
Tradition and Modernity in Postcolonial African Philosophy

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The relationship between tradition and modernity has been a central theme of postcolonial African philosophy. While African philosophers have examined this theme from many angles, several basic questions have become the focus of ongoing debate and discussion: What is the relevance of indigenous African traditions to the challenges of contemporary life? Do traditional modes of thought and behavior constitute resources or impediments to the projects of development and modernization in Africa? What, precisely, is meant by the terms “development” and “modernization” when they are used in reference to African countries?

Discussion of such questions reveals a conflict between two broad perspectives. The first perspective, which Kwame Gyekye calls “cultural revivalism” (Gyekye 1997b, 233), assumes a basically reverential attitude toward the African cultural heritage. According to this view, the key to effectively addressing contemporary problems lies in reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous traditions that have been degraded and suppressed in the wake of colonialism. Colonialism violently disrupted African cultural traditions and imposed, with varying degrees of success, European forms of thought and social organization upon colonized peoples. Having achieved political independence, postcolonial Africans must now pursue a more decisive liberation, a “decolonization” of African minds and societies. While revivalists are often skepti-

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cal of calls for development and modernization, viewing them as thinly veiled calls for the continued imposition of European cultural norms, it is important to realize that they do not typically view their own project as *antimodern*. For revivalists, the key point is that genuine modernization in Africa can only be realized through the revitalization of African cultural norms.

Critics of revivalism call for a “clean break” with the premodern past.

The second perspective assumes a more critical attitude toward the indigenous heritage. Adherents to this perspective argue that the revivalist project is fundamentally misguided and ill-suited to the challenges of contemporary Africa. According to critics, the call for a nostalgic return to the past is not merely naïve and romantic, but positively dangerous. In their view, cultural revivalism diverts attention from pressing political issues, such as authoritarian oppression and class exploitation, and endorses forms of thought that interfere with the important goals of scientific and technological advancement. The most extreme form of this view, hinted at by some thinkers but seldom explicitly endorsed, suggests that Africans must make a “clean break” with the premodern past in order to address the most urgent demands of the present (Hountondji 1996, 48). Modernization, for them, requires a mental orientation commensurate with the problems of the present, not an attempt to resurrect ideas from societies of the distant past.

It should come as no surprise that the debate between cultural revivalists and their critics hinges in large part on contrasting interpretations of “modernity” and “modernization.” “Modernity” is a much discussed term in philosophy, and I will not engage the numerous arguments about the meaning of modernity, or the debates about whether modernity itself should be eclipsed by a “postmodern” sensibility. In order to understand the debate within African philosophy, it will suffice to identify two distinct aspects of modernization. The first and most conspicuous aspect involves scientific and technological development—that is, the emergence of science-based technologies that can be used to improve the basic conditions of human life. The second element is broadly political in nature. This aspect, described by one scholar as the “modernity of liberation” (Wallerstein 1995, 472), involves the development of political institutions that move away from authoritarian rule, toward forms of government that enhance the liberty and welfare of all citizens, rather than the select few. We can think of this political project as the “modernity of democratization.”

It is worth emphasizing that, in the context of African philosophy, both aspects of modernization function as normative concepts rather than merely descriptive concepts. In other words, the concepts do not merely describe changes that have occurred or that might occur; they identify changes that *should occur*. Of course, not everything that travels under the banner of modernity, science, or democracy is desirable, but there are obvious ways in which science-based technologies and democratic political systems are conducive to peace and prosperity in African societies. For these reasons, modernization is typically viewed as a sign of progress and an ideal to be pursued.

In examining the debate between cultural revivalism and its critics, the key question thus becomes: Do indigenous traditions tend to enhance or impede the processes of scientific and political modernization?

In what follows, I will examine the main arguments in the debate about tradition and modernity, beginning with the case for cultural revivalism. I will then outline some key criticisms of the revivalist project, focusing initially on the influential work of Paulin Hountondji of Benin. As we will see, Hountondji argues that revivalism rests on mistaken assumptions about African culture and about the nature of philosophy. Hountondji exposes some serious flaws in the revivalist project but, unfortunately, he proceeds to suggest that traditional thought is largely irrelevant to the challenges of contemporary life. I think this conclusion is unjustified. Drawing on work of two prominent Ghanaian philosophers, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu, I will argue that certain aspects of indigenous thought may well be inimical to *scientific* modernization, but other aspects provide valuable resources for thinking about *political* modernization.

As we will see, this assessment has interesting implications not only for the trajectory of development in Africa, but for our understanding of development in the West.

Colonial Discourse and the Emergence of Cultural Revivalism

Cultural revivalism has its historical roots in the colonial era, and in fact emerged as a response to European discourse about African culture and identity. In order to understand the revivalist project, it is necessary to begin with some brief remarks on this European discourse.

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Colonialism in Africa was supported by a broad range of popular and scholarly literature which highlighted fundamental differences between Europeans and Africans, and which reinforced ideas of European superiority. One of the most notorious examples of this literature was the work of the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl. In a series of works bearing titles such as *The Primitive Mentality* and *The Mental Functions of Inferior Civilizations*, Levy-Bruhl distinguished between two fundamentally different mentalities: the mentality of the civilized European and that of the primitive non-European. According to Levy-Bruhl, the civilized mentality is regulated by reason, and interacts with the world through carefully organized conceptual schemes. In contrast, the primitive mentality is “hardly capable of abstract thought,” and is regulated by the forces of myth and superstition (see Levy-Bruhl 1995, 54ff.). The racism expressed in Levy-Bruhl’s work under the guise of scientific objectivity was echoed not only in popular European writings, but in remarks of esteemed philosophers, such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Although this discourse fulfilled several functions in the context of European culture, for our purposes its most important function was the role it played in the European understanding of colonialism. The images of the civilized European and the primitive African helped sustain the idea that colonialism was a fundamentally benevolent enterprise—that is, an enterprise in which Europeans were attempting to bring civilization to the “dark continent.” In short, European domination, exploitation, and cultural devastation were rationalized under the guise of a so-called “civilizing mission.”

