

# Conceptual Decolonisation: Kwasi Wiredu's Disruption of Philosophy

In conceptual terms, decolonisation is very important to previously colonised peoples because they seek to establish a fresh historical continuum, thereby fostering a sense of collective dignity, restoring forms of blemished consciousness and then equipping themselves with the necessary tools to face the future with renewed vigour.

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Colonialism, in spite of its various modernist aspirations, was often pursued with incredible degrees of violence largely inflicted upon the colonised. Therefore, decolonisation had to incorporate a therapeutic component in healing broken selves and indeed broader forms of consciousness.

Kwasi Wiredu, a Ghanaian philosopher, is an important voice in the discussions on decolonisation in Africa. The tenor of Wiredu's project of conceptual decolonisation is by and large pragmatic - he interrogates the divide between tradition and modernity in African contexts. Here, this pragmatism comes to the fore. Wiredu does not unduly romanticise the supposed beauty of ancient African cultures and traditions; instead he is selective in accepting parts of them that he finds useful and repudiating others that impede Africa's development. For instance, Wiredu is not uncritical of aspects of Akan traditional culture that he deems to be counter-productive, nor is he eulogistic in relation to unhelpful or unnecessary Western methods. What he attempts, instead, is a sort of cultural synthesis between Euromodernity and a traditional African culture. This conceptual approach has been very influential in most of Anglophone Africa, particularly in West Africa and East Africa.

Undoubtedly, his significance has been restricted to largely philosophical and academic circles. This development is somewhat curious. It appears that philosophy is, in many cases as well as regions, quite distant from everyday

concerns. Philosophy is a significantly metaphilosophical discipline that reflects reality from a safe Platonic contemplative distance. The Athenian origins of Western philosophy obviously do not address the urgencies of African existential dilemmas and this is probably one of the reasons that African philosophy sometimes appears not to be in the forefront of the social processes of decolonisation in Africa.

African philosophy, as such, seems removed from the hotbed of decolonisation even when Wiredu's project of conceptual decolonisation provides an undoubtedly important approach to the topic. For philosophy to obtain relevance to the practices of everyday life in Africa, it has to be embedded in and defined by everyday struggles and experiences. However, not all philosophical trends in Africa are seemingly removed from everyday realities. For instance, the Southern African concept of *ubuntu* is constantly bandied about in the public realm as opposed to being limited to the discourses circulating only within ivory towers.

## **Afrocentricity**

Afrocentricity is another African(ist) orientation in philosophy that seeks to embed itself within everyday African consciousness in a more or less direct way. Wiredu has not engaged with this trend in African contemporary thought and practice. As such there has been a - for want of a better term - schism between academic philosophy and non-academic intellectual practice, a trend that mirrors what exists in black America where academic luminaries based within the academy are hardly known outside it whilst Afrocentric thinkers become, in the eyes of the public, learned folk heroes precisely because they engage constantly with their communities on a wide range of burning issues. Thought, as it were, has to be imbued with a measure of social activism and transformational potential otherwise the divide between the ivory tower and the community remains unmediated.

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Wiredu is aware of the other traditions of African contemporary thought that seek to bridge the divide between academic philosophy and folk thought, as

exemplified by the contributions of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Leopold Sedar Senghor, who were termed philosopher-kings by the Anglophone school of African philosophy. All the aforementioned African freedom fighters-turned-political leaders combined the conceptual and practical aspects of decolonisation under one overarching imperative to forge an existential vision for the decolonised African.

Wiredu's entire corpus unearths, albeit unwittingly, the distance between Western philosophical traditions and African systems of thought. And this distance can be quite enormous depending on the historical approach one adopts. Afrocentricity encourages a robust engagement with the African historical past in order to discover the true meaning of philosophy, which in Afrocentric terms can only be located in ancient Egypt. Such an Afrocentric conception of philosophy exceeds the ordinary boundaries of Western philosophy. Wiredu's understanding of philosophy is clearly not Afrocentric in the usual sense of the term but in spite of its Western analytic framework it attempts a recuperation of the African subject as a central object of discourse. Here, the African subject suddenly finds him/herself within a Western - and often alien - canon of rationality. The mere incongruity of this presence disrupts the "normal" dynamic of analytic philosophy and then announces the frightening possibility for a multiculturalism that is fundamentally alien within that philosophic equation.

