

# Kwasi Wiredu's Moral and Social Philosophy: Community and the Birth of Personhood

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**Abstract:** This article explores Kwasi Wiredu's argument that personhood is a status to be obtained through one's community instead of being given on account of being born a human. Therefore, a person becomes (or loses) their personhood through communal engagement. This makes personhood a moral and political concept with massive implications for how Western philosophy perceives the self and the other. I argue that these moral and political implications are much stronger than many want to realize. Wiredu's account, if accepted, compels one to reconceive the notion of personal development, worldhood, and what decolonization entails.

*Keywords:* personhood, Kwasi Wiredu, communalism, African philosophy, the self, the other

## 1. Introduction

Within Western philosophy, the notion of a person, or 'the self,' is often a presumed identifier of an individual when exploring questions such as epistemology, morality, and especially subjectivity. However, through decolonial scholarship and explorations of communalism within the Global South, the concept of the self and/or person has become a site of critical re-examination with broad-reaching implications. This article contributes to this ongoing discourse by examining Kwasi Wiredu's genealogical analysis of communalism and how one becomes a person through community.

What Wiredu's perspective adds to the discourse is that, for him and his Akan heritage, being a 'person' is a qualitative achievement whereby personhood is bestowed upon a human being through their community (Wiredu, "Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa" 336). One can also lose their personhood if they fail to achieve specific moral obligations within that community (Wiredu, "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood" 16). Importantly, though, when one loses their personhood, it is not that the community condemns the individual as much as it is a recognition that someone is in moral danger. This emphasizes that the individual needs the community's help to restore themselves and reconcile whatever wrong made them lose their personhood in the first place (see Eze and Metz). Drawing upon Akan philosophy, Wiredu's notion of personhood within/through community articulates that personhood—or selfhood, in a phenomenological locution—is not a given and is not something biologically or metaphysically essential to being human. Personhood, thus, is inherently moral and political since it is a status to be achieved.

Accordingly, Wiredu's notion of personhood and community spirals outward to encompass both an interpersonal ethics and a wider, communal (and eventually global) ethic, which he describes through the concept of impartiality and a broad reading of the so-called Golden Rule.<sup>1</sup> Wiredu's ("Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa" 334–335) notion of becoming a person through community also lends itself toward questioning the Western, dominant forms of selfhood and/or personhood, which, on the whole, tend toward individualism (as an ethics) and an isolated consciousness perceiving phenomena on its own (as an existential-phenomenological

presupposition or metaphysical concept). Finally, this notion of personhood is fundamentally moral and thus holds vast socio-political implications for both self and communal identity.

Accordingly, this article will present Wiredu's notion of personhood-through-community so that it can tease out the political and moral implications embedded within it. I first set a foundation for this exploration by backgrounding Wiredu's philosophical approach and its aims to clarify that my scope is a stand-alone reading of Wiredu's personal-communal framework, which Wiredu built throughout his philosophical career. Afterward, I will describe this personal-communal framework, which will then lead to a final section where I engage its moral, political, and decolonial implications. I will then conclude by addressing Wiredu's critics and, in so doing, will present a few challenges that open Wiredu to conversation with other decolonial approaches. Namely, I will seek to answer whether his employment of 'the Golden Rule' and his notion of 'conceptual decolonization' hold the gravity for a truly transformative encounter between a person, their community, and the world at large.

## 2. Situating Wiredu: Wiredu's Philosophical Approach

As Barry Hallen (*Reading Wiredu 2*) summarizes, it is essential to recognize that Wiredu is an essayist, and there "is no book by him that provides a synoptic, comprehensive overview of his thought." What this means for us is that, while there are conceptual threads woven throughout his work, as an essayist, Wiredu covers various issues within ethics and political philosophy, the Analytic philosophical tradition, as well as African philosophy. Furthermore, like Serequeberhan, he began his career amidst the ethno- and professional philosophy debates. Yet, contrary to Serequeberhan, who eschewed the debate as *Gestellungen* (en-framed) within Western confines, Wiredu (*Cultural Universals and Particular* 136–138)<sup>2</sup> agrees with Hountondji that African philosophical thought must tightly hew to a rational basis for (or defense of) its claims (136–138).<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Wiredu believed that many ethno-philosophers were still in a "semi-anthropological paraphrase of African traditional beliefs" and that the way out of colonial entrapment was to form rational arguments that at once critically engage the West while employing/developing Africa's indigenous rationalities and traditions (Wiredu, "On Defining African Philosophy" 88).<sup>4</sup> This process is what he eventually calls "conceptual decolonization."<sup>5</sup>

