Betwixt and Between: Kwasi Wiredu’s Legacy in Postcolonial African Philosophy

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While Kwasi Wiredu’s name is associated with the genesis of modern African philosophy, there are some aspects of his work that are in tension. Although Wiredu is an advocate of a modernized and science-based philosophical orientation, on the African continent, he is also equally committed to a possibility of the existence of philosophy in traditional African society. In the development of his philosophical theses, it appears that he relies on both sources for his method and argument. It is this dual usage of two conflicting systems that leads to a tension in some aspects of his philosophy. In addition, Wiredu’s philosophy is in serious respects shaped by the postcolonial era it emerges from. In part, his thinking is a response to colonialism, and in another part, an attempt at overcoming the effects of colonialism. My aim is to show how Wiredu’s philosophy is ultimately a product of these contradictory forces.

Key words: Kwasi Wiredu; African philosophy; traditional philosophy; western philosophy; postcolonial

1 Introduction

Kwasi Wiredu’s (*1931) name is synonymous with the beginnings of modern African philosophy. Alongside Paulin Hountondji, Wiredu contributed to the nullification of an unproductive and traditionalist approach to philosophy on the African continent. It is hardly surprising that he is credited with playing a leading role in the establishment of what is called the professional trend in African philosophy. My aim is not to pursue a well-trodden path of acknowledging Wiredu’s influence by heaping praise on his achievements or making connections between his impactful contributions. Space available here will not allow me to pursue this line in detail. I suggest that it would be productive to engage Wiredu’s work by picking and evaluating parts I consider crucial to his philosophical approach. While I do not seek to create a halo around Wiredu, I equally do not seek to be overly critical. My aim is to locate the tension found in his philosophical commitment to the beginnings of African philosophy as a system of thought that was grounded in tradition but that also sought to overcome limitations of that tradition. That dual occupation, I will argue, presented a curious tension for the foundation of African philosophy that has continued up to this day. I divide this paper into three sections: the first section locates the beginnings of Wiredu’s philosophy within a time that could only allow him to emerge the way he did. The second section looks at the tension to be found in his philosophical program. The third section seeks to show that the heritage of modern African philosophy exhibits Wiredu’s tensions as outlined in the second section. What I hope to achieve by following this line of thought is to show how African philosophy is tied in a nexus between tradition and attempts at professionalizing.
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Wiredu’s Context

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, in a festschrift dedicated to Theophilus Okere, writes: “In postcolonial African philosophy, Theophilus Okere belongs to the ‘continental’ side. In fact, in Africa, Okere is to the continental style of philosophizing what Kwasi Wiredu is to the ‘analytical’ side” (Eze 2005: 15).¹ There are three significant points that emerge from this very brief quote. The first is that there exists a division between what can be termed continental and analytical styles of philosophizing on the African continent in the postcolonial era. This distinction, though not very severe, of course follows on the tradition of such distinction as established in the west. The second point is that with both traditions Okere and Wiredu feature in equal prominence and influence. One can say they are pioneers of their respective styles. The third point, which is of greater significance, is that the period under which both Okere and Wiredu fall, known as the postcolonial, is not only specific to their work and influence but could have probably shaped that work. For example, I may venture to say, if Africa had never been colonized and Wiredu had never been trained in England—but had still gone on to become a philosopher—what kind of philosopher would he have been? What sort of philosophical topics would Wiredu have thought important to pursue? What philosophical orientation would he have adopted and what kind of philosophy would he have produced? While it may prove futile to pursue any speculation that seeks to provide answers to these questions, since the result can only be wild speculation, it is important that we start with these questions. What these questions do is to point out how Wiredu is a product of the history of Africa’s encounters with the west, more precisely Africa’s history of colonial subjugation. It is from this encounter that Wiredu becomes aware of and competent in western philosophy. He becomes, as Eze points out, acutely competent at a particular form of western philosophy—the analytic tradition. The fact that Ghana was colonized by Britain and Wiredu himself went on to study at Oxford under the supervision of a competent philosopher such as Gilbert Ryle all work together in producing the philosophical orientation found in Wiredu.

