The Challenge of Working with Believable Instead of Historically Verifiable Claims

EMMANUEL IFEANYI ANI
University of Ghana, Africa (eiani@ug.edu.gh, mabrowest@yahoo.com)

Kwasi Wiredu has proposed a democracy by consensus as an alternative to the majoritarian model of democracy many African countries inherited from their colonial masters. As part of his proposal, Wiredu made a number of claims about traditional African consensus democracy that appear to be personal conjectures rather than information obtained from proper empirical investigation. These apparent conjectures have led to confusion and disagreements regarding what actually happened in these traditional societies. In this article, I outline the dangers of such an approach to scholarship. I show that Bernard Matolino's attempt to defend this methodological laxity is not successful. I argue that inaccurate claims can lead to inaccurate values, and to the designing of mistaken social and political systems.

Key words: African philosophy; consensus democracy; deliberative democracy; African studies; African history

1 Introduction

Kwasi Wiredu decries the inclemency of adversarial politics occasioned by the multiparty majoritarian system of democracy many African countries inherited from their colonial masters. Observing that this system of democracy exacerbates rather than ameliorates conflict in Africa, Wiredu asks us to consider the consensual democratic practices of precolonial traditional African societies, such as his own society. But he makes claims about these societies' practice of consensus that so far lack any research backing. Some of these claims have led to confusion and debate. In a 2014 article, I commented that we may have to rely more on the normative merits of consensus than its historical practice. My reason was that the sources of the practices informing these claims are too remote to be identified, and what we have are more like conjectures and romantic colorations than accurate data. Bernard Matolino has responded by arguing that I exaggerate the matter in claiming that all descriptions regarding traditional practices are conjectures. He argues that historical verification is not necessary to know what happened in the old days: what is needed is philosophical investigation. By this he means determining what is believable between two conflicting claims. First, I show that Matolino misinterprets me by alleging I consider *all* traditionalist claims to be conjectures. Second, I argue that Matolino's recommendation of philosophical investigation (determining claims that are believable) is not a good substitute for historical verification. To illustrate this, I further show Wiredu's tendency to substitute his personal wishes and views as the cultural beliefs of his people. I show this by digressing briefly to examine Wiredu's views about his people's religious and spiritual views.

This essay is divided into three sections. In the first section I outline some of Wiredu's claims about precolonial Ashanti society that lack empirical support. I then recall my remarks in a previous publication about the need to pay more attention to the normative merits of an idea rather than to descriptions of how the idea was practiced in the distant past. I argued that such a past is so long gone that we cannot accurately know how things were done at the time, especially if proper anthropological work was not done then. In the second section, I outline Matolino's response to me. I show that his accusation is a misrepresentation. Then I argue that his

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

suggestion regarding philosophical investigation cannot substitute historical verification. I do this by demonstrating that believable claims could actually be false. I cite Wiredu's claims not just regarding Akan consensus democracy but also regarding Akan religious beliefs and concepts to demonstrate this. In the third section, I argue that many claims are value claims, and that inaccurate claims about phenomena risk projecting the wrong values. I give examples with wrong factual claims made by Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and early African communitarians, which led to cherishing misleading values. This is another danger of simply conjecturing about what happened in precolonial times.

2 The Sources and Credibility of Claims in Wiredu's Consensus Proposal

Kwasi Wiredu, one of the most prominent philosophers in Africa, has reached into the traditional African models of political organization to propose an alternative to the multiparty majoritarian model of democracy many African countries inherited from their colonial masters. He argues that the majoritarian model is adversarial, aggressive, and divisive, exacerbating conflicts instead of resolving them (Wiredu 1996: 179, 186).[1] Wiredu notices these problems not just in African countries but also in those countries that are supposed to be global star democracies, such as the USA, where the phenomenon of gridlock is often used to obstruct meaningful government policies (Wiredu 2012: 1059). Wiredu observes that in situations when the race for power is close, majoritarianism often makes those in opposition as numerous as those supporting the ruling party, establishing a sort of constitutionally backed, pre-established disharmony (Wiredu 2012: 1060). Due to these problems, Wiredu asks us to take a fresh look at the consensus political systems of traditional African societies. He presents the political system of his native Ashanti in Ghana as an example.

