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

By Sanya Osha



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.

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.

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.

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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 rebuilding 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 metaphysical, 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.

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.

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 there 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.

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.

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**

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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.

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