



The Contemporary Africanist Philosopher and the Need for Indigenous Modern Knowledge

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In this paper, I examine what it means to be an Africanist scholar within the discipline of philosophy in the 21st century. I posit that an Africanist philosopher among other things inherits the necessary burden of decolonization on account of Africa's history and present experience. However, I argue that this responsibility represents the minimum. I argue further that the task of the Africanist philosopher transcends the decolonization of foreign categories of ideas and the repudiation of moribund traditions in the search for eclectic concepts with utility value. Decolonization as conceived by Wiredu while important, sets the trap of making African philosophers simply those who unearth and transmit past knowledge rather than creators of new knowledge. The Africanist philosopher I assert, has the added, and perhaps more important task of creating indigenous modern knowledge (IMK) in response to the numerous modern-day challenges faced by the continent. I conclude that precolonial indigenous knowledge systems (PIKS) serve as a foundation, not the edifice itself, upon which Africanist philosophers ought to build. While PIKS serves the purpose of repudiating Eurocentric assumptions about Africa and offers solutions to some to its current challenges, the hope of a truly developed Africa I submit, rests on the extent and richness of its indigenous modern knowledge creation.

Introduction

Philosophy as an intellectual discipline thrives more on the questions it provokes than the answers it provides. While some philosophical questions recur either because they are fundamental or difficult to answer, different factors and circumstances influence the nature and character of the prevalent questions of every epoch. Thus, philosophy in Africa, as elsewhere, ruminates upon its own peculiar

questions, even when they have universal implications and broader contexts. As has been widely asserted, African philosophy was birthed in protest, or defiance, so to speak. As gleaned from available literatures, African philosophy as we know it today developed in reaction to the Eurocentric denial of the capacity of Africans to engage in ratiocinative activity. The claim had been that a barbaric collection of people without a history are logically incapable of having a history of systematic thinking. The counter-response to this view has generated a trove of literature to assert the capacity of the African person to apply his or her mind analytically and critically to fundamental questions arising from the interaction with nature as well as others within a social system (Oladipo, 2006). The ensuing controversy over the nature and character of African philosophy, and who an African philosopher is, has bifurcated the discourse along two major lines of scholarly inquiry. Academics of these approaches are labeled respectively the Particularists and the Universalists. While the former group argues that all philosophies are cultural and context-based, and that to such an extent, western scholarship is not in a position to impose its standards of rationality on other cultures, the latter posits that philosophy as an activity has peculiar features that are universally deducible across cultures and periods (Bodunrin, 1981). These features, chief among which is individual thought as well as documentation of same were missing in precolonial Africa. Kwasi Wiredu's idea of conceptual decolonization seeks to bridge the two sides of the argument. Having in the early part of his career leaned towards the universalist position, Wiredu considered it possible to reconcile the two seemingly divergent views and use such harmonization as a framework for articulating the task of the contemporary African philosopher (Wiredu, 1998).

In this paper, I intend to show the huge ramification of Wiredu's synthesis, and the extent to which it has shaped the direction of African philosophy in contemporary times. I shall argue that conceptual decolonization, as a framework for bridging the famed gap between tradition and modernity in Africa has succeeded significantly in helping lay to rest the notion that precolonial Africans were incapable of systematic reflection and self-organization. I shall argue further that on the downside, this fact appears to have been over-demonstrated at the expense of what I consider the obligations and preoccupations of contemporary African philosophers. The paper is divided accordingly, into three major parts. In the first, I examine the Eurocentric motivation for the modernity versus tradition debate, and the efforts it elicited in defence of African identity(ies). The following section is an exposition of conceptual decolonization—middle point reconciliation of tradition and modernity—a move which seeks, as espoused by a number of scholars and of whom the most prominent African philosopher remains Kwasi Wiredu, to reconcile the relevant part of Africa's past with western modernity. In the third section, I take cognizance of the positive benefits of looking into the past to create what today has become known under the umbrella of indigenous knowledge systems and argue that it is inadequate for the 21st century Africanist scholar to commit to this task alone. I demonstrate the limitations of finding an African variant of ideas considered as Western, using the notions of consensual democracy and African bioethics as fodders. I conclude by making the point that increasingly, there is a need in Africa for the creation of modern, yet indigenous knowledge system in response to the continent's developmental challenges.

Eurocentrism, African Identity and the Tradition Versus Modernity Debate

The long years of colonial imperialism and its offspring—Eurocentrism—have their fingerprints all over the heated problem of defining the identity of African philosophy and philosophers (Fayemi, 2011). Eurocentrism, a brand of ethnocentrism (i.e. a belief characterized by or based on the attitude that one's own group is superior to others), refers to the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective, with an implied belief, either consciously or subconsciously, in the preeminence of the European culture (Bekele, 2015). This attitude permeated much of European scholarship between the 16th and 20th century. Hegel for instance in this line of thought claimed that:

Africa is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World... Africa is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. (Hegel, 1956 p. 99)

