

African Systems of Thought

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**AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY
AS CULTURAL INQUIRY**

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Introduction to Part 3

African Discourses on Development

“Development,” in all its many senses and with its complex associations with ideas about progress, modernity, and rationality, is an underlying theme of virtually all of the literature on African philosophy. The question of African development and of the political, social, and cultural forms that it should take is often the subject matter of critical discourse in and about Africa. The essays in this section examine the meaning and impact of the global economic order as they relate to the evolution of African nations and their civil societies as well as the values associated with them, as the global order attempts to impose its ideology and order on the ways in which historical transformations are defined and managed.

In this order of things, Africans have been ambivalently drawn to both sides of the dominant and competing developmental ideologies and strategies. They have also tried to articulate an autonomy that is commensurate with ideas of nationalist freedom and perceptions of agency at the state level. This has all along been a subtext of African philosophy. The debates between collective and individual reason or between reason and culture produce antagonistic categories and ambivalences similar to those found in the Enlightenment period from which capitalist ideology derives its terms. The essays contained in this section of the volume critically address different facets of this ambivalence toward development and modernity as manifested in African discourses on development.

Wiredu's essay raises important questions about the idea of “development” from the perspective of analytical philosophy (and also within the limits of this philosophy). It critiques classical modernization theory by objecting to its polarizing and individualizing effects on society. To paraphrase Apter (1987: 15), the “analysis” of development remains crucial. Still, it is only one among several possible “languages,” each of which is a mode of signifying and establishing meaning. No single language is powerful enough to monopolize so complex a subject. Thus, according to Wiredu's analytic view, modernization is not bad in and of itself, but ill-conceived programs of implementing modernization have been harmful to African societies. For Wiredu, the role of philosophers must complement that of sages—philosophical or otherwise—in articulating the nature, value, and direction of social needs and changes. Systematic thinking about the nature of African society must embrace idioms

of Africans' senses of themselves, as expressed in the words of the sages as well as in the ethic of everyday life.

Bogumil Jewsiewicki's essay on the Congolese artist Chéri Samba examines how these very issues, as well as the themes developed in Part 2, play out in a visual medium whose products circulate not only at the national site of production but also internationally and for a rather different audience, one which does not fully share the same cultural and performative assumptions with the producers of the cultural object.

Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga's essay is a philosopher's account of the harmful consequences that Wiredu refers to in his chapter. He argues that the human flourishing or the development of the humane society, the *mos maiorum* in the ancient Greek civic republic, takes place within, and is at the same time a product of, the political good; it is simultaneously part of and produced by the civil society (*civilization*) as a social-political condition and space for action. Eboussi-Boulaga's essay is, in a very general sense, part of a recent and powerful genre of scholarship issuing from Cameroon (see, for example, Bayart 1979, 1981, 1986; Rowlands and Warner 1988; Mbembe 1989, 1992; Eboussi-Boulaga 1993; Bidima 1994; and Geschiere and Fisiy 1994), the main focus of which is the critical analysis and examination of the conditions required for the legitimacy of state and, specifically, the conditions under which the state in Cameroon (like patrimonial states throughout the continent) delegitimizes itself through practices (such as corruption, encouraging civil strife, and apathy to dehumanizing social conditions) which undermine social order. In the end, these states also undermine their own legitimacy, especially when the collapse of the Cold War deprived their regimes of international patrons who desired to use them to pursue geopolitical goals (Richards 1996).

For Eboussi-Boulaga, current transformations in Africa reveal a state of affairs that could hardly be described as symbolic of what Wiredu has called "human flourishing." Rather, these transformations reveal a disruptive change, a crisis in social order: economic crisis; state bankruptcy; human catastrophes resulting from wars, famines, and coercive, violent, and murderous regimes; extortions; and disregard for the law.

