

The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy

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In June 1980 at the UNESCO conference on "Teaching and Research in Philosophy in Africa" I advocated a program of conceptual decolonization in African philosophy.[1] In the present discussion I wish to pursue this idea further. I write now with an even greater sense of urgency, seeing that the intervening decade does not seem to have brought any indications of a widespread realization of the need for conceptual decolonization in African philosophy.

By conceptual decolonization I mean two complementary things. On the negative side, I mean avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation in our thought (that is, in the thought of contemporary African philosophers) of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought. And, on the positive side, I mean exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy. The negative is, of course, only the reverse side of the positive. But I cite it first because the necessity for decolonization was brought upon us in the first place by the historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems through colonialism.

This superimposition has come through three principal avenues. The first is the avenue of language. It is encountered in the fact that our philosophical education has generally been in the medium of foreign languages, usually of our erstwhile colonizers. This is the most fundamental, subtle, pervasive and intractable circumstance of mental colonization. But the two other avenues, though grosser by comparison, have been insidious enough. I refer here to the avenues of religion and politics. Through these have been passed to us legacies of long-standing religious evangelization, in the one case, and political tutelage, in the other. I can only touch the tips of these three tremendous historical icebergs in one discussion.

Take first, then, the linguistic situation. By definition, the fundamental concepts of philosophy are the most fundamental categories of human thought. But the particular modes of thought that yield these concepts may reflect the specifics of the culture, environment and

even the accidental idiosyncracies of the people concerned. Conceptual idiosyncrasy, although an imponderable complication in human affairs, probably accounts for a vast proportion of the conceptual disparities among different philosophical traditions, especially the ones in which individual technical philosophers are deeply implicated. Think, then, of the possible enormity of the avoidable philosophical deadwood we might be carrying through our historically enforced acquisition of philosophical training in the medium of foreign languages. Of course, a similar pessimistic soul-searching is altogether in place even among the natives of any given philosophical tradition vis-a-vis their historical inheritance. This is, in fact, much in evidence in contemporary Western philosophy, for example. But the position is graver in our situation of cultural otherness, for even ordinary common sense would deprecate needlessly carrying other peoples garbage.

What exactly are the concepts am I thinking of here? There is a large bunch of them, but let me mention only the following: Reality, Being, Existence, Thing, Object, Entity, Substance, Property, Quality, Truth, Fact, Opinion, Belief, Knowledge, Faith, Doubt, Certainty, Statement, Proposition, Sentence, Idea, Mind, Soul, Spirit, Thought, Sensation, Matter, Ego, Self, Person, Individuality, Community, Subjectivity, Objectivity, Cause, Chance, Reason, Explanation, Meaning, Freedom, Responsibility, Punishment, Democracy, Justice, God, World, Universe, Nature, Supernature, Space, Time, Nothingness, Creation, Life, Death, Afterlife, Morality, Religion.

In regard to all these concepts the simple recipe for decolonization for the African is: Try to think them through in your own African language and, on the basis of the results, review the intelligibility of the associated problems or the plausibility of the apparent solutions that have tempted you when you have pondered them in some metropolitan language. The propositions in question may be about topics that have no special involvement with Africa, but they may well be about the internalities of an African thought system.

By the sheer fact of our institutional education, we are likely to have thought about some at least of these concepts and problems framed in terms of them using English or French or some such language. The problem is that thinking about them in English almost inevitably becomes thinking in English about them. It is just an obvious fact, in Philosophy at least, that one thinks most naturally in the language of one's education and occupation. But in our case this means thinking along the lines of conceptual frameworks which may be significantly different from those embedded in our indigenous languages. In virtue of this phenomenon, we constantly stand the danger of involuntary mental de-Africanization unless we consciously and deliberately

resort to our own languages (and culture). It turns out that this form of self-knowledge is not easy to attain, and it is not uncommon to find highly educated Africans proudly holding forth on, for instance, the glories of African traditional religion in an internalized conceptual idiom of a metropolitan origin which distorts indigenous thought structures out of all recognition.