So, we could, on one hand, pursue the philosophical commitments found in Wiredu’s work along lines of the tradition that the British had developed through the ages up to the time that Wiredu became a student of philosophy first in Ghana and later in Britain. Yet on the other hand, we cannot help but see the occupation with Africa that is found both in Wiredu’s conceptual framework as well as in themes that he addresses. What this points to, I think, is not a contradiction that resides in a man who is simultaneously committed to African and British philosophical worldviews at the same time. Rather, we find a man, who by reason of time and historical factors, is made a citizen of both worlds and who begins a philosophical conversation between both worlds that eventually led him to the famed station he occupies in respect to the analytic tradition on the African continent. Although it is true that, technically, Wiredu never wrote a monograph in the literal sense of setting out to write a single book, the topics addressed in his first published book, Philosophy and an African Culture (1980),² particularly, point to his commitment to both worlds. At times, a tension arises between the specifically British tradition of philosophy and what Wiredu thought of as traditional African philosophy and this tradition’s necessary features. This tension at times arises with a striking presence.

While the context of Wiredu—the African man who is receiving philosophical training—is easy to trace and outline, there is another context that also plays itself out in quite subtle ways. It is important that we return to Eze’s characterization of Wiredu and Okere as philosophers in postcolonial Africa. We cannot debate this characterization, as it is accurate. However, what we can do is question what the implications of being a philosopher in the postcolonial era actually meant for any thinker of that era. Does a philosopher of Wiredu’s period have special obligations to philosophy in general and to African philosophy in particular that another African philosopher from another era will not have? Do Zara Yacob (1599-1692) and William Amo...
(1703-1753), as philosophers from completely different eras, have the same duty to African philosophy as Wiredu? I think the answer to that question should be no, and it should be no for obvious reasons. The former lived before colonization and belong to an epoch that is not seized with the social and conceptual tangles of Wiredu’s period. Even Eze himself, a formidable philosopher, does not have the same duty to African philosophy as Wiredu. Eze, as a postcolonial philosopher by virtue of his work and topics of concern, like other formidable postcolonial philosophers, does not carry the same burden to philosophize as Wiredu. While they work, broadly, in postcolonial African philosophy, they cannot be said to have the same standing in the field as Wiredu. Wiredu, as someone who arrives a little earlier to the domain of African philosophy, finds himself—together with his peers—having to untangle what those two words “African” and “philosophy” mean when used together. But Wiredu is aware that this is not just a matter of definition of terms, or of plain linguistic satisfaction of categories of existence or reference and meaning; he understands the political connotations behind the usage of the phrase “African philosophy.” He knows how they imply a game of life and death to whoever wants to affirm the state of the African’s capacity to reason and philosophize.

At the same time, Wiredu is aware of an unproductive insistence on a distinct African philosophy; such an insistence plays to the need for self-affirmation. He sees the shortfall of such an approach, and he fights hard against its basic assumptions (Wiredu 1980).

Yet unlike Hountondji, he is prepared to admit that there is some value in what tradition represents and what it may impart to the postcolonial condition. I will return to this point in the next section where I seek to outline how this commitment brings about a serious tension in Wiredu’s work. For now, it suffices to point out that Wiredu is a man who is committed to both Africa and philosophy, and he appears to have a definite idea of what constitutes both. Another aspect of Wiredu’s context is of course what some Africans had written about being African in general. They had inadvertently belittled Africans’ thought processes to a non-philosophical status. Yet they had insisted that this was the best of African philosophy. It is here that we find Wiredu (and Hountondji) in their element. Meticulously pulling down the farcical representations of African philosophy, Wiredu especially attempts to sketch a more respectable account of what philosophy is when it relies on its traditional local setting.