The collapse of the state in Africa, Eboussi-Boulaga argues, is due partly to the tendency to consider the state and its constituents, ethnic groups, in the context of a thesis-antithesis relationship. The obsessive focus on ethnicity in Africa and in accounts of African nations that are both in favor of its promotion or for its suppression—both dimensions of tribalism—undermines the legitimacy and authority of the state and places this legitimacy and authority in the fragmentary ethnic components of society. This focus creates the kind of state-society tensions—in the form of tribalism and corruption—which po-

litical writings have identified as characteristic of the crisis of the contemporary African state (Shafer 1955; Kohn 1967; Callaghy 1984; Young and Turner 1985; Ronen 1986; Chazan et al. 1988; Migdal 1988; Potholm 1988; Rothchild and Chazan 1988; Sitton 1989; Dubois 1991; Davidson 1992; Zartman 1995).

Yet the ideological structures that define ethnic groups as "tribes," that set up evolutionary schemes that place Africa at the bottom of a hierarchy, are neither new to postcolonial Africa nor located entirely in Africa. In his essay on Chéri Samba, Bogumil Jewsiewicki uses a comparison between the works of Paul Gauguin and Chéri Samba to analyze and appraise the paradoxes and ambivalences that underlie and define the categorical relations between "the modern" and "the primitive," "the Westerner" and "the non-Westerner," "the white" and "the black," and "the civilized" and "the savage" from colonial discourse to their disguised forms in development discourse in the postcolonial state. In Jewsiewicki's view, Samba's painting is an ambivalent critique of the categories underlying development discourse, as it is a discourse on the primitive and the modern themselves, if the two could even be separated. The relationship between these identity categories is organized as a paradoxical dialectic, in which difference is claimed through appropriation of the Other by both parties. But the logic of this appropriation does not work the same way in both directions. While the "modern" hunts for the "primitive" in order to appropriate its raw energy in order to invigorate itself, the "primitive"—represented by Jewsiewicki in the form of Chéri Samba's artistic work—searches for the "modern" in order to enhance itself by means of a reverse imitation, in which "the Western" (as a body of norms and values of judgment in ethics and aesthetics) becomes "the primitive" and an object of scorn. What we see in Chéri Samba's artistic and political expressions is almost a replay, in aesthetic terms, of what had taken place in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) three decades ago, when it briefly played a leading role in defining a new and cultural and political ideology—*authenticité*. Since then, the Zairian arts have become the only positive contribution that Zairian society has made to world culture, in the face of the collapse of state and society. Zairian music and painting were both influential internationally and were powerful instruments for social and political critique at home.

In Gauguin's works, the European search for and re-incorporation of the "primitive" serves to expose "modernism" as an ideological construct, one that pretended to be "a unitary, revolutionary phenomenon" instead of the "forward—and backward—looking" tendency it in fact was" (Hiller 1991: 87). In Chéri Samba's art, the representation of European desire for the black woman's body and the European woman's desire for Chéri Samba is a two-edged act of leveling difference(s), an act of scorn and contempt for that which poses itself

as "superior," an act of conquest. Samba reduces the "superior" to the level of the ordinary, such that it is subject to natural and instinctive drives that are free of ideological bounds: *indifference*. Chéri Samba's art is a commentary on the vanity of the ideology of power, whether this is political, social, cultural, or racial. Samba dismantles the myth of "primitivism," just as Gauguin dismantles that of "modernity" while practicing his own form of cultural colonialism.

While those sections of Jewsiewicki's writing which discuss Chéri Samba are loaded with the idiom(s) of "locality"—emphasis on the local and particular, on Chéri Samba himself, and on Kinshasa—the image that this vernacular idiom creates also captures the entire and vast landscape of change in African cultures and histories. It invokes other artists and writers in other African countries who have also played significant roles as critics of state and society. The scenes that they evoke and critique are too familiar across the continent (Mbembe 1992): social and economic inequality; official indiscipline, which creates oppression, injustice, and corruption, even to the point of assuming to be ordinary, the preying on the nudity, dignity, and privacy of the powerless women and children by political "big men."