In order to unpack what actually happened before colonialism in his native Ashanti kingdom (a period long before Wiredu was born), Wiredu obtains data from the work of Kofi Busia. This work is a book titled *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*. In this book, Busia explains that the Ashanti political system was primarily a kinship lineage system: every lineage elects a head. The lineage head represents the lineage in the town council. This council also elects a member to represent it at the regional council, which in turn elects a representative at the national council headed by the king of the Ashanti, the *Asantehene*. Wiredu claims that all of these elections were by consensus; however, I find that Busia does not make any such claim. In fact, Busia does not mention the word "consensus" in his book. Wiredu claims that consensus was "a manifestation of an immanent approach to social interaction," and consensus was axiomatic as a basis for joint action (Wiredu 1996: 182). I have already mentioned that Busia wrote nothing regarding consensual decision-making. But Wiredu goes ahead to write that although traditional African societies had their own experiences of conflict, consensus led to genuine resolution of disputes whenever it was used, rather than mere abstentions from further disputes (Wiredu 1996: 182).

At this point, it is pertinent to ask where Wiredu is getting these facts about precolonial society, given that his experiences of his society can only be postcolonial. There is no doubt that these claims provide inspiration to Africans who are witnessing the polarizing effects of multiparty majoritarian democracy in countries where it was haphazardly copied from western countries. But is such a positive emotion sufficient reason to ignore the more academic question of the source of these claims? It is also true that Wiredu hails from the said society. But is this sufficient ground to make unverified claims about the precolonial period of that society? I grant that Wiredu must also have benefited from folklore and other transgenerational stories. But I need to make a distinction between two aspects of a historical claim: its inspirational value and its accuracy. These two aspects do not always harmonize in a historical claim. Those claims that

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

have inspirational value, but are either concocted or otherwise not accurate, are called myths. The question is whether some of Wiredu's claims could be explained by identifying them in this category. I will show later that some other of Wiredu's claims are not folklore, myth, or in any way from Wiredu's society: they are rather views that Wiredu acquired in Europe and the USA during his studies in philosophy subjects such as empiricism and certain theories in philosophy of mind.

Before discussing other claims from Wiredu that are absent from any historical records of precolonial Ashanti society, let me first return to Wiredu's claim that decision at all levels of the Ashanti political system was by consensus (Wiredu 1996: 185). If Wiredu makes this claim for the period prior to British conquest and domination, then it is his personal claim—or let me say he does not show the source of the claim. But if he makes the same claim for colonial and postcolonial Ashanti society, then voting has already infiltrated the society through contact with the west. Either way, the credibility of the claim is not well settled.

Wiredu claims that there was no longstanding word for voting in precolonial Ashanti society, and that its current usage is a foreign importation for a foreign practice. He writes, "Indeed, there is no longstanding word for voting in the language of the Ashantis. The expression which is currently used for that process (*aba to*) is an obvious modern coinage for a modern cultural import or, shall we say, imposition" (Wiredu 1996: 184). But from the absence of records, there is no way of determining the truth of this claim: we cannot establish whether *aba to* is a European coinage or not. As attractive as this claim is, Wiredu cannot make this claim on behalf of those of his tribesmen who lived two centuries before him, the time gap being too much for the integrity of the claim. And there are no etymological studies to which we can appeal. Later, I will show that Wiredu's personal claims on behalf of the culture of his people are full of contradictions and not to be wholly relied on.

The second point is this: the question is whether Wiredu wanted us to conclude that voting was nonexistent. For if voting were nonexistent, the Ashanti would not be aware of it as an option in decision-making. But elsewhere, Wiredu writes that consensus was a premeditated option (Wiredu 1996: 185). A premeditated option implies a consideration and rejection of an alternative to consensus, and voting is the only other alternative. This implies that Akan deliberators were aware that decision could be taken according to the numbers supporting positions on issues. Confirming this suspicion, Wiredu writes,

> I would like to emphasize that consensus was a deliberate effort to go beyond decision by majority opinion. It is easier to secure majority agreement than to achieve consensus. And the fact was not lost on the Ashantis. But they spurned that line of least resistance. *To them, majority opinion in itself is not a good enough basis* for decision making, for it deprives the minority of the right of representation… (Wiredu 1996: 186)