These are the forces that work on Wiredu to produce the commitment he adopts toward the possibility of Africa both as a place and as a concept, as well as the possibility of philosophy in Africa. Had Wiredu been a philosopher of a different time and different historical and political realities, he would have probably been a remarkably different philosopher. One does see, at times very clearly, Wiredu fighting the all-encompassing influence of colonialism. He best combats colonialists’ philosophy and even religious beliefs through the Akan system, which he admits may be extended to similar African systems. A worthy illustration is his theory of the mind. Wiredu resists the supposedly strict separation between the physical and the non-physical. In attributing the operations of the mind to the disposition of the brain to be ideational, as he says Akans would have it, he undercuts the Cartesian assumption that such a separation not only exists but is also compelling. He maintains a similar line of reasoning when he turns his attention to the composition of a person. Wiredu suggests that the invisible part, known as okra, should not be thought of as analogous to the soul. Okra does tend to have quasi-physical attributes, as it can be seen by gifted medicine men. Although his fellow countryman Kwame Gyekye (1939-2019) objected to this characterization, what Wiredu posits is interesting for its rootedness in what he considers to be not only a correct interpretation of the Akans but equally a rational interpretation. If something is seen, Wiredu could argue, then it does not have the same properties as a soul. While Gyekye would oppose such a move by claiming that whatever is seen by gifted medicine men happens outside the normal range of physical manifestation, Wiredu cannot be bothered by such an objection. Gyekye himself, in Wiredu’s view, commits his own version of sunsum to retain physical attributes that are not visible. In this respect, we could see
Wiredu being faithful to traditional thought but also having the ability to subject it to analysis that can stand up to logical rigor. In these instances, one can see Wiredu’s employment of what we can call philosophical argument to justify a position that proceeds from Africa’s traditional resources. Yet Wiredu is always careful to caution against undue excitement with traditional sources. In his “How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought,” Wiredu (1995) not only chides westerners who are overly fascinated by the traditional resources of African societies, but also points to their own ignorance of their own traditional societies. If they were aware of the histories and trajectories of their own traditional societies, he argues, they would find that it is productive to compare traditional western societies to their African counterparts, instead of comparing modern western societies to traditional African societies. However, this does not make Wiredu a defender of traditional African societies; where he thinks that traditional thought is a hindrance to philosophy or development, he is only too happy to call out tradition.

3 Philosophical Tensions within Wiredu’s Thought

While it is easy for anyone with a rudimentary training in philosophy to find some form of tension or contradiction in the thinking of any great philosopher, what is not equally easy is to track the implications of that tension. The basis of that tension and what it would have meant in the general scheme of the great philosopher might even elude the rudimentary reader. There could be many moments of tension in Wiredu’s work, but I am confident of one that I think has significance for how we should read and understand his philosophical project.

Wiredu bemoans Africa’s inability to develop arguments in favor of a position and the tendency to be imprecise in its manner of proceeding on any issue. This approach is traced to an unanalytic and unscientific habit that has been deeply ingrained in African culture (Wiredu 1980: 5). While he acknowledges that education may do well to deal with this shortcoming, he also acknowledges that the education system being followed on the continent only contains patches of enlightenment and at times may prove to be of disservice to the population. With his attention on philosophy, he holds that there are many aspects of traditional life on the continent that are guided by philosophy.

A fact about philosophy in a traditional society, particularly worthy of emphasis is that it is alive in day-to-day existence. When philosophy becomes academic and highly technical it can easily lose this quality. It is, of course, not necessary that this should happen. Though technicality and a high degree of complexity are inevitable in any serious and sustained philosophical inquiry, the best philosophers are always conscious of the ultimate relevance of their thinking to the practical concerns of life. To return to traditional philosophy: the closeness of the relation between traditional philosophy and practical life makes a thorough examination of traditional philosophical ideas imperative. We are living in a transitional epoch in which our actions and habits of mind are governed, frequently unconsciously, by inherited traditional conceptions in combination with ideas and attitudes coming to us from foreign lands. It is saying the obvious to remark that the combination is often riddled with confusion in both parts. We might as well begin to try to get clear about our own traditional side of the combination. It would be good if clarity could begin at home (Wiredu 1980: 16).

