

## **Kwasi Wiredu's on How not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought: A Critical Evaluation**

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### **Abstract**

Every philosophy has its root. The root eventually forms the approach of the people and their way of thinking. Unfortunately, the overbearing dominance of Western Philosophy on other Area Philosophies is no longer healthy, since it even seems to stiffen the peculiarity of their way of thinking through self-imposition. In the Universities, Courses are introduced as if they only belong to Greek philosophy. The title of Courses ought to be particular with certain prefix such as "African", "Greek", "Western", "Eastern" Philosophies. However, the prefixing of philosophical courses only exists when it is outside Western Philosophy. Even the prefixing of philosophical courses once they have to do with other climes other than the West shows that these other thought systems are not completely accepted as true philosophy. Yet, it is obviously an undeniable reality that there are thought-systems in these climes that qualify and are indeed philosophy. Africa and her traditional philosophy happen to be a victim of this misconstrued impression about philosophical thinking leading to the old but unending debate if there is African philosophy. Probably, this friction in the acceptance of African traditional thought emanates from a wrong dimension of comparing African traditional thought with Western thought. For this reason, Kwasi Wiredu deemed it necessary to devote a chapter of his book "Philosophy and an African Culture" to "How not to compare African traditional thought with Western thought". This research work specializes on critically analyzing this position of Wiredu using the descriptive method.

**Keywords:** *Africa, Western, Philosophy, Tradition, Thought.*

### **Introduction**

The relationship that exists between African traditional thought and Western thought is a clear case of one who was more privileged in time. Probably, if Africa saw enlightenment before the West and did exactly what the Westerners did to propagate their ideas, it is possible that Africa would have dominated the empire of academic knowledge and documented history. But the reverse is the case and it is noticed in the acceptance and rejection of our ideas into certain platform or not. Actually, when one reflects on the affixture of names to things, one hardly senses a corresponding necessary relationship between the names and those objects they are named after. For instance, is there any particular reason that the day after Sunday is named Monday? If it was named any other thing, would it not be acceptable? Although through the power of abstraction and association, we conjecture in our heads that there is a link between things, their

characteristics and their traits. Sometimes we are guilty of relating unconnected correspondence in transporting ideas from one culture to another. We try to force the Western reality into African existence even where there are sometimes no connection. Whose place or office is it to determine how wisdom should be displayed? Wisdom is not an exclusive reserve of any race or group of people. But when one comes to limelight before others, it seems as if such person has acquired originality more than the one who may not be privileged to come to public knowledge. Sometimes first to be known may not be the first to acquire the object for which it is known. As such, it will be wise to keep the window of anything associated with wisdom open to anything that has the marks of wisdom in it. The denial of critical thoughts from some people and the acceptance of others could be on the ground of the differences in methods of exhibiting wisdom in various people. Besides, no philosophy exists without development. Currently, Western philosophy has grown in leaps and bounds, but we must not forget that its origin in the cosmology of the Athenian philosophers was not as sophisticated as it is today. This is not different with African traditional thought. It may have started with fables, proverbs, poems, et cetera, but in the present day, it is being reinterpreted in the spectrum of critical reasoning. There is a trajectory through which African traditional thought got to where it is existing today. However, for some reasons bordering on methodology, some philosophers have refused to acknowledge such thoughts as critical enough to be included in the philosophical framework.

Kwasi Wiredu's work on "How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought" is not only appropriate but also timely. This is because every thought system is founded on circumstances and traditions. As such, Wiredu identified three senses of the term 'philosophy' and built his thoughts on how not to compare African traditional thought with Western thought around this idea of the three senses of philosophy.

### **Kwasi Wiredu's Three Senses of Philosophy**

Kwasi Wiredu begins the chapter under review by alluding to what he treated in the previous chapter, described as the two senses of the term 'philosophy'. He started by saying "In the last chapter" distinction was made between two senses of the term "Philosophy", (Wiredu 1980, p. 37). However, he added a third sense of the word "Philosophy" thus:

There is a third possible sense in which one might refer to the thoughts of class of individuals in traditional African societies who, though unaffected by modern intellectual influences, are capable of critical and original philosophical reflection as distinct from repetitions of the folk ideas of these people. (Wiredu 1980, p. 37).