If the Akan *deliberately* chose consensus as an option, it means they were aware of voting. If they were aware of voting, at least in an informal sense, they *must* have called it something: they must have had a name for it. This throws into doubt Wiredu's claim that the Ashanti word for voting is a modern coinage. In another instance, Wiredu writes, "Since majorities are easier to come by than consensus, it must be assumed that the decided preference for consensus was a deliberate transcending of majoritarianism. Assuredly, it was *not an unreflecting preference, it can be shown to have been based on reflection* on first principles" (Wiredu 1996: 143). If the Ashanti, *upon reflection*, tried to transcend majoritarianism, it means, at the pain of repetition, that they were reflecting on majoritarianism and its disadvantages. It means they were aware of majoritarianism, at least as a temptation in decision-making. What we could charitably say is that majoritarianism existed but precolonial Ashanti deliberators tried to avoid it as much as possible. This is the most logical interpretation of the two immediate citations of Wiredu above. Again, in another instance,

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

Wiredu writes, "But, again, can consensus always be had? As already noted, the Ashantis seem to have thought that it could, at least in principle. But suppose this is not the case. Even so, it can always be aimed at…" (Wiredu 1996: 186). This raises the question of what precolonial Akan deliberators did when they did not reach consensus in their deliberations.

I appreciate that these are claims about the past that are made to inspire the designing of a consensus democracy. But providing inspiration based on purely concocted claims could lead to the mobilization and designing of a highly mistaken political system. Very crucial to designing political systems is the need to know, as accurately as possible, how similar systems may have worked before or elsewhere. Early nationalists such as Julius Nyerere had sought to build their newly independent African countries on very inspiring but very mistaken claims about traditional society. Matolino had himself cited some of these mistaken beliefs on the part of Nyerere regarding traditional African economic life. Nyerere is largely seen as a good man, and no doubt he had good intentions for Tanzania, a country he was privileged to rule as its first President. His goodness can even be seen in his interpretation of traditional society and his conception of an ideal political system: indeed, he regarded both as the same, and it was that the good society is equivalent to a family (what Nyerere calls *Ujamaa*). In a family, no member owns anything, including the head of the family. Likewise in a good society, no one should see oneself as owning anything. All should labor for all, and no one should harbor an acquisitive tendency.[2] Unfortunately, implementing this in real life boiled down to using force in the face of people's refusal to comply. Matolino cited a passage from George B. N. Ayittey, summing up the issue:

> Nyerere, however, misunderstood his own African heritage. His claim of "communal ownership of the means of production" was incorrect. As I made abundantly clear earlier, all the means of production in indigenous Africa were privately owned. Three economic factors of production—labor, capital, and the entrepreneur—were owned by the peasants, not their chiefs or the state. Land, the other factor, belonged to the ancestors. The chiefs and kings held land only in trust, it did not belong to them or the state. Furthermore, the African emphatically does not "regard all men as his brethren." Otherwise, there would be no tribal wars or tribalism. Like many other African leaders, Nyerere displayed a woeful lack of understanding of his own black African heritage and culture. Such leaders attempted to graft an ideology onto an African culture they did not understand. (Ayittey 1998: 117, cited in Matolino 2019: 22)[3]

Matolino himself had this to say: "Not only did leaders such as Nyerere have a false understanding of communitarianism, they were also immersed in their own theoretical interpretations of African reality" (Matolino 2019: 12). But this is the same problem we see in Wiredu's claims regarding his traditional society. As I will shortly show, Matolino contradicts his position on scholarly rigor by defending Wiredu's laxity. The question would therefore emerge at the end of this essay: Why is Matolino less concerned regarding the accuracy of Wiredu's claims about traditional African society?