Wiredu thus described himself as a philosopher who employed John Dewey's "genetic method," which entails a deep, empirical analysis of cultural mores and language (Wiredu, "What is Philosophy?" 164–165). Through this method, Wiredu utilizes a linguistic-cultural investigation of African traditional thought that analytically challenges philosophies within both Western and African contexts (Hallen, *Reading Wiredu* 20). For Wiredu, Dewey's genetic method breaks open the conceptual canons of rationality so that one can further investigate the "patterns" that emerge from "our interaction with the environment," meaning both our physical and social environments (Wiredu, "Kwasi Wiredu: The Making of a Philosopher" 331). This consequently allows one to investigate not just knowledge as such but the epistemological-linguistic frameworks that deem certain things as knowledge and others as superstition, unsubstantiated claims, etc. For Wiredu, this method allows him to analytically define the rationality of a given culture/community and how their truth claims are comparable to others through translation (see Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought"; Hallen, *Reading Wiredu* 20–25, 33–36). Translation holds significant importance to Wiredu since the ability to translate ideas between different languages proves that there must be some 'universals' germane to all cultures.

For those unfamiliar with Wiredu's primary influence, John Dewey was a pragmatist who emphasized how thinking itself was not merely an abstract activity but, rather, a worldly and concrete activity since thinking is always already bound to the language in which one is thinking. This language is built within the world, and the terms, verbs, grammar, etc., were derived

from concrete observations. This means one's cultural mores are built upon those observable experiences formed through one's given language. Thus, a genetic method explores how these worldly linguistic-cultural constructs form ideas about the world (epistemology, metaphysics), which entails an ethics or at least a pattern of governance through which those ideas are employed within the world/society (see Hallen, *Reading Wiredu* 46–48).

Returning to Wiredu, the final important aspect of his thinking is that he defines his Akan heritage, as well as other African systems of thought, as a distinct and unique form of empiricism, which he calls 'empiricalism.' For Wiredu, a primary issue with the Western gaze upon African traditional thought is that it is either seen as too abstract (i.e., supernatural) or too immanent, neither of which lends itself to authentic philosophical reflection ("An Oral Philosophy of Personhood" 46–47).<sup>6</sup> Addressing these concerns, Wiredu ("Empiricalism" 22) notes that "the familiar claim is that African thinking is exhaustively empirical and innocent of metaphysical reflection. This is quite a severe misunderstanding. A mode of thinking can be both empirical and metaphysical, and I ... [argue] that traditional Akan metaphysics is an empirical metaphysic." In defining what he calls 'empiricalism,' Wiredu (33) states that it "is the adherence to the empirical imperative without the sensationalistic incoherencies of empiricism. It is the view which close attention to the conceptual intimations of my own culture renders the most plausible to me regarding the fundamental character of human knowledge."

Wiredu's philosophical approach thus engages the analytic tradition, holds an autoethnographic component, and also employs critical, genealogical hermeneutics. It is rather difficult to slot into any particular school (Western or African), which Barry Hallen (see *Reading Wiredu* 22–24, 30–32; "Book Review" 175–176) argues is why many critiques against Wiredu are often misplaced or derived from poor readings of his texts. For example, some critics question his conceptualization of Akan and African culture as being too utopic and that he shaves off certain nuances, such as Akan notions of faith, to craft his own philosophical stance (see Gyekye; Molefe, "A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu's Humanism and Impartiality"). Other critics engage whether his moral and political philosophies are viable or have enough decolonial impetus to create change, regardless of their fidelity to the Akan tradition (see Bernard Matolino; E. C. Eze; Osha). For our purposes, I will touch upon these critiques in the final section and conclusion to open Wiredu to conversation with the larger decolonial discourse.

With that said, it is crucial that we read Wiredu as a stand-alone thinker and not merely an extension of Akan thought. Taking this approach brings his notion of personhood as a status to be achieved into full relief. From this, we can better understand the hermeneutic and moral tensions that give rise to this status and how, once someone achieves their personhood through/within their community, we can explore whether a said person can or cannot proceed to change that community—either through conceptual decolonization or otherwise.