For purposes of African philosophy, the most important development in European discourse about Africa came in the form of a text produced by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels. While studying and living amongst the Luo in the Congo in the 1940s, Tempels produced a text entitled *Bantu Philosophy*. In this book he argued that the so-called “primitive mind” was considerably more sophisticated than had been suggested by Levy-Bruhl and others. More precisely, he argued that Bantu peoples possessed a comprehensive “philosophy of life,” a complex system of concepts regarding the nature of the world and persons, which provided a basis for their codes of conduct and social organization. The key element of this philosophy was the belief that the universe is comprised of “vital forces” that exist in a dynamic and hierarchical relation with

each other, beginning with God, the supreme vital force, ranging downward through an array of intelligent spirits, including those of the ancestors, into the world of living humans (Tempels 1995, 63ff., 77ff.). For our purposes, the details of Tempels's account are less important than his claim that the Bantu understanding of reality was different from that of Europeans, but not necessarily less rational or less worthy of the honorific name "philosophy."

It must of course be noted that Tempels's study of the Bantu had colonial motives—he wanted to understand the Bantu primarily in order to facilitate conversion to Christianity, and his studies were not entirely devoid of notions about European superiority. Yet, despite his colonial agenda and biases, Tempels's work challenged prevailing ideas about the primitive mind. For this reason, it was not well received by colonial authorities. In contrast, *Bantu Philosophy* was eagerly received by a number of African intellectuals, who seized the opportunity to explore and revitalize traditional African thought as a basis for their struggle against colonialism. In short, Tempels's work provided a key stimulus and touchstone for African cultural revivalism.

Perhaps the most notable early effort in this direction was the philosophy of *négritude* developed by Leopold Senghor. Senghor accepted the idea of fundamental differences between black Africans and white Europeans, and his account of the black and white mentalities echoed at least some of the ideas that had long been part of colonial discourse. For example, Senghor argued that "the negro is a man of nature" (Senghor 1995, 117), more sensuous and responsive to the rhythms of the environment than his white counterpart. In contrast, whites approach the world in the manner of a scientist or an engineer, differentiating themselves from the natural world, placing nature at a distance, so to speak. Through this objective stance, the natural world can be surveyed, measured and, ultimately, manipulated for human purposes. Of course, in distinguishing these two mentalities, Senghor directly challenged claims of white superiority, almost to the point of inverting the colonial racial hierarchy. In his view, Africans did not lack reason, but displayed a different form of reason, a more fundamental way of apprehending the world, one that allowed objects to shine forth in their "primordial reality" (Senghor 1995, 121). In contrast, Senghor argued that the objectifying reason of classical Europe "slays the object" and "feeds off" the natural world. Citing the words of

an elder from his own country, Senghor writes: “the whites are cannibals,” and if their attitude toward nature continues to dominate, things are likely to turn out badly for all of us (Senghor 1995, 118). Négritude was thus articulated as something to be valued and drawn upon as a resource in the struggle for independence. This concept of black identity became the basis for a cultural nationalism that carried over to Senghor’s tenure as the first president of Senegal.

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A brief survey of anthologies in African philosophy shows that this revivalist project remains influential. For example, in his contribution to one collection of essays, Innocent Onyewuenyi argues that “The African has an unwritten timeless code of behavior and attitudes which have persisted for centuries” (Onyewuenyi 1991, 39). After offering an account of these behavioral codes that draws heavily on Tempels, he concludes that Africans emphatically must not yield to laws and institutions that are “divorced from our philosophy, from the nature of beings as we understand them, . . . from our view of the world” (Onyewuenyi 1991, 45). As we can see from these remarks, the goal for Onyewuenyi and other revivalist thinkers is to mobilize African cultural norms to address contemporary problems. These thinkers by no means absolve Africans of responsibility for the numerous problems that beset the continent, but they ultimately attribute these problems to the cultural and spiritual corruption initiated during the colonial era. The problem, as they see it, is that indigenous beliefs and practices have been swallowed up by systems of thought and social organization that are impediments to African wellbeing. The solution, as stated by another revivalist thinker, is to “rediscover and resume our proper selves” through a study of African civilizations (Owomoyela 1991, 181). Until this is done, spiritual and social subservience will persist, despite the de facto end of colonial rule.¹

For revivalists, questions about modernization must therefore be addressed within the framework of a careful examination of African culture, with due attentiveness to the ongoing task of “decolonization.” With regard to the scientific aspect of modernization, revivalists typically challenge the idea that indigenous African cultures lacked scientific knowledge, citing the medicinal

¹ In the United States, an influential strain of the revivalist approach can be found in the work of Afrocentrist writers such as Molefi Asante. See, e.g., Asante 1987.

use of herbs, advanced agricultural techniques, and methods of food preservation as evidence of such knowledge (see Owomoyela 1991, 173-75). There is, in addition, a burgeoning literature on the accomplishments of ancient Egyptian civilization, including evidence of developed metallurgy, astronomy, and mathematics. For revivalists, the call for Africa to become “more scientific” overlooks these accomplishments, and amounts to a call for Africans to duplicate European models of scientific development, which is just one more version of the so-called “civilizing mission” at the heart of colonial ideology.