There is no pretence, of course, that recourse to the African vernacular must result in instantaneous philosophic revelation. The chances, on the contrary, are that philosophical errors are evenly distributed among the heterogeneous races of humankind. Suppose, for example, that a concept, much employed in, say, English philosophical discourse seems to lose all meaning when processed in a given African language. This consequence may conceivably be due to an insufficiency in the African language rather than to an intrinsic defect in the mode of conceptualization of the foreign language or culture concerned. How does one determine whether this is so or not? The only way, I suggest, is to try to reason out the matter on independent grounds. By this I mean that one should argue in a manner fathomable in both the African and the foreign language concerned. With that accomplished, it would be clear that the considerations adduced are not dependent on the peculiarities of the African language in question. In general, failure to heed this requirement is one of the root causes of the kinds of conceptual idiosyncracies that, in part, differentiate cultural traditions of thought.

Notice that if such independent grounds can be adduced, relativism is false. In many of the things I have written elsewhere, I have argued against relativism.^[2] Here I will take it for granted that the theory is false and proceed to give some illustrations of the procedure of conceptual decolonization that I have been talking about, so far, in a rather general way. Let us attend, to start with, to the cluster of epistemological concepts in the list of basic concepts given above. We mentioned Truth, Fact, Certainty, Doubt, Knowledge, Belief, Opinion and some more. Now, one very powerful motive for the persistent wrestling with these concepts in Western epistemology has been the desire to overcome skepticism, and one very influential form of skepticism has been the clear and simple form of it encountered in Descartes' methodological skepticism. Interestingly, classical Greek skepticism was more complex in its argumentation than the Cartesian version. But, possibly, partly because of its devastating simplicity and lucidity, it is the latter that has become the driving force of epistemological inquiry. At peak, the skeptical problem à la Descartes is simply that so long as my cognition is subject to the possibility of error, it is uncertain; and so long as it is uncertain, it falls short of knowledge. In the *Meditations*

the program of doubt starts with the observation that the senses have proved deceptive in the past and consequently cannot be trusted to give us knowledge. This consideration is reinforced with the reflection that, in any case, all our perceptual beliefs might very well be dream illusions. These two degrees of doubt still leave simple a priori propositions, such as those of elementary school arithmetic, unscathed. But not for long, for soon Descartes invokes the hypothesis of an all powerful God, or for fear of the impiety of the idea, 'some malicious demon of the utmost power' who might make me 'go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square'.^[3] Aside from the dramatic imagery of the hypothesis, what it means is simply that none of our cognitions or at least none of those considered up to that point are exempt from the possibility of error. And this is the sole reason why all claims to certainty must be suspended. As is well known, the only thing that proves capable of breaking the suspension is the Cogito, the contention that 'I think therefore I am', which, in the eyes of Descartes, is guaranteed against, not just error, but indeed the very possibility of it. From all which it is apparent that for Descartes certainty means the impossibility of error.

It is important to note that this conception of certainty is not peculiar to Descartes in Western philosophy. It has held sway in that tradition, before and since Descartes, over the minds of innumerable philosophers of differing persuasions. For example, the logical positivist position that empirical knowledge is incapable of certainty was predicated upon the single consideration that such cognitions are perpetually open to the possibility of error. This notion was also entertained (very notably) by C. I. Lewis, the 'conceptual pragmatist' and other non-positivists in contemporary philosophy.^[4] Yet, on a little reflection, this understanding of certainty is, or should be, seen to be rather surprising, for exemption from the possibility of error is nothing short of infallibility. Accordingly, the quest for certainty^[5] becomes the quest for infallibility -- as chimerical a quest as ever there was. Certainly, neither Descartes nor the logical positivists and others are known to have laid explicit claims to infallibility in any part of their knowledge. How, then, has this quest for infallibility gone on in actual practice for so long and exercised so controlling a force in Western epistemology? The answer is that this is probably due to the fact that it has almost always - not quite always, because it is explicit in Plato^[6] - gone on concealed under the designation of certainty.^[7]