### 3. Wiredu's Philosophical Anthropology: How a Human Becomes a Person

I have found that D. A. Masolo articulates Wiredu's notion of personhood best since he contrasts Wiredu with Kant to describe Wiredu's notion of personhood while highlighting Wiredu's critique against Western universalism (see Etyiebo). Concerning the latter, Masolo (139–141, 149–154) argues that Wiredu directly critiques how particular notions of personhood, articulated from one culture to the next, are discarded by Western modernity or, at best, flattened out to become analogs to Western rationality.

As Masolo argues, Kant arrives at a philosophical anthropology *after* his three famous critiques, whereas Wiredu inverts this and begins with an anthropology from which he then explores its implications. Kant and those influenced by him typically argue that philosophy follows a certain linear path: first, it questions "What can I know?"; then, "What ought I do?"; afterward, it asks, "What can I hope for?"; finally, it arrives at "What is man?" Furthering this

and quoting Kant, Masolo highlights how specific branches of philosophy address these issues: the first question is covered by metaphysics, the second by morality/ethics, the third by religion, and the fourth by anthropology (137).<sup>7</sup>

For Masolo, echoing Wiredu, beginning from a metaphysics and then moving toward an anthropology, unduly introduces presumptions on what a person is and is not (138). Contrariwise, Wiredu's exploration of anthropology as 'first philosophy' recognizes how one's rationality is shaped by what an individual knows about themselves and how they conductively employ this knowledge within the world. Furthermore, Wiredu argues that metaphysics itself is not a universal foundation of reason from which one's self-understanding arises. Rather, it is the individual coming to a sense of their own existence in relation to their community/world which creates a metaphysics. As Masolo (138) states:

While Kant starts with human nature as phenomenologically complete in its (metaphysical) constitution at least in the domain of understanding, Wiredu seeks to establish the view that such defining characteristics of being human are not endowed in humans by a force that exists outside an already existing environment of the deliberate actions of other humans, namely the socializing processes out of which the actualization of human capacities emerges. Thus, Wiredu argues, in an Aristotelian fashion, [sic] what makes humans humans cannot be their psychology, for this is an already-constituted aspect of them.

In sum, Wiredu is wary of any categorical or transcendental concepts that endow oneself with identity. Being human is merely a biological fact, and Wiredu (tongue in cheek yet matter-of-factly) states that humans are merely "featherless bipeds dispersed over the surface of the world" (Wiredu, "Identity as an Intellectual Problem" 215). Therefore, self-understanding is a psycho-philosophical issue of the mind which develops through empirical engagements with the world. Recall that Wiredu draws upon an Akan-African worldview that he calls 'empiricism,' whereby one's potentiality for personhood and identity is constituted through concrete encounters, which then develop into a systematic framework of understanding (i.e., an empirical metaphysics built upon encounters that are understood through culture and its given language or languages). The mind is always already in the process of becoming, and, as we will see below, its endgame is achieving a robust moral personhood that is esteemed from one featherless biped to another through communal-social relations. Concerning the issue of mind and its procurement of self-understanding, or identity, Wiredu (214) states:

We are born human beings by virtue of our biology and inherited potentials, but we become persons only by socialization. This is the process by which we not only develop the powers of our mind but also, more importantly, begin to have any sort of mind at all. In other words, we are not born with a mind that is a *tabula rasa* ... *Rather we are born with only the potential for one.* The acquisition, through suckling, nursing, and nurturing by parents or persons in *loco parentis*, of the gestured rudiments of language is the first hint of a baby's pretension to mind. Even this much is already heavily laden with culture, that is, with a certain particular way of becoming sensitive to "the other" and subsequently cognizant of the self. In due course, one acquires a working command of a mother tongue (emphasis mine).

From this, the resultant question becomes how one can explore identity and philosophical anthropology without outside categories, transcendental or otherwise. This is where Dewey's influence enters the picture. Wiredu argues that one can begin to understand how identity or personhood are developed through a genetic exploration of linguistic-cultural norms. Furthermore, such an approach shows that universal categories cannot describe personhood, and neither can culturally relativistic, particular rationalities. The fact that language and culture are translatable shows that there are some universals at play, but they are expressed in particular ways unique to the truth values within their own linguistic culture. As he states plainly, "human beings cannot live by particulars or universals alone, but by some combination of both" (Wiredu, *CUP* 9).