Cultural revivalists take a similar approach to the political aspect of modernization, arguing that indigenous African societies displayed a humanistic ethical orientation and a communalist political philosophy that can be mobilized in the contemporary setting, serving as powerful antidotes to political authoritarianism and the growing influence of Western individualism and consumerism. These ideas must be reclaimed and revitalized, not ignored in favor of European ideas about political organization.

Responses to Cultural Revivalism:

Toward a Critical Assessment of Tradition

In the 1960s, a new generation of African intellectuals began raising serious questions about the revivalist project. One of the most prominent figures in this critical trend was Paulin Hountondji. In a series of articles and addresses, Hountondji offered a multifaceted critique of what he called “ethnophilosophy”: the idea that African philosophy exists in the form of a collective worldview and that the task of contemporary African intellectuals is carefully to document this worldview so that it might be pressed into the service of practical aims. Hountondji argues that this project, which is basically synonymous with what we have been calling “cultural revivalism,” rests on mistaken assumptions about African peoples and about the nature of philosophy. In the end, he believes this project impedes rather than facilitates efforts effectively to address the challenges of the present. Let me briefly describe the key elements of Hountondji’s critique, which has exerted a strong influence on contemporary African philosophy.

First, Hountondji argues that ethnophilosophy perpetuates a false and ultimately insulting view of African peoples. When African intellectuals speak of “négritude,” “timeless codes of be-

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havior,” or “*the African worldview*,” they perpetuate what Hountondji calls “the myth of primitive unanimity” (Hountondji 1996, 60)—i.e., the myth that black persons are fundamentally united in their views about the most important matters in life. This idea originated in colonial discourse about Africa, and Hountondji argues that it is not enough simply to put a positive spin on the traits that define African identity. The very idea of a global African mentality or worldview distorts the richness and cultural diversity of African peoples. Revivalists might see such unifying concepts as a basis for needed solidarity, but Hountondji and other critics see them as a distinct liability, since they fail to take into account real differences among Africans in addressing the complex problems that beset the continent. In a recent discussion of unanimism, Kwame Appiah highlights precisely this point when he remarks: “Africans share too many problems and projects to be distracted by a bogus basis for solidarity” (Appiah 1992, 26).

Hountondji himself emphasizes a more ominous side of the distraction noted by Appiah. Specifically, he argues that cultural revivalism serves as a powerful tool for authoritarian governments who wish to divert the population’s attention away from the realities of exploitation and oppression. In a characteristically acerbic passage, Hountondji writes:

At a time when the gap between oppressor and oppressed is widening throughout our continent and political differences are becoming more radical, the ethnophilosopher claims that we have always been . . . and always will be unanimous. On every side we see terror tightening its stranglehold on us . . . ; every word spoken spells danger and exposes us to untold brutality . . . ; insolent neocolonial state apparatuses parade in triumph, leaving a trail of intimidation, arbitrary arrest, torture and legal assassination and poisoning genuine thought at its source. And the official ideologue smiles, content, and declares: “Alleluia, our ancestors have thought!” (Hountondji 1996, 170)

As Hountondji sees it, in authoritarian states, slogans about African authenticity and attendant celebrations of African cultural traditions function as a “powerful opiate,” which serves to “mystify” the masses and deaden them to the bleak realities of everyday life (Hountondji 1996, 170).² And when African intellectuals, espe-

² Mobutu Sese Seko’s reign in Zaire was notable for its use of the discourse of authenticity. Despite Hountondji’s concerns about the ideological function of such discourse, some scholars have commented favorably on Sese-Seko’s writings on authenticity. See, e.g., Adelman 1975.

cially would-be philosophers, are content to document traditional belief systems instead of asking hard questions about existing social and political conditions, he thinks they become complicit in this very process.

This last point brings us to one of Hountondji's most conspicuous criticisms of cultural revivalism—his claim that it perpetuates a mistaken understanding of philosophy. As we have seen, revivalists assume that African philosophy exists in the form of a collective, unconscious worldview shared by indigenous African peoples, and that the task of the contemporary African philosopher is to document the core features of this worldview. Hountondji, along with many other African philosophers, strenuously objects to this definition. The problem with this use of the term "philosophy" can be seen when it is contrasted with the way the term is used in reference to the Western tradition. For example, when we speak of Greek philosophy, we are not referring to the collective beliefs of ethnic Greeks about the gods, nature, society, and so on. Rather, we are referring to the work of individual thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. While these thinkers often considered popular and traditional views about key matters in life, they did so from a critical perspective, and usually concluded that such views were flawed or at least in need of improvement. To cite the most famous case, after carefully examining popular Athenian beliefs about justice, piety, and education, Socrates concluded that these beliefs were rife with errors, and were not conducive to the wellbeing of individual Athenians or society as a whole. As any first-year philosophy student can tell you, this kind of critical reflection is the hallmark of philosophical thinking.

The problems with the revivalist understanding of philosophy should be clear in light of these remarks. To define philosophy as a collective worldview is to obscure the proper meaning of the term: Philosophy is a critical activity, not a passive holding of beliefs by either individuals or social groups. More importantly, to suggest that Africa's finest minds should be content to document and revere traditional beliefs does not lead to the articulation of a genuine African philosophy. Instead, it amounts to an evasion of the kind of critical thinking that is urgently needed to address the problems that exist within African societies. What is needed is a careful analysis of the ways in which traditional beliefs might impede modernization, and the ways in which they might provide

Authoritarian governments use slogans about African authenticity to divert attention from oppression.

Genuine philosophy is a critical activity, not a passive holding of beliefs.

