

## **KWASI WIREDU AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTUAL DECOLONIZATION**

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Kwasi Wiredu, the Ghanaian philosopher is important to African philosophical discourse several reasons. First, he has been able to appropriate most the major signposts of Western philosophy which is a feat that has hardly been accomplished by many Western-trained African philosophers. Secondly, he is very aware of the need for a desirable African mode of selfhood within a broadly modern framework. Very few African philosophers, indeed intellectuals have been able to achieve this, In this regard, one can mention Wole Soyinka as an Intellectual - and of course literary artist-who has been able to attain a high degree of cultural ambidexterity in adopting a considerable percentage of the crucial elements of Western culture in conjunction with those of his indigenous heritage. But obviously Wiredu's project is different from Soyinka's by virtue of the fact that they operate within two disparate disciplines. Soyinka is granted more creative freedom as a literary artist, a freedom that he brings to bear heavily even on his more intellectual reflections. Wiredu on the other hand has to restrict himself to the language of scholarly philosophical discourse, a restriction which one would think makes his task rather more difficult. This difficulty is for a large part the subject of this article which is also a critical examination of a new volume of essays by the renowned Ghanaian philosopher.

The volume entitled *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, (which has an illuminating introduction by Olusegun Oladipo who is himself a prominent Nigerian philosopher) is in fact an apt summation of Wiredu's philosophical interests to date. For those who are familiar with his landmark philosophical work, *Philosophy and an African Culture* published first in 1980, this new volume would serve as a fertile source for greater elucidation.

Wiredu writes, in the second essay of the volume entitled "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy" (in relation to the issue decolonization) that "with an even greater sense of urgency, the intervening decade does not seem to have brought any indications of a widespread realization of the need for conceptual decolonization in African philosophy"<sup>1</sup>. Now, why this is not the usual survey is that it seeks to examine some of the ways in which Wiredu has been involved in the frustrating task of decolonization. Decolonization in itself is a painful ordeal because it necessitates the destruction of certain conceptual attitudes that inform our worldviews. Secondly, it usually entails an arduous attempt at the retrieval of a more or less fragmented historical heritage. In the Fanonian sense decolonization is a necessity for all colonized peoples and more importantly "a programme of complete disorder"<sup>2</sup>. However, we are talking of decolonization

here as a matter of a purely practical interest. This is not to say that Fanon had no plan for the project of decolonization in the intellectual sphere. Connected with this project as it was then conceived, was a struggle for the mental elevation of the colonized African peoples. It was indeed a programme of violence in more senses than one.

But with Wiredu, there is not an outright endorsement of violence, for decolonization in this instance amounts to conceptual subversion if one may be permitted the use of the expression. As a logical consequence, we might as well stress the difference between Fanon's conception of decolonization and Wiredu's. Fanon, we may state, can be regarded as belonging to the same crucial philosophical tendency that harbours figures like, Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and Sekou Toure, "the philosopher-kings of early post-independence Africa"<sup>3</sup> as Wiredu calls them. Those "spiritual uncles" of professional African philosophers were engaged as Wiredu tells us in a strictly political struggle and whatever philosophical insight they possessed was put at the disposal of this struggle instead of a merely theoretical endeavour. So for Fanon and the so-called philosopher-kings, decolonization was invested with a Pan-African mandate and appeal. We must note in full, this disparity with what we shall soon demonstrate to be the Wiredu conception of decolonization. But whether we accept it or not, Africans generally would have to continue to ponder the entire issue of decolonization as long as our sense of selfhood remains obscured, our economies in a state of prostration and our social and political institutions plagued by cancerous disintegration.