The way in which Wiredu connects particulars and universals is through language. Following Dewey's genetic method (though not cited directly in this section of *Cultural Universals and Particulars*), he argues that communication and, thus, language are biological necessities for humans to survive. Wiredu even goes as far as saying that cultural universals are "vital communications" that are *sine qua non* for the existence of the human species (21). 'This is where to find food,' 'This is where to find shelter,' 'Beware of the predators over there'; all these communications are necessary for such featherless bipeds to survive in an unstable, harmful world.

This communication is an "evolutionary force" and the "cultural universal *par excellence*" which, in tandem with survival, establishes humans as social creatures (41, 28). Formal languages with set grammatical rules and vocabularies evolve from these rudimentary communications and give rise to culture(s). Out of these cultures comes a system of morality on how to conduct oneself within said community, and crucially, these systems of governance also become the means of knowledge creation. Thus, from survival to culturally produced knowledge, Wiredu locates language and its evolution as how communities bind themselves together and hand down their traditions to future generations.

This binding happens when a social group evolves its communication beyond a system of survival to create meaningful ties and, in this process, conceives a culture amongst its members. Importantly, these meaningful ties arise through the evolutionary force of language. As Wiredu states, "the notion of different persons perceiving or apprehending the same entity presupposes a system of interpersonal correlation of inner experiences with external reality, which is inconceivable without communication" (19). For Wiredu, this happens as a matter of course, almost instinctively: "Given a common language as a medium of communication, various things will be defined ... according to the semantical rules operative in the given language. ... speaking literally, it is not the community that does the defining [i.e., in a judicial, authoritative sense]; it is the individuals who do it, using rules developed in the community" (Wiredu, "Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa" 338).

Through this anthropological, genealogical account, Wiredu argues that "a human being is a rule-following animal, and language is nothing but an arrangement of rules" (CUP25, 27). These rules—either in grammar/syntax, ethics/culture, rationalities/epistemologies—become the structures by which both personhood and community co-develop. Subsequently, each community's rules become the cultural particulars that arise from humanity's universal, biological needs.

Masolo was right to contrast Kant and Wiredu because Wiredu's account of rationality is not fixed nor endowed by the facticity of life itself. Contrariwise, Wiredu argues that rationality and the development of the mind are themselves constructs to describe how a human being first survives life and then develops their sense of self within their community. This community frames this sense-self through its morality, which is communicated through a particular language-culture that is taught or handed down. Crucially, this morality and its language-culture frames meaning and, eventually, epistemology:

[The capacity to be rational] has tremendous implications. It implies, for example, that we (human beings) are capable of learning from our experience of the environment and of adjusting, or trying to adjust, our behavior to the constraints of that experience. Now the environment is of two basic types. There is a natural and there is a social environment. The constraints of the natural environment arise from our contact with physical objects and forces [*i.e., empiricism*]. In terms of detail, different peoples react differently to the environment, but in basic essentials, there is only one human way of doing this. And that is the pursuit of survival and well-being through action on the basis of perception and inference [*i.e., meaning-making/epistemology*]. From the standpoint of cognitive biology, then, there is a basic way of being in the world. That is to say, there is a basic culture common to all human beings. There is another species-wide cultural commonality. It appertains to the conditions of the social environment. It is a necessary truth about human beings that

they live in societies. But to live in a society is, in general, to have some conception of other selves in contrast to oneself [*i.e.*, *personhood*]. At the minimum, this involves having a sense of one's own interests in relation to the interests of others. It involves also, beyond this, some sense of the need to harmonize these interests, which, by any account, are apt frequently to conflict. This need is the root of all morality. The rules for securing that minimum of harmony required by the survival of human community constitute morality in the strictest sense. In this sense, morality is the same for all humans. This, then, is a second element of unity in human nature and culture. (Wiredu, "Reflections on Cultural Diversity" 204; brackets are mine)

So far, one sees how communication is a biological and social necessity, but the moral implications of personhood need more fleshing out. Wiredu argues that Akan and, more broadly, African communities endow individuals with personhood, and thus, being a person requires an individual to be 'seen' or accepted by their community. This happens through social engagements whereby the individual achieves good standing through their community's morality. To my mind, some analogs to Akan-African personhood can be seen in religious rituals such as Christian baptism or Jewish bar/bat mitzvahs; here, one becomes accepted into the community—essentially becoming 'one of them'—through performing a systematic ritual. Systematic, here, is imperative since each moral-social framework must have an impartial basis: impartial in that it applies to all persons, thus becoming the foundation upon which one can judge their own actions (see Wiredu, "Moral Foundations of an African Culture" 196–198).