But, now, that concealment seems to be at all possible only in a language like English. I find it hard to think that anyone could so much as make a beginning of such concealment in my own

language, namely, Akan. In this language to say 'I am certain' I should have to say something which would translate back into English in some such wise as 'I know very clearly' (Minim pefee or Minim koronyee) or 'I very much know' (Minim papaapa). For the more impersonal locution 'It is certain' we would say something like 'It is indeed so' (Ampa) or 'It is true' (Eye nokware) or 'It is rightly or very much so' (Ete saa potee)[8] or 'It is something lying out there' (Eye ade a eda ho). None of these turns of phrase has the slightest tendency to invoke any intimations of infallibility. To suggest that in order to say of something that ete saa potee I must claim exemption from the possibility of error would strike any average or above average Akan as, to say the least, odd in the extreme. (The Akans are given to methodological understatement.) Any Akan will tell you, even at a pre-analytical level of discourse, that just because it is possible for me to go wrong, it does not follow that I can never go right. A popular adage says 'If you look carefully, you find out' (Wo hwehwe asem mu a wuhu mu.)

This is not, by any means, to imply that skepticism is unknown in Akan society. But in that environment a skeptic is not one who is moved to doubt the possibility of knowledge through viewing certainty under the pretensions of infallibility. S/he is simply an akyinyegyefo, literally, one who debates, in other words, one who is apt to question or challenge received beliefs. And the challenges are ones that are inspired by more stringent criteria of justification (whether in perceptual or conceptual discourse) than is customary. This form of skepticism is akin to the variety which is manifested in the disputing of, say, the belief in God on the grounds that good reasons are lacking. That is a well established usage of the concept of skepticism in English discourse. In comparison with it, the skepticism of Descartes, even as a methodological foil, seems highly misconceived. And the essential reason is not because it is not supportable by Akan linguistic categories or epistemologic intuitions, but rather that it involves a fallacy, namely, that of confusing certainty with infallibility of which all judicious thinking should steer clear, whether in the medium of Akan, English or Eskimo. The relevance of Akan language here is only this: that (in my opinion) any Akan who reflects on the matter from the standpoint of his or her own language is very unlikely to be drawn into that fallacy.

I will illustrate this relevance further by means of another example still involving Descartes. His Cogito has already acquired quite a place in African philosophy, dialectically speaking. Mbiti has commented, by implication, that 'I think therefore I am' betrays an individualist outlook, to which he has counterposed what he takes to be the African communalist axiom: 'I am because we are, and since

we are, therefore I am'.^[9] Before Mbiti, Senghor had expressed a characteristic 'participatory' reaction to the Cogito on behalf of the African: Spurning "the logician's conjunction 'therefore'" as unnecessary, "the Negro African", according to Senghor, "could say, 'I feel, I dance the Other; I am'".^[10] But, by far the most conceptually interesting African comment on Descartes' claim was that by Alexis Kagame who pointed out that throughout the Bantu zone a remark like 'I think, therefore I am' would be unintelligible for "the verb 'to be' is always followed by an attribute or an adjunct of place: I am good, big etc., I am in such and such a place, etc. Thus the utterance '.. therefore, I am' would prompt the question 'You are ... what ... where?'"^[11] Kagame's point holds very exactly in the Akan language also, and I would like to amplify it a little and explore some of its consequences for the Cogito and other philosophical suppositions.