Charles Darwin's work on the origin of species by natural selection was a prelude to a culture of racial prejudice that swept through Europe for centuries, even if the primary motive was not racist (Kanu, 2014). On the basis of a theistic claim, Linnaeus (1758) had stratified human beings in a hierarchical order with the white race at the top and the black race on the lowest rung of the ladder, just above brute animals. Sentiments from Linnaeus can also be found in similar stratification by Gobineau (1915). The famous Scottish philosopher, David Hume on his part wrote that "I am apt to suspect that the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, or even an individual eminent in action or speculation" (Hume, 1882, III: p. 253). Levy-Bruhl's (1949) skepticism about the African's ability to conceive any supreme deity agrees with the view of Baker, who had earlier noted that:

The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced in idolatry...he has never grasped the idea of a personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a future state of reward and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress. (as cited in Kanu, 2014 p. 90)

Fayemi (2011), further observes that "the anthropological claims of Durkheim (1912), Frazer (1922), Levy-Bruhl (1949) and Horton (1981) also support the ethnocentric, racist and imperialist claim that rationality is the exclusive prerogative of Western civilization, while Africans are mentally primitive" (p. 260). As a result, African philosophy developed in reaction to these uncritical and denigrating biases in order to salvage its identity. Defending the existence and nature of African philosophy was the ignition for early African scholars who sought to redeem what had been unjustly marred. In achieving this goal, two emerged—the Particularists and the Universalists.

The Universalist orientation with adherents such as Peter O. Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu, Odera Oruka and Paulin Hountondji contends that philosophy has a ubiquitous appeal with a universal methodology and deals with abstract general problems found everywhere, is open to self-criticism and tailored in the dialectical or pedagogical line of enquiry (Kanu, 2013). This group of thinkers is of the view that there is

a difference between folk philosophy, preserved in the tradition of the people across different cultures in oral, unsystematic form, and critical philosophy. Critical philosophy on the other hand, is a form of intellectual inquiry that is reflective, conceptual, individualistic and logically deliberative (Wiredu, 1980 p.14). Thus, even if myths, fables and languages are suggestive of, or disposed towards some philosophical ideas, they are communal products that are at best philosophical in a secondary or parasitic sense (Bello, 2002 p. 238). While this position imbibes key elements of philosophy, Uduigwomen, (1995) raises the issue that such a standpoint is lacking in pragmatic relevance within specific and concrete realities.

On the other hand, the Particularist orientation with proponents such as Placide Tempels (1969), John Mbiti (1970) and Leopold Sedar Senghor (1964) contends that African philosophy connotes the conglomeration of her multiple worldviews as sifted from various cultures, traditions, myths, folklores and proverbs. It is taken in this light to be indigenous and unadulterated by western categories such as logic, science and argumentation. Segun Gbadegesin (1995) argued against this position due to its communal, traditional and non-literary nature which was also observed to have characterized early western philosophy (Kanu, 2013).

The traditional position which is defended by African scholars such as Sophie Oluwole, Claude Sumner, W. E. Abraham, K. C. Anyanwu, I. C. Onyewuenyi, Akin Makinde and C. S. Momoh and described by Kwame Gyekye (1997) as “cultural revivalism” accords a reverential attitude towards African cultural heritage which is manifest in its penchant for recouping and reasserting indigenous traditions that have been suppressed by colonialism, to address contemporary problems (Ciaffa, 2008). On the contrary, the modernists with a critical poise towards indigenous knowledge systems in Africa argue that the misguided and ill-suited nostalgic return to the past to work against Eurocentric bias in philosophy is not only naïve, quixotic and potentially dangerous but subtly serves to augment the Eurocentric claim they intended evading ab initio by revealing the poverty of novel ideas in the face of the problems facing 21st century Africa. Bodunrin shares the same skepticism with Hountondji who criticized the revival of traditional thought as largely impotent and incapable of addressing contemporary issues in Africa (Ciaffa, 2008).

These intellectual interchanges within the African intellectual arena birthed the tradition versus modernity debate in post-colonial African philosophy. On the fringes of this debate were questions on the relevance of indigenous African traditions to the contingencies of contemporary life as well as assessing whether these traditional knowledge systems are resources or hindrances to development and modernization in Africa (Ciaffa, 2008). Situated within the context of modernization processes in Africa, the debate on the right approach to African philosophy revolves around the changes in the physical and mental outlook of the people, thereby raising the question of what cultural and epistemological approaches are most suited for development (Oladipo, 2006). Hountondji’s view, flowing from the premise above, is that the methodology of African philosophy in contemporary times “must attach itself closely to the destiny of science by integrating itself with the immense movement towards the acquisition of scientific knowledge that is now developing on the continent” (1996 p.107). Scholars who are sympathetic to the Particularist claims however, disagree. African philosophy even in its modern sense, they insist, must reject the universalization of the European model of philosophy as archetypal, and emerge in relation to the culture from which it grows because essentially, philosophy is a cultural phenomenon (Owomoyela, 1987; Gyekye 1995).