Wiredu also adds that this impartiality is constantly being negotiated between the person's own interests and their community's, seeking harmony between the two. This allows a dynamism to individual morality—lest it becomes too rigid and *impersonal*—while also opening a space for morality to develop and change according to the person and their society's needs. Wiredu ("Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa" 334) calls this negotiation an "empathetic impartiality" and equates it to the Gold Rule, or some non-Christian analog, where one always ought to treat others as they want to be treated.

For now, we can see how empathetic impartiality sets the rules through which one becomes a person within a given community (see Wiredu, *CUP* 29). It gives someone a baseline for understanding their role within the community by providing the criteria for that community's culture and collective self-understanding. One can see this in constitutions written by communities either in the political sphere (e.g., national constitutions) as well as in the religious sphere (e.g., theological doctrines), and especially in epistemologies and methodologies which categorically decipher what is knowledge, superstition, and/or trivia.

Significantly and finally, since language can be translated and therefore cultural exchanges can exist, one can at once see the universality of culture being language-bound as basically essential for life to flourish but also see the particularity of each culture since they require translation in the first place (25–26). If they could not be translated, then they could not be universal; if they did not need translation, then they could not be particular. One needs both possibilities to understand how personhood and community establish harmonies. Moreover, one needs both possibilities to understand how these featherless bipeds dispersed across the earth are the same species and how they communicatively self-identify through their given culture.

Wiredu therefore comes full circle: communication is essential to the biological survival of the human species. This commutative survival evolves to develop meaning-making and culture through established languages. Thus, a linguistically bound epistemological framework is crafted, which, as a framework, is nothing but a set of rules through which one crafts an understanding of the world and/or themselves. This language-culture's rules help bind a community through evolving into an impartial morality through which a community weighs and judges individuals. Seeking harmony, individuals employ the same language-culture's morality to judge their community. Through this co-esteem between individual and community, a

dynamic relationship evolves culture to develop concrete, empirical epistemologies through which they both engage in critical reflection to further discover their world and evolve their moral sensibilities. This engagement with the world entails cross-cultural exchanges, which is only possible if there is a baseline of language and morality as biologically vital and as an intellectually evolutionary force that is essential to being human. Thus, we arrive at a universal notion of what it is to be human and a culturally particular notion of what it means to be a person in a given society.

#### 4. Wiredu's Conceptual Decolonization: The Implications of Personhood via Community

To my mind, Wiredu's philosophy employs a particular type of relational logic. Since communication is needed for survival, and thus a conveyance of information from one to another, the entire framework is based upon relationships between shared inferences and, eventually, shared language-cultures. Relational logic from the bottom to the top, his entire project emphasizes that anything known as 'fact' or 'knowledge' only becomes so through their communal acceptance. This consequently emphasizes the political and moral nature of not just personhood but the epistemological framework through which personhood is understood (Wiredu, "What is Philosophy?" 164–165).<sup>8</sup> Everything is moral, right down to being a person or even knowing which plants are food and which are poisonous. The fact that there is translatability between language-cultures shows, for Wiredu, that there are moral aspects at work within a particular culture that are constantly being negotiated. To further describe this, I will give a brief illustration.

Traditionally, one cannot be a father without a child to parent, and one cannot be a husband without a wife. Furthermore, one cannot be a 'man' without a shared network of references that designate proper masculinity. Here, the designations of father, husband, and masculinity are related to both other persons (such as parenting a child) and to cultural-moral norms (such as obtaining the requirements for 'manliness'). There are impartial baselines to obtain these characteristics of one's self-identity and personhood.