Due to the compromised nature of many of Wiredu's claims about consensus in traditional African societies, I argued in a 2014 article that political paradigms should be evaluated on their normative appeal rather than "on their alleged antecedents in an ancient society that is difficult to access and examine today" (Ani 2014: 347).[4] I will provide a summary of that argument in the next section. Looking at the troubles bedeviling Wiredu's claims about traditional societies, I had commented that return-to-source (or return-to-tradition) political theories are challenged by the fact that the "source" is "too remote to be verified or examined," because it has been "too disrupted by the twin disasters of colonialism and the lack of a written tradition to be recovered in any significant way." I complained that what we have today are mostly "descriptions by proxy or conjecture (inspired by post-colonial residue that ought not to

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

be relied upon)." Examining the particular tenor and tone of Wiredu's personal claims, we can see that they are examples more of "nostalgic colorations than accurate descriptions" of traditional societies, and "we may not know which are true or false" (Ani 2014: 347).

3 The Question of Historical Verifiability

In a 2019 publication, Bernard Matolino has criticized me for "despairing" in the authenticity of return-to-source accounts. According to him:

> However, I think that Ani exaggerates the matter a bit when he claims that all we are left with are descriptions by proxy or conjecture. While there is real difficulty in working out how traditional society was constituted it should not necessarily lead to Ani's despairing conclusion that we may not know what is true and what is false. I do not think that there is need to look for historical verification to inform us which of the two given and competing versions is possibly true. All we need is philosophical investigation. (Matolino 2019: 59)

Before I begin, let me correct a misrepresentation that Matolino has committed in his interpretation of my statement. I had written, "*What* we have today are *mostly* descriptions by proxy or conjecture…" (Ani 2014: 347). In response, Matolino writes, "…Ani exaggerates the matter a bit when he claims that *all* we are left with are descriptions by proxy or conjecture…" (Matolino 2019: 59). So while I refer to *most* descriptions of traditional practices, Matolio alleges I refer to *all* descriptions of traditional practices; this allegation is to pave way for an easy retort that not all descriptions of traditional practice can be conjectures. Having clarified this, let me go back to the substantive issues in Matolino's passage.

By arguing that there is no need for historical verification, Matolino appears to admit that historical verification in the matter under discussion is *no longer possible*. If this is the case, then it is not an exaggeration to conclude that what we are left with are mostly descriptions by proxy or conjecture.

Matolino's critique of this conclusion raises more questions. He admits that there is "real difficulty in working out how traditional society was constituted" but argues that it does not warrant the "despairing conclusion" that we may not know which accounts are true and which are false. Matolino then argues that we do not need historical investigation to determine the truthfulness of return-to-source claims: all we need is philosophical investigation. But how do we investigate historical claims *philosophically?* Matolino suggests that we can do this by determining whether a historical claim is *philosophically defensible*. But what does Matolino mean by the philosophical defensibility of a historical claim? Matolino suggests that to determine which of two conflicting historical claims is philosophically defensible, we need to determine (or *decide*) "which account is closer to reality" than the other. (Matolino 2019: 59). This suggestion begs the question: Which "reality" is Matolino talking about? The only reality today is that of modern Africa: even current rural areas in Africa are culturally diluted with global values.

I am happy that Matolino does not dispute the fact that traditionalist claims (at least on the subject matter of precolonial consensus decision making) are not historically verifiable. I also do not object to Matolino's argument that in the absence of historical verifiability, we should settle for the philosophical defensibility of return-to-source claims. The import of this argument by Matolino (which has become an agreement between us) is that African philosophers have no option but to settle for *claims* about their past, and to proceed mainly by deciding for themselves which claims are philosophically defensible claims. At the pain of repetition, it means that scholars in some areas of African philosophy (including the topic under discussion) are working

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

with unverified claims. We need to acknowledge the weakness of this continental situation and be clear on the disadvantages it puts upon African philosophers. The first disadvantage is that unsupported claims (especially the types we have seen from Wiredu) are *conjectures*. What Matolino calls "philosophically defensible" accounts logically includes philosophically defensible *conjectures*.