What this quote represents is an awareness that Wiredu has of the environment in which philosophy in Africa both is influenced and operates. There is on one hand a justification of the presence of philosophy in traditional African thought and there is on the other hand a present and increasing influence of a technical imperative on doing philosophy. The consequence of this
mixture, as Wiredu perceives, is confusion. The call that he makes to counter this confusion is interesting for its own commitment but also for what it eventually does for African philosophy. When Wiredu claims that a productive attempt would be to get clarity on the traditional side of African thought, he shows at once his commitment to the possibility of philosophy in both traditional and modern Africa. He is effectively acknowledging the possibility of a continuing string between traditional African thought and modern attempts at philosophizing. What ties both ends together is “clarity.” I suggest that the use of clarity is to be understood in the same manner as it was employed by analytical philosophers at the height of that orientation. An emphasis on clarity for Wiredu, an analytic philosopher, has significance in that it will be able to separate what can be viewed as philosophically sustainable and what is philosophically unviable. If there is a philosophical orientation in traditional Africa, bringing clarity will play an important role in establishing both the credentials and tradition of such a philosophy. The ninth chapter of his Cultural Universals and Particulars (1996) describes in detail a useful philosophical approach to themes in traditional African thought.4

But the tension in Wiredu arises in what I consider to be his attempt at striking a balance between his commitment to his philosophical training and his commitment to traditional African philosophy, or shall we say the project of clarifying the latter. In the second chapter of his Philosophy and an African Culture (1996), Wiredu uses a very specific underlying idea of what philosophy should be. He argues that philosophy must be informed by science and be modeled on those traditions that have registered great modern scientific achievements. Secondly, he holds open the possibility of philosophy being universal while maintaining that it is always sensitive to its local conditioning. What matters for Wiredu is not the origin of the person who proposes an idea, but the soundness of the idea proposed. This interplay is what characterizes Wiredu’s understanding of philosophy in general, how African philosophy should orient itself, and how traditional philosophy can be refined into an analytically competent candidate.

The tension in Wiredu becomes very alive when he sets out to argue for a practical aspect of philosophy: democracy in Africa (Wiredu 1997, 2001, 2011). While we recall Wiredu’s commitment as an opponent of uncritical valorization of traditional practice, he appears to fall into that same trap with his advocacy for consensus democracy. His version of democracy relies on what Eze identifies as a return to the source project (1997: 313). This project is typified by a glorious appraisal of traditional institutions, beliefs, and practices in the hope that they can create grounds for inspiring their modern equivalents. While there have been many false criticisms of Wiredu’s defense of consensus and an impressive number of defenders, one criticism that is hard to deal with is of a general sort. The criticism is that Wiredu seems to abdicate his philosophical commitment that encourages critical engagement with Africa’s past (see Matolino 2018). In particular, while Wiredu warns against the evils of anachronism, supernaturalism, and authoritarianism at the beginning of his Philosophy and an African Culture, in his outline of consensus, he appears to embrace a defense of an anachronistic account and practice of democracy. The problematic part about Wiredu’s advocacy of consensus is not that it is short of arguments that seem to make obvious what its attractions are. Rather, it is that he appears to be closed off, in this instance, from his own more generally held view that both the world at large and Africa are in a constant cultural, political, and theoretical motion as influenced by science and modernity. Wiredu has, what we might call, a progressive view both of science and of science’s potential contributions to philosophy. Philosophy and modernity emerge from scientific achievements, he believed, and did so in a form that radically differs from their traditional antecedents. However, this commitment to philosophy does not carry itself through to his analysis of democracy. There is much to be conceded by Wiredu to arguments that the consensus model he relies on was specific to traditional pre-modern tight-knit African communities that were governed in accord with the spirit of kin relations. With the disappearance of such societies and the ties that made their political organization possible, what
then could be the relevance of such a political system when its supporting systems have all but disappeared? Even if it were proven to be the case that there are parts of Africa that closely approximate traditional societies and mores, as Wiredu would describe them, it would still be of no use to his advocacy of consensus, as those parts of Africa are not central to the political degeneration that has gripped the continent (see Matolino 2019).  