Conceptual Decolonization, African Philosophy and the Retrieval of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge

Kwasi Wiredu as earlier noted was sympathetic to the Universalist spectrum of the debate on African philosophy. His views are well outlined in his 1980 work, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought." Therein, he made the point that rationality is not exclusive to any race or group of persons. Yet, he noted that philosophy, in the ancient Greek tradition from Plato, until modern times, has evolved professionally, and is characterized by certain features that separate it from day to day layman philosophy. While the latter is a feature of all human societies, the former (i.e. professional philosophy) is a more recent activity in Africa. His conclusion on how Africa can borrow the scientific attitude from the West, while teaching it some morals to curb its consumerist and materialistic tendencies hinted at what he considered as the possibility of the two traditions engaging in a mutually beneficial exchange of influences. Subsequently, the opening remarks of his treatise, "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion" (1998) captures the essence of decolonization as:

[D]ivesting African philosophical thinking of all undue influences emanating from our colonial past. The crucial word in this formulation is "undue". Obviously, it would not be rational to try to reject everything of a colonial ancestry. Conceivably, a thought or a mode of inquiry spearheaded by our erstwhile colonizers may be valid or in some way beneficial to humankind. Are we called upon to reject or ignore it? That would be a madness having neither rhyme nor reason. (Wiredu, 1998 p.17)

This introductory remark hints that Wiredu was not disposed to throwing away the baby and the bath water by denying altogether the relevance of every colonial influence but that a critical and sieving approach should be adopted. In the first part of the discourse he draws attention to certain colonial influences in the areas of language, education, culture and religion (Wiredu, 1998).

Wiredu observes that the peculiar effect of colonialism on African education owes much to the fact that African philosophizing was done in a foreign language using western categories that adulterated the original meaning of words and left much room for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Thus, there is the need for a decolonization which is basically conceptual in nature since there was nothing like a systematic African philosophy in colonial and precolonial times (Wiredu, 1998). Decolonization then for Wiredu does not only involve a critical study of contemporary African philosophy but also of the primordial knowledge systems in terms of culture and language. He noted that though disciplines like logic, mathematics and natural sciences are markedly absent in precolonial African philosophy, Africans unconsciously and unsystematically employed the underlying principles of these disciplines in their reasoning. Thus, he calls for a domestication of these disciplines with caution, bearing in mind the African context (Wiredu, 1998). To achieve this goal, he proposed that concepts such as personhood, afterlife, God, Spirit, morality etc. should not be studied generally but individually to see what they mean in various cultures and languages of different indigenous African societies. At the same time, he argued for juxtaposing them with their western counterparts to see how our notion of these concepts have been influenced by western thought and to assist in proper conceptual decolonization (Wiredu, 1998). This does not entail forcing a philosophical consensus among the diverse cultures in Africa. The diversified communal philosophy in

Africa which is the product of the thoughts of individual sages overtime becomes the bridge between traditional African philosophy and modern African philosophy. This has a double implication. The first is that traditional communal philosophy in Africa is subject to error and as such requires decolonization through constant review, reconstruction and evaluation (Wiredu, 1998). The second is a clarion call to study the thoughts of individual traditional African philosophers/sages so as to prove the essence of African philosophy in its originality (Wiredu, 1998). The attempt to unearth and showcase the indigenous and traditional knowledge systems of precolonial African societies is not limited to philosophy. Historians, ethnographers, linguists, sociologists and scholars in other disciplines are engaged on diverse aspects of the retrieval efforts of African scholarship.

The term “indigenous” here, refers to the complex, culturally diverse societies of Africa which have resulted from decades of immigration and integration (Semali & Stambach, 1997). Thus, the term Indigenous Knowledge System encompasses what local people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations. These practices are developed through trial and error and have proven flexible enough to cope with change (Semali & Stambach, 1997). Also, the UN characterizes indigenous knowledge as a form of knowledge that is:

[S]elf-identifying as indigenous and being accepted by the community as a member; demonstrating historical continuity with precolonial and/or pre-settler societies; evincing a strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources; having distinct social, economic, and/or political systems; having a distinct language, culture, and/or beliefs; comprising a non-dominant part of society; and resolving to maintain and reproduce ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities. (United Nations, n.d. p.1)

Drawing inferences from the discourse above, one sure fact is that the effects of colonialism and the ethnocentric denigration of all things African have mostly overtly or covertly influenced the trend and progression of philosophical interaction in Africa. As such, one might not be far from the truth to suspect that the undue clamor for Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) in present day African scholarship owes much to the perceived burden by some African scholars to offset the intellectual bias about the rationality of Africans.

In spite of the benefits of the efforts to assert the mental capacity of Africans for ratiocination and defend the moral, epistemic and ontological identity of Africans in a way that exposes the insincerity of the racist logic behind the denigrations, I consider it important to draw attention to the creeping fixation with the past in African scholarship, especially philosophy. It would appear that one popular way of doing philosophy in Africa today is treating universal concepts described as western by first going back to tradition to find their corollaries before employing them. Sometimes even when adequate analogies are lacking, some go as far as doing some form of interpretative violence by distorting the original ontology of African categories in order to juxtapose them with western categories all in a bid to gratify one point which I summarize as “the rational precipitates of your philosophizing is analogous to that of our forefathers and so we are by all means equal and rational as you are”.