How do we know an account that is philosophically defensible? Matolino tells us that it is an account that we can reasonably believe. So by a "philosophically defensible" account, Matolino refers to a *believable* account. But we need to be careful because *a believable account can still be in fact a false account*. In a 2016 article, Matolino writes, "In effect, the chief is expected to be largely silent during deliberations, only speaking through his representative, if he absolutely had to" (Matolino 2016: 44).[5] Is this claim backed by any research? It is neither in Wiredu nor Busia. It therefore appears to be a conjecture. Moreover, Busia's account contradicts it directly. Wiredu based his account of the Ashanti royal deliberation on Busia's account of the political system of the Ashanti. In turn, Busia based much of his own narratives on the research of the English man Robert Sutherland Rattray.[6] The minutes of several meetings of the Ashanti Confederacy Council, which Busia accessed, shows that the Ashanti king is the one who proposes a topic for discussion, listens to views, and sums up the deliberation by taking into cognizance his own views and those of others. In some of the deliberations, the king also contributed his own view midway or somewhere into the deliberation.[7] The research on Ashanti royal deliberation, therefore, denies Matolino's claim. This is the danger of making conjectures about what happened two centuries ago in traditional African societies.

It also appears that Wiredu makes conjectures in place of scientific empirical research regarding traditional societies. He writes that consensus was usually about actions and hardly about notions. According to him, "…where there is a will to consensus dialogue can lead to a willing suspension of disagreement, making possible agreed actions without necessarily agreed notions" (Wiredu 1996: 183). Wiredu is silent on whether this is a description of what used to happen in precolonial society, or a prescription for a future consensual democracy. Actually, it would be far better as a prescription because it is an ideal that can do a lot of good in deliberation although it cannot be cleanly achieved. Unfortunately, the statement is right in the middle of a purely descriptive paragraph about precolonial traditional practices, giving the impression that Wiredu is telling us how things were actually done. Did Wiredu get this particular information from Busia's book (on which he relied for his empirical data), or is it Wiredu's idea? Unfortunately again, Busia wrote no such thing, leaving us with the conclusion that, without any empirical research, this is another conjecture Wiredu is making on behalf of dialogues that took place centuries ago.

This conjecture, however, pales in comparison to what Wiredu claimed about the Akan conception of spiritual entities and the Akan approach to worshipping divinity. Although this is a brief digression from the topic of consensus democracy, I wish to show that elsewhere Wiredu has made claims presenting his personal views as the culture of his people. I have cited elsewhere Wiredu's claims that Akan thought is completely empirical, and that the Akan do not understand transcendental concepts, "concepts referring to entities, beings, processes, relations that are, in principle, not conceivable through possible experience" (Wiredu 2011: 27).[8] As such, concepts such as "Space, Time, Existence, Substance, Thing, Quality, God, Person, and Nature" could not be conceived by the Akan except through empirical experience (Wiredu 2011: 27). Martin Ajei has argued that this view of Akan metaphysics is incorrect.[9]

Wiredu asserts that the Akan believe in a hierarchy of beings with the Supreme Being (God) at the top of this hierarchy. But Wiredu argues, "everything that exists in [the ontology] exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical" (Wiredu 1996: 49). To avoid confusion, Wiredu tells us that the Akan believe that those beings that are not fully material are quasi-material, and a quasi-material being is "any being or entity conceived as spatial

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

but lacking some of the properties of material objects" (Wiredu 1996: 53). Wiredu then claims the Akan do not believe in anything that is not ultimately governed by the laws of physics (Wiredu 1996: 50). Wiredu sums up his exposition by saying that the Akan cannot comprehend a transcendent God or any other notions such as "spiritual" or "supernatural" (Wiredu 1996: 40–50). Ajei counters this claim by citing the Akan concept of God as *Odomankoma,* the "Interminable or Infinite Being" (Ajei 2012: 192).[10] This is a transcendental concept of God.

Wiredu had also claimed that "the belief in *Nyame* (God) has no essential role in the conduct of Akan life," and that if this belief were deleted from Akan consciousness, absolutely nothing would be lost "in terms of sustenance of any institutions or procedures of practical life" (Wiredu 1996: 57). But elsewhere, Wiredu makes the same claim regarding his *personal* attitude to *Nyame*. He writes, "Speaking from my own experience, failure to retain belief in Nyame (the Akan Supreme Being)—I make no mention here of the Christian God, the conception of whom registers no coherent meaning upon my understanding—has caused me not the slightest alienation from any of the institutions or practices of Akan culture" (Wiredu 1996: 58). The upshot is that Wiredu somewhere makes a particular claim about his people's belief, and elsewhere writes that the belief is his. So how do we distinguish between Wiredu's own beliefs and the beliefs he ascribes to the Akan?