By contrast, E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo's essay on Samuel Ayany's cultural discourse shows that the idea of progress and, by implication, the idea of history, clearly indicate that the self-invention of a "new" subject takes place in the postcolonial period and discourse. In both his (litigious and confrontational) character and (universalist) ideology, Ayany loved to defy unjustified beliefs. His text, by suggestion, could have opened with an epigraph from this Cartesian dictum: *We ought never to allow ourselves to be persuaded of the truth of anything unless on the evidence of our reason*. He (Ayany) considered cultural traditions as one type of unjustified collective belief. "It is this accumulation of complacent, confident conviction, and its acceptance, which leads men into error. There must be another and a better way" (Gellner 1992a: 2). Ayany's text significantly reproduces the European Enlightenment rationality, which is predicated on the acceptance as knowledge of only those propositions which are rationally justifiable. He views local histories as the imperfect imitations (shadows) of the "real" history of the state. These local histories are doomed, he believed, to be like life in the Platonic cave, where people are "chained" to the powerful influence of the illusions of shadows (beliefs), unless an intervention is made by one of their own who has become enlightened and thus knows the difference between the imperfections of the cave and the realism of the universal. The enlightened intellectual has a mission: to liberate his folk from the damnation of the cave and from the misleading visions of their cultural historians. The text, translated and re-presented by Atieno-Odhiambo here, leaves little doubt that Ayany envisioned himself as one who held the Platonic

role of leader from darkness to a state of enlightenment. Ayany champions historical modernity.

Yet even Ayany's legacy exhibits the ambiguous and ambivalent attitude of African artists and thinkers to the appeal of the modern. Ayany was known in Kenya, and especially among the Luo people, whose culture he criticized, as a master of "traditional" rhetoric. His predilection for litigation was accompanied by a mastery of oral skills and the use of invective and insult (Ayany translates from Dholuo as "insult") that made him the hero of many stories. At the same time as Ayany criticized unthinking devotion to custom and belief, he made himself the master of tradition and used tradition in a vigorous defense of the modern. His ambivalent legacy stands as a simulacrum of the profound ambivalence and outright contradiction that characterize so many African discourses on development and which the essays in this section seek not so much to deconstruct as to reexamine for their relevance to the present. The authors in this section argue that the recent past, with its uncritical rejection of culture and ethnicity and its ambivalent and even nostalgic embrace of what it rejects, should not be a prologue to the present.

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7. Our Problem of Knowledge: Brief Reflections on Knowledge and Development in Africa

Kwasi Wiredu

Knowledge is necessary for action. That is axiomatic. Action is necessary for survival. That too is axiomatic. Therefore, most certainly, knowledge is necessary for survival. So what problem do we have when it comes to knowledge? The most obvious problem is that much of the knowledge we need in Africa now is in the hands, and sometimes in the heads, of non-Africans. This part of our cognitive needs is that part which can only be fulfilled through science and technology. There are all sorts of problems in the mechanics as well as the politics and economics of the needed transfer of knowledge. But there is a psychological problem in the very idea of the need for such knowledge transfer, a problem which arises from the fact that we came to be in such need from the unpleasant historical fact of colonization. If it had not been for colonialism, Africa might now, perhaps, be in the forefront of the acquisition and application of scientific knowledge. Who knows?

But as things stand now, pressing for science and technology in Africa is apt to give the appearance that Africans simply want to imitate their erstwhile colonizers. And this seems to be why there is a certain ambivalence to science in the attitudes of some African intellectuals. Ironically, this attitude brings them into alignment with those intellectuals in the Western world who are disenchanted with science and technology as a result of having too much of it in their society. Perhaps those Africans too are imitators. But since it may not be a bad thing to imitate a good thing, the question might be "Which imitation is the more sensible one?"

Perhaps it may not be a question of imitation at all. The quest for knowl-