There is a tension in Wiredu's own work between his advocacy of a universal philosophical system that is apparently loyal to modernizing and scientific forces and his equal advocacy of an apparently anachronistic political system. Traditional consensus might be out of step with the direction that Africa is taking as a global player and it might be ill-equipped to aid Africa in finding its place in the universal aspect of politics. While Wiredu's criticism of majoritarian democracy might be forceful, what will not work for him is his attempt to ground a viable alternative in a milieu that for good or ill he describes as no more (Wiredu 1980: 29). If that milieu is no more, it must necessarily mean that its practices and conceptual support for those practices must be treated also as not existing anymore. Besides offering historical descriptions of what might have been, there is little practical value in attempting to retrieve such systems.

But, as mentioned earlier, we must understand Wiredu's multiple commitments as being responsible for his commitment to positions that are in tension with each other. We can say Wiredu is committed to the following: 1. science and the benefits of scientific achievement; 2. an analytical form of philosophy that takes seriously the achievements of science and powers of argumentation; 3. movement towards modernity; 4. opposition to debilitating effects of an inhumane modernizing and industrializing world; 5. traditional society’s philosophical viability. All these commitments are a product of a man who is a beneficiary of being an African and a western-educated philosopher. This is why Wiredu asks what the heritage of the modern African philosopher could be. He decides that both the western model and the traditional African model are inadequate roots for the modern African philosopher. The recommendation that follows is interesting: “He should try to acquaint himself with the different philosophies of the different cultures of the world, not to be encyclopaedic or eclectic, but with the aim of trying to see how far issues and concepts of universal relevance can be disentangled from the contingencies of culture” (Wiredu 1980: 31). Since, as Wiredu acknowledges, this philosopher would have come to realize that his own education is steeped in the philosophical traditions of others, and in the quest of finding himself discovers that he has no philosophical tradition to speak of, he has to sort of invent his modern philosophy using those tools that universalism approves. But as Wiredu struggles with finding a balance between his practical commitments to Africa and his conceptual commitment to philosophy that might be of benefit to Africa, his struggle is synonymous with Africa's postcolonial struggle.

At the beginning of this essay I made much of the periodization that Eze gives Wiredu, a period that is different from periods before it and that will likely influence periods that will come after it. This period is marked by a great deal of tension on all fronts of existence and thought. Such tension has extended itself to affect how individuals may even see their own thought processes. It is manifest in their commitments to a variety of truths that constitute their sense of the world and of how incompatible parts of the world they inhabit are true to their existence in equal measure. It is this reality that colors Wiredu’s approach and leads to the tensions in both his practical commitments and theoretical commitments. It could be the case that Wiredu was a man of his times, an African caught up in the viciousness of postcolonial Africa, in an age that was resistant to domination and sought to find itself through affirming what it had thought itself to be in its traditional make-up. If Wiredu had, for example, had the benefit of theorizing and choosing practical commitments a hundred years before or after he was born, he would perhaps have come up with radically different theoretical and practical commitments. He could be after all correct in insisting that philosophy is always sensitive to its local conditions. Here is a man...
who is highly influential because his condition called him to begin defining a trend in philosophy. And through the accident of his philosophical training he became committed to a version of philosophy that he tried to combine with his commitment to his place of birth.