Ajei has contested Wiredu's above claim (the one Wiredu presumably made on behalf of the Akan). Ajei admits that divinity is not the source of Akan morality, but argues that Akan assign a significant role to God in their moral deliberations. He writes that when an Akan has suffered an injury at the hands of another but sees no reparation in sight, she could say, "'*Nyame betua wo ka*!', meaning 'God will pay you back'" (Ajei 2012: 194). Ajei also claims that the Akan talk of God's intervention when they think they have avoided a calamity, and pour libations at functions summoning God (*Nyame*).

Wiredu may retort that such Akan behavior is modern (beginning after contact with Europeans) and does not necessarily constitute Akan culture before contact with the west. But, in my view, *how do we know?* Who is saying the truth and who is not? It is inadequate to argue, as Matolino does, that we simply look at the positions and decide which looks *more real*. For Matolino's only knowledge of reality is thoroughly modern.

Let me give another example of the kind of confusion that arises from conjecturing in the absence of proper historical investigation. Wiredu claims that his people, the Akan, conceive the Supreme Being to be that which nothing greater than can be conceived (Wiredu 1996: 46). He also claims that the "Akan and kindred languages are such that transcendental concepts—concepts referring to entities, beings, processes, relations, that are, in principle, not conceivable through possible experience are not expressible in those languages *without demonstrable incoherence*" (Wiredu 1996: 27; my emphasis). But this contradicts Wiredu's claim that the Akan conceive the Supreme Being as that which nothing greater than can be conceived, for such a claim implies that the Supreme Being is conceived through reason rather than experience.

The problem with conjectures gets worse when Wiredu denies that the Akan have any coherent concept of the spiritual. His defense of this claim appears to be a residue of his western training in philosophy rather than the thoughts of precolonial Africans. Wiredu argues that we should separate the spiritual from spirituality, saying that spirituality is "sensitivity to the less gross aspects of human existence" and arguing that spirituality in Akan life does not mean the Akan recognize the spiritual (Wiredu 1996: 54). He argues that the Cartesian definition of spirituality as absence of the material is a definition of pure negation, which brings little enlightenment because it fails to separate spiritual from void, as an example. Wiredu also argues that defining the spiritual as "unperceivable" would not help because the definition equates spirituality with gravity, which is also unperceivable. But the problem with these analyses of spirituality is that Wiredu is examining the spiritual with empirical tools of examination (Ani

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

2019: 234). More importantly, one is no longer sure at this point whether Wiredu is still exposing Akan thought or just marshaling his personal arguments and views.

This uncertainty deepens when one examines Wiredu's claim about the Akan concept of mind (see also Ani 2019: 234). Wiredu describes the mind as "the capacity, supervenient upon brain states and processes, to do various things" (Wiredu 1996: 53). This definition of mind is precisely Donald Davidson's theory of non-reductive physicalism, which proposes that the mind is the capacity of mental events to supervene (depend) upon physical events (Davidson 1980: 110).[11] At this point, one must ask: Where does the Akan thought stop in Wiredu's presentation and where does western philosophy of mind begin? One only recalls Valentin-Yves Mudimbe's unsettling observation:

> one wonders whether the discourses of African gnosis do not obscure a fundamental reality, their own chose du texte, the primordial African discourse in its variety and multiplicity. Is not this reality distorted in the expression of African modalities in non-African languages? Is it not inverted, modified by anthropological and philosophical categories used by specialists of dominant discourses? (Mudimbe 1988: 199)[12]

4 Absence of Terminology as Absence of Phenomenon

Recall that Wiredu claims that there is no longstanding word for voting in precolonial Ashanti society (Wiredu 1996: 184). But I will show that Wiredu equivocates when he wants us to believe that lack of a word for a phenomenon indicates that the phenomenon does not exist. In certain places he argues that absence of terminology *does* indicate absence of phenomenon; in other places he argues that absence of terminology *does not* indicate absence of phenomenon.