In the end, there is a plethora of African literature doing this or that comparative analysis with western concepts, excavations into the past, retrievals, hermeneutics and the likes. In some instances, efforts are even made to show that Africans had a grasp of an idea long before westerners did. Of course, that is not impossible in some

cases, unless one assumes that an idea has to always be apprehended or comprehended first by westerners. But in making these claims without any documented account, but only a rendition of the way of life of the people, such claims fall into the same error they accuse western scholarship of, which is the denial of the rationality of Africans largely on account of the absence of documented history.

Decolonization as advocated by Wiredu has been and continues to be applied to different issues of philosophical relevance in Africa. For the purpose of this paper however, I shall limit myself to two. One area of interest to decolonial scholars is democracy. Kwasi Wiredu, in his paper “Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for Non-party Polity” (2000), argues that multi-party democracy is alien to Africa, and breeds undue competition and conflict in a way that contradicts the harmonious and consensual procedures of decision-making in precolonial Africa. While mindful of the implications of modernization, urbanization and complex social patterns in contemporary Africa that threatens the “kinship networks that provided the mainstay of the consensual politics of traditional times, a consensual approach in African states would eliminate the destructive pandering to western pressure to democratize, and make political associations avenues for projecting diverse interests without the “Hobbesian proclivities” of the party system (Wiredu, 2000 par 28). This view is in sync with that of Claude Ake who argues that liberal democracy, by focusing on the individual rather than the collective, ignores the cohesive nature of African societies and has proven that it “is not quite appropriate to these communal societies” (Ake, 1996: 5). My intention here is not so much to discuss the merits and limitations of liberal democracy, but to highlight its critique within the debate on decolonization in African philosophy. The position of Wiredu and Ake is that traditional African societies were democratic before colonization, and that the limitations of democracy in postcolonial Africa are rooted in its detachment from its consensual and collective character. The solution then, is to return democracy to its precolonial form.

Another area of philosophy that has attracted efforts at decolonization in African philosophy is bioethics. Numerous scholars on the history of bioethics put its emergence around the late 19th and early 20th century. As a philosophical field of enquiry, it is less than fifty years old (Gordon, n.d; Wilson 2013; Reich, 1978). Reich defined bioethics as “an area interdisciplinary studies concerned with the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and healthcare” (1978 pp. xv). The notion of bioethics as a form of applied ethics was articulated by Tom Beauchamp and James Childress in their book *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (1979). Since joining the discourse however, notable African philosophers have berated what they consider the universalization of the western bioethical worldview which ignores the African perspective. This has, as expected, resulted in a flurry of academic papers that aim to decolonize the concept and offer the African variants in their diverse manifestations. These variants, however, do not reflect the original thoughts of the African philosophers espousing them. Rather, they are the re-articulation of what has been labeled traditional African bioethics, to countervail a discipline whose birth in western scholarship is a little more than four decades old.

Some African scholars whose works can be found in this area are C. Andoh (2011), Azetop (2011), Behren (2013), Chukwuneke, Umeora, Maduabuchi, and Egbunike (2014), Gbadegesin (1993), T. Metz (2010, 2016), C. Onuoha (2007) and G. Tangwa (1996). Most of these scholars see African bioethics as a:

thinking that is rooted and which flows from Africa’s innate traditional values. That is, Africa’s traditional values are quintessential for moral decision making. Bioethics in this context is looking for its roots or origin in African traditional values and it also has to look

backward in the distant past and the present so as to plot the future. (Andoh, 2011 p.69)

In rooting African bioethics in its cultural milieu, Segun Gbadegesin's 1993 article entitled "Bioethics and Culture: An African Perspective" argues for a bioethics deep-rooted in cultural realities, especially those cultures that promote human flourishing (Gbadegesin, 2009 p.33). For him, bioethics values are on the one hand universal and cut across every culture, although on the other, there might be differences in application. The problem proposed by bioethics is found in all traditions and cultures but is being tackled differently depending on the moral underpinnings of each culture. What is needed is to "pay attention to the cultural realities and assumptive frame of reference of different peoples" (Gbadegesin, 1993 p.257). What this implies is that bioethics is both universal and particular.