Gap between scientific development in the West and in Africa should not be ignored.

useful resources.

African philosophers who have embarked on this process of critical analysis have concluded that there are some serious conflicts between traditional modes of thought and the scientific aspect of modernization. Despite revivalist claims about the existence of scientific knowledge in African societies, we cannot ignore the glaring gap between scientific development in the West and Africa, and this gap is due in part to traditional ways of thinking about the natural world. Gyekye provides a lucid account of this problem in his discussion of science and technology in traditional African cultures (see Gyekye 1997a, 26ff.; 1997b, 244ff.). Although traditional cultures developed many useful technologies pertaining to herbal therapeutics, food preservation, and the like, Gyekye argues that they did not develop a deep scientific understanding of nature. Scientific inquiry involves systematic observation, disciplined by experiment, in the quest for explanatory theories regarding the causes of natural phenomena. In regard to medicinal therapeutics, for example, such a quest would involve inquiry into the causes of disease and the chemical properties that render certain herbal treatments efficacious. Yet, there is little evidence that such inquiries occurred in traditional African cultures, and Gyekye argues that this was due in large part to religious beliefs—more precisely, to the prevalence of spiritistic understandings of the natural world. To return to the case of medicine, in traditional cultures the onset of disease was typically attributed to supernatural entities who were responding to social transgressions or some other inappropriate behavior. Likewise, the effectiveness of herbal remedies was attributed to the benevolent intervention of spirits. The threat posed by this kind of thinking to the development of science is obvious to Gyekye: “Science,” he writes, “is based on a profound understanding and exploitation of the important notion of causality: that is, a deep appreciation of the causal interactions between natural phenomena. But where this is enmeshed with supernaturalistic orientations [toward nature], science . . . hardly makes progress” (Gyekye 1997a, 29).

In light of this assessment, Gyekye argues that scientific development in Africa will require a significant restriction on the scope of traditional religious beliefs. Gyekye does not claim that traditional religion must be completely abandoned, but he does insist that religious beliefs must yield where they interfere with a

scientific understanding of nature. The task, he says, is to achieve a proper demarcation between the realms of science and religion, and to cultivate “a new intellectual attitude to the external world uncluttered by superstition, mysticism, and other forms of irrationality” (Gyekye 1997a, 36). While Gyekye focuses on restricting the scope of beliefs in spiritual agency, Wiredu offers a more encompassing critique, arguing that “superstition”—defined as “rationally unsupported belief in entities of any sort” (Wiredu 1995, 163)—must be eradicated from all spheres of thought. Wiredu’s less conciliatory view is based on his belief that, so long as superstition endures on a broad scale, the task of developing scientific thought habits in Africa will be hindered. In this regard, Wiredu chastises African leaders who simultaneously call for scientific and technological development, while pouring libations to the ancestral spirits who, as he puts it, are supposed to be hovering about and sipping ceremonial schnapps (Wiredu, 1995, 162).

Despite differences in the tenor of their respective critiques, Gyekye and Wiredu both argue that traditional beliefs in spiritual agency must be significantly altered to accommodate scientific development. It is important to recognize, however, that others have been less willing to accept this claim. Albert Mosley offers a noteworthy response to Gyekye and Wiredu, arguing that the conflict they perceive between science and religion is based on both theoretical and practical misunderstandings. Drawing on Robin Horton’s much discussed comparative work on African religion and Western science, Mosley suggests that the ostensible conflict between religion and science recedes once we recognize that the two enterprises are complementary attempts to create order in a puzzling and sometimes chaotic world. Whereas science attempts to impose order on the natural environment in accordance with our interests in prediction and control, religion, says Mosley, is largely concerned with the social world and addresses our need to “engage personal participation in forms of moral agency” (Mosley 2000, 28). In light of these observations, Mosley argues that religious accounts of the world should be viewed “not as an obstacle to the development of scientific thought, but as a parallel exercise of theoretical abilities answering to different needs and interests” (Mosley 2000, 26). On a practical level, the history of scientific and technological development in the West provides additional evidence that Africans need not jettison their religious beliefs in order

to develop a scientific outlook. For Mosley, the African beliefs that Wiredu characterizes as “superstitious” are no more incompatible with scientific development than religious beliefs that were widely held in the West at the onset of the scientific age.

Belief in saints was not incompatible with technological development in the West, and belief in witches need not be incompatible with technological development in Africa. . . . Nor was the development of a scientific world view contingent on the rejection of religious beliefs. Neither Galileo nor Newton questioned the supernatural agency of Christ. Jesus walked on water and witches fly, as Sogolo wryly put it, and neither belief is necessarily an impediment to technological development. (Mosley 2000, 29)

Mosley’s emphasis on the different yet complementary functions of science and religion must surely be taken into account in assessing the question of whether a conflict exists between African religion and the quest for scientific development. Indeed, Mosley’s argument echoes Gyekye’s own frequently used metaphor of “rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and God what is God’s,” which suggests the possibility not only of conflict but of reconciliation between the two enterprises (see Gyekye 1997a, 37). It should be noted, however, that the potential for accommodation envisioned by Gyekye is between science and “spiritual life,” broadly construed, *not* between science and forms of religious belief that center on what he calls “agentive causation” (Gyekye 1997a, 28, 37). On the contrary, Gyekye repeatedly laments the ubiquitous role of agentive causality in African life, precisely because it impedes the development of scientific explanations that facilitate the goals of prediction and control. The problem is that *these particular and prominent religious beliefs* are firmly enmeshed in “Caesar’s domain.” In this regard, I would suggest that Mosley’s use of Horton’s work to criticize Gyekye is somewhat misplaced. While Horton attempts to dispel some common misconceptions by highlighting the parallel theoretical functions of religion and science, he emphasizes the role that African religion plays in understanding the *natural* rather than the social world and argues that spiritual forces play *the same role* in religious explanations that material causes play in scientific explanations of *the same phenomena* (see Horton 1995, 304, 306).