One of Wiredu's principal reasons for saying that the Akan do not have a phenomenon in their culture is to say that their language does not capture the phenomenon. His reason for saying the Akan do not have a religion or conceive of the transcendental is that the Akan language does not have concepts for any of these (Wiredu 1996: 45). Again, Wiredu argues that Akan language lacks abstract terms. As an example, Wiredu claims that the Akan word for being is *wo ho,* which means to be at a particular place, and the word for nothingness is *se whee nni ho*, which means the absence of something at a particular place (Wiredu 1996: 55).

But in a different place, Wiredu argues that the fact that the Akan lack the kind of unitary abstract terms used in English does not mean the Akan do not think in abstract terms. Wiredu gives an example of the abstract concept of a chair. He argues that the Akan do not conceive of *chairness* but conceive of *the circumstances of being a chair* (*se bribi ye akongua*) (Wiredu 1996: 24). Wiredu points out that the circumstance of being a chair is just as abstract as chairness, so it is a mistake to think the Akan do not think in abstract terms (Wiredu 1996: 24).[13] If we allow this argument, then it implodes Wiredu's other arguments that an absence of terminology means absence of certain phenomena in Akan language. The fact that the Akan have no word for religion, the transcendental, the supernatural, the spiritual does not mean they have no ideas about these phenomena.

Evidence of conjecturing on Wiredu's part is that he takes liberty of positions according to his whim. What we see from the above is that in certain places, Wiredu chooses to say that the absence of unitary abstract terms does not prevent the Akan from thinking in the abstract, and in certain other places, Wiredu argues that the absence of transcendental and abstract terms *in some other issues* means such issues do not exist in the Akan scheme. This is inconsistent, and only throws a reader into confusion as to what to believe.

In discussing consensual democracy, Wiredu argued that there is no longstanding word for voting in Akan language (Wiredu 1996: 184). But given the inconsistencies we see above,

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

how do we know that the absence of a word for voting translates into the absence of voting? By voting, I mean the informal acknowledgement of the role of numbers on decisions in deliberation, including consensual deliberation, not just the more formal role of balloting we see in modern majoritarian democracy. Could it be the case that a majority of group decisions were the products of ideas advocated by the minority in a group deliberation? Wiredu denounces such a prospect, for in his consensual democracy proposal, he also presumes that group decisions are usually products of majority positions. He writes that the minority is normally expected to suspend disagreement whilst the majority is expected to prevail upon the minority, not simply over the minority (Wiredu 1996: 184, 190). This puts a reader into considerable confusion regarding Wiredu's accounts of consensus deliberation in traditional societies. And the confusion is due to the dominant role that conjecturing is playing in how we retrieve practices and norms from traditional sources.

One needs not forget that Wiredu is himself an Akan. He in fact clarifies that his presentation of Akan culture is "through birth, upbringing, reading, and deliberative reflective observation" (Wiredu 1996: 45). But from all the evidence of conjecturing we see above, it is obvious that belonging to a culture is not sufficient for speaking on behalf of the culture, for the speaker could substitute personal wishes and beliefs for acclaimed popular thought. What is needed is historical investigation (if the historical records are available), or at least ethnographic research (taking into account the distortion of past tradition by foreign cultures). The genuine descriptions that Wiredu offers of Akan culture depend heavily on the account of Kofi Busia in the book *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*. But Busia in turn depended heavily on Rattray. For his account of the Ashanti lineage system, as well as the position and functions of a chief in the Ashanti kingdom, Busia frequently cited information from Rattray's book *Ashanti Law and Constitution*. So we have a series of dependencies, potentially whittling down accuracy with each new dependency. The substitution of personal views for actual data increases as narratives pass from agent to agent. Where available, the most original historical record (the primarily literature) should be consulted, not second-, third-, or fourth-level dependencies on the original historical record.

From the amount of confusion I have highlighted in this essay caused by the presentation of personal views as collective thought, we see that it is not at all an exaggeration to say (as I said in 2014) that what we are left with are mostly conjectures of what actually happened in Wiredu's depiction of the precolonial Ashanti consensual system.