However, these norms and referents are constantly renegotiated. First, some fathers abandon their kids and are thus considered poor fathers or not even fathers at all, especially by their now-abandoned children. Also, someone else can take up the father's role and become the father to a child without being biologically related. Second, many societies have renegotiated what a 'husband' is. The obvious example is the recognition of same-sex marriages, but also, if one betrays or abuses their partner, then they may lose their privilege to be a husband either by divorce or force of law; the latter locates a certain impartiality where society legally intervenes. Either way, the husband may forfeit any rights and privileges of this social esteem. Finally, the concept of masculinity is constantly renegotiated within culture up to the point where the gendered notion of 'man' has changed, in the West at least, to a performative act (à la Judith Butler), and the moral acts that characterize 'good' masculinity have changed too (as seen within the discourse on toxic masculinity). These examples show how identity is not static: it is neither self-given nor arbitrarily endowed by the community. In both an individual and socially negotiated sense, these aspects of one's personhood are relational to a network of referents that judge the behavior of the individual in question and deem them worthy of these characteristic identifiers. Ultimately, all of these characteristics are dynamically relational.

Concerning translatability, it is obvious that different cultures have various notions of what is (or who can be) a father, a husband, or a man. The fact that we can notice these differences is a form of translation since we recognize these characteristics in other cultures. Furthermore, rightly or wrongly, the fact that we judge another culture's definitions of these characteristics furthers the point that they are indeed translatable. Conversely, the fact that we can notice

different practices of fatherhood, marital relationships, and masculinities across cultures means that we can also weigh and measure our own culture's practices. Through these cross-cultural exchanges, we develop our own culture's notions by accepting or rejecting principles from others. Or, contrariwise, we can condemn the practices of another culture's principles, rightly or wrongly, but hopefully productively and in conversation with that culture. Either way, translatability always already holds a moral component since one culture is constantly judging both its and the others' norms, regardless of whether it is implicit or explicit. Note that 'moral' here simply means that there is a value-ethics at work in these intercultural translations and negotiations.

For Wiredu ("Are There Cultural Universals?" 60), the moral ideal for this translatability is exemplified in the Golden Rule in its various articulations. In whatever version it is expressed, the resonance of treating others as one wishes to be treated still resonates. For Wiredu, a global ethics binds all cultures together since our universal need for survival requires that we be social creatures who need to live in harmony with each other. The Golden Rule thus provides an impartial basis for social harmony. What gives a culture its own identity is how it particularly articulates and practices the Golden Rule, which Wiredu ("On the Idea of a Global Ethic" 46) localizes as "an ethic." As Motsamai Molefe ("An African Perspective on the Partiality and Impartiality Debate" 472)<sup>9</sup> summarizes, "thus an ethic refers to subgroup-specific rules and/or norms for regulating human life in these groups; and ethics refers to the 'necessary laws for (all) human behaviour.' ... And, I might add, both are needed for a robust human life" (472).

Here again, we see the universal and particular at play: ethics maintains a fundamental universality that is tied to survival, and the ethic is the given praxis within a specific community. For Wiredu, this moves the moral aspect of translatability into politics since cultures can debate, adopt, or impart their ethic to another culture since they share a basic ethics (see Wiredu, "Society and Democracy in Africa"; "Democracy by Consensus"). For our purposes, what this shows is, again, from bottom to top, that there is a relational logic at play that is at once moral and political. The ultimate goal of this morality, whether locally or globally, is to seek harmonization, either between person and community or between one community and another (Wiredu, "Society and Democracy in Africa" 35).

Yet, what happens if people are forcefully initiated into an alien culture through events such as colonization? Here, the effects of this moral miscarriage amount to a severe estrangement between individuals and their respective communities, effectively severing this relational dynamic between them. Consequently, one's sense of personhood dissolves along with the communal fabric woven throughout each person. This sentiment echoes Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's notion that colonialism was a "cultural bomb" which devastated communities by severing people from their language, their heritage, and their sense of self (Ngugi 3).

Having been forced to take up Western norms such as the individualist concept of personhood, the propositional nature of Western logic through Western languages, the adversarial nature of governance, a "colonial mentality" was thus forced upon them (Wiredu, *CUP* 4). They were conscripted by force to take up an identity—a persona—that was pressed upon them, which severed them from their language-culture and, consequently, their sense of personhood. For Wiredu (46–52), this is especially true with Christian missionaries who devalued African Traditional Religions, suppressed native languages, denied any cultural rationality beyond the West, and consequently deprived African peoples of their own sense of personhood and community.

