history but make it contingent to overlook the African beliefs, values and cultural heritage of that same time? (Harrison 71)

Therefore, it is better to search for approaches and perspectives from the socio-cultural framework of African epistemologies to engage in African philosophy in the decolonization project. The argument here is that "if contemporary African philosophy cannot be based on African traditional thought system, where do philosophers turn to for the foundation and history of African philosophy? Who better to turn to than those who encountered and lived through it all, whether oral or documented?" (Harrison 72).

It is agreeable and plausible that cultural renewal is advantageous for African philosophy, but jettisoning the African cultural paradigm as a basis may lead Africans to indulge in yet another indirect colonialism. This paper agrees with Harrison that philosophy is culturally relative and every race does have its unique pattern of thinking that gives way to its ideologies. What is considered and taken to be the norms and reality in any cultural setting depends on that cultural experience and tradition (Harrison 72). In line with this Momoh writes that a true philosopher individual is a child of his time, experience and culture (45). This goes on to illustrate that all philosophical activities take place within the parameters of experience and culture, which shape our outlook (Harrison 72 – 73).

Based on the above, a comparative study of two philosophical traditions might be a difficult task. It may be hard to adopt a universalist approach in postmodern societies. Postmodernism is rooted in relativism and subjectivity. To adopt an otherwise approach is a futile effort. As such,

it is safe to agree with Harrison in this regard that Wiredu's cultural reconstruction based on foreign tradition and a universalist perception will be difficult if not impossible (Harrison 73). Doing such will generally raise questions such as: what are the prerequisites to judge that such an African philosophy as advocated by Wiredu has been 'modernized' even if we use the Western methodology as a paradigm? How do we adjudge authenticity to such a mixed-bred philosophy? What are the criteria that will be used in judging its authenticity? Is it nationality, content and context, the subject matter or methodology? Finally, at what point can we determine that indeed we have modernized African philosophy? (Harrison 73). Therefore, the diversities of African culture and pluralism of the postmodern context afford a more diverse approach from the traditional and cultural framework to be used in African philosophy (Sogolo 23).

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing analysis and reflections, it can be concluded that Kwasi Wiredu's contribution to the discourse on the substance and nature of Africa is highly informative and enlightening, though it is open to dispute and further reflections just like every other philosophical work. It can be seen that Wiredu's particular contributions to contemporary African philosophy reside in his theory of conceptual decolonisation and cultural reconstructionism. He discovered a challenging path in modern African thought in which he sometimes takes the meaning of the existence of African philosophy for granted. However, his approach is somewhat problematic and may not be fit for the postmodern context where cultural relativity and subjectivity are allowed. In this regard for contemporary philosophers, it behooves that Wiredu's analytic framework may be adopted and some of his insightful drives are essentially needed in doing African philosophy. But, culturally-inclined and realistic approaches should be adopted in doing Africa Philosophy. The diversities of African cultures and traditions as well necessitate a pluralistic approach from various parts of Africa. It is the position of this paper that whilst we have some fundamental cultural elements that unite us as one in Africa, there are various divergences and uniqueness that can bring fresh vitality to the field of African philosophy.

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