There is however, a fashionable dimension to the question of decolonization that is now engaging the attention of Third World scholars and researchers on Third World issues. As we know, the end of colonization in Africa and other Third World countries did not imply the end of imperialism and the dominance of the metropolitan countries. Instead, the politics of dominance assumed a more complex if more subtle form. African economic systems floundered alongside African political institutions and all manner of major and minor crises have been engendered as a result, such that we shall still have to address for a long time to come. Let us look briefly at the intellectual sphere for that is what concerns us immediately. A segment of post-colonial theory involves the entry of Third World scholars into the Western archive as it were with the intention of dislodging the erroneous epistemological assumptions and structures regarding their peoples. This, one might argue, is another variant of decolonization. Wiredu partakes of this type of discourse but sometimes, he carries the programme even further. We shall now look at how he does this. He affirms:

Until Africa can have a lingua franca, we will have to communicate suitable parts of our work in our multifarious vernaculars, and in other

forms of popular discourse, while using the metropolitan languages for international communication.<sup>4</sup>

This conviction has been a guiding principle with Wiredu for several years. In fact, it is not merely a conviction, there are several commendable attempts within the broad spectrum of his philosophical corpus where he puts it into practice. Some of such attempts are his essays entitled "The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language" and "The Akan Concept of Mind". In the first named article, Wiredu informs us that "there is no one word in Akan for truth"<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, we are told that "another linguistic contrast between Akan and English is that there is no word "fact"<sup>6</sup>. For reasons of economy I shall cite an extract I deem to be the central thesis of the essay and it is, "to make a metadoctrinal point which reflection on the African language enables us to see, which is that a theory of truth is not of any real universal significance unless it offers some account of the notion of being so"<sup>7</sup>. Wiredu's argument faces several problems, such that make his notion of decolonization seem a little suspect due mainly to what one may regard as a form of epistemological hesitation. In many respects, Wiredu is only computing component parts of the English language with the Akan language and not always with a view to drawing out "any real universal significance" as he says. The entire approach seems -to be irreparably futile. But before we go on, it is of considerable importance to stress a distinction that Wiredu does not appear to bear constantly in mind. One is not saying that he is totally unaware of it, but that he doesn't put it consistently in the foreground of his reflections. This distinction is that' which lies between an oral culture and a textual one. Most African Intellectuals usually gloss over this difference even though they acknowledge it as it were. And the difference is ,indeed very immense because of the many imponderables that come into play. We first of all have to admit the fatal circumstance of stasis occasioned within an oral culture. The scope for discursive reflection is circumscribed by the very constraints of orality while the discursive mobility attendant upon an inter-textual situation is all too evident. Once again, we have the discursive dichotomy that characterizes the distance between traditionalism and modernity. And, once again, we are confronted with the stereotypes of the colonial script, one that reacts violently against most notions of "Westernity" or modernity as conceived solely by the West or a dogmatic recourse to indigenous culture. It is this kind of situation that further frustrates efforts of decolonization. To be sure, Wiredu has not adequately interrogated the distance between orality and textuality. Because if he has sufficiently done so, he would not be too confident about the manner in which he thinks he can dislodge certain Western philosophical structures that should be in the main, the concern of the West primarily. Herein lies another problem with the issue of decolonization. Where do we establish the limits? Does decolonization end with the conceptual structures that concern formerly colonized peoples or does it

approach or seek to contest all Western epistemological structures that indicate a tendency towards global dominance and universality? If the second aspect of the question is the case, then violence at once becomes a central theme in Wiredu's conception of `decolonization since we have accepted the unlimited or unrestricted scope of the decolonizing operation. Wiredu is a careful philosopher, he constantly stresses the view that:

if we approach... the philosophic suggestions of other cultures (as, for example, those of the Orient) in the spirit of due reflection, being always on the look out for any conceptual snares, perhaps we can combine insights extracted from those sources with those gained from our own indigenous philosophical resources to create for ourselves and our peoples modern philosophies from which both the East and the West might learn something.<sup>8</sup>

"Due reflection" is the key expression but one would have to admit that it is a problematic one for the very meaning of what is to be so classified is a highly philosophical matter. Wiredu illustrates some instances in which he mentions how the process of due reflection could be applied which we shall look at later. But let us be forewarned that not all the instances are altogether satisfactory. Any reflective activity upon a given concept or situation in the effort towards decolonization is an extremely hazardous task for the mere reason that there are no readily available criteria, in other words, all push debates can only lie resolved empirically or pragmatically and the methods by which they are resolved are beyond any concise or predetermined approach. So much for now on "due reflection."