5 Claims as Value Claims and the Designing of Value Systems

I will conclude by highlighting another major disadvantage of working with claims in place of verified historical *facts*. It is that most claims are usually value claims (claims about practices whose value we desire to retrieve and inject into contemporary society). Value claims resting on unverified or inaccurate factual claims risk being claims about unrealizable (or even wrong) values. And in fact, in the history of postcolonial African scholarship and politics, many of the claimed values were false. Kwame Nkrumah had claimed that classes did not exist in precolonial Africa (Nkrumah 1964: 69).[14] That was false. As I have shown, Nyerere's claim that nothing was privately owned in precolonial African societies was also false. We are all too familiar with the mistaken social and political systems that Nkrumah and especially Nyerere went ahead to build. Early communitarian thinkers (those Kwame Gyekye calls radical communitarians) presented an exaggerated picture of community ascendance over the individual (Matolino 2019: 19–35). These are the hazards of *deciding* (quite arbitrarily) the philosophical defensibility of claims about precolonial traditional practices. The biggest difference between philosophical positions and historical investigation is that philosophical positions are prone to the risk of being incorrect,

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

politically motivated, or driven by selfish interest. A verified fact suffers none of these defects. For good or ill, African philosophy is saddled with only the philosophical defensibility of quite a number of unverified claims. In view of the problems I have shown, this situation calls for caution in the use of data regarding precolonial life. But the reality is that many African philosophers treat the claims undergirding their work with the confidence deserving of only actual historical facts. This includes the nationalists I have cited. African philosophers, therefore, need to recognize that they are burdened with a special limitation. If they hope to philosophize in ways that benefit their societies, they need to be careful about the claims they work with.

6 Conclusion

I have in this essay highlighted the problem of inaccuracy in retrieving information about precolonial events and phenomena. I have identified this as a major cause of the debate (now producing sub-debates) surrounding Kwasi Wiredu's proposal for a consensual democracy. I have highlighted various contradictions and inaccuracies in Wiredu's claims regarding precolonial practices, beliefs, and norms. I have also argued that Matolino's attempt to minimize the seriousness of this problem is not successful. I have argued that inaccurate claims can lead to inaccurate values, and the designing of highly mistaken social and political systems.

Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani is a Senior Lecturer of Philosophy at the University of Ghana, Accra, and was a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra. He is an Associate Editor at the *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*.

1 Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996). Also see Kwasi Wiredu, "The State, Civil Society and Democracy in Africa," in *Reclaiming the Human Sciences Vol II,* ed. Helen Lauer and Kofi Ayidoho (Legon-Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2012), 1059–61, 1063.

2 Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968); Julius Nyerere, *Uhuru na Ujamaa: Freedom and Socialism: A Selection from Writings and Speeches* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968).

3 G.B.N. Ayittey, *Africa in Chaos* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998); Bernard Matolino, *Afro-Communitarian Democracy* (London: Lexington Books, 2019).

4 Emmanuel Ani, "On Traditional African Consensual Rationality," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2014): 342–65.

5 Bernard Matolino, "Rationality and Consensus in Kwasi Wiredu's Traditional African Polities," *Theoria* 63, no. 146 (2016): 36–55.

6 Rattray was a barrister with a diploma in anthropology and headed the anthropology department of the British colonial government in the Ashanti region of Ghana from 1921 to 1930.

7 Minutes of the Confederacy Council 1941, cited in Busia (1951: 126–7); minutes of the Confederacy Council 1943, cited in Busia (1951: 191); minutes of the Confederacy Council 1942, cited in Busia (1951: 201); minutes of the Confederacy Council, cited in Busia (1951: 202–4).

8 Kwasi Wiredu, "Empiricalism: The Empirical Character of an African Philosophy," in *Identity Meets Nationality*, ed. Helen Lauer et al (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2011). Also see Emmanuel Ani, "On the Non-Worshipping Character of the Akan of Africa," *Sophia* 58, no. 2 (2019): 225–38.

9 Martin Ajei, "Problems with Wiredu's Empiricalism," *Legon Journal of Humanities* 23 (2012): 185–204.

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02

[10] Ajei cites J.B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944), 30.

[11] Donald Davidson, "Mental Events," in *Readings in Philosophy and Psychology,* ed. B. Ned (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[12] Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[13] Also see Ani (2019: 235).

[14] Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonisation* (London: Panaf Books, 1964).

Journal of World Philosophies 6 (Summer 2021): 13–23

e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.02