For our present purposes the most relevant fact regarding the concept of existence in Akan is that it is intrinsically spatial, in fact, locative; to exist is to be there, at some place.^[12] 'Wo ho' is the Akan rendition of 'exist'. Without the 'ho', which means 'there', in other words, 'some place', all meaning is lost. 'Wo', standing alone, does not in any way correspond to the existential sense of the verb 'to be', which has no place in Akan syntax or semantics. Recur now to 'I think, therefore I am', and consider the existential component of that attempted message as it comes across in Akan. In that medium the information communicated can only be that I am there, at some place; which means that spatial location is essential to the idea of my existence. It is scarcely necessary to point out that this is diametrically opposed to Descartes' construal of the particular cogitation under scrutiny. As far as he is concerned, the alleged fact that one can doubt all spatial existences and yet at the same time be absolutely certain of one's existence under the dispensation of the Cogito implied that the 'I', the ego, exists as a spiritual, non-spatial, immaterial entity. The incongruity of this sequence of thought, quite apart from any non sequiturs, must leap to the Akan eye. There is, of course, nothing sacrosanct about the linguistic categories of Akan thought. But, given the prima facie incoherence of the Cartesian suggestion within the Akan conceptual framework, an Akan thinker who scrutinizes the matter in his or her own language must feel the need for infinitely more proof of intelligibility than if s/he contemplated it in English or some cognate language. On the other hand, if on due reflection, the Akan thinker becomes persuaded of the soundness of Descartes' argumentation, that would not necessarily be a loss to conceptual decolonization, for that program does not envisage the automatic refusal of all foreign food for thought. I might mention, though, for what it is worth, that in my own case the exercise proves severely negative.

Negative or not, the implications of the Akan conception of existence for many notable doctrines of Western metaphysics and theology require the most rigorous examination. It is well known that inquiries into the explanation of the existence of the universe enjoy a high regard among many Western metaphysicians and is one of the favorite pursuits of philosophical theology. However, a simple argument, inspired by the locative conception of existence embedded in the Akan language, would seem, quite radically, to subvert any such project: To have a location is to be in the universe. Therefore, if to exist means to be at some location, then to think of the existence of the universe is to dabble in sheer babble. This reasoning does not, by the way, mean that it is so much as false to say that the universe exists. More drastically, it means that it does not make sense to say of the universe either that it exists or that it does not exist. But this same impropriety must obviously afflict any idea of a being who supposedly brought the universe into existence. If one cannot speak of the universe either as existing or not existing then neither can one speak of its having been brought into existence. Since the Akans, in fact, generally believe in a supreme being, it must occur to the student of Akan thought that the Akan conception of that being cannot be of a type with, say, the ex-nihilo creator of Christianity but rather must be of the character of a quasi demiurgic cosmic architect.[13]

Here now comes the challenge of conceptual decolonization. Have Akan Christians, of whom there are many, confronted the conceptual disparity thus revealed and opted for the Christian notion in consequence of critical reflection or have they perhaps unconsciously glossed over them or, worse still, assimilated the Akan conceptions to those of Christianity or vice versa? One answer that any of them would be exceedingly ill-advised to attempt would be to say that religious matters are not a subject of argument or analysis but, instead, of faith. For where two incompatible faiths are available through indigenous culture and foreign efforts of proselytism, to go along with the latter for no conscious reason would be the quintessence of supine irrationality. It would, besides, betray a colonized mentality. Again, the suggestion is not that profession of the Christian persuasion on the part of an African is automatically a mark of the colonial mentality. In general, only the unreasoning profession of a religion with an association with colonialism merits that description.

Actually, if it comes to that, the unreasoning profession of any religion, indigenous or foreign, is not a model of intellectual virtue. The Akans believe traditionally that the existence of the supreme being, as conceived by them, is so obvious that no one need teach it

to a child. (Hardly any Akan adult brought up in Akanland can be ignorant of the Akan saying *Obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame*, which means 'No one teaches the child the supreme being'.) The implication is not that no reflection goes into the acquisition of the belief, but rather that it takes only a little of it. If so, the least an Akan thinker who embraces a foreign conception of the Supreme being can do, if s/he is mindful of the Akan tradition, is to make sure that there are good reasons for that metaphysical belief mutation. Otherwise s/he cannot escape attributions of the colonial mentality. I myself do not believe either in the Akan or the Christian or any kind of supreme being, though (a) I find the Akan concept more intelligible than the Christian one (which, in truth, I find of zero intelligibility) and (b) I am of the opinion that the locative concept of existence found in the Akan language is more conducive to sound metaphysics than its rivals.[14] Although, my convictions in these matters are quite stout, I enjoy no sense of infallibility, and I do not rule out the possibility of being argued out of them in one direction or another. I might stress in the present connection, though, that on any appropriate occasion I would be prepared to try quite industriously to offer rational justifications for these intellectual commitments or avoidances. Hopefully, I might thereby be able to make some little progress towards freeing my own mind of any vestiges of the colonial mentality. It is, at all events, impossible to overemphasize the necessity for the rational evaluation of religious belief in contemporary African philosophy, for the unexamined espousal of foreign religions, often in unleavened admixture with indigenous ones, is the cause of some of the severest distortions of the African consciousness.