Another essay by Wiredu entitled "The Akan Concept of Mind" (published much earlier than "Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy") is also an attempt at conceptual recontextualization to employ a much milder expression this time. Wiredu begins by stating that he is restricting himself to a study of the Akans of Ghana in order "to keep the discussion within reasonable anthropological bounds"<sup>9</sup>. His objective is a modest but nevertheless an important one since it sits very well with his entire philosophical project which as we have noted earlier is concerned with ironing out philosophical issues "on independent grounds" and possibly in one's own language and the metropolitan language bequeathed by the colonial heritage<sup>10</sup>. So we are to proceed gradually, transversing the problematic interfaces between various languages in search of satisfactory structures of meaning. As mentioned earlier, even if this approach is a modest one, it is also a highly engrossing one. The most immediate effect would be a radical diminishing of the entire concept of African philosophy, a term which under these circumstances would have to become a misnomer in the sense that in order to achieve the remotest resemblance of a homogenous whole we have to embark on the lung detour through conceptual fragmentation. To

arrive at the being of African philosophy, we shall have to dismember the monolith that it now is, by discovering innumerable rants of ethnic philosophies and from this scene of epistemic dissemination construct a more representative monologue of African philosophy.. This is an issue if not a problem that will invariably confront the African philosopher if we adopt the Wiredu approach.

Furthermore, in dealing with a traditional Akan conceptual system or any other for that matter, we must always bear in mind that we are relating to "a folk philosophy, a body of originally unwritten ideas preserved in the oral traditions, customs and usages of a people"<sup>11</sup>. Wiredu is fully aware of this but what remains is the manner in which he negotiates the wide expanse between the assumptions of a textual culture and the illusions an oral culture presents. This is a very grave problem indeed.

We should however, attempt to look more closely at his article, "The Akan Concept of Mind", which is the subject of this part of our discussion, Wiredu again enumerates the ways in which the English conception of mind differs markedly from that of the Akan due in a large part to certain fundamental linguistic dissimilarities. Another major point he raises is that "the Akans most certainly do not regard mind as one of the entities that go to constitute a person"<sup>12</sup>.

It is alright to know all this but where does it lead? In addressing these obvious errors in a metropolitan language and with a modern system of reference, the entire exercise becomes somewhat suspect. Having reformulated traditional Western philosophical problems to suit African conditions, it remains to be seen how African epistemological claims can be substantiated using the natural and logical procedures available to them. In spite of all claims to the contrary; behind every quest for decolonization is the quest to diminish irrevocably the role of the Other. In other words, there is essentially a latent taste for violence. Wiredu for instance says that:

by comparison with the conflation of the concepts of mind and soul prevalent in Western philosophy, the Akan separation of the "okra" from "adwene" suggests a more analytical awareness of the sanctification of human personality."<sup>13</sup>

We need to substantiate more rigorously claims such as this because we may also be making a category-mistake in establishing certain troublesome linguistic or philosophical correspondences between two disparate cultures or traditions. Another crucial if distressing feature of decolonization is that it always has to measure itself up with the colonizing Other, that is, it finds it almost impossible to create its own image so to speak by the employment of autochthonous strategies. One is not asserting that decolonization has to always avail itself of indigenous procedures but isn't the very concept of decolonization concerned with a breaking away from imperial structures of dominance in order to state a

will to self-identity or presence? To be sure, the Other is always present, defacing all claims to full presence. The Other is always there to present the criteria by which one is adjudged either favourably or uncharitably. There is no getting around the Other as it is introduced in the latent violence inherent in invariably all projects of decolonization. The only recourse in this case would be to begin the process of decolonization from within, that is to hold up the mirror of selfhood before one's self and begun the painful ordeal of recreation with all the traces of the Other finally evaded. Of course, this is easier said than done but if Wiredu could go as far as stating that conceptual decolonization entails at least partially, the reformulation of Western philosophical problems in African languages to see if they remain tenable in their new contexts, then almost any other option is acceptable.