Gbadegesin argues further for transcultural bioethics, which stands against the monolithic western bioethics by putting together the "commonalities" in ideas, principles and beliefs of different cultures (Gbadegesin, 1993). With this, Gbadegesin establishes the case of African bioethics in Yoruba culture by exploring issues of surrogacy, euthanasia, infertility, adoption, and transplantation. He further advances his argument on bioethics in Yoruba culture in his paper; "Bioethics and African Value System" (2013). Gbadegesin avers that Yoruba bioethics are based on "wellbeing and flourishing of the person in community" (Gbadegesin, 2013 p. 8). A person in Yoruba culture, according to him, consists of "ara" (body) and "emi" (spirit). The Yoruba people believe that persons as;

1. Individuals are creatures of Olodumare (the Yoruba supreme deity) and are endowed with dignity and worth, with a capacity for moral reflection and virtuous life.
2. It is wrong to cause unnecessary harm to a creature of Olodumare, including non-humans.
3. A person who is a member of a community must not be sacrificed to the deities of the community.
4. Personhood is constituted by communal relationships through the articulation of values shared with other members and the actualization of individual potentials in response to, and by active participation in, the community. (Gbadegesin, 2009 p.33)

With this, Gbadegesin argues that the western notion of "beneficence, nonmalevolence, and justice can be accommodated within a traditional Yoruba ethics of healthcare" (Gbadegesin, 2013 p.13). But individual autonomy, patient confidentiality or privacy is incompatible with African bioethics. In presenting his case, we were asked to consider the case of "A Mother-as-Surrogate":

An adult daughter, Laide, is seriously ill. Her Mother, Sade, goes to consult Healer-Diviner on behalf of Laide, the daughter. By the time that Mother gets to the diviner, other clients are waiting to see him. Mother takes her place on the queue. When it is her turn, she presents her problem to the healer by whispering to the divination chain. Healer takes the chain and consults with the oracle, chants some verses of the corpus until he strikes at Mother's problem: illness in the family. Healer tells Mother what to do—offer sacrifice to the gods and give some herbal medicine, which he supplied, to Daughter. Later, Healer visits Daughter in Mother's presence, listens to her complaints and gives her more herbal remedies. (Gbadegesin, 2013 p. 7)

In this scenario, Gbadegesin liken the family members to nurses and the healer to a doctor. The communication and interaction between the family members and the healer is likened to the interaction between a doctor and his nurse in our modern hospitals. But unlike what is obtainable in contemporary health care system where individual privacy is revered, the Yoruba health care system “appears to be based on trust and on the understanding that a patient’s openness about what is wrong or not right with her is the beginning of her cure, which may come from unlikely sources” (Gbadegesin, 2013 p. 8). In all, what Gbadegesin has done is to begin by treating bioethics as a universal field of philosophy while ending with its particularization within specific cultures.

Just like Gbadegesin, Godfrey B. Tangwa (2004) contends that moral values are universal, although the application might be different. And since there is universalism of moral values, all cultures are equal. For Tangwa (2004); “What all human cultures have in common is that they are all creations of human beings, reflecting, on the one hand, human capabilities, goodness, ingenuity, wisdom etc., and, on the other hand human limitations, fallibility, frailty, perversity, foolishness etc” (p.126). This reaffirms the commonality of human culture.

Tangwa defends an African conception of bioethics based on the moral principles of the Nso people of Bamenda, Cameroon. In his paper entitled, “Bioethics: An African perspective” (1993), Tangwa called his bioethical exercise “eco-bio-communitarianism”. This term encompasses the Nso ideas on transmigration, transformation, transmutation, and reincarnation, across and within species (Onuoha, 2007 p.220). Eco-bio-communitarian implies a “recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful co-existence between earth, plants, and animals” (Andoh, 2011 p.71). This term he says, covers bioethical issues such as euthanasia, suicide and abortion. Abortion, for instance, is a taboo in Nso community. The Nso people equate abortion to the “harvesting of mature crops before it has been certified mature enough for harvesting...”(Tangwa, 1996 p.197). Such an act brings misfortune and bad fate to the perpetrator.

To atone this requires that rituals are carried out. So, abortion, in this context, is the harvesting of immature human before nine months. This is because abortion is carried out mostly during the early stages of pregnancies, whereby the baby is forced out of the womb with a drug or surgical operation. In cases where abortion has been done, the culprit must conduct a ritual ceremony in order for misfortune not to befall her. This incompatibility of Nso culture with abortion, according to Tangwa, is only limited to therapeutic abortion. The Nso people approves of abortion when pregnancy is life threatening to the mother. Reasons like the child is an “evil spirit, disguised itself and lodged in her womb under the pretext of being a child” (Tangwa, 1996 p. 197) are also invoked to justify abortion. The implication of these arguments is that what is regarded as bioethics today has a history in African communal life that transcends its historicization in western scholarship. Also implied here is the idea that current bioethical issues such as abortion and surrogacy have always had philosophical significance which are also relevant in current times in traditional African thought.

From the two instances of democracy and bioethics cited above, a number of issues arise. One is that whereas the decolonization approach especially as espoused by Wiredu can diagnose concepts and practices whose problematic nature require adequate interrogation, the proposed solution of “going back to the past” is oftentimes inadequate and riddled with its own problems. There is no reason for instance to believe that abolishing party democracy in Africa will eliminate totalitarian rule similar to that of a one-party system. In fact, the disappearance of platforms for the

articulation of divergent views may accelerate further descent into dictatorial rule.