It is equally obvious that Africa has suffered unspeakably from the political legacies of colonialism. Unhappily she continues in this sphere to suffer, directly or indirectly, from the political tutelage of the West. This is due to a variety of causes, frequently not of Africa's own making. But it is impossible not to include in the inventory of causes the apparently willing suspension of belief in African political traditions on the part of many contemporary African leaders of opinion. After years of subjection to the untold severities of one-party dictatorships in Africa, there is now visible enthusiasm among many African intellectuals and politicians for multi-party democracy. Indeed, to many, democracy seems to be synonymous with the multi-party system. This enthusiasm is plainly not unconnected with foreign pressures; but there is little indication, in African intellectual circles, of a critical evaluation of the particular doctrine of democracy involved in the multi-party approach to government. Yet that political doctrine seems clearly antithetical to the philosophy of government underlying traditional statecraft. The advocates of the one-party

system at least made an effort to link that system with African traditional forms of government. That linkage was uniformly spurious, and in some cases, perhaps disingenuous.[15] But there was at least an intent to harmonize the contemporary practice of politics in Africa with what was considered viable in the traditional counterpart. The lack of evidence of any such intent in more recent times must raise legitimate fears of a new lease of life for the colonial mentality in contemporary African political thought.

What, then can we learn from the traditional philosophy of government that might be of relevance to the contemporary quest for democracy? Traditional African governments displayed an interesting variety of forms. But amidst that variety, if the anthropological evidence is anything to go by, there was a certain unity of approach, at any rate among a large number of them.[16] And that unity consisted in the insistence on consensus as the basis of political decision-making. Now, this conception of decision-making is very distinct from that which makes the will of the majority, by and large, decisive. 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. And the most fundamental principle here is not far to seek. It may be stated as follows: In any council of representatives -- traditional councils usually consisted of representatives elected by kinship units -- the representative status of a member is rendered vacuous in any decision in which s/he does not have an impact or an involvement. And any such voiding of the will constitutes a deprivation of the right of the representative, and through him, of his constituency to be represented in the making of a decision that affects their interests (broadly construed). By any reckoning, that should be considered a violation of a human right.

It is or should be well-known that majoritarian democracy, that is, the form of democracy involving more than a single party in which, in principle, the party that wins the most parliamentary seats forms the government, is apt to render the will of a substantial minority of no effect, or almost of no effect, in the making of many important decisions affecting their interests. It is, then, from a consensus-oriented standpoint, a system that is frequently deleterious of genuine representation, that is, representation beyond parliamentary window-dressing. It is obvious, by the same token, that a democracy based on consensus must of necessity be of a non-party character, not in the sense that political associations must be proscribed, which, of course would be authoritarian, but simply in the sense that

majority at the polls need not be an exclusive basis of government formation. Perhaps, some proponents and practitioners of the one-party system confused the one-party with the non-party concept. May the former never return to Africa!

The detailed and systematic working out of a system of the sort barely hinted at above in the contemporary world, as distinct from the comparatively simpler circumstances of traditional times, must encounter many difficulties. But its serious exploration would at least show some sensitivity to the need for intellectual decolonization in African political life. Besides it might conceivably lead to a system that might bring peace and the possibility of prosperity.