To go back to a problem that was raised earlier, that is, the problem of relating an oral culture to one in which established forms of textuality prevail, in an oral culture, one observes mainly static conceptual modes and consequently the entire discursive potential of such a community is severely restricted when compared with a culture of textuality. To buttress this point, one notices that in presenting the Akan concept of mind, Wiredu has only a few related concepts at his disposal unlike the plenitude of Western alternatives to a similar philosophical issue. This problem as mentioned earlier arises primarily from the alternatives and range enjoyed by a textual culture as opposed to a basically oral one.

One would submit that some of Wiredu's more recent attempts at conceptual decolonization have been highly stimulating. A such attempt would have to be his essay entitled "Custom and Morality: A Comparative Analysis of some African and Western Conceptions of Morals". He is able to explore at greater length some of the conceptual confusions that, arise as a result of the implantation of Western ideas in the African collective psyche. This wholesale transference of foreign ideas and conceptual models has caused the occurrence of severe cases of loss of identity and to borrow a more apposite term, colonial mentality. Indeed, one of the aims of Wiredu's efforts at decolonization is to indicate instances of colonial mentality and determine strategies by which they can be minimized. So, he does nuke a lot of sense when he argues that polygamy in a traditional setting amounts to efficient social thinking but is most inappropriate within a modern framework<sup>14</sup>. In this way, Wiredu is offering a critique of a certain traditional practice that ought to be discarded on account of the demands and realities of a modern economy.

In the same vein, he demonstrates how the Western idea of ethics regarding marriage differs immensely from the Akan conception. To be precise, "Christianity, as it came to us in Africa through the missionaries, proscribed premarital sex, as totally incompatible with morality"<sup>15</sup> but on the other hand among the Akans, "considerable mutual knowledge between both principles, including "carnal" knowledge, is regarded as a commonsensical requirement"<sup>16</sup>.

He concludes this line of argument by affirming that "in regard to this notion of the dependence, of morality on religion, we encounter a rather striking contrast, for it does not even make sense in the Akan context"<sup>17</sup>. This essay, one may add accomplishes a lot of stimulating results. The reason being that the theoretical models employed are able to engage highly practical considerations in a highly fruitful manner.

However, one cannot ascribe a similar quality to his essay "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity". In this essay, Wiredu argues that:

The Ashanti system was a consensual democracy. It was a democracy because government was by the consent, and subject to the control, of the people as expressed through their representatives. It was consensual because, as a rule, that consent was negotiated on the principle of consensus. (By contrast, the majoritarian system might be said to be, in principle, based on "consent" without consensus)<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, political party structures are to be dismantled in favour of expressly consensual politics and nothing captures the urgency of this conviction more than the concluding remark that "far from the complexities of contemporary African life making the consensual, non-party precedents of traditional African politics now unusable, they make them indispensable". Wiredu does not seem to have estimated the distance between a past disfigured by the decisive onslaughts of a colonial encounter and the exigencies of the perplexing machinations of modernity. The African mind is inevitably caught between these two frustrating and elusive sets of circumstances. To hold that a certain African historical reality may be summoned at will and completely is to underestimate the extremely excruciating impact absorbed by the African self in relation to the decisive event of the colonial encounter. This event we must never fail to remind ourselves (go matter how tempting it is to forget or reduce it) should be the yardstick by which we attempt to retrieve whatever can be recalled from the past.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 4 essays, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995, p. 23

<sup>2</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Kwasi Wiredu *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Kwasi Wiredu "The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language" in *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives* (ed), P.O. Bodunrin, Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., 1985, p. 46.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Kwasi Wiredu *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Kwasi Wiredu "The Akan Concept of Mind" in *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*,\* No. 3, October 1983, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> Kwasi Wiredu *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Kwasi Wiredu "The Akan Concept of Mind", 1983, p: 113.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid pp. 58 - 59.