For these reasons, I believe Mosley’s response to Gyekye and Wiredu has limited value. He is surely correct to point out that belief in supernatural beings is compatible with a scientific outlook,

and to this extent I would agree that Wiredu's concern about the deleterious effects of pouring libations to ancestral spirits is overstated. But when belief in supernatural beings plays a robust role in one's causal explanations of the natural world, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that religion is interfering with the development of scientific understanding.³

The development of scientific thought habits in Africa would thus appear to require revising at least some prominent religious beliefs regarding spiritual agency. And, contrary to the claims of cultural revivalists, this does *not* constitute a call for Africans to abandon their indigenous traditions in favor of European or Western cultural norms. Two points must be emphasized here. First, there is nothing specifically *Western* about the scientific understanding of nature. While science may be more developed in the West, this should be viewed as a matter of historical circumstances, not a sign of some deep difference between the Western and African minds (see Wiredu 1995). Scientific thinking is a basic human capacity, one which holds important benefits for persons regardless of their cultural setting. As Gyekye indicates, the lack of systematic scientific inquiry stunted the growth of important technologies in African societies. To cite the most obvious example, the lack of science-based medicine led to serious problems for the accurate diagnosis of diseases and the administration of proper medicinal dosages. Unfortunately, in contemporary Africa this is still a problem that needs to be addressed. In some locales, persons are suffering and dying from treatable diseases because so-called "Western" medicinal methods are rejected in favor of traditional methods, such as the use of a diviner to identify malicious spirits. In Gyekye's view, such attitudes and practices are simply tragic, and should *not* be viewed as signs of African authenticity. In reality, he says, they contradict "the humanistic essence of African culture" (Gyekye 1997a, 42).

There is nothing specifically Western about the scientific understanding of nature.

The second point about science and Westernization is this: When thinkers like Gyekye and Wiredu call for scientific development in Africa, they are not suggesting that Africans should simply mimic Western forms of science and technology. Africans can

³ It should be noted that beliefs in agentive causality by no means constitute the whole or even the core of traditional African religion. Wiredu argues that amongst the Akan and the Yoruba the core of religion is belief in the power and perfection of a single divine being, and that the belief in lesser spirits is not even properly classified as religious. See Wiredu 1998, 191-92.

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surely learn from scientific developments in Europe and elsewhere, but their own scientific work should be geared to the specific needs of African societies. Thus, Gyekye argues that an emphasis on research and technologies related to food and agriculture, health and housing, and the like would be more appropriate than investing in advanced military technologies or space exploration (Gyekye 1997a, 41). Despite a preponderance of rhetoric about the need for “globalization,” the pursuit of information and media technologies would also seem to be less urgent than technologies that address basic human needs.

Let me turn now to the question of political modernization. Democracy has clearly not flourished in much of postcolonial Africa, and there is considerable debate about both the causes of this problem and the range of viable solutions. For our purposes, the most important focus of debate is the extent to which precolonial African societies included democratic features, and the extent to which traditional political ideas are relevant to the challenge of democratization. Of particular concern is the relevance of traditional communalism, a mode of social organization which emphasizes solidarity based on shared interests, and the idea that individual activities should be geared toward the common good. The ensuing discussion will focus on the question of whether traditional communalism provides a viable basis for thinking about democracy in the contemporary context.

Although Gyekye is perhaps a bit flippant when he declares that “defining the concept of democracy is not difficult,” I would agree with his claim that democracy, at its most basic level, involves two related principles (Gyekye 1997b, 124). First, democratic governance must be representative—that is, it must include institutions that allow for the will of the people to be expressed in political decision-making. Second, genuine democracy must include institutions that ensure basic rights and justice for all members of a society, so that popular rule does not degenerate into a “tyranny of the majority.” In Western countries, the representative aspect of democracy is expressed through practices such as periodic elections, whereas the moral aspect is addressed by constitutional and legal protections. In contrast, precolonial African societies were often ruled by hereditary chiefs, and lacked formal constitutions ensuring things such as the rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” But they, too, had democratic features, which were

expressed through a variety of institutions governing political authority and political decision-making. For example, in Akan societies chiefs were not selected through simple hereditary succession, but through an electoral process in which clan leaders examined the leadership qualities of candidates and consulted with their respective constituencies. Once the chief ascended to the throne, he did not rule by dictatorial fiat, but through close consultation with a council of advisers, again comprising clan leaders. If the chief became too autocratic, the people had the power to depose or “destool” him through their advisory councils. Thus, contrary to a popular misconception, rule by chiefs did not imply that precolonial societies were fundamentally undemocratic (Gyekye 1997b, 116ff.).

Precolonial African governments had democratic features.

It is also important to recognize that these societies included institutions that allowed members of the community to speak and air grievances before the chief and his councilors. Perhaps the most noteworthy institution was the palaver, a discussion forum that was used to resolve disagreements. It is often noted that once a palaver was convened the participants “talked until they agreed,” which often took a considerable amount of time. This is because the goal of the palaver was not simply to reach a *majority decision*, but to reach a *consensus*—that is, a decision that reflected the views of all participants. As Gyekye points out, the pursuit of this kind of agreement required “patience, mutual tolerance, and an attitude of compromise” (Gyekye 1997b, 130). Participants had to be willing to modify and perhaps even abandon their positions in the face of more persuasive arguments. In precolonial societies the quest for consensus did not always result in unanimous agreement, but it did give everyone a thorough and fair hearing and, as far as possible, it allowed everyone’s view to be reflected in decisions of the group.