Thus, Wiredu postulates three senses of the word "Philosophy". The first being philosophy as emanating from folk world-view, the second being modern philosophers whose intellectual resources of the modern world help them to grapple with philosophical problems and the third being traditional philosophers but distinct from folk ideas of their people. This agrees with the three categories of African philosophers, described as verbal

African philosophers, philosophers of the origin of African philosophy and modern African thinkers whose ideas are built on these days' problems in philosophy. Whereas verbal philosophers refer to verbal ethnophilosophers, philosophers of the origin of African philosophy point to early African philosophers, who wrote down their ideas, although their ideas were still close to ethnophilosophy and the last group refers to critical and classical philosophers in our time, who philosophize through the window of African thoughts. Joseph Omoregbe also partitioned what he described as 'philosophy in Africa' into three phases; the Ancient in which he made references to St. Augustine and Origen, Medieval era which he described as verbal and traditional thoughts around metaphysics, cosmology, ethics and so on. The third is what he describes as Contemporary African philosophy in the philosophies of people like Kwame Nkumah, Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Kwasi Wiredu, Nnamdi Azikwe and Obafemi Awolowo. As such, the philosopher under review falls into Omoregbe's Contemporary phase of philosophers. Most people associate anything that has to do with African philosophy into three, although from different dimensions.

Referring to his first category of folk worldview, Wiredu believes allusion is more strictly African traditional philosophy. He expresses some reservations over seeing African world-view as one and the same thing with African philosophy, but still maintained critical traditional thoughts as philosophical. According to him, every society has a pre-scientific era, even though most Western anthropologists lack basic idea of their pre-scientific era. He therefore cautions against a misinterpretation of a people's philosophy based on the ignorance of those who try to interpret it in the light of their limited knowledge.

### **The Reality of Tradic -Cultural Factors in Philosophy**

Every philosophical postulation is a product of someone's mind, who is a person. "...the person is an individual substance of a rational nature." (Mondin 1991, p. 247). Since the mind is the seat of rationality, one can therefore say that the mind constitutes the basic ontological reality of the person. A person is therefore more of his mental content. While acknowledging the high place of nature in the constitution of a human person by making references to classical philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Plotinus et cetera and the place of the will and freedom as found in the philosophical postulations of Modern philosophers such as Nietzsche, Hegel, Sartre, Heidegger and so on, Mondin developed a concept that we must "... consider man as neither a natural being nor a simply historical being, but rather a cultural being." (1991, p. 147). By this, Mondin means that the somatic and biological dimension of the human person comes from nature through their parents but that 'a great part of that which we possess and do, already from when we were one-year-olds, is not the fruit of nature, but rather of culture.' (1991, p. 147). Oxford Dictionary defines culture as "... the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society" (Oxford, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> July 2021). This definition already points to the fact that the way a people think, speak, behave, eat, act and so on, is part of their culture. Thus, "culture beyond being an essential property of man, is also a factor which distinguishes the various social groups, clarifying and specifying them." (Mondin

1991, p. 149). The differences of significance found in the behaviour and social life of a people is therefore attributable to their culture.

Every philosopher is a product of a culture and his ideas, perceptions, method of associations, behaviours, food, dressing, et cetera are drawn from his culture. Since thoughts are products of culture, the philosophy which emanates from these thoughts are also products of their culture. But Wiredu also cautions against what he described as the three complains which can afflict a society, which are anachronism, authoritarianism and supernaturalism. The problem of unacceptance of some people's speculations could build on these complains. Whereas some societies are judged, whether correctly or not as anachronistic, some are judged to be supernatural and bringing about authoritarian imposition of foreign ways of doing things. While stating that Western societies have passed through the stage where the explanations of phenomena relied on the agency of spirits, he criticized the lack of interest in cross-cultural comparisons of modes of thought (Wiredu 1980, p. 39). Congruent upon lack of commitment in understanding the African traditional system and the reality of rational speculations in Africa, "... many Westerners have gone about with an exaggerated notion of the differences in nature between Africans and the people of the West". (Wiredu 1980, p. 39). Consequently, self-images of Africans themselves deteriorate, partly through the influence of Western anthropology and partly through insufficient critical reflection on the contemporary African situations.

### **Rational Knowledge as a Universal Reality**

The power of ratiocination is endemic in every human person. It is found in all parts of the world, irrespective of the culture, colour, creed, et cetera. As such, the impression that rational capacity is limited to some people based on their colours or place of origin is not correct. Chimamanda Adichie while making reference to John Locke says;

Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Locke, who sailed to West Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses," he writes, "they are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts." (2009, p. 6).