These layers of disruption within a supposedly "pure" canon of Western philosophy is what Wiredu accomplishes with his work. By daring to introduce an African presence into a lily-white canon, a discomfort arises, one that preempts other conceptual possibilities that ultimately question the meaning and limits of philosophy. The African subject thus finds him/herself entrapped within a Western philosophical vocabulary that necessarily constrains his/her discursive agency, notwithstanding the realities of being ensconced within an ostensibly African voice, in this case, Wiredu's own voice.

One is compelled to return to the immense possibilities of Afrocentricity, which seeks to recover the purity of the African voice. Wiredu's work, which represents the introduction of an African voice into a Western philosophical canon, in this sense, constitutes a conceptual revolt. Afrocentricity, on the other hand, promises a total revolution, a liberation from the traumas and limitations of conceptual schizophrenia, whereby an African subject is forever reduced to agonising over the discomfort and ambiguities of a superimposed philosophical lexicon.

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By interrogating the overarching tradition/modernity dialectic, Wiredu has announced cultural synthesis as a pragmatic approach. But it seems the benefits of this conceptual approach would have been better realised in the fields of cultural studies, and other related discourses. African philosophy seems to have lost a considerable amount of momentum. Even though the African presence constitutes a disruption within the Western philosophical canon in the manner in which Wiredu announces it, this disruption, as pointed out earlier, does not entail a complete transformation of the philosophical tradition that hosts it.

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These remarks about the outcome of Wiredu's work are based on observations that stem from "post-colonial" African life. Such a context is never predictable as the nightmares and astonishing potentials being witnessed in contemporary Africa must be far removed from the dreams the likes of Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and Ngugi wa Thiongo had for the continent.

In the African continent, as states fail constantly, ethnic strife erupts and millions are displaced through wars, migrations, disease and famine. Thus an all-too-familiar picture of the beleaguered continent is further lodged in our minds, one that panders to convenient and uncritical stereotype. But within this seemingly unsalvageable scenario we see instances of astounding resilience, colour, strength and creativity, such that outstrip our conceptual vocabularies. Cultural synthesis as understood by normal philosophical diction does not quite capture the forms of life in constant transition that the inhabitants of Africa battle with daily.

These supposed random and chaotic fragments of African existence are

paradoxically a liberation of the African voice, a dervish of presence which colonialism had done everything to deny, suppress and ultimately, destroy. Such a presence constitutes a grave existential antithesis to philosophical equilibrium, and therefore, decorum. In reality it ought to be more than just a disruption in order to realise its true potential; it had to be, in an Afrocentric sense, a complete transformation of concept and consciousness in a manner that repudiates all existing philosophical discourses, except those discovered (and recovered) through a largely Afrocentric project.

## **An African cosmology**

In identifying frames of reference that suit the decolonised African subject, discourses, such as cultural or ethnic and race studies, appear to be better positioned than philosophy. One of the reasons for philosophy's limitations is its innate reluctance to question and undermine the basis of its attitudes in relation to the African subject. In other words, the African subject is compelled, with little or no voice, to find its locus of muteness within an invariably Western philosophical canon. Within this philosophical straight jacket, its potential for manouverability is significantly curtailed. If indeed it is able to acquire a voice, it is one that is mangled, lacking in confidence and ultimately unrepresentative and self-defeating.

But all around us within the continent, there are cacophonies of voices, unruly regimes of representation, disclosure and iconicity, clashing, jarring, refusing to be curtailed and silenced, bursting forth in variegated hues and displays until the senses experience multiple stages of sensory overload. It becomes evident that we have no vocabulary to describe this state of affairs that constantly threaten to overwhelm our abilities to cope with, classify and assess phenomena. Instead of philosophy and normal theoretical language, we find succour in constant eruptions of music, dance, and the ever-revolving institutions of the "palaver" and in other forms of conviviality that may emerge suddenly and then disappear only to reappear in somewhat altered conditions in ever-mobile cyclicality, and shifting bases of transformation.

In these constantly moving and evolving forms are to be found our rough and ready conceptual implements that would make academic philosophers wince, recoil and depart for more stable social conditions where they are able to find comfort in jaded vocabularies.