Of course, it is one matter to cite the existence of democratic institutions in precolonial Africa, and another to show how these institutions might be relevant for contemporary African societies. Some aspects of precolonial governance, such as rule by hereditary chiefs, would surely not be acceptable in the current context. But other ideas appear to be more promising. For example, Gyekye argues that the emphasis on shared needs in traditional communal societies provides the basis for a more comprehensive understanding of democracy, which emphasizes not just political rights but a

broader range of social and economic rights than one finds guaranteed in Western societies. Along similar lines, Wiredu argues that traditional ideas about consensus and political organization provide the basis for developing what he calls “consensual democracies.” These democracies would be characterized by localized decision-making bodies, national advisory councils, and deliberative processes geared toward achieving consensus rather than simple majority decisions. Although Wiredu recognizes that there are significant disagreements between groups in today’s African societies, he argues that such disagreements need not evolve into a multiparty political system, which enshrines permanent oppositions and, all too often, ensures a minority whose voice is not adequately heard. Instead, he argues for the creation of a “nonparty polity,” based on a sense of shared interests and solidarity, and committed to the consensual ideal of granting serious consideration to the perspectives of all persons when disagreements arise (Wiredu 1997, 308ff.).

Ethnic, religious, and class differences render traditional communalism difficult.

While the project of developing a communalist understanding of democracy has been avidly pursued by a significant group of African philosophers,⁴ this project has also been subject to some serious criticisms. The most significant objection highlights glaring differences between precolonial and contemporary Africa, which seem to undermine the possibility of a present-day democracy based on communalist principles. As Peter Bodunrin points out, precolonial communalism prevailed in small societies with non-money economies, in which members were bound together by common blood and feelings of extended familyhood. Such societies were also characterized by substantial agreement regarding customs, morality, and religious beliefs, which combined to provide a sense of solidarity and, indeed, shared destiny amongst the people. In contrast, today’s much larger African societies are characterized by increasing urbanization, and by significant ethnic, religious, and class differences within their populations. And, of course, they feature money economies tied in varying degrees to world markets. These conditions foment divisions rather than solidarity, and lead Bodunrin to question whether the principles of traditional communalism are workable in today’s Africa (Bodunrin 1991, 69-70).

Emmanuel Eze puts a finer point on Bodunrin’s concerns about the functionality of traditional communalism by arguing that the

⁴ See, e.g., the essays in chapter 6 of Wiredu’s edited volume (2004).

call for communalist or consensual democracies in fact rests on a misunderstanding of the purpose of democracy in contemporary Africa. When persons enter political discourse with a sense of shared destiny and substantial agreement regarding the common good, the quest for consensus is a viable enterprise that contains some hope of success. On the other hand, in a pluralistic society, in which people lack this sense of solidarity and often operate with sharply contrasting views of the good life, the quest for consensus is not only implausible but wrongheaded. Eze's argument, which is directed principally at Wiredu, focuses on the core issues of *political interests* and the *common good*. The basic premise of communalism is that we have a primary obligation to pursue the common good precisely because this good is defined by interests that are common to all members of society (see Gyekye 1997b, 45-56). Wiredu and Gyekye repeatedly cite the Akan image of the two-headed crocodile fighting over a piece of food to express this fundamental insight: It is irrational, in their view, for the heads to fight over the food when the nutritional benefit is destined for their common stomach. The consensual approach to political decision-making is directly tied to this claim about the primacy of shared interests. In precolonial societies, says Wiredu, "adherence to the principle of consensus . . . was based on the belief that *ultimately* the interests of all members of society are the same, although their immediate perceptions of those interests may be different" (Wiredu 1997, 306).

According to Eze, this communalist argument not only fails to appreciate the depth of conflict that exists in contemporary African societies, but underestimates the importance of particular interests versus shared interests. To acknowledge that human beings share certain fundamental interests—e.g., those in life, liberty, and security—does not imply that our interests are "ultimately identical," or that the particular interests that divide us along familiar lines of class, ethnicity, and religion are somehow "illusory" or unimportant. Individual and group-specific interests are often crucial to our identities and our life projects and, in Eze's view, to suggest that these interests should be set aside in order to pursue a common good defined by shared interests is fundamentally undemocratic. The purpose of democracy, Eze argues, is to provide a *formal framework* for the mediation of competing interests; such a framework cannot require *substantive decisional outcomes* on contested issues, and it certainly cannot require the kind of unanimity suggested by

Particular interests along group lines not "illusory" or unimportant.

the idea of consensus. "The only 'consensus' primary to democracy," says Eze, "is the initial, formal agreement to play by a set of rules" (Eze 1997, 321). Ideally, these rules will manage discussion in a way that protects the rights of all participants, including the right to dissent and pursue one's own life projects, to the extent that such projects are consistent with the rights of others.