4 Modern African Philosophy’s Heritage of Tension

While I do not seek to suggest that Wiredu is responsible for instantiating any tension that is seen in modern African philosophy between a commitment to western philosophical traditions and commitment to traditional African philosophy, I do suggest that some aspects of Wiredu’s work typify such a tension. What those aspects show is how postcolonial African philosophy has been influenced and shaped. It is a product of forces of the colonizing project as well as the attempt to free the continent from the effects of that project. This attempt at freeing philosophy from the colonial effect is in some part philosophical but in some serious respects a political exercise. Wiredu, in his search for the modern African philosopher’s heritage, comes to recognize that the reason why the modern African philosopher cannot claim the west’s philosophical achievements as part of his heritage is that some prominent western philosophers have peddled racist views and have seen the black person as incapable of philosophical activity. Postcolonial African philosophy emerges, in its professional manifestation, as a product of rival western traditions. However, Wiredu and his generation are dissatisfied with merely following the practice and concerns of the respective traditions they have been formally trained and qualified in. They sincerely believe that there is an African philosophy, but are equally dissatisfied with what dominates its presentation. In finding a path that will accurately represent what philosophy is and what it also is when it is African, they can’t help but begin a political fight for the establishment of a tradition that is born in an epoch that is characterized by the struggle for freedom and need for self-affirmation. To my mind, this is what is postcolonial about the philosophic period and work of Wiredu and Okere.

This philosophy, then, is committed to understanding reality from the perspective of formerly oppressed and ill-treated people. It is not an enterprise that is simply restricted to the fundamentals of ideas and arguments for their own sake, but the fundamentals of ideas and arguments in as far as they relate to the histories and ongoing struggles of black people as formerly oppressed. While Wiredu does show his philosophical dexterity as an analytically trained philosopher, with some of his discussions clearly avoiding an express reference to African specifics, one always gets a sense that Wiredu works with a background commitment to prove the existence of African thought as philosophical. This, I think to a great degree, characterizes African philosophy as postcolonial philosophy. It is firstly engaged with its own postcolonial condition. Whatever the implication and result of that engagement, it is at its starting point also the starting point for modern African philosophy. It is also engaged with its past, in some ways attempting to restore that past, in other ways to-reinterpret and apply it to concerns of today, and also in other ways to simply correct mischaracterizations of that past. All this is, in different ways, an attempt to restore what was damaged and rehabilitate Africa’s pride and history. It, in some way, counters the distortions of the past that were used to conquer and dehumanize.

But there is also another project going on alongside these attempts: the search for the relevance of philosophy both in the past and in the present African condition. As a place that is largely transitioning through a number of stages, which are at times contradictory and conflictual, the clarification of philosophical ideas may prove inadequate. What is needed is also clarification of the potential use of those ideas. For a place that is in transition from servitude to freedom, from tradition to modernity, and from scorn to pride, the inspiration of transition may prove not only elusive but also highly contested. What also worsens the situation is that the complications
that Africa is faced with are at times internally generated and are at times externally sponsored. When thinkers, such as philosophers, attempt either to understand the situation or to identify possibilities to deal with that situation, they find themselves compelled to use different tools of analysis. Depending on their formal academic training, they may think a certain philosophical orientation better than another, but they also quickly come to the realization that this tool was not meant for this place; hence they fall back into their tradition. But they also find, as Wiredu does, that the tradition is evaporating under sustained pressure to modernize. From there, they can become advocates of modernizing, or be recalcitrant in insisting on tradition, or be pragmatic about it all and choose to embrace selected aspects of both sides. Whatever they do, the choice is always an uneasy existence in a paradigm that is open to endless possibilities of attack.

Yet it is in this environment that the project of philosophy in Africa started and continues to unfold. It unfolds as an exercise that affirms the co-existence of two realities: Africa and philosophy. But it is the existence of these two realities in the realm of the postcolonial that also unites a number of intriguing combinations into a potentially coherent idea of African philosophy.

5 Conclusion

While the politics of African philosophy have been hard and influential, the project of African philosophy itself is no different from philosophy anywhere. It seeks to understand, clarify, affirm, disprove, rebut, and be logically consistent. Very much like philosophy anywhere, it is sensitive to the dynamics and influences of its place of origin. At times it succumbs to the circumstances of its place of origin and at times it rises above those circumstances to provide a clear (if not detached universalistic) assessment of its place of origin’s incoherencies and contradictions. What can then be said about Wiredu is that he was a pioneer in a field that still retains the same character of a postcolonial philosophy in a transitioning society.

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