Though Wiredu does not reference Fanon, I find that Fanon's notion of the "fact of blackness" complements Wiredu's reading of colonial personhood and its colonial mentality. Stripped of relational identification, one is seen and called Black by an invading mindset; one loses themselves and resultantly, in Fanon's words "little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race" (Fanon 92). Moreover, when the colonized seek liberation—whether in revolution or in the post-colony—they do so through "white liberty and white justice; that is values



secreted by [their] masters” (172). Thus, the colonial mentality, for both Wiredu and Fanon, haunts the postcolonial situation in that what remains for the formerly colonized to rebuild their lives is the colonial artifacts used to subjugate them (Wiredu, *CUP* 92–95, 142–144).

Wiredu’s concerns about African philosophy at large follow a similar pattern in that he sees a lurking colonial mentality that haunts the entire enterprise. On the one hand, many ethnophilosophers present their retrievals in translation for Western constructs and fail to engage them directly. On the other, many professional philosophers fail to adequately consult their own traditions, and their work resultantly fails to achieve any resonance within their own African context (Onah, “The Universal and the Particular in Wiredu’s Philosophy of Human Nature” 89–90).

Wiredu’s approach splits through both ethno- and professional philosophy in that he calls for a “conceptual decolonization” where the point is not to fall completely to one side or the other, but to disentangle mental colonization through a methodical self-awareness. One cannot get rid of the legacy of the imperial West, nor can one directly return to traditions that have forever been altered. Rather, similar to the themes addressed throughout this article, one has to live with a combination of both. Conceptual decolonization, then, is a disentanglement:

... it is worth repeating that in [conceptual decolonization] there is no assumption that what comes from Africa is necessarily true, sound, profound et cetera. Much less, of course, should there be an over-valuation of what comes from the West. In fact, however, exactly such an overvaluation, at an apparently semi-conscious level, is the hallmark of that infelicity of the mind called the colonial mentality still afflicts us in African philosophy and other areas of African intellectual life. The cure for that mental condition, however, does not require the disavowal of all foreign sources of possible edification. It seems to me likely that any African synthesis for modern living will include indigenous and Western elements, as well as, perhaps, as some from the East. There are good reasons for such catholicity (Wiredu, “Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy” 54–55).

What conceptual decolonization does, then, is locate the ways in which the colonial “modes of conceptualization” have become instrumental reasonings within African thought. However, rather than discarding Western conceptualizations, Africans may engage them through their “own reflective choices” (56). What this means is that instrumental reasonings/rationalities become transparent and therefore engaging for Africans writ large; they can choose to use Western concepts and methods such as phenomenology or democracy, but they do so with the self-awareness that it is a Western concept which comes with certain presuppositions attached that may need to be modified to fit said African thinker’s context. Wiredu’s conceptual decolonization essentially employs his relational logic where the formerly colonized are aware of the tensions between their traditional beliefs and the Western, postcolonial ideologies into which they were inculcated. Through this awareness, they do not have to choose one over the other but use both to reckon with their own sense of personal identity, their own moral values, and their interlaced cultural context.

##### 5. By way of Conclusion: Wiredu, his Critics, and First Philosophy

Wiredu has been critiqued as an ethnophilosopher since he reaches back to Akan traditional philosophy to argue his points. Yet, he has also been critiqued as a professional philosopher since he employs analytic philosophy and often engages issues within an analytic context.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, some thinkers like Sanya Osha (vi) find Wiredu’s conceptual decolonization to be too closely attached to an “ethnocentric Western epistemology” to have the intellectual and political force to actually decolonize African life. For Osha (63–69), this epistemology locates a methodological problem within Wiredu’s conceptual decolonization, namely that his highly analytic approach tries to bring African traditional thought to the fore, but only as much as it

gives evidence to an analytic proof; it never goes beyond this to explore a deeper interrogation of the methodological and epistemological presumptions underlying its ideal.<sup>11</sup>

Osha thus champions a decolonial approach that hews closer to a continental philosophical tradition, writ large, against an analytic one that he finds wanting. I bring this up to show how, in some ways, the ethno- and professional philosophy debate has evolved—or perhaps assumed into—the analytic-continental divide within global philosophy. This is relevant since, pace Wiredu, there still remains an entanglement between conceptual canons of thinking whereby the formerly colonized have an either/or decision forced upon them. Contrarily, and in partial defense of Wiredu, a space could exist where one could seek a harmonization between decolonial projects. Rather than picking one epistemological-methodological framework over another, one can find the framework which best relates to their own personal and communal circumstances since neither will prove universally adequate for all the formerly colonized across the globe. Perhaps there is space for both.