I am inclined to agree with Eze's claim that Wiredu and Gyekye underestimate the importance of particular interests versus shared interests, and overestimate the ability of rational dialogue to dissolve political conflicts. One needn't be a cynical advocate of power politics to be skeptical of Wiredu's assertion that "there is no problem of human relations that cannot be resolved through rational dialogue" (Wiredu 1997, 307), or of Gyekye's parallel claim that all social conflict "stems from a misperception either of the common good, of the individual good, or of the relationship between the two" (Gyekye 1987, 160). On a strictly practical level, I would also agree that erosion of the traditional bases for solidarity undermines the viability of a consensual, nonparty approach to democracy in contemporary Africa. Requiring persons to set aside deeply held interests in the pursuit of consensus is not only impractical, but seems to violate basic democratic precepts concerning liberty and equality. The idea of prohibiting political parties is problematic on similar grounds. While Wiredu concedes the legitimacy of "political associations to propagate preferred ideologies," he suggests that, unlike parties, such associations would not be "relentlessly dedicated to wresting or retaining [power]" (Wiredu 1997, 310). This claim seems highly dubious—political associations, though presumably smaller than parties as defined by Wiredu, could certainly exhibit the same "Hobbesian proclivities" that he fears. More importantly, there is nothing inherent in the definition of a political party that requires it to pursue power indiscriminately or for its own sake, or that precludes it from effectively cooperating with other parties. Ironically, Wiredu himself calls attention to historical examples of cooperation amongst ethnic groups in Africa, but proceeds to argue against ethnic-based parties in the contemporary context (Wiredu 1997, 310). It is surely lamentable when political groups focus primarily on gaining and maintaining power while failing to consider the legitimate interests of other groups. But there is no reason to think that a "party" as opposed to an "association" will exhibit such tendencies, and there are good reasons to

think that preventing persons from forming parties along chosen lines would be both impractical and inconsistent with the aforementioned principles of liberty and equality.

While I share Eze's concerns about the viability of a consensual, nonparty democracy, his critical response to Wiredu and Gyekye is by no means an unqualified success. In fact, there are significant shortcomings in Eze's analysis that are highly relevant for the point in question—namely, whether “democracy as practiced in the past” has any relevance in the contemporary context. In making his case against consensual democracy, Eze rightly emphasizes the role of particular and sometimes irreconcilable interests in the political arena, and challenges the idea that our interests are “ultimately the same.” At the same time, however, he portrays democracy as a purely formal “framework for agreement or disagreement” that cannot prejudge substantive decisional outcomes (Eze 1997, 321). The problem with this view is that our acceptance of a democratic framework involves fundamental moral commitments that clearly do require a certain range of substantive decisional outcomes. While Eze illustrates the irreconcilability of competing interests through the example of a dictator whose sheer interest in power and domination conflicts with the interests of an oppressed citizenry, it is precisely this kind of example which undermines his purely formal view of democracy: The rules of genuine democratic decision-making, however conceived, would clearly exclude decisions that sanction dictatorial interests, just as they would exclude decisions in favor of slavery or other actions that involve egregious violations of rights.

I highlight this point because it is relevant to the question of whether traditional communalism provides a viable basis for democracy in the contemporary world. As I understand it, the core argument for a communalist approach to democracy—stripped of its problematic calls for consensus and a nonparty polity—is that social responsibilities and the common good should be accentuated in the “ground rules” for political decision-making. While this orientation recognizes the importance of individual rights, it insists that these rights must be tempered by our responsibilities to others and, more precisely, by our duty to promote shared interests. A detailed account of this position is not necessary to frame my key conclusions regarding the viability of a democracy based on

Acceptance of a democratic framework involves fundamental moral commitments.

communalist principles.⁵ First, there is nothing *undemocratic* about founding a political order on the kind of “altruistically freighted” morality endorsed by Gyekye and others (Gyekye 1997b, 67). Indeed, Gyekye suggests that such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of democracy than what is found in societies that proceed from a minimalist account of individual rights, which thereby renders many important social responsibilities morally optional. Second, in my view, political discourse in a communal democracy need not require the impractical ideal of consensus or a prohibition on political parties. Nor would it rule out serious and sometimes irreconcilable differences between competing parties on many issues. But it would require a different range of substantive decisional outcomes than one finds in a democracy that is founded on individualist assumptions. For example, it would rule out an interpretation of property rights that allows individuals to accumulate great wealth while significant portions of the population suffer from lack of food, shelter, and healthcare. Finally, and most importantly, I see no insurmountable practical or theoretical obstacles to a current-day African democracy appropriating and adapting these core ideas of traditional communalism.

Of course, a democracy organized along such lines would look rather different from democracy as practiced in many Western countries. While this runs contrary to a common assumption that political modernization in Africa requires implementing Western models of democracy, Gyekye and Wiredu repeatedly challenge this assumption, and I believe they are correct to do so. Despite long-standing democratic traditions, the ideals of justice and equality have not yet been adequately realized in many Western countries, and this problem may be attributed in part to their prevailing systems of political organization. Multiparty systems in some countries have institutionalized not just discussion and debate, but antagonisms and partisan fixations on power that often compromise the effective pursuit of important social goals, including the need to care for those who are least advantaged. A democracy organized along communalist lines would still have to contend with the ignoble human instincts that creep into the political arena, but its baseline commitment to social responsibilities would position it

⁵ For a detailed account, see Gyekye’s carefully argued defense of what he calls “moderate communalism” (1997b, ch. 2).

to ameliorate some of these problems.