Most of the considerations relating to the need for decolonization urged in this discussion were derived from facts about language. I was, accordingly, constrained to focus on the only African language about which I am somewhat confident. Africans from other linguistic areas are invited to compare and, if appropriate, contrast, using their own languages. The principle of decolonization will, however, remain the same. My own hope is that if this program is well enough and soon enough implemented, it will no longer be necessary to talk of the Akan or Yoruba or Luo concept of this or that, but simply of the concept of whatever is in question with a view to advancing philosophical suggestions that can be immediately evaluated on independent grounds.

Nor, is the process of decolonization without interest to non-African thinkers, for any enlargement of conceptual options is an instrumentality for the enlargement of the human mind everywhere.

Notes

[1] K. Wiredu: Philosophical Research and Teaching in Africa: Some Suggestions [Toward Conceptual Decolonization]. In: Teaching and Research in Philosophy: Africa. Paris 1984.

[2] See, for example, (a) Philosophy and an African Culture. London 1980, p. 216-232, (b) Are there Cultural Universals? In: Quest. Philosophical Discussions 4, No. 2 (1990).

[3] The Philosophical Writings of Descartes. Vol. II. Transl. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. New York 1984, p. 14.

[4] See Norman Malcolm's critique of Lewis and others on this issue in his The Verification Argument. In: M. Black (ed), Philosophical Analysis (1950).

[5] Of the great Western philosophers none, perhaps, was more scathing of this quest for certainty than John Dewey, witness his *The Quest for Certainty*. New York 1930 (1960). Yet, in the apparent resurgence of pragmatism in recent times it is not clear how well and truly the allurements of that ideal have been resisted, all the fulminations against 'foundationalism' notwithstanding.

[6] See Plato: *The Republic*, for example V, 478. In the translation by F. MacDonald Cornford. New York 1945, p. 185.

[7] Infallibility has marched on with other disguises too, such as Indubitability, Incorrigibility, Absolute validity, etc. For example, some of the logical positivists, such as Schlick (but unlike Neurath) insisted that an 'observation sentence' (as also an analytic one) is indubitable or absolutely certain in the sense that it makes 'little sense to ask whether I might be deceived in regard to its truth'. See M. Schlick: *The Foundation of Knowledge*. In: A.J. Ayer (ed), *Logical Positivism*. Glencoe 1959, p. 225. Compare O. Neurath: *Protocol Sentences* in the same volume.

[8] An entry in a dictionary written long ago by German scholars is quite useful: (a) J. G. Christaller, C. W. Locher and J. Zimmermann: *A Dictionary, English-Tshi (Asanti)*. Basel 1874, p. 46: Certain, it is -- , ewom ampa; Certainly, adv. ampa, nokware, potee.

[9] J.S. Mbiti: *African Religions and Philosophy*. London 1991, p. 108.

[10] L.S. Senghor: *The African Road to Socialism* (1960). In: *On African Socialism*. Transl. M. Cook. New York 1964.

[11] A. Kagame: *Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Bantu Thought*. In: P. Ricoeur (ed), *Cultures and Time*. Paris 1976, p. 95.

[12] In his *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* Kwame Gyekye very correctly insists on the locative character of the Akan concept of existence. (See Cambridge 1987, p.179 and 181).

[13] See further, K. Wiredu: (a) *Universalism and Particularism in Religion from an African Perspective*. In: *Journal of Humanism and Ethical Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1990. Reprinted in D. Kolak and R. Martin (eds), *Self, Cosmos, God*. New York 1992 under the title *Religion from an African Point of View* and (b) *African Philosophical Tradition: A Case Study of the Akan*. In: *The Philosophical Forum* XXIV, No. 1-3, (1992-93), p. 41 ff.

[14] I am aware of the objection that a locative conception of existence will have to be dumb in respect of the existence of abstract objects, like, say, numbers. My reply is that abstract objects are objects only in a figurative sense, and figurative locations are not hard to come by.

[15] The extremely useful anthology of Readings in African Political Thought. London 1975, that was edited by G.-C.M. Mutiso and S.W. Rohio included in its VIIth part some of the best arguments for and against the one-party system.

[16] See, for example, M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds): African Political Systems. Oxford 1940.