In addition, it is not so clear that political conflicts in Africa are driven by party differences. Rather, political parties appear to be mere vehicles for the expression of more fundamental differences, rather than the core drivers of conflicts. The Rwandan genocide, or the separatist agitations in parts of Nigeria, that have given influence to movements like IPOB (Independent People of Biafra) are not products of party differences. In fact, in the latter case, separatist agitations have been undermined by elite participation in party politics that cut across several divides. Granted, without necessarily conceding that precolonial African societies were consensual, democratic and largely devoid of political contestations, the erosion of their largely homogenous nature by colonialism renders the kind of decolonization advocated impracticable. What this means therefore is that an adequate response to the crisis of democracy in postcolonial Africa requires a new thinking and imagination that is indigenous but not rooted in the past.

The other issue arising is what I consider the laborious effort to find from Africa's past, equivalences of what is regarded as a body of current western ideas. With regards to bioethics, one could see that what is being presented as African scholarly contributions to bioethics are communal practices of precolonial Africans. I do not see how this can be of much help for a number of reasons, notable among which is that instances similar to the one cited by Gbadegesin can be found in the traditional accounts of almost all societies. In the Old Testament, the bible recorded the story of Naaman, an Assyrian Army general who was afflicted with leprosy and got healed when his Israeli slave facilitated a meeting with Prophet Elisha. The bible recorded that he was skeptical about the prophet's recommended therapy of bathing in river Jordan until he was persuaded by the servant. In the same manner, relatives of Lazarus were recorded to have reached out to Jesus with the hope of getting him healed before his death (and eventual resurrection).

If we grant the preceding, it should be very clear therefore that the idea of patient confidentiality and privacy which Gbadegesin described as western and un-African, found its way into modern medical practice at a more recent time. In all probability, the attitude of many westerners who lived in the ancient and medieval periods shared many similarities with that of precolonial Africans. Gbadegesin, like Tangwa clearly made cases for African bioethics by contrasting contemporary western societies and practices with traditional African societies. The problem associated with this, in comparative philosophy leads to the problem of incommensurability. While the idea of African bioethics is not entirely out of place, its advocates so far, have mostly progressed in a manner that suggests that contemporary African perspectives on bioethical issues are possible mainly by racing back into the past. As is the case with most other areas of comparison in African philosophy, the approach has been to dig into the past as a way of contributing authentic African ideas to contemporary discourse.

There are possibilities oftentimes, of finding ideas wholly or in part, that are relevant to pressing issues of the time. In many other instances however, what is required are new ideas, borne out of reflection over challenges of the present or those anticipated. This is no less important as earlier averred, in the area of bioethics, where issues such as transhumanism, transgenderism, patient autonomy, cosmetic surgery, genetic engineering among others; continue not only to recur but also open up new areas of disputations and knowledge. In many parts of Africa, issues such as infant mortality, access to basic healthcare, the deadly prevalence of certain ailments like

malaria, polio, leprosy, Ebola, among others, pose challenges with which contemporary African bioethicists in Africa have to grapple. One big problem with the comparison by inversion, aside from that of incommensurability, is perennialism. Admittedly, this problem is not specific to scholarship in Africa. As it applies here though, it relates to how proponents of African theories, who often propose them as equivalents of versions regarded as western, proceed as if the African cultures from which these ideas emerged are frozen, and incapable of evolving. Thus, many of these accounts fail to capture the changes that have occurred within these societies between the pre-colonial and present time.

This is perhaps why Hountondji argues that ethnophilosophy perpetuates a false and ultimately insulting view of African peoples. When African intellectuals speak of “negritude”, “timeless codes of behavior”, or “the African worldview”, they perpetuate what Hountondji calls “the myth of primitive unanimity” (Hountondji, 1996 p. 60)—i.e., the myth that Black persons are fundamentally united in their views about the most important matters in life. This idea originated in colonial discourse about Africa, and Hountondji argues that it is not enough to simply put a positive spin on the traits that define African identity. The very idea of a global African mentality or worldview distorts the richness and cultural diversity of African peoples. Revivalists might see such unifying concepts as a basis for needed solidarity and identity, but they can become a liability when they fail to take into account real differences among Africans in addressing the complex problems that beset the continent (Ciaffa, 2008).

These limitations apply however, not only to the idea of African bioethics, but also, works on African democracy, African theories of justice, African feminism and numerous areas of African philosophy. This is clearly exemplified for instance in the attempt to revive the idea of ubuntu since the advent of democracy in South Africa. Interpreted from varied viewpoints, ubuntu is often translated as “I am because we are” or “humanity towards others” but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean the belief in the universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity (Ramathate, 2013). Matolino and Kwindiwi have however cautioned against the “Ubuntu-isation” of the intellectual, business, public, and private lives of South Africans. They noted that the aggressive attempt to promote Ubuntu in post-apartheid South Africa is a project championed by the new black elite and bound to end in political and social failure (Matolino and Kwindiwi 2013) Furthermore, they were skeptical of the appositeness of ubuntu as a compass for a nation’s navigation due to the chasm that exists between the metaphysical prerequisites necessary for the realization of Ubuntu and the glaring ontological and moral crisis bedeviling the new elites and the contemporary man (Matolino and Kwindiwi 2013).