Wiredu offers a more pointed criticism of those who would rush to adopt Western approaches to social and political life when he argues that the West is in fact *underdeveloped* with respect to the central issues of political modernization. In his important essay entitled, "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought," Wiredu suggests that "development," in its most fundamental sense, is measured by "the degree to which rational methods have penetrated thought habits" (Wiredu 1995, 163). If we think about development in these terms, he says, it becomes clear that the West remains underdeveloped in many key areas of thought, despite its advanced state with respect to knowledge of the natural world. Wiredu summarizes his position as follows:

The Western world is "developed," but only relatively. Technological sophistication is only one aspect, and that not the core, of development. The conquest of the religious, moral and political spheres by the spirit of rational inquiry remains . . . a thing of the future even in the West. From this point of view the West may be said to be still underdeveloped. (Wiredu 1995, 163)

Wiredu leaves it to his readers to ponder the full meaning of this provocative remark, but we needn't look far for examples of the "underdevelopment" he might have in mind. In my own country, the United States, we can readily identify a number of prevailing "thought habits" that are symptomatic of the "underdevelopment" to which Wiredu alludes. With regard to the political sphere, it seems clear that the central ideals of democracy are not well served when political discourse becomes so mired in inflammatory rhetoric and partisan posturing that substantive discussion becomes virtually impossible. Yet, sadly, this is what political discourse has become in the popular American media and, to a significant extent, in the deliberations of our governing bodies. With regard to morality, it should be clear that our highest ideals concerning justice, equality, and human dignity are not best served by an ethical relativism that would reduce moral judgments to nothing more than expressions of individual feeling or cultural preference. Yet many people in the "enlightened West" tend to think about morality in precisely these terms, often based on the mistaken assumption that such relativism expresses a commitment to tolerance, respect for diversity, and the like, when in fact it just as readily legitimates oppression, intolerance, and all manner of heinous behavior. At the juncture of the moral and political domains, we might also

Technological prowess does not preclude moral and political "underdevelopment."

take note of staggering levels of poverty, hunger, and lack of access to adequate health care in the United States, blights that could surely be reduced given sufficient “political will.” This, too, can be viewed as a sign of underdevelopment since, in the context of political modernization, “rational thought habits” must encompass not just instrumental rationality and heightened technological efficiency, but considered commitment to the ideals of justice and equality. Finally, it hardly needs to be mentioned that our most lofty religious principles are not well served when persons attempt to justify narrow and sometimes hateful political agendas through facile appeals to the will of God or the commands of unimpeachable religious authority. Such tactics, however, are depressingly familiar.

Thus, when Wiredu suggests that “the realms of religion, morals and politics remain strongholds of irrationality” even in the West (Wiredu, 1995, 163), I believe there is plenty of evidence to support his claim. Like Wiredu, I think we can and must do better before we hold ourselves up as examples for social and political development in Africa or elsewhere. Indeed, Africans would do well to recognize the aforementioned attitudes in the political, moral, and religious spheres as insidious impediments to the highest ideals of modernity.

Concluding Remarks:

Traditional Life and the Challenges of Modernization

I will conclude with a very brief assessment of the dispute about tradition and modernization in African philosophy. In my view, Hountondji and others expose serious flaws in the position we have been calling “cultural revivalism.” In a continent characterized by significant diversity, the romantic quest for a generic African mentality or worldview is unlikely to provide a basis for effective social and political action. Likewise, documenting and celebrating traditional beliefs without any critical analysis seems at best unhelpful and, at worst, an impediment to the challenges of the present. Progress in any society requires adapting, changing, and in some cases abandoning traditional ideas and behaviors. It also involves borrowing and adapting ideas from other cultural contexts. I fear these points are lost upon many cultural revivalists.

Unfortunately, while making the case against cultural revival-

ism, some critics have veered too far in the opposite direction, toward what Gyekye calls “cultural rejectionism.” As Atieno Odhiambo has noted, for some critics the problem “is not this or that African tradition or custom but rather the general idea that custom and tradition are some kind of heavy burden that Africa must carry” (Odhiambo 2002, 11). Hountondji himself exhibits this tendency when he calls for a “clean break” with the past (Hountondji 1996, 48), and suggests that African philosophy and culture lie before us, rather than behind us. The problem with this rejectionist stance is twofold. First, as I have just argued, in the moral and political spheres traditional life has much to offer as Africans grapple with the challenges of political modernization. Second, thinkers who view the African past with varying levels of disdain and skepticism are often guilty of overemphasizing the scientific aspect of modernization at the expense of the political aspect. The problem, as I see it, is that they flirt with the idea that scientific development should be viewed as the “gold standard” for judging human progress and success. Lansana Keita, for one, explicitly endorses this view when he declares: “Any analysis of the contemporary world shows that the most successful civilizations are those which are the most technologically advanced” (Keita 1991, 147). This scientific barometer of success is also evident in the often repeated observation that it was science, after all, that allowed a relatively small number of Europeans to colonize a much larger number of Africans (see Owomoyela 1991, 162-63).

The problems with this view should be evident in light of the preceding discussion. When science is used to subjugate other human beings and appropriate their natural resources, this should certainly *not* be regarded as a sign of social success. It should, on the contrary, be viewed as a sign of precisely the political, moral, and religious *underdevelopment* mentioned by Wiredu. An obvious but important corollary of this insight is that the “success” that comes with science is more the product of extrascientific values than of experimental and theoretical breakthroughs. Scientific and technological development, unconstrained by moral and political vision, clearly harbors the potential to compromise rather than promote human welfare. Gyekye has aptly emphasized this point in his discussion of technology in postcolonial Africa, and I will close with his remarks on this important matter:

I support the view that the humanist essence of African culture . . .

Scientific development unconstrained by moral vision is potentially harmful.

ought to be maintained and cherished in the attempt to create a postcolonial modernity. It must be realized that technology alone cannot solve . . . deep-rooted problems such as poverty, exploitation, economic inequalities and oppression in human societies *unless* it is underpinned and guided by some basic moral values; in the absence of the strict application of such values, technology can in fact create other problems, including environmental problems. Social transformation, which is an outstanding goal of the comprehensive use of technology, cannot be achieved unless technology moves under the aegis of basic human values. (Gyekye 1997a, 42)

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