It is tempting to state that philosophy loses its powers in Africa unless it resorts to the language of pathology, that is, at least, a certain understanding of philosophy, which paradoxically, Wiredu is able to employ in his project of conceptual decolonisation. However, what I have pointed out are the limitations of acquiring and maintaining a liberated voice within that fraught conceptual milieu. At best, that constrained voice constitutes a disruption within “normal” universal philosophical momentum. But essentially, what we require more than ever is a complete transformation of the conceptual apparatus so that we are able to embrace more fully our essential realities rather than being alienated and stymied by them at a fundamental conceptual level.

The disruption caused by Wiredu’s insertion of an African presence in philosophy foreshadows a crucial logical progression, one that demands that philosophy must turn against itself in order to be representative of an African cosmology. There has got to be a more inspiring way to capture myriad sounds, languages, voices, dialects and tropical colours that characterise African existence. Instead, under the structures of analytical philosophy (and other similar traditions), what we see is a retreat by philosophy from this reality. By doing so, it disqualifies itself as a medium of expression for non-Western experiences and instead launches an offensive by labeling everything African as barbaric, or at best, unformed, non-descript and unnameable. Being a philosopher of the proper sense of word, Wiredu obviously despaired of the possibility in effecting a negation of philosophy. What isn’t clear is whether he read philosophy’s limitations in the manner described in this brief article. But even if he senses its fundamental limitations, he never quite attempts to transcend them in a radical manner.

Afrocentricity, on the other hand, attempts a total re-fabrication of the entire conceptual apparatus dealing with the African subject as an experiential and philosophical being. This wide-ranging operation works at many levels in the following ways: a re-consideration of the question of African historiography; a re-evaluation of the place of the African subject in history; a thorough-going re-positioning and realignment of the discipline of philosophy incorporating its pre-Athenian locus and orientation in order to transcend the bounds of philosophy itself in its contemporary form.

Essentially, this kind of operation constitutes a considerable advancement on Wiredu’s project of conceptual decolonisation. In this manner, the haunting occasioned by deep loss, collective psychic disequilibrium and severance, and a

psychological misalignment with a superimposed cultural order are downplayed for more vigorous engagement with the internal momentum of pre-colonial African history. The point, is, how do we deal with traumas of loss without the usual recourse to collective amnesia? Afrocentricity suggests that this is wholly possible. Wiredu's project of conceptual decolonisation appears to be lacking the psychological resources to cope with the traumas of loss and the unremitting despair caused by the diminution or even erasure of identity, and so in establishing a conversation between tradition and modernity, the African subject still has to avail him/herself of lush means to deal with chronic agonies of cultural disconnect that are in turn provided by Afrocentricity and its multi-pronged approaches to cultural reconstruction on a massive scale.

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## **Neither Here Nor There: The 'Double Consciousness' of Oppressed People of African Descent**

The experience of slavery, which is directly linked to the European imperial project and colonisation, did not only entail a forceful subjugation of African bodies but also involved a despotic transformation of African cognitive systems and mentalities. In this sense, Africans often underwent a painful existential and epistemic severance from African systems of knowledge and an imposition of alien patterns and structures of knowledge that were often derogatory and dismissive of their histories, experiences and achievements.

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*have little utility value for the continent or have been detrimental to African growth and advancement.*

Accordingly, after the successful overthrow of political colonisation, an elaborate re-connection with African modes of knowledge (sometimes in the uncouth politics of ethnic authenticity) was necessary to undertake the ongoing task of decolonisation. Along with this definite conceptual maneuver, there was also the challenge of modernity with which to contend. In most cases, African traditions of authority and leadership were severely affected when not drastically transformed or even destroyed by the colonial encounter and it became necessary to adopt Western modes of governance that were not always palatable to African requirements and specificities. At the level of governance, this has created enormous problems and challenges in African societies.

Indeed, there have been noteworthy attempts in Africa to surmount the varied challenges posed by the colonial encounter and legacy. Some of these attempts have been largely intellectual while others stem from the innate resilience of peoples of African descent to establish links with their past.

Kwasi Wiredu, the Ghanaian philosopher, is probably the most influential Anglophone thinker in Africa. His impressive intellectual stature stems from his seminal work on what he terms “conceptual decolonisation”, which is concerned with the systematic subversion of Western concepts, ideas and structures of knowledge embedded in the modern African *episteme* that either have little utility value for the continent or have been detrimental to African growth and advancement. In pursuing this particular epistemological project, Wiredu’s scope and terms of reference are quite specific. His Akan ethnic background provides the epistemic and linguistic canvas upon which he embarks to explore the establishing of a feasible synthesis between African and Western cultures in a bid to hoist Africans out of the existential and epistemic dilemmas caused by the colonial encounter.