John Locke as reported by Chimamanda perceives Africans as good as lower animals, incapable of thinking. You see why many parts of the world doubt that Africans are actually normal human beings capable of rationalization and fully human with the power of reason. For this reason, Wiredu addresses the issue of rationality as universal. According to him, "it should be noted, conversely, that the principle of rational evidence is not entirely absent from the thinking of the traditional African." (1980, p. 42). No people can survive as human beings for long without the use of reason. Nobody can do anything that needs rationality without having rational ability or capacity. Wiredu, therefore, affirms that "the truth, then, is that rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West nor is superstition peculiarly of the African" (1980, pp. 42 – 43). This means that there is both rationality and superstition in any part of the world. Nevertheless, it is a fact that Africa lags behind the West in the cultivation of rational inquiry. The slow pace of African developments both in modernization and education are clear pieces of evidence.

### **African Philosophy as both Pre-Scientific and Modern**

Africa has a history and just like any other part of the world, the history of Africa has both pre-scientific and modern eras. Wiredu accepts the existence of both eras as he states that "...by traditional thought here we mean pre-scientific thought of the type that tends to construct explanations of natural phenomena in terms of the activities of gods and spirits." (1980, p. 39). Whereas the traditional thought is pre-scientific thought, the modern way of thinking, he described as scientific. At some point, Wiredu seems to accept even the pre-scientific thoughts which builds on fables, poems, proverbs, adages, et cetera as philosophical but still believes the modern thinkers can critically interpret these pre-scientific thoughts. For him, "in fact, many traditional African institutions and cultural practices ... are based on superstition." (Wiredu 1980, p. 41). By superstition, Wiredu means "... a rationally unsupported belief in entities of any sort." (1980, p. 41). For this reason, he believes that folk stories can be accepted as philosophical. Folk thought can be comprehensive and interesting on its own account, but its non-discursiveness remains a drawback.

On the other hand, Wiredu asserts that the present-day African philosophers have been trained in the Western tradition, in the continental or Anglo-American style, depending on their colonial history – their thinking, therefore, is unlikely to hold many peculiarly African novelties for anyone knowledgeable in Western philosophy. For this reason, African militants and Afro-American brothers are often disappointed with the sort of philosophy syllabus that is taught at a typical modern Department of Philosophy in Africa. Wiredu holds that,

They find such a department mainly immersed in the study of logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy, etc, as these have been developed in the West, and they question why Africans should be so engrossed in the philosophy of their erstwhile colonial oppressors. (1980, p. 48).

Wiredu, therefore, believes that because of the prevailing circumstance, an African philosopher is coerced to conduct his philosophical inquiries in relation to the philosophical writings of other people. He must of necessity study the written philosophies of other cultures, because it would be extremely injudicious for him to try to philosophize in self-imposed isolation from all modern currents of thought. In the ideal, he must acquit himself with philosophy from other parts of the world, compare, contrast, critically assess them and make use of whatever value he may find in them. In this way, it is hoped that a tradition of philosophy as a discursive discipline would eventually still come to be established in Africa which future Africans and others too can utilize. For him, "The African philosopher cannot, of course, take the sort of cultural pride in the philosophical achievements of Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Marx or Frege, which the Western student of philosophy may permit himself." (1980, p. 49). Indeed, an African needs a certain level-headedness to deal with some of these thinkers. Some of them such as John Locke earlier cited, David Hume and Karl Marx, displayed some level of disrespect for the black man, so whatever prejudice the African philosopher may develop for these thinkers must rest mostly on considerations of the truth of their philosophical thought.

### **Critical Evaluation**

Kwasi Wiredu ventured into an area many people do not have the courage to dare. He highlighted the poverty of reference materials in African philosophy and stated the most ideal way a researcher in African philosophy can philosophize at the moment. He reminded Africans of the lowly placed position they occupy in the evaluation of the Western philosophers we take pride to acquaint our minds with, and encourages Africans to develop African philosophy, even from folk thoughts. Wiredu also cautioned against hasty comparisons between African and Western philosophies and stated that there are no comparisons between the two, as both have different foundational structures. We must therefore be proud to identify with such great scholar who happens to be one of the first persons to dare a dreaded area of study, which up till date, has suffered scanty reference.