To return to personhood and conclude, what Wiredu's conceptual decolonization provides to his notion of communalism is the recognition that the damage of colonialism will not fade away. It is thus a false choice to unreflectively decide between returning to a tradition that is forever altered or maintaining a Western mentality that is forever foreign. Language evolves and may recapture portions of its grammar and vocabulary, but it only does so through re-appropriation and not a wholesale rewrite of its own history, its own becoming. So, too, does our sense of personhood evolve, and the formerly colonized should, according to Wiredu, recapture their traditions but can only authentically (or, in Sartrean terms, in good faith) do so as a re-appropriation that is self-aware of their historico-cultural situation.

Thus, the best pathway to authentic personhood—authentic being broadly construed to apply to various circumstances—is to find a relational harmony between the individual and the community, knowing that the community has been haunted by colonialism and recognizing what colonialism has denied oneself is part and parcel of the personal-communal negotiation. In this sense, the agency of personhood is fully formed in that it directly confronts the colonial mentality perpetuated through the community and challenges the community to transform and decolonize itself by questioning its instrumental reasoning. Again, there is a relational dynamic at play here where individuals within their community (re)negotiate their community's ethic to re-articulate their own notion of the Golden Rule or, more technically, their own reading of a foundational-universal ethics. It can do so through a reappreciation of the community's original language-culture, and the fact that these (re)negotiations carry a translatability with them means that they can negotiate what they wish to appropriate from other cultures, colonizing Western cultures included.

Though Wiredu's conceptual decolonization of the person and community may be benign for some, and I, too, wish it had more force and impetus to galvanize social justice movements, it is ultimately a philosophical anthropology and not a manifesto for change. What Wiredu aims at, whether one agrees with him or not, is to provide the first philosophy *for effective change*, not to provide change itself. Wiredu limits his scope here so that second, third, and further orders of philosophy may emerge. Or, returning to the counterpoint he takes against Kant, if there is going to be a decolonization, it needs to begin with the question 'What is a person?' before it attempts to liberate persons.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Wiredu (“Are There Cultural Universals” 61–62; *Cultural Universals and Particulars* 56, 109–110; “Moral Foundations of an African Culture” 198). For an overview, see Hallen (*Reading Wiredu* 70–80).
- <sup>2</sup> Hereafter *CUP*.
- <sup>3</sup> One can see this especially in Wiredu’s critique of a certain, unquestioning notion of faith. See, amongst multiple examples: Wiredu (“Identity as an Intellectual Problem” 212).
- <sup>4</sup> Note that Serequeberhan is fond of quoting this passage.
- <sup>5</sup> This concept will be covered later, but Wiredu employs this notion often within his work. For an overview, see: *CUP* 136–144, and “Identity as an Intellectual Problem” 224–226.
- <sup>6</sup> I use ‘African Traditional thought’ rather than ‘African Traditional Religions’ (ATR), to widen the range of rationalities and practices.
- <sup>7</sup> Masolo quotes from Kant (13).
- <sup>8</sup> See also Graness (32–34); Wiredu (*CUP* 108–110).
- <sup>9</sup> He cites Wiredu (“On the Idea of a Global Ethic” 45).
- <sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Wiredu prefers the ‘professional philosopher’ distinction albeit in a nuanced way: “Apart from anything else, some might conceivably regard much of the work I have done in Akan philosophy as ethnophilosophy. Be that as it may, I personally prefer to let the term “professional philosopher” refer to anybody who gets paid to teach, and meditate on, philosophy. In this sense, the traditionalists too are generally professional philosophers” (Wiredu, “Kwasi Wiredu: The Making of a Philosopher” 336).
- <sup>11</sup> For similar critiques, see Asouzu (*Ibuaru*) and Edet (“The Question of Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy”). For a defense against these critiques, see Carman (“A Defense of Wiredu’s Project of Conceptual Decolonization”).

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