Wiredu’s project of conceptual decolonisation is elaborated in two major books: *Philosophy and an African Culture* and *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. At first glance, it would appear that Wiredu’s project is purely philosophical as he focuses on well-known philosophical concepts such as “truth”, “mind”, “language”, “ethics” and “religion”. However, the significance of

his approach immediately assumes deeper value when faced with the challenge of re-building African societies and epistemic frameworks in the wake of the colonial intervention.

In order to successfully embark on conceptual decolonisation, as prescribed by Wiredu, at least three kinds of competencies are needed. First, a knowledge of Western cultures and languages, together with their disruptive effect on subject cultures. Second, a keen familiarity with indigenous cultures and languages prior to their infiltration by Western traditions. Third, the possession of the conceptual nimbleness and aptitude needed to confront the often obfuscating colonial legacy.

By establishing this blueprint, Wiredu has opened up a channel not only to interrogate the lingering effects of the colonial encounter but also one by which a diverse range of modern projects can be undertaken. In conceptual terms, his project is historical, philosophical and metaphilosophical, and regenerative and this is why it can be applied to a seemingly infinite array of African contexts.

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Unlike many radical nativists who prefer to see nothing of value in the colonial encounter and Western cultures generally, Wiredu’s contribution involves a dispassionate assessment of the current existential situation in Africa and a solemn contemplation of the conceptual options available to the decolonising as well as the modernising consciousness. He thus poses the dual fundamental question: What can we recuperate from our past while keeping what is useful in the present? In this manner, the survival of the African subject becomes paramount, which from this perspective is largely existential. But the apparent simplicity of the framing of this question obviously carries considerable philosophical value and utility. As we can see, Wiredu’s project of conceptual decolonisation contains both intellectual and existential dimensions that are often interchangeable and are mostly vital for the African subject’s negotiation of the often perplexing intricacies of hybridised forms of modernity.

## Cultural bifocality

E. B. Dubois referred to the issue of cultural bifocality as “double consciousness”, which was experienced by peoples of African descent in the New World who were attempting to navigate the realities of blackness alongside the alienating conditions of their foreign cultural and sociopolitical milieu. The traumas of racism, marginalisation and social exclusion placed blacks in the New World in a neither-here-nor-there existential context that created deep divisions within their consciousness. The notion of double consciousness can thus become an overarching strategy of survival that enabled the oppressed black subject to speak and act with an aptly considered ambivalence that minimised the threat posed by the white oppressor. Here in the New World, the threat was immediate, external and real and hence required prompt and concrete reaction in the epochs of slavery and racial segregation that followed it.

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However, the fundamental violence of racial oppression is accompanied by an even more subtle kind of self-inflicted infringement. In this instance, the oppressor does not have to act upon the victim directly. Instead, the victim takes it upon him/herself to cause damage upon him/herself by employing the lens of whiteness. In a manner akin to the Fanonian “black skin, white mask” syndrome, the black subject peers into a mirror and wishes s/he were white; s/he repudiates him/herself in order to become something other or different from what s/he truly is; s/he willingly becomes the antithesis of him/herself under the vaguely looming or even absent gaze of his/her racial oppressor and plunges him/herself into a whirlpool of self-denial that causes a concatenation of syndromes for which s/he has no cure. The concept of identity becomes doubly loaded, elusive and problematic. As a result, it also becomes a tool for political opportunism and misleading cultural abbreviations.

## Memory and language

Memory and orality (or what some have gone on to term *orature*) became sources of self-preservation and re-invention in the face of the radical discontinuity that essentially constitutes the experience of slavery and cultural severance. The oppressed black subject preserves something of his/her past and relives its allegory, myth and history as a bulwark against an unbearable present that seeks to re-mould him/her anew out of the scalding ashes of oppression.