Notwithstanding, Wiredu's reflections on "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought" has its own flaws. In his work on "A Review of Kwasi Wiredu's 'How not to Compare Africa Thought with Western Thought'", G.O. Ozumba did a critique of this work, even though we differ in some of his opinions. A critique of this work ranges from content and style of writing to the aim of the work. First of all, "Wiredu is seen using traditional philosophy, traditional thought, folk thought and African philosophy interchangeably and this is not very clarifying". (Ozumba 2009, P.511). African tradition thought may not necessarily mean African traditional philosophy. Traditional thought may or may not qualify as philosophy. For traditional philosophy to merit the tag 'philosophy' it has to qualify as philosophy. But we must agree with Wiredu that there is wisdom in African folk thoughts and subjecting such thoughts to critical review could give, a complete critical thinking that could qualify to be termed 'philosophy'. The truth is that any topic subjected to critical lens can qualify to be philosophy. Therefore, it is more of the approach used and not just the content that a work could qualify to be philosophy.

Another criticism for Wiredu is his position that "every traditional philosophy is essentially pre-scientific and that every people have its own traditional philosophy, a stock of originally unwritten proverbs, maxims, usages, et cetera, passed on through successive generations. It is very true that every people have their traditional thought and that their traditional thought forms the foundation of their philosophy, but it may not be true that these people consider their thoughts as philosophical. Wiredu's conflict here emerges from the combined way he raised this concept of 'thought' and 'philosophy'. Most documented philosophies know exactly when a critical approach was introduced into the traditional views of the people and people's traditional thought may not necessarily mean their traditional philosophy.

On the style of Wiredu, we must acknowledge the fact that he showcased good knowledge of the issue that appertain to traditional thought especially the Ghanaian traditional thought. But what baffles or should baffle a meticulous reader will be the undecipherability of any systematic pattern of writing. As a philosopher of indisputable repute, one expects to see Wiredu stating in no uncertain terms how he is to progress, and the methodology that he is using. But this is lacking and a lot of repeated points almost made the work clumsy. A philosophical work is hardly complete or successful if it lacks

systematicity. The style of Wiredu's work, to the extent, that it lacks the philosophical ingredient of systematicity and stated methodology can be seen to have partly failed.

Finally, on the aim of Wiredu's work, one may ask: what are the objectives of Wiredu's work? Unfortunately, he did not state it and we can only work with perceived objectives which we cannot claim with absolute certainty fit into Wiredu's objectives. From the title "How not to compare African thought with Western thought", one with some immediate insight, perceives what the aim should be. The aim here is firstly to carry out a comparative analysis of African thought and Western thought. Secondly, to find out whether there are bases for comparison. Thirdly, if there are bases for comparison, to delineate the similarities and differences. Fourthly, if there are no basis for comparison, to state this in bold print. The fifth would be to forewarn people who carry out comparative analysis of that nature to be on their guard when doing anything that concerns African thought. Although, some philosophers completely deny the realization of the aim of Wiredu's speculation on this topic, we would accept that he accomplished some of them as some may not holistically be accomplished. The work under review at least draws the attention of researchers to be careful in comparing African philosophy and Western philosophy. The reality of the success of this is undeniable. We would rather criticize his total denial of places of comparison between African and Western thought because some topics in philosophical discussion in the West fit into philosophical discussion in Africa. For instance, topics such as freedom, death, after death, change, et cetera. Heraclitus says, you cannot step into a flowing water twice and that is true also in Africa. Human beings are free but not absolutely is true both in the West and in Africa. Besides, it is the critical approach of studying that makes a topic philosophical and that is obtainable both in the West and in Africa. It will therefore be presumptuous to say that there is no point of agreement or comparison between different Area Philosophies.

## **Conclusion**

Kwasi Wiredu is one of the earliest African philosophers who helped in establishing the reality of African philosophy as a philosophical speculation through the window of African worldview. He is famous for two articles: "How not to compare African thought with Western thought" and his "Conceptual decolonization in African Philosophy." A close look at these two works show Wiredu's interest to establish a philosophy that would be truly and authentically African. We must acknowledge his effort to venture into an area that was dreaded so much in his time. Writing from a Ghanaian perspective, his work does not cover the spectrum of the entire African Philosophy, but it covers a large portion of it. Hence, it is natural to see his readers hold divergent views. Even the view of this research is open to criticism. In fact, that is the bedrock of philosophical reflection. If African philosophy must navigate the waters of existence, it must embrace views and counter views. That is what philosophy entails. Therefore, all we have done in this work is natural to philosophy.

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