



# Conceptual Decolonisation: Kwasi Wiredu's Disruption of Philosophy

By Sanya Osha



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.

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.

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.

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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 metaphysical 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.

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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.

Afrocentricity is all about a complete ethical and conceptual transformation, with the African subject being the nucleus of such a transformation. In this way, the transformation exceeds being merely a disruption; it is essentially an alteration of consciousness and cosmology, and the recovery of a pure - or lost - conceptual voice.

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 manoeuvrability 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 cyclicity, 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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