In many African scholarly works today, one sees a pattern which suggests that an implied interpretation of Wiredu’s call for decolonization, which calls for a synthesis of what is useful in Africa’s past and what the West offers as modernity, is that there is a historiographic bifurcation of knowledge (Hountondji, 1996). Africa’s knowledge system is traditional and in the past. The West, on the other hand, represents modernity, which is the present. In the tussle between the indigenous past and the foreign present, we are to make something new by taking a bit from both. This is then supposed to be Africa’s own present, its own evidence of modernization. One big gap left unfilled by this approach, for all its merit, is the presence, or more correctly the possibility of an indigenous present that is also modern.

To sum up, decolonization, conceived as digging back into Africa’s past, is useful in significant ways for understanding the continent and its precolonial accomplishments. To this extent, historians, ethnographers, anthropologists and scholars

in a number of related areas are in a good position to bring to light many Indigenous Knowledge Systems that are yet unknown. For philosophers however, especially those concerned with normative and practical ideas relevant to contemporary African societies, there is a need to avoid being bogged down with the past. This is because in many cases, the ideas exhumed and framed as African responses to issues of the moment are ill-suited to the challenges as the ideo of consensual democracy has shown, or are lacking any normatively distinct African character, as we have seen with many of the works on African bioethics.

A Task for the 21st Century African Philosopher

As has been shown, the conceptual decolonization project in African philosophy has covered so many areas. In this regard, much of the progress made in bringing to fore the IKSs that sustained individual and social lives in precolonial Africa owes a lot of gratitude to Wiredu and other African philosophers who have had to extract at great cost, many undocumented clues, and pieced some together to relive as much as practicable, the worldviews of the past.

It is my view however, that African philosophers cannot be perpetually stuck in the cycle of waiting for an idea to become popular in other philosophical circles, the West notably, as a trigger to start digging into the past to find African equivalents. The task of excavation and retrieval is best left to historians, anthropologists and ethnographers. This is not to say their findings from time to time cannot be philosophically relevant, especially at a time when scholarship continues to drift towards interdisciplinarity. But then, there is a need to understand that IKS as a category is not exhaustive and all-encompassing. Beyond the limitations that make the retrieval of all knowledge practices of the past possible, what we refer to as IKSs are oftentimes accumulated discoveries and practices of different epochs in the past. To that extent, the richness of what is to constitute the IKSs of the future is largely dependent on whether or not contemporary scholars, especially philosophers, are able to produce indigenous modern knowledge systems (IMKS). This is how, to borrow from Imre Lakatos (1978), to cumulatively build an enduring knowledge system whose linkage transcends epochs. Precolonial Africans, though rational, are not more prescient than other humans in other places, and could therefore not have foreseen, much less develop adequate solutions to many issues confronting postcolonial Africa.

By IMKSs, I refer to an African body of knowledge developed by African scholars, philosophers especially, to address and anticipate present and possible challenges militating against the development of African societies morally, materially and intellectually. At first glance, one could say that such a body of knowledge is distinct from ideas by non-Africans directed nonetheless at African challenges and problems, which are in themselves welcomed. Neither does it forbid an African philosopher or scholar from contributing to global discourses. In a rapidly globalizing world, it will be too limiting to demand of philosophers of African extraction to focus solely on the continent's problems, even when it is highly likely that such problems are not entirely peculiar to Africa. However, the term Africanist philosopher will most fittingly describe a work or body of works done by an African thinker in respect to Africa. This can be in the area of governance, institution building, conflict manage-

ment, economic theory, bioethics, philosophy of law, feminism or any other area of relevance. More broadly, an Africanist philosopher will be one using his intellectual resources to address independently or in collaboration with others, present and probable challenges in Africa.

Back to the possibility of a philosopher or scholar who is not of African origin but is interested in or has worked on issues of interest to Africa. This is not an issue I intend to explore deeply here but the question can be asked as to why such does not qualify as an Africanist scholar. In my view, there is no essential reason for such exclusion, beyond the fact that at present, it appears to be the convention to identify scholars by a combination of research area and origin (Bodunrin 1981, Hountondji, 1996). Where one has needed to take precedence, origin appears to take the edge. That is why for instance, we describe David Hume as a Scottish philosopher even if his most influential works have nothing to do with Scotland particularly. The same can be said of Immanuel Kant and other philosophers whose works have universal application but are nonetheless described by their origin. However, the origin criterion taken alone, will exclude a scholar of African origin whose works are not about Africa from consideration as an Africanist scholar. My suggestion would be then that the research criterion be given precedence, such that a non-African working on issues relating to Africa is more qualified as an Africanist scholar than an indigenous African whose works bear no resemblance to the continent.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the idea of IKSs, properly speaking, is now envisaged to encompass two categories of indigenous knowledge: Precolonial indigenous knowledge (PIKS) as well as indigenous modern knowledge (IMKS). This is the way it is for the West. To a large extent, one can document the history of ideas in the West, starting from the ancient to the medieval, modern and even contemporary. While Africa need not follow this template strictly, it should be possible, and is indeed important to be able to distinguish between its indigenous ideas of the past and those of the present. That present doesn't always have to be a synthesis of something from the indigenous past and a foreign present.