The entire notion of double consciousness is constitutive of the condition of secretive affirmation and deceptive negation; a philosophical as well as existential doublespeak that defines an entire approach to the question of immediate and long-term survival. Rather than the racial oppressor seeing a dangerously enraged slave, he perceives a smiling, amiable clown (caricatured in many Hollywood movies). The oppressor's complacency is then transformed into a weapon for liberation. The concept of double consciousness is, therefore, also a weapon of the weak and victimised in that it can successfully employ concealment as subterfuge and as a springboard for transformative action. It serves as a camouflage for the victim, a veneer through which effective subversion becomes possible in opposition to the oppressor's hubris.

The complexity of speech and thought, over and above the colonial encounter, is very much evident in traditional African thought. Marcel Griaule, an ethnologist, studied the Dogon of Mali for several years in an attempt to understand a very elaborate cosmological and metaphysical system. He became more or less the pupil of Ogotommeli, a renowned Dogon priest and hunter. For thirty-three days, Ogotommeli expounded on the myths, history and culture of the Dogon by employing a language that was by turns "elaborate, symbolic, and eloquent". Griaule had to study the culture for sixteen years before he could gain some understanding of it. What he eventually learnt was that are four stages to knowledge: the word at face value; the word off to the side; the word from behind; and the clear word. There are eight levels of the clear word the knowledge of which was reserved for only the most accomplished and gifted priests.

Molefi Keke Asante points out the correlation between Africans in the United States and those on the ancestral continent: "African American thought, as expressed in religion and myth, may be seen as an extension of the African foundations." There are numerous instances attesting to the resilience of African

cultures, beliefs and worldviews in spite of often-violent colonial intrusions and disruptive waves of transition. Indeed, strong pockets of Africanity exist in the New World that continue to nourish and inspire peoples of African descent far from the original homeland.

The impact of these surviving traces of Africanity cannot be taken for granted as they are important in shaping the dynamics of identity formation and affirming the location of both the individual and collective selves in milieus that are often profoundly hostile and alienating to black history and experience. It is indeed necessary to examine some manifestations of African cultures in the New World together with their ensuing impact in that context.

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Undoubtedly, the tactics and strategies of the victim were numerous in pursuing the desperate task of self-preservation. Memory, mimesis, ambivalence and the employment of the feint to mask real intent were all useful in maintaining the integrity and continuing survival of the victim and within the canon of postcolonial theory, they are recognised for their strategic usefulness and emancipatory potential.

## **Indigenous forms of spirituality**

Memory was particularly important for the preservation of African religious beliefs and systems in the New World. It served in establishing a chain of continuity between the Old and New Worlds that still persists in the contemporary age. This development is most discernible in the manner Yoruba culture and traditions have gained a foothold in the Americas. (Originally, Yorubanness was associated with ancient Yoruba towns such as Oyo, Ire and Ife.)

The Atlantic slave trade became a vehicle - however disruptive and traumatic - through which Yoruba religious practices became widespread in cities such as Miami and Louisiana in the United States and Havana in Cuba, as well as in Brazil, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Dominica and Argentina. In those cities and

countries, Yoruba gods, such as Sango, Ogun, Osun and Yemoja, have become popular deities enshrined in local cosmology.

Apart from having a purely religious significance, the transposition of Yoruba religion and mythology in the new climes of the Americas was crucial to the organisation of secular resistance to racial oppression and denigration. In this way, the politics of identity and nationalist ideology crystallised and formed the basis through which the consciousness of black resistance became credible and recognisable.

It is important to note that the indigenous African forms of spirituality that were transposed into the New World were bearers of historically rich modes of life; they were repositories of a broad range of culture incorporating geomancy, ancestor worship, practices of healing, music, dance, shamanism and sacrifice. Accordingly, they prepared the individual and the community for most of life's challenges. Therefore, Africans who found themselves relocated in the New World through the slave trade, re-fashioned their religions, as for instance, the Candomble denomination in Brazil and Santeria in Cuba, which are direct offshoots of indigenous Yoruba religion. Similarly, the voodoo (vodun) cult, which was originally practised in Benin (formerly Dahomey) and Togo by the Fon- and Ewe-speaking peoples of Ghana, made its way to Haiti where it continues to thrive.

As such, African religious and philosophical traditions have survived the onslaught of slavery, colonialism and modernity and found ways to remain relevant and vital to both Africans and peoples of African descent in the diaspora. Through the resources of memory and orality, the dynamics of identity formation and preservation have in turn tremendously influenced the modes of black cultural existence anywhere they are to be found.