To reiterate, the past is relevant to Africa's developmental quest, but so is the present, if not more. If Africa is to develop, it needs to look inward and rely less on external support which is oftentimes halfhearted or rendered at costs much steeper than the benefits. In looking inward, the greatest resource available to Africa is the intellect of its people, the best of which are found as a collective in the ivory tower. It is not my intention here to delve into what is required of the ivory tower in contemporary Africa for it to become the incubator of transformative ideas or offer an exhaustive account of the imperatives of IMKSs. It is not too difficult nonetheless to mention one or two areas where IMKSs may be more useful to Africa than decolonization efforts invested in Indigenous Knowledge systems.

Environmental ethics is one area in which new indigenous ideas are much needed. From Nigeria to Niger, Zaire, Angola and many others, exploration activities have left massive environmental catastrophes of immense proportions (Wang & Dong, 2019). Academic conferences and publications in the West have no doubt continued to explore normative ideas that could save the world from the impending effects of climate change, protect the environment, and preserve it for future generations. What has not received sufficient attention, however, is how to put an end to the disproportionate damage done to the global south by powerful interests from the global north. The situation is worsened by the fact that the continent gets far too little from the exploitation of its resources, thereby compounding its environmental challenges with an increasing wealth gap that perpetuates its place as the poorest continent in

the world (World Bank, 2019).

Most scholarly works on environmental ethics in the global north focus on the dangers of a consumerist culture that prioritizes immediate benefits over environmental harmony and sustainability (Wang & Dong, 2019). This is a good effort. Its inadequacy though, lies in the assumption that the trading off of environmental sustainability for prosperity benefits different parts of the world equally. This contradicts the reality of many African states. While the global north continues to sacrifice tomorrow for today in its developmental quest, Africa continues to get robbed of both today and tomorrow.

A focus on this external dimension of the environmental crisis in Africa can however not be comprehensive without considering the flipside. Street littering, bush burning, poor waste management, charcoal burning, unregulated urban development among others are some of the issues that contribute to pollution, flooding, and the spread of diseases even if marginally (Fayiga, Ipinmoroti & Chirenje, 2018). While some of these issues are linked to poverty and inequalities arising from exploitation, they suggest that there is a need to revisit some of the indigenous attitudes that guide how the people relate with the environment. This requires therefore, that Africans who are interested in environmental ethics focus their interventions on the kind of situatedness that mirrors the present reality. While such interventions may be compelled by prevailing realities to depart from the inadequate yet predominant views, seeking succor in PIKSs is also not likely to offer the kinds of ideas needed to address the present challenge. Whereas precolonial Africans may well have had certain normative ideas that guided how they related with the environment, it is doubtful if the same could be developed in anticipation of capitalist and imperialist exploitation on the scale currently being experienced, or that the attitudinal and institutional shortcomings that continues to imperil the environment could be shifted in such a direction. If knowledge is truly culture-bound and situation-dependent as the Particularists have averred, then the colonial and neocolonial exploitation of Africa requires new normative and practical ideas different from those that regulated the way in which people related with the environment at a time when contact and explorative technologies were very minimal. Such precolonial ideas at best will reinforce the point already made, that precolonial Africans, like human beings everywhere else reflected on the world they lived in, and devised mechanisms for understanding, surviving and flourishing in it. Beyond that though, it will be of little practical and normative relevance.

Conclusion

I have tried so far to examine the efforts of African scholars, philosophers especially, to assert African identity and demonstrate the capacity of its people to be ratiocinative in addressing their existential challenges. This I noted has happened in large part as a response to the call for conceptual decolonization by Kwasi Wiredu. The revivalism that has accompanied the digging into the past while commendable I noted, is now in need of being complimented by the generation of new, indigenous yet modern ideas that grapple with Africa's challenges. IKSs are not an exclusive African preserve. Every human society from times past survived on some forms of it. What has contributed largely to human advancement over several centuries, howev-

er, is not so much the reliance on past knowledge but the building of new ones on it.

African scholars have done so much digging and need to now begin to build pyramids of ideas that can reverse the fortunes of the continent and transform it from the continent of ignorance, diseases, illiteracy and mass poverty into one where life flourishes. It is already a daunting task that will be almost impossible to accomplish unless the intellectual class is galvanized and ready to generate homegrown ideas that address the diverse, pressing issues, including but not limited to gender, religion, human rights, group autonomy and self-determination, economy and education. These issues, and many others like them may require a departure from dominant, narrow views that are mostly western, but doing so should mean that the anti-colonial alternatives to them are adequate to address issues within the scope of Africa's current realities.

On a last note, I am aware of the possible charge of agenda-setting, and its restrictive effect on scholarship. Far from trying to straitjacket Africanist scholars into a narrowly defined area of research however, my aim has been to widen the field of focus, in the hope that an increased focus on the present and its demands will open new vistas of engagement in Africanist scholarship, an idea that in itself appears by label to be self-defining already, even if in a loose sense.

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